



ADVOCACY IN ACTION:

A Guide to Local Special Education Parent Advisory Councils

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Dear Readers:

Teamwork.

At the core of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, lawmakers and advocates established a team approach in which parents and educators working together review challenges, explore options, and make decisions in the best interest of each child.

The very teamwork and collaboration that are at the core of IDEA are also at the core of a best practice in special education: Local Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs).

An effective SEPAC takes the teamwork of the IEP process one step further, putting parents in the role of advisors who use their family's experiences, unique perspectives and expertise to influence decisions and help shape programs and policies at the local level.

An effective SEPAC is more than a meeting - it is an approach and a mindset that truly values the advice of parents. When parent advisors are valued and engaged through a local SEPAC, they can work together with school district staff and community leaders to improve education, not only for those with disabilities, but for all children.

Debra A. Jennings

Director | Center for Parent Information & Resources
Executive Co-Director | SPAN Parent Advocacy Network

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PROJECT TEAM:

Debra Jennings, Director | Center for Parent Information & Resources
Executive Co-Director | SPAN Parent Advocacy Network

Myriam Alizo, Project Assistant | Center for Parent Information & Resources

Karen Antone, Project Consultant

Writing, Design, and Production |
Considine Communication Strategies

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Center for Parent Information and Resources offers this guide as a road map to help bring stakeholders together, suggests strategies to help them engage in dialogue, and discusses best practices to help them work together to benefit the local community. It draws on experience and practice from states in which local SEPACs have been in operation for decades.

Some states now require school districts to establish local SEPACs; most do not. But even in states where they are *not* required, progressive families and education leaders have established local SEPACs that have become an asset to the school community.

Because each state and each school district is different, many choices are left up to each community, presenting both challenges and opportunities. The challenges are for each school community to develop and run a SEPAC that is aligned with the unique needs of the school district, bringing in diverse perspectives, and setting the tone for productive discussion, collaboration, and responsive change. The opportunities to improve the school community, climate, and education for *all* students are boundless.

Part I of this guide is designed for parents, state agencies, local education agencies (LEAs), and school leaders who are interested in establishing and running an effective SEPAC in their local school district. It can be used to start a new group, or to strengthen existing collaboration as a means to improving special education services and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Part II of this guide is designed for staff at Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) and National Parent Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs), as well as statewide leaders and advocates, who are interested in supporting existing local SEPACs, and/or helping to build support to establish local SEPACs.

Part III of this guide contains resources and tools that have proven useful in the establishment, development and ongoing operation of local SEPACs.

Color designations in this Guide: Parts I, II, and III of this Guide utilize different color schemes in footer areas, title bars, and page sidebars to help the reader in navigating and using the guide, as follows:

PART I: A GUIDE FOR LOCAL ACTION

PART II: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING LOCAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS

PART III: RESOURCES

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In developing this guide, our project team and consultants turned to state and local leaders who are working to support local SEPACs. We would like to thank the countless families whose interviews and stories helped to inform Part I of this guide, and to the school leaders whose advice and expertise helped shape its content. We also thank the scores of Parent Center leaders who responded to our survey and who took part in phone interviews to help us bring a national perspective for Part II of this guide.

Part I of this guide has been adapted for national use from *Special Education Parent Advisory Groups in New Jersey, A Guide to Developing and Conducting an Effective Group*, produced in 2017. That manual, developed as part of the START Project in partnership with New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), Office of Special Education Professional Development and Office of Special Education Policy and Procedure, and the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, Inc. (SPAN), was funded 100% by New Jersey's federal Special Education—Grants to States.

Part II of this guide was developed using a three-pronged approach to gather qualitative information from Parent Center leaders about activity in their state and their efforts to support local SEPACs.

We surveyed more than 400 Parent Center leaders and staff to learn more about interests and priorities for this guide and ways in which Parent Centers interface with and support parents as advisors, whether on SEPAC or other groups. Their candid responses gave us a starting point for this guide. Scores of respondents indicated a willingness to take part in a phone interview, allowing our team to drill down and get more details about state activities.

Based on the survey results, the project team carried out detailed interviews with leaders at Parent Centers across the country in those states where SEPACs are present at the local or intermediate unit level. 19 leaders from 14 states responded to our requests, and shared their views, experiences and perspectives.

With guidance from state-level leaders, the team looked at enabling state legislation, as well as rules and regulations to implement that legislation (where it exists) to find common threads and look for trends, themes and best practice. We asked parent leaders to send us copies of guides, videos, power point and other training and informational materials so we could review the content and learn more about what is happening on the ground.

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PART I

A GUIDE FOR LOCAL ACTION



A local Special Education Parent Advisory Council, or SEPAC (sea-pack) is a district-level, parent-driven group that provides input to the local school district on system-level challenges in special education and related services.

In different states, these groups may go by different names:

- SEPAC—Special Education Parent Advisory Committee/Council
- LAC- Local Advisory Committee/Council
- CAC—Community Advisory Committee/Council
- SELPA—Special Education Local Planning Area Consortium
- SEPAG—Special Education Parent Advisory Group
- PAC—Parent Advisory Committee/Council
- PAT—Parent Advisory Team
- SIT—School Improvement Team
- SECAC—Special Education Community Advisory Council

In this guide, we will use the term SEPAC—Special Education Parent Advisory Council to refer to these local advisory groups. We chose this term because it includes ‘P’ for parents*, and because the term ‘council’ refers to a group that comes together to bring different perspectives in order to make decisions, consult, or deliberate on a common objective.

*Our inclusive view of the term ‘parents’ reflects biological, adoptive, and foster parents, guardian, grandparents, and extended family caregivers.

IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- What a local SEPAC is — and what it is not.
- The purpose, function, and importance of a local SEPAC.
- SEPAC membership.
- SEPAC responsibilities.
- Benefits of an effective local SEPAC.

What is the purpose and function of a local SEPAC?

A local SEPAC provides direct input to school district leaders about policies, programs, practices, and services that have an impact on students with disabilities and their families. Its purpose is to advise, advocate, and offer guidance, not to decide policy. An effective SEPAC can increase the proactive, productive involvement of families by inviting their input in ways that can be used to shape local special education policy.

An effective SEPAC that uses parental input can:

- Help improve educational outcomes and well-being for all students, including those with disabilities.
- Help identify unmet needs.
- Help shape the development of programs, services, and policies; as well as improve district culture.

These groups are **advisory**. SEPACs do not have formal authority to issue directives or set policy. Rather, they make recommendations and provide guidance that can be used by decision makers and local leaders.

Who can be a member of a SEPAC?

Parents are the core members of a SEPAC.

Members might include:

- Parents of children with disabilities who may have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan
- School leaders, including District or County Supervisors of Special Services and/or members of the Board of Education
- Teachers, Child Study Team members, related services professionals, and other school staff
- Students and former students
- Adults with disabilities
- School staff with disabilities
- Representatives from charter schools
- Advocates for children who are homeless or in foster care
- Advocates for children who are in correctional facilities, nursing homes, or hospitals
- Advocates for immigrant and migrant children
- Any parent or community member committed to improving education in the district

SEPAC membership and procedures should be as inclusive as possible. Parents do not need special training or background knowledge to be a member of a SEPAC. In states that require local SEPACs, the make-up of the group may be described in statute or regulations.

Are local SEPACs required by IDEA?

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires that each state establish and maintain a statewide advisory council (SEAC) for the purpose of advising the state's special education staff regarding the education of all eligible children with disabilities. This is NOT the same as a local SEPAC.

Local SEPACs are *not* required under IDEA, but a growing number of states *have* required them. Even in states where they are not required, progressive school leaders have established them as a way to improve programs and services, and respond to input from parent leaders.

How is a SEPAC different from a PTO, an advocacy group, or parent support group?

Parents come together for many reasons—support, friendship, event planning, advocacy, information, and active response. While each of these purposes is important, **a SEPAC is NOT:**

- an advocacy group, which focuses on upholding rights for children and advocating for change from outside the system;
- a limited effort focused on a single issue or immediate concern; or
- a Special Education PTO or PTA, which might plan carnivals, classroom activities, fundraisers, or other events.

Why should parents get involved?

Participation in a SEPAC offers the opportunity to raise questions, voice concerns, and provide direct input to school leadership and influence policy and program decisions.

The great benefit of participating in a local SEPAC is that the individual needs of a child become part of 'the big picture' and can reach a broader community of children.



What are the benefits of an effective SEPAC?

- **Outreach** – Outreach can engage families of students with disabilities so that they are involved in helping to shape local special education programs and policies.
- **Positive relationships** – Effective SEPACs engage parents and school leaders to establish shared goals and priorities that benefit students with disabilities. They connect with teachers, Child Study Teams, and community resources as sources of support for helping improve programs and services.
- **Collaborative problem solving** – SEPACs thrive on team spirit and team action. While members bring varied perspectives, everyone shares a common mission: to improve outcomes for *all* students receiving special education services and support.
- **System change based on input** – A SEPAC can communicate the needs of parents whose children receive special education and related services, and can advise school leaders on unmet needs identified through parental input.
- **A trusted source of information** – SEPACs can strengthen the bridge between the school district and families. SEPAC members who educate themselves about school policies and channels of communication can be an information source for parents who may need information, support, and resources from their school, and can steer them in the appropriate direction.
- **Information sharing** – SEPACs can provide an opportunity for districts to share information with parents about instructional programs, professional development opportunities, and other matters related to special education.
- **Improved services and programs** – Changes that come about as a result of input from SEPACs are responsive to the identified needs of the school community.
- **Deepened trusts** — Over time, as school leaders react and respond to input from the SEPAC, trust builds and grows.

