

# Dominion Care Academy

## Memo

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To: Melissa Waldron, Principal of Dominion Care Academy  
From: Lindsay Harlow, Vice-Principal of Dominion Care Academy  
Sent: July 29, 2023  
Subject: Academy Improvement for Student Safety Proposal

At Dominion Care Academy, necessary safety precautions have not been updated in the last five years. The gate encompassing the property has had several issues with the automatic closing function, resulting in almost catastrophic situations. During the Field Day event, a student could outrun two faculty members when the gate was open. The gate barely closed in time before the student could enter Chamberlayne Road. The student was, however, able to get close enough to throw a baseball over the gate, breaking the windshield of another car. This event resulted in a liable suit where DCA settled for \$10,000. The inside of the school also needs adequate sensory rooms for students. The repercussions of not having these spaces for students to be in while they have challenging or interfering behaviors can be volatile.

The safety of our students is paramount. Children with limited communication skills are at a higher risk for elopement; preventative measures can help with these associated risks. A new gate and system would be a worthwhile investment for the future of DCA. Virginia Ironworks has quoted a new system at a fraction of the price of the liable suit DCA settled for this previous year. The new sensory rooms for students would be a wise, low-cost, long-term investment with the increasing number of students on the wait list for enrollment. Sensory rooms provide environmental control to the child, increasing their motivation and establishing a more comfortable sensory environment supporting critical relationship-building skills. With the current enrollment status, the new sensory rooms would be paid for in three years.

### **Problem of Surrounding Gate Structure & Sensory Rooms:**

The Virginia Center for Special Needs Safety, in consultation with the Department of Education, has developed a list of items to be reviewed and evaluated in the special needs school safety audits. Incidents reported to school board authorities pursuant to § 22.1-279.3:1 shall include a walkthrough using the safety checklist provided by the Virginia Center for Special Needs Safety (Department of Criminal Justice Services of Virginia, 2013). The audit showed that DCA's perimeter gate was inadequately equipped for student safety, per section § 22.1-279.3:0. Such safety audits are made public within 90 days. This audit was conducted on July 20, 2023. To stay in compliance with state and local safety laws, it is my recommendation that the new gate system be installed before the new school year.

Elopement in autistic children is typically defined as leaving an area without permission and putting themselves in a potentially dangerous situation. Studies have shown that nearly one-third of children with ASD exhibit elopement behavior. The National Autism Society recently published a study that examined over 800 missing person cases related to ASD and elopement in a five-year period. In the last year, DCA has had 12 instances of children elopement outside of the building. Repairing the exterior gate system will ensure that potentially dangerous situations do not occur. Repairing the external gate will also keep DCA compliant

with the Virginia Center for Special Needs Safety audit before the public and clients become aware of the situation.

Sensory Rooms have been used for special educational curricula where the instructor can control the environment for the student by changing the sensory space or equipment. Different sensory equipment includes bubble tubes, fiber optic cabling, tactile boards, and soft padded environments. These de-escalation rooms are often safe spaces for students to lessen their aggression towards others and calm down self-injuring behaviors. These sensory rooms are designed as open spaces at the end of hallways. They are cushioned from floor to ceiling to prevent the student from self-injury. However, the space is in no way a restricted area. It is fully designed to be used as a safe space with the faculty present at all times. It is not meant to suggest that the student is being placed in a "time-out" or being restricted from any of their liberties as per the U.S. Department of Education Individuals with Disabilities Education Act addressing the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of children with disabilities. Many children have been exposed to trauma, disruptions in learning, physical isolation, and disengagement from school peers, all of which negatively impact their health. These rooms are meant to enrich the student's learning experience while also providing a safe space. At present, DCA does not have any such rooms that would fulfill this need.

### **Proposed Solutions for Surrounding Gate Structure & Sensory Rooms:**

The benefits of a new surrounding gate for DCA are threefold. The first of which is keeping our students safe. The second is keeping us compliant with the Virginia Center for Special Needs Safety. The third is ensuring that DCA is not held liable for student elopement or property damage to surrounding properties. To achieve this, I propose that we choose from two of the following companies for a surrounding fence with an automatic gate. The first is Virginia Ironworks, which is for the automatic slide gate with an outside phone system and keypad. The second is the surrounding fence from Virginia Rail Guys for the acre of iron safety fencing that would need to be replaced.

The benefits of new Sensory Rooms would be tremendous for DCA. Having a place for students to cool down or otherwise be able to de-escalate would be highly advantageous. These rooms have also been shown to reduce the number of aggressive behaviors between ASD students in times of high agitation. I propose that we add one new Sensory Room in the downstairs area for the students ages two through nine and turn the reading room upstairs into a Sensory Room for students ages 10-18. The downstairs room would be a projected new space of 400 square feet from the two to three-year-old room. Converting the reading room will cost considerably less than the new space.

