*UF 0 5 2008

Dispute Resolution & **Administrative Services**

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DIVISION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION & STUDENT SERVICES OFFICE OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION & ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

Re:

Public Schools (LEA) v.

Child & Parent(s):

, child parent(s)

Administrative Hearing Officer:

Ternon Galloway Lee, 215 McLaws Circle, Suite 3A Williamsburg, VA 23185

(757) 253-1570

(757) 253-2534 no facsimile

Child's Attorney and/or advocate:

Attorney for

R. Craig Wood, Esq.

of Public Schools:

Superintendent of

Public Schools:

DECISION

I. PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Public School Division ("LEA") filed a request for a due process hearing on September 15, 2008. The Virginia Department of Education ("VDOE") received the request on September 15, 2008, and Ms. ("Ms.

" or "the parent") received the request on September 19, 2008. (HO Exhs. 5, 15). On September 18, 2008, I scheduled the initial telephonic prehearing conference ("PHC") to be held from 8:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. on September 22, 2008. The parties agreed to this

Tr.

Hearing Officer Exhibit HO Exh.

Parent Exhibit

P Exh. Public School Exhibit LEA Exh.

¹ Throughout the decision I will use the following abbreviations:

scheduling. (HO Exh. 2). On the scheduled date of the PHC, however, the parent indicated she wanted attorney representation and declined to participate in any PHC. After obtaining the LEA's available dates and times for holding the due process hearing on September 22, 2008, I issued an order that established October 1, 2008, as the hearing date.² (HO Exh. 4).

On September 25, 2008, the parent filed a motion requesting a continuance of the scheduled hearing. (HO Exh. 11). I scheduled a PHC for September 29, 2008, to address, among other matters, the parent's motion for a continuance. After hearing arguments, I granted the parent's motion for a continuance, and as agreed to by the parties, I rescheduled the due process hearing for October 21, 2008. By order issued October 1, 2008, I set forth, among other matters, the rescheduled hearing date and the date for the parties to exchange their exhibits and witness lists. (HO Exh. 15).

I held the due process hearing on October 21, 2008, as scheduled. Exhibits admitted during the hearing included hearing officer's exhibits 1 through 32, parent's exhibits 1a through 8, and LEA's exhibits 1a through 5. The decision is set forth herein.

The reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA 2004") was signed into law on December 3, 2004. With the exception of some elements of the definition of "highly qualified teacher," which took effect on December 3, 2004, the provisions of IDEA 2004 became effective July 1, 2005 (the "Effective Date"). Newly implemented federal regulations became effective October 13, 2006. New special education regulations for the state of Virginia have been proposed but have not become

² Before issuing the September 22, 2008 order, the undersigned made several attempts to acquire the parent's available dates and times for the due process hearing; however, the parent declined to submit her availability. (HO Exhs. 1, 2, 4).

effective law. Any existing state special education regulations not impacted by IDEA 2004 remain in effect until newly revised state special education regulations are implemented.

II. <u>ISSUES</u>

Is the proposed IEP appropriate without the provision for a one-on-one aide?

III. STATEMENT OF FACTS

- 1. " or "the child") was born on March 5, , and is years of age and classified as a 10th grader at now School (" S") in the , Virginia. was originally found eligible for special education and related services on November 6, 1995, under the disability category of Developmental Delay. was reevaluated to determine his continued eligibility for special education and related services on February 10, 2001, and in December 2004.3 On both occasions, his eligibility was continued under the disability category of Autism. (LEA Exh. 2, p 4).
- 2. The LEA held an Individual Education Program ("IEP") meeting for on February 16, 2007. During that meeting, the parent signed the IEP, giving the LEA permission to implement it. Under the IEP dated February 16, 2007, has received instruction in his core subjects -- English, math, science, and history -- in self-contained classes with small teacher-to-student ratios. The IEP dated February 16, 2007, did not provide a one-on-one aide for ... This same instructional setting exists for during his current 2008-09 school year. The IEP dated February 16, 2007, is the last IEP

³ The evidence does not establish the exact date of the re-evaluation determination in December 2004.

on which the parties agreed. (LEA Exhs. 3, 5; HO Exh. 30 at 9; Tr. at 34 and 135).