- Any school district can establish a local SEPAC. No legislation is required.
- A local SEPAC is part of the local school district, not a private or independent group. It is not a PTO, and it is not a parent support group.
- A local SEPAC addresses system-level challenges affecting students with disabilities and their families.
- A local SEPAC is parent-driven, and often parent-led, but there is an important role for school district staff and leaders.
- SEPAC membership should be as diverse and inclusive as possible.

Learning, Listening, and Leading

SEPACs are a win-win. When parental input is valued and there is a vehicle for meaningful communication, parents are empowered to facilitate change that matters. And when school leaders are able to work with a cohesive, well-organized parent community that provides useful, coordinated input, they are able to move good ideas into action.

WHAT DOES ‘PARENT-DRIVEN’ MEAN?

Parent-driven means that...

Parents determine priorities and activities. They can offer strategic solutions on issues that matter to them, helping schools overcome challenges and make decisions related to special education programs and services.

Parent-driven does NOT mean that...

Parents do everything. District leaders participate, provide information, background, data, and support.

(See suggested roles and responsibilities on page 23.)

IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- The vital need for parent engagement and input.
- The difference between an individual issue and a systemic issue.
- How can school leaders commit to the value of parent input?

*The key to an
effective SEPAC
is mutual respect.*

When parents see themselves as — **and are viewed as** — trusted and valued as advisors, they are empowered to advocate for changes that can result in positive outcomes for all stakeholders, and are less likely to feel like isolated outsiders trying to ‘fight the system.’

The School Community Can Ask:

- How does the district bring a spirit of collaboration to the table?
- How does the district respond to and follow up on parent input?
- How do staff and parents show respect for the perspectives and opinions of others?
- How does the structure and process of the SEPAC allow all stakeholders, especially parents, to obtain and share information with school district leaders?

Parents Might Ask Themselves:

- How might I look beyond the experiences of my own child and family?
- Do I see that, by working to help other children with disabilities, I can help my own child?
- Can I see that my participation, large or small, can contribute to a larger vision and shared goals?

School Leaders Might Ask Themselves:

- How can I support families as they offer advice and guidance to improve local policy and practices?
- What information can I provide to parents to help them look beyond their own family’s experiences to see the ‘bigger picture?’
- How does our district demonstrate that it values parents’ perspectives?
- How can I encourage and support input from families, even when they feel frustrated, angry, or disgruntled?
- Does the district foster a culture in which parents feel supported and comfortable enough to speak freely?
- How can the district provide support and structure to the group, while preserving parent leadership?
- How can the district demonstrate that it is responsive to the feedback provided by the SEPAC?



TAKEAWAYS

What is the difference between an ‘individual issue’ and a ‘systemic issue’?

Often, parents bring a perspective to an issue that is based on personal experiences with their own child or a child they know. Taking action on behalf of a single child is ‘individual advocacy.’

While this is vital, the goal of the SEPAC is to look at systemic issues—that is, challenges and opportunities that affect more than one student or family.

An effective SEPAC invites, collects, and coordinates individual stories and perspectives from parents. Then, it looks at this input to see patterns or trends that can be addressed through policies, programs, and services that have the potential to affect many students with disabilities. That is how SEPACs move from an individual issue to systemic change.



- Local SEPACs should be parent-driven, but this does not mean that parents do everything.
- District staff and leaders need to fully support SEPACs.
- The goal of the SEPAC is to look at ‘system issues.’
- Conversations and brainstorming can help the SEPAC find a creative solution that can benefit children, parents, schools, and community.
- Effective local SEPACs require mutual respect between and among participants.
- Some solutions do not have an impact on the school district budget or require additional district resources.

3

STARTING AND STRUCTURING A LOCAL SEPAC

There are more than 13,500 school districts in the United States. Just as each district is unique, each local SEPAC is unique.

Some districts have a long and successful track record of seeking and using parental input to improve special education; others are using parental input in this way for the first time.

Whatever the history, a well-structured local SEPAC can leverage the positive influence of parental input and be a vehicle for effective communication, building trust, and system change.



IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- A process for starting a SEPAC.
- Resources for assistance and guidance.
- Structures of SEPACs that can best align with the needs of the district and community.
- Strategies to build parental engagement.

SEPAC QUICK START GUIDE

- ❑ District leaders and parents looking to start a local SEPAC can meet to develop a plan.
- ❑ Work with local and regional parent leaders, Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs), Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), and other parent-led organizations.
- ❑ Consider hosting a well-promoted introductory workshop or meeting—inviting all parents—to get the ball rolling.
- ❑ Develop an initial roster of potential SEPAC members. Seek representation from parents within the district who have children with different levels of need, of different ages, in different schools, and in different types of programs, including public, private, and out-of-district programs.
 -  **Best Practice:** Be certain to consider linguistic, religious, racial, cultural, and economic diversity to be sure the SEPAC reflects it.
- ❑ Develop a short mission statement to guide the SEPAC’s work.
 -  **Tools for Change:** Sample mission statements from other SEPACs can be found on page 58 of this guide.
- ❑ Set annual goals and objectives so that the SEPAC can prioritize its work. (For more, see page 29).
- ❑ Plan different types of meetings. These may include ‘parent only’ group meetings; informational meetings with a speaker on a special topic; ‘listening meetings’ held specifically to gather input; as well as meetings with school leaders. (See Chapter 7 for more on this topic).
- ❑ Develop a meeting schedule for the year. A suggested framework might be: Monthly ‘parent only’ meetings; 4-5 informational outreach meetings, with topics and speakers that bring families and schools together; quarterly meetings with key district leaders to present input and suggestions.
- ❑ Every SEPAC needs a foundation to describe how it will conduct business. Establish basic ground rules, bylaws, a procedures manual, or other operating guidelines to describe the scope of work.
- ❑ Determine roles and responsibilities for SEPAC members and district staff. Tasks include taking minutes, preparing agendas, managing membership and contact information, and managing logistics. (See Chapter 4 for more on this topic).
 -  **Best Practice:** Some SEPACs have developed ‘job descriptions’ for members. (For more, see *Resources*, page 57).
- ❑ Consider the communication strategies the SEPAC will use to reach and engage parents from other groups, such as the PTO and PTA. (See page 25 of this guide for more on this topic).
 -  **Tip:** Create and print a simple print flyer and poster to promote the SEPAC to help establish the SEPAC’s legitimacy and build awareness. Include information about the SEPAC on the district’s website and in digital communication to ALL families.
- ❑ Consider using the IEP process and annual review process as a way to help inform parents about the SEPAC process and the opportunity to get involved.

TAKEAWAYS

How can we build and maintain parent engagement?

Even with the best of intentions, it may be a challenge to get—and keep—a core group of parents engaged in the local SEPAC. Smaller districts, geographically large districts, urban districts, very rural districts, and very diverse districts in which there are language and cultural differences each face unique challenges.

Best Practice:

- 1 Ensure that communication about the SEPAC is provided in layman’s terms and is translated into languages used by families in the district.
- 2 Offer childcare, dinner, and/or assistance with transportation for parents attending SEPAC events and meetings.
- 3 Hold meetings at times when families would be at the school for another meeting—for example, before or after a sporting event or school performance.
- 4 Use digital conferencing tools and social media so parents can participate from a remote location.
- 5 Encourage a multi-generational approach to SEPAC membership—invite parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles to attend together.
- 6 Reach out to community organizations and ask them to provide support to families who may want to participate.
- 7 Develop a one-to-one mentor/buddy approach to help build confidence and support for parents who may be new to the process.
- 8 Identify cultural and linguistic liaisons at school who are people with whom parents can relate.
- 9 Ask parents to recruit other parents.
- 10 Use social media, texting, and automated phone services to reach families.
- 11 Hold meetings at various times—daytime, evenings, and weekends—to accommodate a range of work schedules.
- 12 Invest in person-to-person parent outreach.
- 13 Provide simultaneous translation services during meetings.

- A mission statement will help SEPAC members to stay focused.
- Varied meeting formats can be used to engage families in different ways.
- It is important to define, understand, and observe roles and responsibilities.
- A plan for outreach and communication is important.
- A range of strategies and tactics may be needed to engage families.
- Diversity is vital to a successful SEPAC.

4

COLLABORATIONS & PARTNERSHIPS

When parents and district leaders work together as part of a SEPAC, it establishes trust, open communication, and group effectiveness. School district leadership and personnel play an important role in developing, growing, and sustaining a SEPAC.

Honest discussion and shared problem-solving can generate solutions that improve services to students—in many cases, with little or no impact on school budgets and resources.



IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- Examples of successful partnerships.
- Essential elements of strong partnerships between schools and parents.
- Tips for strong collaboration and partnerships.
- Strategies for conflict resolution.
- Roles and responsibilities of parents and school leaders.

PARTNERSHIPS...

Effective SEPACs begin in the spirit of partnership. Here are two examples that show how partnerships were formed.

Parent-Initiated SEPAC:

- Several parents wanted to participate in a SEPAC and, after investigating, found that there wasn't an active one in place. They reached out to school leaders who offered to take part in outreach meetings.
- Parent members of the SEPAC sometimes held 'parent-only' meetings that were encouraged and supported by the Director of Special Services. The school provided and covered the cost of childcare for meetings. This support was critical to successful outreach for this district.
- The SEPAC and Director of Special Services maintained a growing list of shared community connections. These were posted to the district website as a resource for all; Child Study Team members used the resource list, along with parents.
- The SEPAC had quarterly meetings with the Director of Special Services to share their work and findings. It was a give and take: parents asked, "How can we help you?" as often as they asked, "How can you help us?" when probing an issue or solution. They engaged in collaborative discussions to generate solutions.
- The SEPAC shares its work annually with the local Board of Education.