### **Staff Requirements for Proposed Changes:**

During the new gate and fencing installation, staff must adopt a new pick-up/drop-off schedule with students. Students would not be released from the building until their driver or bus was visible to the faculty. No student will be allowed to wait outside unattended. Each student and faculty member will maintain a 1:1 ratio outdoors while the new gate and fencing are installed for obvious safety concerns. A temporary fencing structure will be erected around the playground area to ensure that students can maintain a certain level of outdoor space and physical activity, if not every day, as often as weather permits. Staff will always be required to wear their mobile communication devices while the fencing is down to ensure that student safety is always maintained. All doors will remain locked, with no exceptions during the fencing repair. All visitors

will be radioed to the main door and allowed entrance only with pre-authorized approval by a senior faculty member.

During the addition of the new Sensory Room on the first floor, staff will be asked to keep students away from the construction area. During the repurposing of the Reading Room to the new Sensory Room, staff will be asked to relocate books to the appropriate age level of the classroom. Any items that staff may deem of use in the Reading Room need to be relocated before work may begin. Any items left will be left to the overriding faculty member's discretion. Staff will be asked to keep students away from construction during remodeling.

**The costs for each improvement are as follows:**

**Fencing & Gate:**

832 Feet of Aluminum Iron Fencing	, \$20,832.00
1 Automatic Slide Gate	\$15,000.00
1 Phone System with Keypad	\$ 4,000.00
1 Indoor Wireless Communication System	\$ 4,000.00
1 Electrical for Gate Motor & Keypad Entry	\$ 4,000.00
1 Temporary Playground Fencing Structure	\$ 2,000.00
1 Removal & Disposal of Old Fencing & Gate	\$ 3,000.00
1 Contractor Fees	\$26,416.00
	Total = \$ 79,248.00

**Sensory Rooms:**

1 20 x 20 Concrete Slab	\$ 5,000.00
1 Framing for 20 X 20 area	\$ 6,000.00
1 Pallet of Sheetrock for a 20 x 20 x 10	\$ 8,000.00
1 Demo of Reading Room Wall	\$ 200.00
6 Foam Wall Safety Pads	\$ 7,000.00
2 Safety Floor Mats	\$ 6,000.00
2 Multi-Purpose Ceiling Anchors with Eye Bolts(for Sensory Swings)	\$ 2,000.00
2 Sensory Wide Swings	\$ 1,500.00
2 Sensory Hammock Swings	\$ 1,500.00
2 Sensory Ribbon Accessories	\$ 1,000.00
	Total = \$38,200.00

**Grand Total** **\$117,448.00**

Currently, the proposed budget for the 2023 school year is set at \$800,000.00. The allocated budget for safety measures is \$200,000.00, and the current amount spent thus far is \$105,090.11. I have proposed several ideas to account for the remainder of the allocated funds.

- Fundraisers (Car wash, Bake Sales, Peanut/Wrapping Paper, and Yankee Candle)
- Allocating portions from the Arts Budget
- Allocating portions from the Physical Education Budget

- Requesting an advance of next year's proposed safety budget on credit
- Private Donations

### **Timetable for Improvements**

Once the proposal is approved, Virginia RailWorks and Virginia Iron Works assure me that work can begin within one month of signing contracts and receiving an initial deposit for services rendered. They estimate that the gate and fencing will take anywhere from eight to 12 weeks to complete, subject to weather.

The estimates for the building of the Sensory Room and remodeling of the upstairs Sensory Room were done by Handy Andy LLC and by a second company, Johnny on the Spot. Handy Andy LLC has said that work can begin within two weeks once contracts and deposits are in place. Completion of work would then take six to eight weeks for both rooms. Johnny on the Spot has said that once contracts are signed and deposits are paid, work can begin within four weeks. However, they did quote that the rooms would be complete within three to four weeks.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

I recommend we move forward with installing the new fencing and gate system. By installing the new fencing and gate system, we will ensure the safety of students and our program here at DCA. The new fencing and gate system has been a solid investment for many years since Virginia IronWorks guarantees the gate for ten years, and Virginia Rail Guys has guaranteed the fencing for the next 20 years.

The new Sensory Rooms would be a wise investment for our students and faculty. Facilities with Sensory or De-Escalation Rooms such as these have shown higher levels of student engagement and learning and lower levels of student aggression with other students in children with ASD. Many faculty members have commented on the need for safe spaces when such situations occur. We must ensure that we can fulfill this need not only for our students but also for the importance of our faculty in maintaining an overall sense of employee morale.

By implementing these safety measures, we at DCA can take a positive step toward a safer and happier future for the academy and the clients we serve. I look forward to discussing the details of this safety proposal with you at further length. Please let me know if you have any other questions; I may assist you with making this decision.