- 3. The LEA held an eligibility meeting on November 27, 2007, to determine if continued to be eligible for special education and related services. In preparation for the eligibility meeting held on November 27, 2007, School Psychologist ("school psychologist" or "Ms. ") conducted a psychological evaluation of on September 26 and 28, 2007, and prepared a report of her assessment. (LEA Exh. 2).
- 4. Ms. holds, in addition to her undergraduate degree, a Masters of Education and School Psychology Degree from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. While participating in an internship, she worked with autistic children of various ages. She also has experience working with autistic children in school settings. (Tr. 49). Ms. employed various methods to conduct the psychological evaluation, to include, but not limited to, cognitive testing, testing for autism, behavior assessments using parental and teacher rating scales, and behavior observations. obtained a full scale IQ score of 50 on the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children-Fourth Edition ("WISC-IV"). The scoring indicated obtained a Full Scale IQ score in the

's highest subtest score on the WISC-IV was 67 on the Perceptual Reasoning Index ("PRI") which falls within the extremely low range and corresponds to the 1st percentile. (LEA Exh. 2, p. 4).

extremely low range of cognitive ability which corresponds to below the 1st percentile.

5. The Childhood Autism Rating Scale ("CARS") utilized by Ms. during her psychological evaluation of revealed he displayed mild to moderate autistic characteristics. (LEA Exh. 2, p. 4).

- 6. The school psychologist reported in her evaluation that in terms of behavior, the child's teacher "...Mr. noted concerns in the areas of attention, learning problems, atypicality, withdrawn behavior, social skills, leadership, and functional communication." The evaluation reported the parent indicated she had no concerns about the child's behavior. (LEA Exh. 2, p. 8).
- 7. Behavior observations made by the school psychologist during the evaluation and noted in the written psychological evaluation indicated that completed all tasks presented, maintained attentiveness during testing, appeared to comprehend the instructions, and appeared to give his best guess when confronted with difficult questions. (LEA Exh. 2, p. 8).
- 8. The eligibility committee that met on November 27, 2007, consisted of the following individuals: the parent, Ms ; the director of special education,

("Ms. " or "director of special education"); School Psychologist ;

's science special education teacher and case manager, ("Mr.

"); CHS' principal, ("Ms. "); CHS' counselor,

("Ms. " or "counselor"), 's art teacher, ("Ms.

"); and the speech-language pathologist, ("Ms. "). (LEA

Exh. 2).

9. All members of the eligibility committee agreed that continued to be eligible for special education and related services under the disability category of Autism. The eligibility minutes indicate the eligibility committee considered the psychological evaluation of the school psychologist, observations of at school in both classroom and non-classroom settings, and 's behavior. (LEA Exh. 2, p. 1).

- 10. The IEP team developed a proposed IEP dated December 17, 2007, ("proposed IEP") and the parent rejected it because no one-on-one aide was provided. Thus, the IEP has not been implemented. (LEA Exh. 1; P Exhs. 3, 4; Tr. 154-155).
- 11. The Present Level of Educational Performance ("PLOP") section of the proposed IEP notes in pertinent part the following about 's performance:
 - passed the VAAP assessment in his 8th grade year.
 - is well-behaved.
 - made the honor roll the first six weeks of the 2007-2008 school year.
 - 's goals for his IEP stress functional living and academic skills including math, reading, daily and independent living and organizational skills.
 - is functioning within the extremely low range cognitively and his teacher rated him in the mild to moderate autistic range. (LEA Exh. 1).