District-Initiated SEPAC:

- The district Supervisor of Special Services wanted to facilitate a SEPAC, so he reached out to parents who were already actively involved in special education. They set up a steering committee with parent co-chairs so other parents could learn about SEPACs and how to run effective advisory groups. The steering committee grew into a parent-directed SEPAC that organized its own activities, meetings, and outreach to expand the group.
- The district Supervisor encouraged the SEPAC to be a 'connections channel' so that parents felt more comfortable meeting with him and other school personnel. The SEPAC and district Supervisor met as partners every quarter. Because of the strong foundation, the SEPAC knew how to present issues so that they included suggested solutions and resources.

Both approaches built capacity and resulted in sustainable SEPACs that continued to work in partnership with the district. In both cases, the SEPAC was parent-directed, and district leadership supported parent leaders.

5 TIPS FOR STRONG COLLABORATION

1 Develop and use ground rules that can help all partners in a collaboration know what to expect and develop trust. Some areas to consider are:

- Confidentiality – Parents need to be able to share concerns with the confidence that their input will not include personally identifiable information.
- Use of SEPAC name – Individuals who are members should be reminded not to publish information, articles, announcements, newspaper editorials, letters, or public testimonials under the SEPAC name without group consensus.
- Meeting participation – Commit to attend, turn cell phones off, and be present and collaborative.
- Boundaries – SEPAC members should commit to helping other parents follow the appropriate chain of command, and should seek to serve as liaisons or individual advisors.

2 Agree to listen carefully and without judgment.

- Parents and district leaders must listen to each other with full attention and avoid interrupting.
- Whether engaged in problem-solving or attending a meeting, members should avoid the temptation to generate or share a response before someone else is finished talking.
- Members should not present information without welcoming questions and further examination. Instead, members might say, “*My understanding of this issue is.... Can you share your perspective?*”
- Members should avoid judgment and emotional responses. Instead, they should be encouraged to take a breath in order to get more information and context.

- continues

5 TIPS FOR STRONG COLLABORATION *continued*

3 Work to establish mutual trust and accountability.

- Collaboration is a group effort—multiple voices must come together for the sake of action. Regular attendance should be valued and depended upon.
- Respect and appreciation of members is important, along with valuing people for their expertise and perspective.
- Stay true to the spirit of collaboration, working together as peers with diverse strengths and skills. Courtesy and friendliness in that working relationship is essential.

4 Try to see things from diverse perspectives.

- Parent advisors can make a good start by committing to helping other parents and students with disabilities.
- The best solutions are the result of viewing things from different angles. Parents and district leaders can ask, “How can we help here?” and present input that’s packaged to help facilitate a solution.
- Try phrases like, “That’s a good point,” “I appreciate that input,” and “What you say is interesting—where can we take this?”
- Remember that appreciating SEPAC members and partners is essential and that “thank you” is vital.

5 Collaboration requires mutual respect.

- Learn from mistakes. Avoid holding grudges. Record and celebrate success.
- Keep working together to improve outcomes for children with disabilities.

TIP: SEPACs can submit reports (annually, or more often) to the local Board of Education and (subject to local practice) might invite a member of the local Board of Education to attend SEPAC meetings, events, and trainings. That way, school leaders can better understand and respond to needs.

Resolving Conflicts and Disagreements

Conflict is a natural part of all partnerships and should be expected in a SEPAC. Conflict is not a sign that things are not going well; in fact, conflict can increase understanding, build group cohesion, and expand viewpoints. But poorly managed conflict—or conflict that goes unresolved—can harm the partnership and erode trust. It is important that conflict be recognized and resolved in a positive manner, so that it can ultimately strengthen, not damage, relationships.

Here are some strategies to resolve conflict in a positive way:

- 1 Make building relationships the top priority. Understanding the various points of view, not ‘winning’ the argument, should be the goal.
- 2 Don’t get personal about the disagreement. Focus on the issue, not the person.
- 3 Listen carefully to different ideas and ask questions. Try to understand not only what a person is saying, but also why it matters to them.
- 4 Try to agree on some facts. Conflict can move toward consensus as SEPAC members add to the facts that all can agree on.
- 5 Focus on NOW. Avoid the temptation to bring other issues and problems into the discussion.
- 6 Explore options together, without judgment.
- 7 Know when to ‘let go.’ Sometimes, it is best to ‘agree to disagree’ and come back to a conversation at another time.
- 8 Keep the interests of the children at the center of the discussion.

Roles and Responsibilities

All members should:

- Understand the function of a SEPAC.
- Develop and maintain knowledge of regulations pertaining to the special education process.
- Attend and participate in SEPAC meetings.

Parent members should:

- Participate in outreach that extends to the larger community.
- Record and distribute meeting minutes. (See Tools for Change at the back of this guide.)
- Distribute information to families via a wide range of channels. (see Chapter 8.)
- Establish connections with school committees such as PTA/PTO and community resources.
- Attend and offer oversight/participation for activities and events.
- Explore meetings and events held in other districts.
- Seek representation from other schools in the district and connect with other parent leaders.

School district leaders should:

- Work to engage parents of students with disabilities.
- Arrange services and supports to ensure diverse participation (childcare, accessibility of meetings, translation services, etc.).
- Direct parents to appropriate personnel when individual concerns arise.
- Take responsibility for making communication and the flow of information accessible to all parents and guardians through varied formats to increase accessibility.
- Identify areas of concern at assigned schools and seek remedies working with the cooperation of staff in input of all stakeholders.

- Effective SEPACs depend on a real partnership and mutual respect.
- District leaders can support parent leaders.
- SEPACs can facilitate smarter budgeting and resource allocation.
- Ground rules are important for effective collaboration.
- Well-managed conflict can strengthen collaboration.
- Parents and district leaders have different roles and responsibilities.

If a good structure can be viewed as the engine of a SEPAC, input can be viewed as the ‘fuel’ for change. A SEPAC’s work comes from input collected from parents, educators, and other sources. A SEPAC can use this input to identify systemic issues and solutions.

What is parental input?

Input is simply information, and it comes from many sources and in many forms: letters, proposals, comments, concerns, and even complaints. Other forms of input might include data about the school district. An effective SEPAC will invite input of as many forms as possible. Listen to parents and use input to advise the district on positive change.

What are some strategies a SEPAC can use to reach parents, engage them, and invite input?

SEPACs can tap into diverse sources and channels to gather information about issues affecting students with disabilities. Input can be obtained from a wide range of sources. It is vital that parents are aware of the SEPAC and its function, and are invited to provide input. SEPACs do this through the development of effective, varied outreach and communication strategies.

IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- The meaning and importance of parental input.
- Outreach and communication strategies to invite and maximize parental input.
- How to determine priorities.
- Ways to solicit diverse input.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR SEPACS

- 1 District leadership can distribute information through various means of communication (e.g., email, flyers/ brochures, text messages, social media, phone calls), through multiple venues and platforms (e.g., Back-to-School Night, Parent-Teacher Conferences, and other events that draw parents).
- 2 Districts can establish a mobile friendly web presence and provide clear ways for parents to contact SEPAC members and provide input. This might be a page on the district's website, or a stand-alone website linked from the district's website. Some SEPACs post information on PTO/PTA websites, and on community pages operated by the YMCA or other community groups. The website can also be a repository for information on basic rights, podcasts on special topics, archived webinars, taped teleconferences, and links to advocacy resources.
- 3 Take advantage of social networking to reach parents. Post minutes, information about meetings, links to the SEPAC website, and other resources.
- 4 Start a blog or forum on the SEPAC website to share ideas, articles, and best practices.
- 5 Ask SEPAC members to attend school and community events to increase parental awareness of the SEPAC and the opportunity to provide input.
- 6 Host a 'Listening Night' for parents to talk to SEPAC members about their concerns, experiences, and ideas.
- 7 Establish a dedicated SEPAC email account that parents can use to send input.
- 8 Use surveys that can be posted to sites, shared through social media, emailed, or printed for distribution.
- 9 Jot down ideas and input from parents during chance encounters (e.g., at the soccer game, in the parking lot, or at a school event.) Keep a notebook handy or send yourself a text message.
- 10 Invite experts to present workshops and lectures on topics of interest to parents in the district.
- 11 Make sure that all information and outreach is provided in a family-friendly manner and, if possible, translated to reach as many as possible.

TAKEAWAYS

What can the SEPAC do to support diverse parent participation?

- A SEPAC can work to ensure that parents are able to fully participate in meetings and provide input effectively, simply by asking parents: *“What supports do you need in order to participate and attend meetings?”*
- Some SEPAC groups have found that parents can better participate when districts offer childcare, translation services (including foreign languages, sign language, braille, etc.), transportation assistance, and other supports at meetings.
- Offer meetings at various times, and consider ways to invite input, such as hosting an online meeting or conference call.
- Printed materials (agendas, flyers, brochures), a SEPAC website, and social media can be translated into other languages used in the community.



Tools for Change: Sample agenda, flyers, and brochures can be found in the back of this guide.

- Input is simply information about programs, policies, and systemic issues.
- Parents might need childcare, translation services (including foreign languages, sign language, braille, etc.), transportation assistance, and other supports in order to participate.
- Most SEPACs hold several types of meetings at different times and locations.
- SEPACs need to use a variety of communication and outreach strategies to reach and engage parents, and to solicit input.

6

TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

The success of a SEPAC hinges on its ability to shape the input it collects from parents into concrete issues and solutions, and to direct that information to district decision makers in ways that lead to positive changes in services, policies, and programs.

Not all input will require action. It is important that a SEPAC has a structured process that can help members review each issue and decide whether SEPAC action is needed.



IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- Possible areas for input.
- Strategies for transforming input into action.
- Developing priorities.
- Assessing the impact of the SEPAC's work.



Tools for Change: A problem-solving worksheet can be found in the back of this guide.

WHAT ARE SOME TOPICS FOR INPUT?

Topics for input will likely come from the community organically, as parents share ideas, concerns, and experiences. Sometimes a SEPAC can prompt input around certain topics by hosting an information forum.

SEPACs have addressed such areas as:

- Accessibility and location of programs
- After-school sports and clubs
- Before care and after care
- Bullying/School Climate
- Bus driver/Bus aide education
- Community-based learning
- Curriculum
- District policies and procedures
- District vision and future goals
- ESSA—Parent engagement as an indicator
- Extended school year services
- Funding issues and resource allocation
- Graduation
- IEPs, rights and responsibilities
- Inclusive education
- Out-of-district programs and services
- Professional development
- Reading programs
- Related services
- Scholarship opportunities
- Section 504
- Staffing
- Testing
- Transition from school to adult life
- Transportation
- Unified athletics

SETTING PRIORITIES*

Establishing annual priorities is important for any group or organization. Doing so helps a SEPAC direct its efforts and avoid taking on too many projects that could potentially overwhelm its membership, the local district, or the school board. Identifying one to three critical issues on which to focus during the year provides the opportunity to consider and make informed recommendations. It also leaves time to address other issues that arise during the ordinary course of doing business.

SEPAC's can set priorities as a facilitated activity with a discussion leader and a recorder who lists participants' responses on newsprint that is hung on the wall.

SEPAC members are asked to:

- Identify needs related to the education of children with disabilities;
- Group identified needs by major categories, discussing whether any of the needs are the same or similar enough to be collapsed into one statement;
- Use markers to place checks next to their top five needs on the newsprint; and
- Discuss the five needs receiving the most checks to reach consensus on the top two to three needs on which the SEPAC will focus during the operating year.

The process of coming to agreement on priorities is not simple. It requires the facilitator to continually check for agreement, and when a stalemate is reached on an issue, to move the group to the next issue or need that all members can support.

Once priorities are determined, they should be the focus of periodic reports to the school board. Remember that incremental change is still change, and some recommendations may not be fully implemented in a given timeframe. Subcommittees can be used to allow the SEPAC to study an issue more closely.

It is important to work with school leaders to develop priorities and recommendations that include specific strategies and steps with reasonable timelines for completion.

An outline of dates on which progress will be reviewed and procedures for making needed changes to the plan should be included. This will provide a more valuable product for the school board than a long list of needs that have not been prioritized.

**This section is adapted from *A Guide to Local Special Education Advisory Committees in Virginia*, produced by the Virginia Department of Education and the Center for Family Involvement at the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University, © 2011.*

How can a SEPAC assess the impact of its work?

A critical best practice is to follow up on the input and solutions a SEPAC shares during meetings with school leaders.

Here are a few tips:

- 1 When an advisory meeting closes, minutes should indicate who raised what issue within the meeting, who is responsible for actions, and a timeline for activities and deliverables. If an action remains outstanding, carry it onto the agenda for the next meeting, and in the interim, explore any obstacles to action and ways to resolve them.
- 2 Define what evidence will show that input has been considered and whether it has had an impact. Indicators of success might include high attendance at a topic-focused speaker meeting, encouraging input from surveys, and positive feedback from parents and stakeholders about changes to new or existing services.
- 3 Publish meeting minutes that protect anonymity and focus on positive movement forward. Keep in mind that some of the issues and ideas a SEPAC presents may not receive immediate support. Making change happen takes time and is a learning process. Celebrate victories—large and small—with parents and community.
- 4 Evaluate areas that are problematic and compare them with successful outcomes.

Indicators of a Quality Local SEPAC

- SEPAC structure is based on need of the community and students, not just what is easiest.
- SEPAC membership represents the diversity of the community.
- SEPAC goals and priorities are based on community input.
- SEPAC addresses meaningful issues.
- SEPAC minutes document the actions/growth of the group.
- SEPAC minutes are disseminated to interested individuals and/or groups.
- SEPAC parent facilitators act in an authentic leadership role.
- Council members' advice and input is used to direct and establish policy.
- SEPAC meeting frequency is based on needs to be addressed.
- SEPAC parent leaders are trained and supported.
- SEPAC advice and recommendations are considered by the Board of Education or local governing board.
- SEPAC meets as necessary to address goals and priorities.
- A feedback loop exists regarding recommendations submitted.

From "A Guide for Minnesota Local Special Education Advisory Councils", module 1 (2009) produced by PACER Center.

TAKEAWAYS

- Not all parent input requires SEPAC action.
- SEPACs should seek input on a wide range of issues and topics.
- The first solution is not the only solution.
- SEPACs need a structure to review input and then transform it into action.
- SEPACs should use a variety of strategies to communicate with school leaders, including the Board of Education, about the changes they are seeking.
- Follow-up is vital for success.
- Incremental change is good change. Celebrate every victory, large or small.

How can a SEPAC make its case for change?

SEPACs use different strategies to make the case for system change based on the issue.

These include:

- Providing copies of minutes to school leaders to keep them apprised of developments.
- Sending letters or reports to school leaders summarizing issues and concerns and that identify the action needed.
- Sending letters of thanks and praise when services and supports are working well.
- Preparing an annual report and providing it to the local Board of Education.
- Offering to speak or present to the local Board of Education.



What formats should be used for SEPAC meetings?

SEPACs use a variety of meeting formats, depending on the type of gathering and the goals. Some meetings may be ‘parent only’ meetings, while others might be parent and district meetings.

How can a SEPAC organize effective meetings?

It’s helpful to use a standardized approach when organizing meetings that can accommodate changing availability and needs.

Bring together several SEPAC members to create generic checklists of ‘to-dos’ for different meeting formats. The items on the checklist should reflect the SEPAC’s unique needs and be organized so that parent leaders can work efficiently.

Some SEPACs find that a single meeting organizer works, while others divide the task among several members. Checklists can help an organizer carry out or delegate tasks if necessary. A SEPAC can also assign one member to start meetings with a welcome and introductions and to move the agenda along. It is critical that parents have clear roles and sustainable tools for making efficient meetings happen. It is important to start and close meetings on time, and to stop discussion when it is time to move on to another item on the agenda.

IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- Suggestions for meeting formats.
- A systemic approach to organizing meetings.
- Effective development and use of an agenda.
- Writing and utilizing meeting minutes.
- Strategies for helping new parents feel welcome.
- Examples of group processes for reaching agreement.
- Ground rules for good meetings.

Does every meeting need an agenda?

Yes. An agenda should reflect ongoing work as well as new efforts. It should be made available in advance of every meeting. The agenda should allow adequate time for parental input. Keep a list of topics that are off the agenda so they can be addressed at a later time, either at the end of the meeting or at a subsequent meeting.



Tools for Change: Agenda templates can be found in the back of this guide.

How should minutes be written and used?

Every SEPAC should record the minutes of its meetings. Some SEPACs have set up templates for capturing minutes at a meeting and for publishing minutes via email and online. It is a good idea to establish a role for taking minutes. Some SEPACs appoint a secretary to take all meeting minutes, while other SEPACs rotate the task so that one person isn't responsible for every meeting.

Minutes can be a great source for reviewing input or potential resources, so aim to capture details. Record names of individuals and the input, concerns, or questions they provided to the meeting, and follow up with them to provide or obtain more information, if possible.

Publish minutes from meetings that reinforce the purpose and goals, and emphasize positive results. Be sure to record progress on issues: who raised an issue, what solutions and resources are available, who is responsible for actions, and whether an item is outstanding.

Good minutes will:

- Present summaries that inform readers about topics so that they are knowledgeable and want to learn more and participate.
- Focus on successful outcomes, note whether an issue needs more work, offer a call to action, and include a way to contact the SEPAC.
- Include information about upcoming meetings and topics.

How SEPACs Decide to Take Action

In many cases, decision making is an ongoing process, and is likely to stretch over the course of several meetings. As the SEPAC decides to take action, it will need to keep careful records of completed and outstanding items.

Two popular formats for reaching consensus and agreement are:

- 1 **Voting**—The most formal, and perhaps, the most familiar process is to vote. *Robert's Rules of Order* offers guidelines for meeting formats and 'rules' of conduct, including group decision-making. *Robert's Rules of Order* follows government models, where decisions are generally finalized by a majority vote.
- 2 **Consensus Decision Making**—A creative and dynamic way of coming to an acceptable agreement that everyone can support. Less formal than voting, it requires that discussion continue until all members of the group can agree.

(See the 'Resources Section' for more information on these meeting formats.)

TAKEAWAYS

How can a SEPAC help new parents feel welcome?

An effective SEPAC continuously seeks to engage new parents, so it is quite possible that there will be a newcomer at every meeting. Some groups have a ‘welcome team’ comprising parents who have agreed to greet and welcome new parents. It is also helpful to review or provide in writing the ‘etiquette rules’ at all meetings so attendees—existing and new—have a positive experience and feel welcome. Some SEPACs have created a new member orientation process.

What are some good ground rules for meetings?

It’s a good practice to document meeting ground rules and, depending on context, read essential ones aloud as a meeting starts or include them at the top of meeting agendas.

- Ask for full participation: cell phones off, avoid cross talk, and listen without interrupting.
- Start and end meetings on time and pace agendas so that there is time for all agenda items.
- Protect personally identifiable information so that information published in minutes or announcements will be presented from a group perspective (e.g., “the issue was raised,” not “Jane Doe said”).
- Be clear that the SEPAC is not a parent support group. The SEPAC can help steer parents with individual concerns to the right resources following the appropriate chain of command.

How can a SEPAC build an outreach list for meetings and events?

SEPACs can use outreach meetings to build a private list of email and phone contacts. It’s important to reassure parents that their contact information is private and uphold that commitment.

- Effective SEPACs use a variety of meeting formats.
- Logistical checklists can help a SEPAC stay organized.
- SEPACs need structure for decision making: consensus and majority rule are two popular methods.
- It is important to have an agenda for every meeting.
- Minutes are a vital part of the work of a SEPAC.
- All SEPAC communications should respect privacy.
- A SEPAC should consider how it plans to welcome parents who are new to the process.
- Etiquette rules or ground rules can help ensure that every meeting is productive.
- SEPACs need to establish ground rules.
- SEPACs need to use and expand outreach lists.

Using best practices can help ensure that a SEPAC starts strong and remains effective, with sustained growth and engagement. But even the most effective groups hit ‘speed bumps.’ Here are some ideas from other SEPACs to help a group grow in size, strength, and capacity.

1

Establish annual priorities, goals, and meetings.

- Work with district leaders to set priorities for new or improved programs and services, based on input.
- Plan to write an annual report to the local Board of Education.
- Establish resources within the school and community to support engagement and participation. School and community can provide help with logistics such as:
 - Securing meeting spaces
 - Childcare during meetings
 - Transportation
 - Interpreters
 - Refreshments

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IN THIS CHAPTER READERS WILL LEARN:

- Successful operations of SEPACs.

2 Use a website and other digital tools to create a centralized knowledge base for standard documents and communications, including:

- Membership rosters
- Descriptions of roles and responsibilities
- Bylaws (if applicable)
- Templates for quarterly and annual reports
- Templates for meeting formats, agendas, minutes, contact info, invitations, etc.
- SEPAC guidelines concerning meeting etiquette
- SEPAC new member orientation information
- Lists of school and community resources
- Special education regulations and laws
- Surveys used to gather input
- Print and online formats for a SEPAC flyer/brochure
- Links to the local, regional or county, State and US Department of Education

3 Use a variety of meeting formats geared to different goals.

- **Regular SEPAC members-only meetings:** These meetings focus the agenda on organizing input, defining systemic issues, and collaborative problem-solving.
 - Include time to discuss outreach efforts, communications, and connections with schools and community.
- **SEPAC meetings with district leadership:** Best practices call for a regular meeting in which parent advisors and school leadership explore systemic issues, suggestions, and solutions.
- **SEPAC meetings with a specific topic and guest speaker:** These meetings can attract parents who want to learn more about a particular topic, and are a great way to build awareness of the SEPAC and its purpose. SEPACs have invited speakers from outside the district to present on topics such as delayed readers, executive functioning, social skills, transition, and the IEP process, to name a few.
 - It is a good idea to share the names of possible guest speakers with district leaders before extending an invitation.

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4 Develop relationships at all levels.

- A local SEPAC can help foster partnership and collaboration with families, schools, and the community, both locally and across districts.
- Encourage parents to sign up as a representative to other groups in the school community.
- Embrace a diverse cross-section of parents, schools, and a range of disabilities. Be proactive—for example, if the SEPAC lacks representation from high schools, make ‘improving transition’ part of the annual agenda.
- Establish relationships with public service organizations: libraries, intramural sports, police, transportation, faith-based groups, and others. SEPACs that reach out to such groups find resources for programs and services and volunteer speakers for topic meetings.

5 Forge a network of communications channels.

- Set up social media accounts for the SEPAC.
- Request space on the District website, sites for local schools, and PTA/PTO sites.
- Set up a SEPAC email address that directs parents to SEPAC leaders.
- Create private distribution lists for parents of children of disabilities; remember that not all parents have email, but almost all will have phones, so text messaging can be a very useful tool.
- Ask the PTA/PTO to send out email blasts—they have generic lists for all parents.
- Give printed materials to Child Study Teams and special education staff for distribution.

- Encourage school staff and Child Study Teams to attend outreach meetings as a part of the group.
- Successful SEPACs have found that administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other educational professionals want to connect with parents in a neutral, collaborative setting. They can also serve as guest speakers on a number of topics.
- Assign a group member to serve as a SEPAC representative at local Board of Education public meetings.

CHAPTER 8

TAKEAWAYS

- Establish and follow priorities.
- Stay organized and save time through the use of templates and checklists.
- Use a variety of meeting formats.
- Network and communicate.
- Develop and nurture relationships.
- Learn from other SEPACs about what has worked for them and apply strategies that are a good fit for the district.

PART II

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING LOCAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS



Whether or not your state currently has or requires local SEPACs, there is a lot that Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) can do, both directly and indirectly, to help support SEPACs at the local level. In fact, the very mission of the Parent Centers is to help parents participate effectively, and to partner with professionals and policymakers to improve outcomes for children with disabilities.

Only a handful of states currently require local or regional school districts to have parental involvement through a SEPAC. In some states districts have established a local SEPAC, even though they are not required to do so. In those states, SEPACs are not operating on a statewide basis.

While some states and districts are just now adopting the practice, others have been using parent advisors through a SEPAC model for decades. In states where local SEPACs are required, the enabling language varies greatly: it may be a single sentence of state law or regulation—or pages of it—that sets the tone for the local SEPAC function in that state.

Here are a few of states in which local or regional SEPACs are active:

- **California** has required that parents be part of local planning since 1977. Through their Special Education Local Planning Area (SELPA) regions of California develop a local plan to describe how it will provide special education services. The local advisory groups, Community Advisory Committees (CACs), meet regularly focusing on training and advisory. While the CAC functions at the regional level, not the local district level, they are parent-driven advisory groups.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/as/caselpas.asp>

- **Colorado** does not require local SEPACs but the Colorado State SEAC, in conjunction with the Colorado Department of Education (CODOE), encourages districts to establish them. Together, the SEAC and CODOE issued a resource guide to help local districts establish and run SEPACs. The 14-page guide offers a road map and resources, along with a checklist to consider when organizing the local SEPAC. Local SEPACs are invited to report work to the statewide SEAC to help create an impact on statewide level.

https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/local_seac_guide_accessible

- **Indiana** school districts have SEPACs dating back to 1988. Their mission is multifaceted: support and increased recognition; understanding of children, youth and adults with disabilities, and also to meet with local school administrators to collaborate on a school and community partnership.

“Parent Advisory Committees are made up of parents from the district who want to work with the LEA. They share concerns about hot topics, discuss vital resources and help support families.”

- LESA PADDACK, IN*SOURCE, INDIANA

- **Kansas** school districts have established local Special Education Advisory Councils. In general, they consist of a parent representative from each of the district’s schools, special education staff, Board of Education members, building administration and local special education leadership. Some plan events such as a mini-conference, resource fair, and parent support groups.

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- **Massachusetts** state law (Chapter 71B, Section 3) requires each school district to establish a Special Education Parent Advisory Council. That state law is highly prescriptive, mapping out duties and responsibilities. In addition, state regulations (603 CMR 28:07(4)) reiterate the statute and provide further guidance. The Massachusetts Department of Education developed a 17-page guide—offered in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Haitian Creole—to help place the requirements in context and offer plain language guidance to school districts and parents. Massachusetts encourages districts to develop a welcome packet with resources for new parents, and to help orient them to the SEPAC process. Every district in Massachusetts is required to work with the SEPAC to offer at least one workshop a year on the rights to parents and guardians under special education law.

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/pac/>

“Some districts have very active special education parent advisory councils that are well supported with information, resources, training and the ability to have input by LEAs.”

- RUTH DIAZ, FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS,
MASSACHUSETTS

- **Michigan** Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE 340.1838) requires that each of the state’s 56 intermediate school districts have a Parent Advisory Committee for special education planning. The rules also describe the membership and responsibilities of the committee. While this is not a local district effort, it is a *regional* parent advisory group for special education. Michigan has required PACs for at least 20 years.

https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MARSE_Supplemented_with_IDEA_Regs_379598_7.pdf
- **Minnesota** law (125A.24) requires each school district to have a Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). This statute defines the purpose, structure, membership, and minimum meeting requirements. In Minnesota, the PACER Center has developed a comprehensive training program to help local SEACs be effective tools for change.

<https://www.pacer.org/parent/pdf/FAPE-36.pdf>
- **New Jersey** administrative code (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.2h) requires each of the state’s 613 local school districts to “ensure that a special education parent advisory group is in place in the district to provide input to the district on issues concerning students with disabilities.” There are no further rules, regulations or official guidance, so it is up to each district to develop a process and procedure. The NJDOE funded the Parent Information Center to develop a guide in both English and Spanish, and posted the guide to their official website.

<https://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/resources.shtml>

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- **Pennsylvania** has more than 600 local school districts that make up 29 Intermediate Units (IU) each of which is required to have a task force. The task forces are required not by state law, but under a 1972 Court ordered consent decree in the matter of *PARC v. Commonwealth of PA*, 343 F. Supp. 279 which mandated the development of a comprehensive plan. That plan established a state task force and 20 local task forces, one for each IU, whose primary purpose is to ensure the rights of children with disabilities. The IU has funds to support logistics including meals, mailings, website, and administrative resources. They meet at least five times a year. Pennsylvania has produced an 18-page guide, now in its 6th edition, to help families take an active role in these regional task forces.

http://pattan.net-website.s3.amazonaws.com/images/partner/2015/11/16/New_STF_Handbook0915.pdf

- In **Rhode Island**, a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) is mandated by the Rhode Island Department of Education (300.900) The rules, adopted in 2013, are comprehensive and address issues including committee make-up, membership, functions and responsibilities, duties and responsibilities of the local or regional education agency, conduct at meetings, meeting frequency, minutes, and meeting notification. The rules specifically allow members to be reimbursed for “reasonable and necessary expenses for attending meetings and performing duties.” In addition, the rules specifically require that the LEA contract with the Parent Training and Technical Assistance Agency or another community based agency for support and technical assistance.