12. 's report card grades for the 2007-08 school year are as follows:

Course	1 st 6wk	2 nd 6wk	3 rd 6wk	S1 Ex	S1 Fin
R Math 9	A	В	A	D	В
R Eng 9	A	A	A	A	A
R Sci 9	В	A	В	A	В
Art I	В	A	A	В	A
R Hist 9	В	A	A	A	A
Resource	A	A	A	A	A
II & PE 9	A	A	A	В	A

4 th 6wk	5 th 6wk	6 th 6wk	S2 Ev	S2 Fin	Ein Cul
В	A	1	A	Δ Fin	Fin Grd
A	A	A	B	Α	A
В	В	В	В	$\frac{\Lambda}{R}$	B
	4 th 6wk B A B	4th 6wk 5th 6wk B A A A B B	B A A A A A A	B A A A A A B	B A A A A A A A A B A

Art I	A	Α	Α	A	Α	A	
R Hist 9	A	Α	Α	Α	A	A	
Resource	A	Α	Α	A	A	A	
II & PE 9	Α	Α	Α	В	A	A	

(LEA Exh. 4, p. 6).

- 13. Progress reports submitted by the parent for the 2007-08 school year reflect 's progress was rated in some areas as either needing improvement or being partially mastered.⁴ (P Exh. 7).
- 14. received a failing grade of 20 on an assignment in math class on September 17, 2008. (HO Exh. 30 at 6).
- 15. The parent submitted as an exhibit a letter dated January 2, 2008, from a Dr.

 ("Dr. "). The letter is characterized by its author as a developmental pediatric assessment. The assessment reports that does better one-on- one regarding homework and schoolwork and recommends that continue in his current school program. (P Exh. 1).
- 16. The party seeking relief in this case is the LEA. (HO Exh. 5 at 3). Thus, the LEA bears the burden of proof. Schaffer v. Weast, 126 S. Ct. 528 (2005) (stating in pertinent part that the burden of proof in an administrative due process hearing under IDEA is on the party seeking relief).
- 17. The parties dispute only whether 's proposed IEP should provide a one-on-one aide. (HO Exh. 5 at 3).

⁴ The evidence submitted by the parent does not clearly establish which areas or goals the progress reports were rating.

18. ("Ms. " or "the math teacher") has been a special education teacher for 22 years. She has taken major course work in mathematics and is 's math teacher for the 2008-09 school year. She also taught math during the 2007-08 school year. Ms. has experience working with autistic children. (Tr. 114). 19. ("Ms. " or "the history teacher") has been a special education teacher for 25 years. She is 's history teacher for the 2008-09 school year. The class consists of nine students and an aide is assigned to the classroom because she has 8th, 9th, and 10th graders in the class at the same time. Ms. has some, but not extensive, experience working with autistic students. (Tr. 104-06). " or "the English teacher") is a special education ("Mr.

20. ("Mr. " or "the English teacher") is a special education teacher. He is teaching English during the current 2008-09 school year. During the first two weeks of the 2008-09 school year, an aide was assigned to Mi 's English class. Mr. testified that he has observed that interacts more without an aide. Mr. also has in a resource class also referred to as a study class or study hall. Mr. testified that during the resource class does ask for help when he needs it, but he also works independently. (Tr. 147-51).

IV. APPLICABLE LAW AND ANALYSIS

The pivotal purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA") is to ensure that students with disabilities have available a free appropriate public education ("FAPE"). See Bd. Of Educ. V. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176, 179-81, 200-01. A FAPE includes special education and related services planned to meet the student's unique needs and provided in conformity with a written IEP. 34 C.F.R. Section 300.17[d] and 34 C.F.R. Section 300.320. A school district offers FAPE to a student

when the IEP is reasonably calculated to enable the child with a disability to receive educational benefits and the procedural requirements of the IDEA are met. *Rowley*, 458 at 206-07.

While school districts are required to comply with IDEA procedural requirements, not all procedural errors render an IEP legally inadequate under the IDEA. In matters alleging a procedural violation, a child with a disability does not receive a FAPE only if the procedural inadequacies (1) impede the child's right to a FAPE, (2) significantly impede the parents' opportunity to participate in the decision making process regarding the provision of a FAPE to the parents' child; or (3) cause a deprivation of educational benefits. 20 U.S.C. Section 1415(f)(3)(E)(ii).