<https://risos-apa-production-public.s3.amazonaws.com/DESE/7377.pdf>

“(d) ...The local or regional educational agency shall provide support to the committee by contracting for technical assistance services with the Rhode Island designated Parent Training and Technical Assistance Agency or other community-based non-profit parent organization. Such technical assistance shall include the role of advisory committees in advocating for children, state and federal regulations, community resources, strategic planning and development of an annual report to the school committee...”

- RHODE ISLAND BOARD OF EDUCATION, REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, 2013, SUBPART I, 300.900
(D)

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- **South Dakota** school districts have established local SEPACs but they are not required to do so.

“They have learned that to engage families from reservation communities, they need to have an initial contact with the community to develop trust. The concept of family engagement means different things for different parents. There is no consensus. Technology hinders engagement because people are not meeting face to face. South Dakota has one of the highest rates of working parents with children in daycare settings, so it is really hard for parents to attend meetings.”

- CARLA MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA PARENT CONNECTION,
SOUTH DAKOTA

- In **Virginia**, local SEAC function is established in Virginia Board of Education Regulations for Special Education (8VAC20-81-230 D). The prescriptive rules are further delineated in a 48-page guide, *A Guide for Local Special Education Advisory Committees in Virginia*, which details the state’s requirements for membership, function of the committee, requirement for public notice, meeting frequency and performance indicators. The majority of participants must be parents, and school district staff serves as consultants to the local SEPACs. There are 130 school districts in the state.

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/committees_advisory/special_ed/local_sped_advisory_committees/products/guide/guide.pdf

- **Washington** school districts have established Special Education Parent Advisory Committees comprised of parent representatives who meet with special education district leadership and other district staff monthly. They seek to identify common needs and goals among the parents of students receiving special education services and facilitate strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their respective school programs. The groups serve as an advisory, not a decision-making body. School district leadership serve as ex officio members.

At the core of the Parent Center mission is an effort to engage parents in advocacy and systems change through information, training and support. In states in which SEPACs are in place, whether or not they are required, Parent Centers are taking an active role.

Here are some ways in which Parent Centers across the country are supporting parents as local advisors.

Leader Training Programs

Many states report using the ‘Serving on Groups’ Training Program, developed in Wisconsin, to help parents learn how to be effective members of a SEPAC. In South Dakota, a rural state where distance can be a barrier, SEPACs are not required but many districts have established one. There, Parent Center leaders report using the ‘Serving on Groups’ training curriculum, offering the program live, and also via Skype and webinar. When the webinars are over, they are posted to the Parent Center website for use at any time.

In California, Parent Center staff use the ‘Parent Leadership Curriculum,’ developed by Family Voices to help prepare families to be advisors. Because of the linguistic diversity in that state, they plan to offer the full program in Spanish this year. They are also using the ‘Serving on Groups’ curriculum.

Direct Support to Families

Many states provide direct support to parents in the form of stipends and scholarships. In California, a state well known for traffic in urban areas and long distances in rural areas, Parent Centers provide ‘gas cards’ to help parents pay for transportation. They also offer scholarships for parents to attend conferences from other organizations.

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Direct Engagement with local SEPAC

In **Kansas**, Parent Centers have been invited to provide training on the SEPAC model. Districts there realize that the groups need training and support through the life cycle so the Parent Centers train existing groups, and in districts looking to start a group.

“Some of the LEAs have invited us (PTI) to provide training for their local SEPAC. This has been done both to create interest at the startup of a group, as well as for long-standing groups. Some of the SEPACs disseminate information about PTI activities to try to engage parents.”

- LESLI GIRARD, FAMILIES TOGETHER, KANSAS

In **New York**, Parent Centers staff serve directly on a SEPAC as a voting member.

“Buffalo has a Special Education Parent Advisory Committee. It is a formal Committee of the Board of Education. The purpose is to provide advice to the special education department and provide support to families. Parent Network of West New York serves as the only community member.”

- SUSAN BARLOW, PARENT NETWORK OF WESTERN NEW YORK, NEW YORK

In **California**, Parent Centers provide trainings, host two meetings a year with SEAC chairs so they can collaborate and maximize resources. They also offer one-to-one support via phone, as well as in-person clinic appointments.

In **Michigan**, Parent Center leaders take an active role in mentoring individual parents as advisors.

“Currently, our PTI is pretty heavily involved in trying to mentor parents to be involved in PACs, to take leadership roles to help facilitate PACs to be a true parent engagement activity.”

- NICOLE MILLER, MICHIGAN ALLIANCE FOR FAMILIES, MICHIGAN

In **Pennsylvania**, Parent Center leaders train families, and attend local meetings.

“We make sure we connect to each of the local task forces, and we have had a number of individuals who have gone through our parent leadership program who go on to serve in a leadership role on their local task force.”

“We try to have a PEAL staff member attend at least one meeting for each local task force.”

- JEANNINE H. BRINKLEY, PEAL CENTER, PENNSYLVANIA

- continues

In **Rhode Island**, the state special education regulations (300.900) specifically direct each LEA to contract with the Rhode Island designated Parent Training and Technical Assistance Agency or other community-based non-profit parent organization in order to provide support to the committee. The mandated technical assistance includes the role of advisory committees in advocating for children, state and federal regulations, community resources, strategic planning and development of an annual report to the school committee.

State-funded Training and Support

In Virginia, the state DOE has funds for the Parent Center to provide training.

In Michigan, PTI staff present training at ISD on topics such as IEP Basics, IEP and Beyond, and Personal Curriculum (if students need a different curriculum aligned with standard one). They also have a training called ‘Skills for Effective Parent Advocacy.’ The local SEAC meetings are not parent-led; typically they are district-led (the ISD staff lead the sessions).

Guides and Print Materials

In several states, Parent Centers have taken a proactive role in supporting local SEPACs through the development and dissemination of guides, brochures and flyers.

In **Minnesota**, PACER has developed a comprehensive 118-page training program to help parents become active leaders of their local SEPAC. Rich with resources, including job descriptions, and tips to energize the SEPAC, the guide can be used as a whole, or broken down into its 12 individual modules.

In **New Jersey**, SPAN Advocacy received state funding in 2016 to produce a guide to develop and run local SEPACs. In addition to being posted on SPAN’s website, the guide is also on the NJDOE website, and is being used as a framework for part one of this guide.

Making It Happen in Your State

Where should you begin if your state does not have local SEPACs?

Local engagement through SEPACs **IS** possible *without* enabling rules or legislation, but it is more likely to be carried out in a uniform manner if there are a few rules or guidelines from state government. Change can begin locally and grow organically to a statewide system.

Here are some ideas:

- 1 Start hyper-local with your own school district to establish a local SEPAC. Use the strategies in Section I of this guide to get the ball rolling. Who better than a local parent leader?
- 2 Look for local examples of parents as advisors to local school districts working in other areas, such as Title I. Use video, social media, trainings, and other tools to promote stories of successful collaborations and positive outcomes that came about as a result of well-organized parent advisors.
- 3 Leverage the good work of the state’s Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). Each state SEAC is required to have a period of public comment. Work with local parent leaders interested in being part of a local SEPAC to bring the message to state advisors and urge them to take action.

- continues

In **Virginia**, the Parent Center developed a comprehensive guide to operate local SEPACs.

“We have a guidebook with everything from recruiting to running a meeting on our state page. We do workshops through the PTI.”

- KRISTIN KANE, PEATC, VIRGINIA

A Note About Laws, Rules and Regulations

Even in those states that currently require local SEPACs, there are vast differences in the ways in which they are established and used at the local level. In fact, some districts do not have them when they are required to, or have an ineffective SEPAC that operates in name only. No laws are self-enforcing, and rules and regulations are never a substitute for an attitude of collaboration and a commitment to using parents as advisors.

It is important, however, that there be movement towards a commitment to state-sanctioned SEPACs. Without it, SEPACs are at risk of coming and going.

“We have our PTOs, and some are specially for special education parents to relay concerns to the district. You might see an advisory group every now and again, but it kind of burns out...it does not hold any weight.”

- CARRIE WOODCOCK, MAINE PARENT FEDERATION

Making It Happen in Your State *continued*

- 4 Reach out to colleagues in states in which local SEPACs are active and invite them to speak at your conferences, webinars and other events to build interest and momentum.
- 5 Develop and submit proposals to speak at statewide conferences hosted by major stakeholders (Special Education Directors, State’s School Board Association). Share the concept of the local SEPAC and describe how it can improve local services.
- 6 Build partnerships with other organizations whose missions include parents as advisors for change (see page ##).
- 7 Leverage requirements for ESSA’s emphasis on parent engagement to help establish local SEPACs in your state (see page ##).

TOOLS FOR CHANGE

ESSA: From Parent ‘Involvement’ to Parent ‘Engagement’

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed into law in 2015, replacing the *No Child Left Behind Act*. This bipartisan measure reauthorized the 50-year-old *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), the national education law reaffirming a commitment to equal opportunity for all students.

Parent and family engagement and consultation have always been a key piece of the law, focused on the low-income parents of ‘Title I-participating’ children. New language in ESSA emphasizes an important shift—no longer is it acceptable for schools to simply have parent ‘involvement’, the law now requires parent ‘engagement’ - a much higher standard.

The state and local ESSA Plan is often overlooked as a vehicle for special education parent engagement. ESSA specially mentions that school districts MAY establish a parent advisory board to represent families in evaluating school policy. SEPACs can be an important resource in helping states meet the goals spelled out in their ESSA plans. In fact, in California the ESSA plan specifically mentions that state’s local parent advisory councils.

“If they are getting Title 1 funds, they have to have a parent advisory group. In Maine, there is a rubric for parent involvement through ESSA that includes a parent and family engagement policy, but no one is enforcing that.”

- CARRIE WOODCOCK, MAINE PARENT FEDERATION

Did you know?

- Title I schools must develop a written policy on parent and family engagement, developed jointly with families.
- Schools may receive Title I funding only if they conduct outreach to **ALL** parents.
- Title I schools are required to coordinate and integrate parent engagement activities with other relevant programs.
- When ‘Parent involvement’ is one of the outcome measures in a state’s ESSA plan, local SEPACs can be an effective strategy.
- The law requires that districts build dual capacity. As such, they must provide specialized training to teachers and school leaders, with the assistance of parents, about the value of parental input and how to work with parents as equal partners.



TIP: Parent Centers can access funding through the local district or the state ESSA plan to help develop SEPACs at the local level.

“We are a vast rural state with a small population, so some districts have one advisory group to serve several functions. We have a lot of districts with Title I funding, so they have a parent advisory function, but it may not be specific to special education.”

- CARLA MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA PARENT CONNECTION, SOUTH DAKOTA

To learn more: <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/ESSA-Quick-guides-on-top-issues.pdf>.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS TO BUILD EFFECTIVE LOCAL SEPACS IN YOUR STATE

While resources may be limited, leveraging partnerships is one way for Parent Centers to help build support for a state requirement for local SEPACs, and, to support local SEPACs as they are getting started. Once statewide partners share your vision for parents as valued advisors, they are more likely to work with you toward change.

In the states in which local SEPACs are active, some of the partners are:

The State Department of Education—In nearly every state with local SEPACs in place, the state’s DOE offers some form of information, guidance and/or technical assistance, often partnering with a Parent Center. The state’s DOE may distribute state or federal funds to support projects to build, sustain, and improve local SEPACs. In some states, the DOE has funded PTIs to develop videos, training or guidebooks to help support the development and continued work of local SEPACs. In some states the state’s Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) provides support and information, and will seek information from the local SEPACs for their own work.

Strategies for Engagement:

- Encourage parents to attend and speak at State Board Open Public Hearings.
- Consider meetings with DOE leaders to introduce and connect with local SEPACs.
- Engage with state leaders around the development of your state’s ESSA Plan (See page 48).

State Special Education Advisory Council—Because of its advisory nature, the state’s SEAC is a natural partner to help support and sustain local SEPACs. In at least one state, the state’s SEAC asks local SEPACs to report to them on the needs of students at the local level. And in Colorado the state’s SEAC, together with the state’s DOE, developed and disseminated a guidebook on local SEPACs, even though that state does not require them.

Strategies for Engagement:

- Attend and comment at public meetings.
- Promote awareness of the work of SEPACs in your state or, if they do not exist in your state, in other states.
- Encourage your state’s SEAC to promote the concept of local SEPACs.
- Share information from this guide with your SEAC.

“We are really lucky in our district because a member of our local SEAC was also the state’s SEAC president. We are lucky to have someone who is knowledgeable and can bridge some of our local discussion with state level discussion.”

- KRISTIN KANE, PEATC, VIRGINIA

- continues

State Councils on Developmental Disabilities (Councils)

are federally funded, self-governing organizations charged with identifying the most pressing needs of people with developmental disabilities in their state or territory. Councils are committed to advancing public policy and systems change that help these individuals gain more control over their lives. State Councils work to address identified needs by conducting advocacy, systems change, and capacity building efforts that promote self-determination, integration, and inclusion. Key activities include conducting outreach, providing training and technical assistance, removing barriers, developing coalitions, encouraging citizen participation, and keeping policymakers informed about disability issues. Every 5 Years, Councils are required to develop a plan to map out priorities for the coming years.

In some states, Councils have provided grant funding, child care and travel stipends and other forms of financial support to help parents participate in SEPACs, as well as related conferences and training programs. Many Councils have community-generated grant opportunities that can be used to help organize, train and support families who want to take a more active and engaged role in a local SEPAC.

While not directly related to SEPACs, many state Councils fund or provide a program called *Partners in Policymaking*, a nationally recognized advocacy training program. As the name implies, the goal of *Partners in Policymaking* is to educate participants to be active partners with those who make policy.

And in some states, the Council has working groups, task forces or subcommittees that take up special issues, including education and parent/consumer engagement.

Strategies for Engagement:

- Testimony or public comment at Council Meetings.
- Grant or funding opportunities for special projects.
- Provide input on State Plan.
- Volunteer to be part of a workgroup or subcommittee around issues of parent engagement in special education.

University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Services (UCEDD)

Since 1963, University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service (UCEDD) have been working to accomplish a shared vision that foresees a nation in which all Americans, including Americans with disabilities, participate fully in their communities. Independence, productivity, and community inclusion are key components of this vision. Currently, sixty-seven UCEDDs in every state and territory are located in a university setting.

Strategies for Engagement:

- Work to ensure that professional preparation programs for teachers, and educators emphasize the important role of parents as advisors.
- Advocate that guest speakers brought in for conferences and lecture series address the topic of SEPACs and parents as advisors.

- continues

Local and Statewide NGOs can be a resource to help get a SEPAC in your state. Some Parent Center leaders have worked with colleagues at organizations such as The Arc and Learning Disabilities Associations.

Strategies for Engagement:

- Co-sponsor workshops and conferences to highlight the concepts and benefits of SEPACs.
- Blog or provide content for their social media and newsletters to promote the benefits of local SEPACs.

Centers for Independent Living are a consumer-controlled, community-based, cross-disability, nonresidential private nonprofit agencies that are designed and operated within a local community by individuals with disabilities and provide an array of independent living services. Among the core services they provide are individual and system advocacy, and transition assistance for youth, so the partnership opportunities are natural. In some states, the independent living centers offer training and support, and guest speakers.

Protection and Advocacy System

In some states, the Statewide Protection and Advocacy System can be a partner for outreach and training to help families get engaged as advisors.

PART III

RESOURCES

RESOURCES

Alliance for Excellent Education

This website includes easy to use information about ESSA plans in every state.

<https://all4ed.org/issues/>

Beyond the Bake Sale: A Checklist to Determine How Well is Your School Bridging Racial, Class and Cultural Differences

<http://www.sfusd.edu/en/assets/sfusd-staff/Racial%20Class%20&%20Cultural%20Differences.pdf>

Family Engagement Toolkit, California DOE

<https://www.wested.org/resources/family-engagement-toolkit/>

IDEA State Advisory Panels (SAP) and State Interagency Coordinating Councils

<https://collab.osepideasthatwork.org/sap-sicc/>

Minority Parent and Community Engagement: Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Closing the Gaps in Student Achievement

http://www.maldef.org/assets/pdf/MCO_MALDEF%20Report_final.pdf

National Center for Family and Community Connection with Schools

<http://www.sedl.org/>

National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships

<http://www.pta.org/nationalstandards>

Parent Center Hub

The Center for Parent Information and Resources maintains a list of the OSEP-funded Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resources Centers serving families of children with disabilities in every state and U.S. territory.

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/?s=family+engagement>

Parent Engagement Toolkit and Family Matters

https://www.michigan.gov//mde/0,4615,7-140-6598_81739-425428--,00.html

Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (PDF)

<http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>

RESOURCES *(continued)*

Research on Parent Involvement with Diverse Families

<http://www.pacer.org/cultural-diversity/research-literature.asp>

Robert's Rules of Order

<http://www.robertsrules.org/>

Serving on Groups

<http://www.servingongroups.org>

Signetwork Family Engagement Resources

A virtual library of curated resources on topics in family engagement, including on Building Partnerships.

http://signetwork.org/content_pages/184-family-engagement#building

The World Café

The World Café is a structured conversational process intended to facilitate open and intimate discussion, and link ideas within a larger group to access 'collective intelligence' or collective insight.

<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>

Tips for Administrators, Teachers, and Families: How to Share Data Effectively

<https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Tips-for-Administrators-Teachers-and-Families-How-to-Share-Data-Effectively>

OUR PROCESS

We used a three-pronged effort to develop Section II of this guide. This was not a comprehensive research effort, but rather, an effort to gather qualitative information from Parent Center leaders about activity in their state and their efforts to support local SEPACs.

- **Survey**—We surveyed more than 400 Parent Center leaders and staff to learn more about interests and priorities for this guide and ways in which Parent Centers interface with and support parents as advisors, whether on SEPAC or other groups. Their candid responses gave us a starting point for this guide. Scores of respondents indicated a willingness to take part in a phone interview, allowing our team to drill down and get more details about state activities.
- **Interviews**—Based on the survey results, the project team carried out detailed interviews with leaders at Parent Centers across the country in those states where SEPACs are present at the local or intermediate unit level. 19 Leaders from 14 states responded to our requests, and shared their views, experiences and perspectives.
- **Research**—With guidance from state-level leaders, the team looked at enabling state legislation, as well as rules and regulations to implement that legislation (where it exists) to find common threads and look for trends, themes and best practice. We asked parent leaders to send us copies of guides, videos, power point and other training and informational materials so we could review the content and learn more about what is happening on the ground.

TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Local SEPAC Start Up Checklist

- Identify SEPAC Mission, purpose and function.
- Determine the role of the Special Education Director.
- Create a diverse membership.
- Build Stakeholder representation.
- Establish operating procedures (bylaws, norms).
- Hold orientation/planning meeting.
- Advertise and promote meetings.
- Set priorities.
- Establish communication and consensus-building strategies.
- Determine annual activities and projects.
- Review annual accomplishments and decide on next steps.