The FAPE requirement is satisfied when a State provides the handicapped child with "personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit the child to benefit educationally from the instruction." Doyle v. Arlington County School. Bd., 953 F.2d 100, 106 (4th Cir. 1991) (citing Rowley, 458 U.S. at 203). The statute guarantees an "appropriate education," not an education that includes everything that a loving parent might desire. See Walczak v. Florida Union Free Sch. Dist., 142 F3d 119, 132 (2d Cir. 1988) (quoting Tucker v. Bay Shore Union Free Sch. Dist., 873 F.2d 563, 567 (2d Cir. 1989) (citations omitted); see Grim v. Rhinebeck Cent. Sch. Dist., 346 F. 3d 377, 379 (2d Cir. 2003).

In the present case, the parent desires a one-on-one aide for . Because the LEA has refused to provide this service, the parent has not agreed to the proposed IEP's implementation. The LEA has sought relief by filing a request for a due process hearing. I examine the evidence to determine if the IEP must provide an assigned aide.

A related service within the meaning of the IDEA is necessary only if the child needs it to access special education. 34 C.F.R. Section 300.34; see also 8 VAC 20-80-10.

The evidence establishes that has been receiving more than a minimal educational benefit without the assistance of a one-on-one aide. Particularly, school personnel with longstanding and short-term relationships with as well as exhibits of record substantiate the related service's non-essentiality.

's teachers who have been providing him instruction since the 2007-08 school year testified that his independence would be hampered by assigning him a oneon-one aide. School personnel highlighted that independence is a significant goal for , especially considering his 10th grade status and imminent adulthood. (Tr. 86-87, 116-117, 139). Of particular note is the testimony of Ms. , the child's art teacher. She testified that she has observed that when an aide assists , his creativity suffers and his drawings lack details. (Tr. 86-87). Ms. also stated that excels in art class. (Tr. 86). To that end, 's above-average report card grades in Ms. 's class for the 2007-08 school year corroborate her testimony. (LEA Exh. 4, p. 6). testified with certitude and her testimony was not rebutted, I find Noting that Ms. her testimony credible and assign great weight to it.

Mr. has been 's science teacher and case manager since the 2007-08 school year. (Tr. 133). Much like Ms. , he also concluded that did not need a one-on-one aide. Mr. 's testimony established that his science class used an aide during the 2007-08 school year. (Tr. 135). But the aide was not assigned to . Instead, the aide assisted any one of the eight students in the class on an "as need" basis. (Tr. 135-136). Mr. testified that no aide is assigned to his

class for the current 2008-09 school year. (Tr. 136). He testified that is making sufficient progress in science class and is able to do his work with prompting. (Tr. 138). Report card grades submitted as evidence by the LEA indicate received five Bs and one A in science for the marking periods during the 2007-08 school year. (LEA Exh. 4, p. 6). Having observed Mr. 's appearance and manner on the witness stand, I find his testimony credible.

Similar to the testimony noted above, Ms. , 's math teacher for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, agreed that he did not need a one-on-one aide. (Tr. 112). She testified that has performed well in her class. (Tr. 118). She described him as "being consistent at following procedures and knowing how to ask for assistance when he needs it." (Tr. 115, 120). 's report card grades for Ms. 's math class for the 2007-08 school year indicate he received four As and two Bs. I note that Ms. 's testimony shows she has developed extensive knowledge of and I find her a credible witness.

Other school personnel with long-term relationships with corroborate the assessments of the above referenced teachers. For example, School Psychologist testified that she observed for 30 minutes in his math class in September of the 2007-08 school year.⁵ During the observation she noted that no aide was in the class, arrived timely, when prompted he started working with other students, and he required no redirection. (Tr. 34). The school psychologist observed again in the classroom during the current 2008-09 school year. The second observation confirmed her

⁵ The school psychologist did not provide the exact date of the classroom observation. Thus, I am unable to provide it in this decision.

prior perceptions of him. (Tr. 41). Also, Ms. 's principal since the 2007-08 school year, testified that since entered S, she has observed him numerous times in various settings within the school. (Tr. 70-71). From her ongoing observations, she has perceived the child as being able to (i) move through the school like any other child, (ii) socialize like the other students, and (iii) ask for assistance when he needs it. (Tr. 71-72). Further, the counselor at S since 2006 testified that shows the ability to ride the bus, arrive timely for class, do his school work, ask for help when he needs it, behave, and socialize appropriately. (Tr. 59, 65). She emphasized that 's core classes are self contained with a small teacher-to-student ratio, and assistance is available for him should he need it without the use of an assigned aide. (Tr. 62). In addition, the special education director, Ms. whose familiarity with spans over ten years, testified likewise. (Tr. 60-61),

I note that during the hearing I had the opportunity to observe the demeanor of Ms. , Ms. , Ms. , and Ms. . All testified without hesitancy and had several opportunities to observe in a school setting. As a result, I find the testimony of these witnesses credible.

The testimony of the above-referenced school personnel who have longstanding relationships with is substantiated by the testimony of teachers who are teaching for the first time during the 2008-09 school year. For instance, 's English and resource teacher for the 2008-09 school year testified that works well independently and is more personable without an aide. (Tr. 147-51). Similarly, 's current history teacher testified that behaves and socializes appropriately, usually understands what he is doing and can be redirected if necessary. (Tr. 106-107). I note

both the English and history teachers appeared genuine when they testified and I find them credible witnesses.

Just as the testimonies discussed above indicate does not need a one-onone aide so do the psychological evaluation and developmental pediatric assessment of record.

At the conclusion of her psychological evaluation, Ms. did not recommend receive a one-on-one aide. Instead, she referred her evaluative results to the eligibility committee for further deliberations, even though testing results showed that 's cognitive ability fell in the extremely low range and he displayed mild to moderate characteristics of autism. (LEA Exh. 2 at 8). I note that at the time School Psychologist wrote her evaluation she held more than minimal experience working with autistic children of various ages and had observed in a classroom setting. I am convinced in part of the LEA's position because of the absence of a recommendation for an assigned aide from Ms. — one who I find is knowledgeable about autistic children and has observed in school settings.

The parent offered a developmental pediatric assessment dated January 2, 2008, and authored by Dr. to support her contention that needs a one-on-one aide. (P Exh. 1, p. 2). Among other remarks within her written letter, Dr. stated

⁶ I note the LEA submitted a Speech-Language Summary ("summary") signed by , M.S. Ed., SLP/CCC. (LEA Exh. 2, p 3). The LEA did not present the author of the summary to testify. A review of this evidence indicates the author did no testing and based her summary on a review of unidentified records. Moreover, it is not clear if the author of the summary actually observed the child or reported observations of others. Furthermore, the author did not date the summary. Considering the omissions and uncertainties surrounding the summary, I have given very little weight to it.

the following:

With regard to homework and school work, [] tends to be disorganized, has a short attention span, daydreams, does better one-on-one, is easily distractible, and cautious with a normal activity level.

(P Exh. 1, p. 2). Dr. concluded her written assessment by recommending, in pertinent part, that continue in his current school program.

Dr. 's assessment does not persuade me that needs a one-on-one aide for several reasons. First, nothing exists in the record to suggest that Dr. observed in a classroom setting to determine whether his academic needs can only be met by an assigned aide. Second, unlike School Psychologist , nothing in the record establishes to what extent, if any, Dr. is knowledgeable about autism, particularly autistic children. Third, assuming for the sake of argument that Dr. 's comment that does better one-on-one was a plea for an assigned aide, I give deference to the professional educators' decision that does not need a oneon-one aide. See MM Ex Rel. DM v. Schl. Dist. Of Greenville County, 303 F.3d 523, 531-533 (4th Cir. 2002) (reversing the lower court for finding that the IEP was inadequate when the lower court (i) failed to consider the actual educational progress made by the child and (ii) substituted its judgment for that of the educators). The evidence before me establishes that the educators have based their decision to deny the assigned aide on observations of the child and the child's above average achievement in his classes. have considered, among other evidence, that achievement --'s report card grades for the 2007-08 and interim grades for the 2008-09 school years. Those grades reflect is doing well academically. Thus, I give little weight to Dr. `s

assessment that arguably purports to show that needs an assigned aide.