Adapted from 'A Guide for Local Special Education Advisory Committees in Colorado,' © 2010 produced by the Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) and Colorado Department of Education, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/CSEAC.asp> (303) 866-6943.

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Sample SEPAC Job Description

This position has primary responsibility for working with other SEPAC members to fulfill the following functions outlined:

- Advise the local school district of needs in the education of children with disabilities.
- Participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities.
- Submit periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board.
- Assist the local school district in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services.
- Review the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board.
- Participate in the review of the local school district's annual plan.

Individuals in this position work closely with the local director of special education. Other responsibilities include:

- Review and abide by SEPAC bylaws.
- Attend regularly scheduled local SEPAC meetings.
- Maintain an ongoing knowledge of special education law.
- Be informed of activities of the committee and familiar with current school division special education plans.
- Read the minutes of each meeting; advise the chair of any corrections or additions.
- Participate in the work of the SEPAC, including serving on subcommittees when required.
- Encourage parents and other community members to join/attend the SEPAC.
- Participate in community awareness activities to increase visibility of the local SEPAC.
- Focus on systems change, not personal grievances or individual advocacy.
- Work collaboratively with other SEPAC members and school division leadership and personnel.

Adapted from 'A Guide for Local Special Education Advisory Committees in Virginia,' © 2011. Used with permission from the Center for Family Involvement at the Partnership for People with Disabilities at the Virginia Commonwealth University. 804-828-3876. All rights reserved. http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/committees_advisory/special_ed/local_sped_advisory_committees/index.shtml

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Sample Mission Statements

- 1 Our mission is to facilitate communication between students, parents, community members, administrators, and the Board of Education, for the purpose of improving the quality of district-wide special education policies, programs, and practices. The (district name) SEPAC offers the opportunity to raise questions, to voice your concerns, and to provide direct input to administrators regarding Special Services and the Board of Education.
- 2 The mission of the (district name) SEPAC is to facilitate collaboration between students, parents, staff, the Board of Education, and the community in order to promote inclusion, understanding of, respect for, and support of all children with special needs in our community.
- 3 The (district name) Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) is a district-wide volunteer organization. We offer advice, provide information, and make available resources to parents of children with special educational needs. We work closely with the (district name) Child Study Team to identify areas of need from (grade levels). We are parents of children with learning differences and we are willing to share our experience and information with you. The (district name) SEPAC is a supportive, informative, and encouraging forum for you and your child. It is our goal to empower you, the parent, to become an effective advocate for your child.
- 4 The mission of the (district name) Special Education Parental Advisory Council (SEPAC) is to encourage honest and effective communication, understanding, and mutual respect in a supportive partnership inclusive of all students, parents, educators, and the community at large in an effort to ensure the delivery of appropriate services to students with disabilities.

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Sample Copy for a Flyer

SEPAC's role:

- To provide direct input on the policies, programs, and practices that affect services and supports for students with disabilities.
- To increase the involvement of families of children with special needs.
- To advise on issues that affect the education, health, and safety of students with special needs.

Who should attend a SEPAC meeting?

- Anyone in the district with a student or students with disabilities.
- Anyone with a student or students eligible for or receiving services under an IEP or 504 plan.

What happens at a SEPAC meeting?

- Concerns related to a group of students are shared and discussed.
- District representatives provide updates related to special services in the school district and at the state and national levels.
- Parents have adequate time to discuss issues among themselves and plan the agenda for the next meeting.
- Speakers, other district leaders, and individual staff members may be invited, based upon requests from the SEPAC.

What else can a member of the SEPAC do to advance the mission?

- Volunteer to be a parent representative regarding issues and concerns raised at your individual school.
- Remember that SEPAC meetings are not the forum for a discussion about individual students or a child's IEP. Topics are limited to those which impact all students or a group of students. Additionally, these meetings are for parents only. It is not appropriate to have your child attend these meetings.

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TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Sample SEPAC Bylaws

The SEPAC will provide input and make recommendations on special education policy, programs, and practices to the district.

SEPAC members will act as liaisons to share comments and concerns with school leaders.

A secretary will be appointed to coordinate activities, attend meetings, and take minutes at SEPAC meetings. Meeting minutes and an agenda will be distributed prior to all meetings.

Meetings will be held at a variety of times and locations and will be announced on the SEPAC website. Notices will be available in every school and will be distributed to parents, including those in out-of-district placements, via print and email.

Principals, PTO Presidents, and Child Study Teams will assist in identifying parents who may want to be part of the SEPAC.

Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised shall govern all meetings in all cases in which they are applicable, and in which they are not in conflict with these bylaws.

The SEPAC will work to ensure that membership reflects the linguistic, religious, racial, cultural and socio-economic diversity of the local school community and includes members from each preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school, as well as at least one parent of a student receiving services out-of-district.

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Members Present: _____
Recorder: _____

Today's Date: _____
Date/Time/Place of Next Meeting: _____

| Agenda Item | Person Initiating | Summary of Discussion/Task List | Action Decision | Person to Follow Up | Target Date Completion |
|--|-------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Parent Input- Access to Library- Elem school | SEPAC | Students in third grade are unable to use the library. There are stairs and one child is in a wheelchair so the entire class does not go to library. | Build a ramp so all students have access to the library. TD will contact the/access | TD will contact the principal and set a deadline for completion | Principal by Dec 1. Deadline for completion Dec 20. |
| Parent Input- Social Skills instruction needed | SEPAC | Parents concerned that lack of social skills instruction impacts education, students are bullied and having difficulty participating in group projects. DSS had no funding for social skills. | DSS and SEPAC leaders will reach out to local universities to find students interested in running social skills programs as interns. | DSS & TD SEPAC Co-Leader | Dec 12 |
| SEPAC Input | SEPAC | SEPAC would like visible location on district website and on each school website, ability to share contact and meeting information. | SEPAC information will be posted on district and school websites. Parent reps of schools to check to make sure information is updated on school websites. | DSS will contact webmaster to add SEPAC to website under Student Services | At last one week before next meeting |
| District Input- New Transition Coordinator | DSS | The district Transition Coordinator will be looking at improving programs and transition services. | Parents would like a meeting with Transition Coordinator to share concerns, discuss programs and how parents can help with community job coaching locations. | DSS TD | Hire date Dec Meeting date in Jan |
| District Input Professional Development | DSS | 113 district paraprofessionals will be attending a training on Positive Behavior Supports. | This training may reduce the use of restraint by teaching staff de-escalation techniques and to help students self-regulate their behaviors. | | Training is on PD Half day Nov 30 |
| Possible Agenda Items for Next Meeting: | | | Odds and Ends List Next Meeting Date: | | |
| 1. 2. 3. | | | 1. 2. 3. | | |

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Members Present: _____
 Recorder: _____

Today's Date: _____
 Date/Time/Place of Next Meeting: _____

| Agenda Item | Person Initiating | Summary of Discussion/Task List | Action Decision | Person to Follow Up | Target Date Completion |
|---|-------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Possible Agenda Items for Next Meeting: | | | Odds and Ends List Next Meeting Date: | | |
| 1. | | | 1. | | |
| 2. | | | 2. | | |
| 3. | | | 3. | | |
| 4. | | | 4. | | |
| 5. | | | 5. | | |

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| List possible topics for discussion at a SEPAC meeting. | Is this topic... | | What are some ways that this issue can be addressed/resolved? |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Individual? (address through IEP) | Systemic? (affects most/ all students) | |
| 1. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| 2. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| 3. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| 4. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

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| What information do you still need? |
| With whom will you share the information you learned today? |
| Who do you need to speak with to move forward with your local SEPAC? |
| What are your next steps? |

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| What outcome do we want? |
| Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome? |
| What action will we take to achieve that outcome? |
| What help do we need to achieve this? |

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The following form can be used by SEPAC members and the director of special education to get an impression of how well the SEPAC is doing. Each member and director of special education should complete the form about four weeks before the meeting at which the results will be reviewed. Ideally, a subcommittee of the SEPAC will receive the completed forms, collate the results, and write a report indicating the number of respondents who rated the SEPAC for each of the 12 considerations.

| Considerations | 5 Strongly Agree | 4 Agree | 3 Neutral | 2 Disagree | 1 Strongly Disagree |
|---|------------------|---------|-----------|------------|---------------------|
| 1. SEPAC members have full and common understanding of the functions, roles, and responsibilities of the SEAC. | | | | | |
| 2. The SEPAC has clear and easy to understand by-laws. | | | | | |
| 3. The SEPAC has clear priorities based on objective assessment of needs. | | | | | |
| 4. The SEPAC has established procedures for reporting needs for the education of children with disabilities and making recommendations to the school board. | | | | | |
| 5. The SEPAC seeks diverse input in developing recommendations to the school board. | | | | | |
| 6. The SEPAC effectively outreaches to special education constituencies. | | | | | |

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http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/committees_advisory/special_ed/local_sped_advisory_committees/index.shtml

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| Considerations | 5 Strongly Agree | 4 Agree | 3 Neutral | 2 Disagree | 1 Strongly Disagree |
|---|------------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| 7. SEPAC meetings facilitate focus and progress on important issues and matters. | | | | | |
| 8. The SEPAC receives regular reports on budgets, program performance, and other important matters. | | | | | |
| 9. The SEPAC regularly monitors and evaluates progress on priority issues. | | | | | |
| 10. All necessary skills and stakeholders are represented on the SEPAC. | | | | | |
| 11. The SEPAC conducts ongoing training for its members. | | | | | |
| 12. School board and division personnel are responsive to the work of the SEPAC. | | | | | |

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