I also note that Dr. 's evaluation explicitly recommended that remain in his current school program. (P Exh. 1 at 4). A review of the evidence shows that 's current IEP on the date of Dr. 's written assessment and the date the LEA filed its due process request was the IEP dated February 16, 2007. (LEA Exhs. 3, 6; HO Exh. 30) See e.g., 17 IDELR 113 (November 6, 1990) (indicating that the operative placement at the time a dispute arises is the current school placement of the child). A review of the IEP dated February 16, 2007, indicates 's current educational program does not include an assigned aide. Accordingly, I find the written assessment by Dr. recommending the child remain in his current school program does not support the parent's argument.

The parent also offered as support for her position a school assignment that failed and a related progress report. The evidence shows that on September 17, 2008, in Ms. 's math class. completed an assignment in his math workbook. He failed the assignment with an assessed score of 20. An accompanying progress report from Ms. 's class dated September 26, 2008 revealed that out of the 16 assignments in her class for the month of September, failed only the abovereferenced one. Further, as of September 26, 2008, he had acquired an overall math grade of B. I also note, the failing grade on the assignment occurred nine months after the proposed IEP was developed. To that end, I mention that an IEP must be judged as to its appropriateness at the time that it is written, and not with respect to subsequently obtained information about the student. Roland M. v. Concord Sch. Committee, 910 F.2d 983, 992 (1st Cir. 1990), cert. denied, 111 S.Ct. 1122, 133 L.Ed 2d 230 (1991) (stating in

pertinent part "an IEP is a snapshot, not a retrospective ... and must take into account what was objectively reasonable at the time the IEP was drafted"). Having considered this gap in time and the uncharacteristic occurrence of the failing grade, I give little weight to failing grade on the assignment dated September 17, 2008.

Further, in support of her position, the parent submitted some progress reports from the 2007-08 school year indicating the child needs improvement or has only partially mastered some of his goals. (P Exh. 7). I was unable to determine from the evidence on what classes the progress reports purport to report.

IDEA does not require that a child with a disability receive maximum benefit from his IEP nor does the IDEA require mastery of all goals and daily activities. IDEA only requires that the IEP be calculated to confer some educational benefit on the disabled child. See, Rowley, 458 at 207.

In the present case, under the proposed IEP, would receive his instruction in core subjects in self-contained classes with a small teacher-to-student ratio as he did during the 2007-08 school years. No aide would be assigned to 's report card grades of As and Bs and his progress as noted by his teachers during the 2007-08 and current 2008-09 school years show that he is receiving more than a minimal educational benefit without the use of a one-on-one aide. What is more, the evidence shows that the absence of a one-on-one aide in 's IEP enhances his creativity, independence, and social skills.

Therefore, I find not assigning an aide in his IEP is appropriate.

V. DECISION AND ORDER

I have reviewed and considered all evidence of record whether specifically

mentioned in the decision or not.

I find the LEA's proposed IEP or IEP dated December 17, 2007, is appropriate without the provision of a one-on-one aide and is calculated to provide an educational benefit and therefore FAPE.

I further find all requirements of notice to the parent have been satisfied; that is a child with a disability as defined by applicable law 34 C.F.R. Section 300.8 and is in need of special education and related services. I also find that the LEA has provided for a free appropriate public education; however, the parent has not allowed the LEA to implement the proposed IEP dated December 17. 2007.

VI. PREVAILING PARTY

Pursuant to 8 VAC 20-80-76K11, I have the authority to determine the prevailing party on the issue. I find the prevailing party on the issue is the LEA.

APPEAL INFORMATION

This decision is final and binding, unless either party appeals in a federal District court within 90 calendar days of the date of this decision or in a state circuit court within one year of the date of this decision.

ENTERED THIS 2rd day of November 2008.

Ternon Galloway Lee, Flearing Officer

Cc:

, parent (via fax if available and mail)
R. Craig Wood, Esq., Counsel for LEA (via fax and mail)
Ronald Geiersbach, Esq., Virginia Dept. of Education (via fax only)
, Dir. Of Special Education and Federal Programs for
Pub. Schs. (via fax and mail)

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