



*SPAN Parent
Advocacy Network*

Special Education Parent Advisory Groups in New Jersey

*A Guide to Developing and Conducting
an Effective Group*



Statewide Parent Advocacy Network

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INTRODUCTION

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.
- African proverb

More than 40 years ago, Congress drafted the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA*, then called the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*. The measure opened the door for every American child with disabilities to have a free, appropriate public education. At the center of the act, Congress established a team approach – parents and educators working together to review challenges, explore options, and make decisions for each child.

The very teamwork and collaboration that are at the core of *IDEA* are also at the core of the Special Education Advisory Group process. Special Education Parent Advisory Groups – SEPAGs – engage parents, community leaders, and school district staff in collaborative teamwork to improve education, not only for those with disabilities, but for all children. SEPAGs ensure that there is a forum for meaningful parental input to the local school district, with the opportunity for system-level change.

The key to any successful partnership is meaningful collaboration and exchange of ideas. This guide was developed with that in mind and is intended to offer a road map to help bring stakeholders together, suggest strategies to help stakeholders engage in dialogue, and offer best practices to help them work together to benefit the local community.

Just as no two children are identical, no two SEPAGs will be identical. In fact, the rules and regulations around SEPAGs leave many choices up to each community. This presents both challenges and opportunities.

The main challenges are for each school community to develop and run a SEPAG that is aligned with the unique needs of the school district, bringing in diverse perspectives, and setting the tone for productive discussion, collaboration, and change.

The opportunities to improve the district’s school community, climate, and education for all students are unlimited.

Debra Jennings,
SPAN Executive Co-Director

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Debra Jennings".

Peggy McDonald, Acting Assistant
Commissioner, Division of Learning Supports
and Specialized Services, NJDOE

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Peggy McDonald".

SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY GROUPS

What is a Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG)?

A Special Education Parent Advisory Group, or SEPAG (sea-pag) is a state-mandated, district-level, parent-driven group charged with providing input to the local school district on system-level challenges in special education and related services.



Each district board of education shall 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 (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.2(h))



The regulation allows parents and school district leaders to create and run an advisory group that meets local needs. SEPAG requirements open the door to collaboration that can make a difference.

A SEPAG should be structured to benefit all students with disabilities, not just a single group of students, or a single issue. The more inclusive a SEPAG is, the more opportunities there are to achieve positive outcomes.

READERS WILL LEARN:

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

What is the purpose and function of a SEPAG?

A SEPAG gives parents the opportunity to provide direct input to their school district about policies, programs, practices, and services that have an impact on students with disabilities and their families. An effective SEPAG can increase the proactive involvement of families by inviting input that can be used to shape local special education policy.

An effective SEPAG 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; and,
- improve district culture and climate.

Who can be a member of a SEPAG?

Parents are the core members of a SEPAG. This includes parents of children with disabilities who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) who are educated in schools within or outside of the student's home district. Parents do not need special training or background knowledge to be a member of a SEPAG.

Other members may include:

- school leaders, including the District Supervisor of Special Services and/or members of the Board of Education;
- teachers, Child Study Team members, and other school professionals;
- students and former students;
- other parents committed to improving education in their district; and
- community leaders and other citizens.

SEPAGS should ensure that all families are represented, even if their children are in different schools: "out-of-district does not mean "out of the community." Many SEPAGs ensure that each school in the district be represented. In addition, it is vital that membership reflect the diversity of the local school community.

The size and makeup of a SEPAG are not defined by the state. These decisions are up to each SEPAG. Leadership terms, membership terms, and other formal aspects of SEPAG membership vary from district to district and are sometimes spelled out in bylaws developed by the individual SEPAG.

SEPAG membership and procedures should be as inclusive as possible. There is a role for anyone interested in becoming informed about special education programs and services.

What are the benefits of an effective SEPAG?

- **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 SEPAGs 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 for students and their families.
- **Collaborative problem solving** – SEPAGs 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 SEPAG 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** – SEPAGs can strengthen the bridge between the school district and families. SEPAG members who educate themselves about school policies and channels of communication can be a source for parents who may need information, support, and resources from their school, and can steer them in the appropriate direction.
- **Information sharing** – SEPAGs can provide an opportunity for districts to share information with *all* 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 SEPAGs are responsive to the identified needs of the school community.
- **Effective resource allocation** - Parents can provide valuable input regarding allocating resources and establishing priorities.

Coming Together for Systems Change

Parents come together for many reasons – support, friendship, event planning, advocacy, information, and active response. While each of these purposes is important, a SEPAG is different.

A SEPAG is NOT:

an advocacy assistance group, which focuses on upholding rights for children and advocating for change from outside the system;

a limited campaign dedicated to addressing a single issue or immediate concern; or

a Special Education PTO or PTA, which might plan carnivals, classroom activities, dances, fundraisers, or other events.

A PARENT ASKS...

Why should I get involved in my local SEPAG?

Participation in a SEPAG offers the opportunity to raise questions, voice concerns, and provide direct input to district and school leadership.

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

CHAPTER 1 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- Every school district in New Jersey is required to have a SEPAG.
- A SEPAG is part of the local school district, not a private or independent group.
- A SEPAG is an advisory group that addresses system-level challenges affecting students with disabilities and their families.
- A SEPAG is not a parent support group.
- A SEPAG, by definition, is parent-driven, and often parent-led.
- Membership of the SEPAG is up to the group.
- SEPAG membership should be as diverse and inclusive as possible.

2

THE VALUE OF PARENTS AS ADVISORS

Learning, Listening, and Leading

Effective engagement of parent advisors can benefit both parents and school districts. When parental input is valued and there is a vehicle for meaningful communication, parents are empowered to facilitate change that matters.

When school leaders are able to work with a cohesive, well-organized parent community that provides useful, coordinated input, they are able to move ideas into action. It is a win-win.

The key is mutual respect.



READERS WILL LEARN:

- The vital need for parent engagement and input.
- The difference between an individual issue and a systemic issue.

Why should school leaders value parent input?

By definition, a SEPAG is a **parent** advisory group. Best practices call for a parent-driven process that works closely with schools and the larger community. Parents can offer input and strategic solutions that help schools overcome challenges, and make decisions related to budgets and resource priorities, for special education programs and services.

When parents are 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.’ Parents and school leaders, by establishing sustained, positive relationships, can work together in the best interest of students.

All SEPAG members can ask:



- How does the school district work to bring a spirit of collaboration to the table?
- How do members show respect for the perspectives and opinions of others?
- How can the school district establish and demonstrate mutual respect for the roles of parent leadership and school leadership?
- How does the structure and process of the SEPAG allow all stakeholders, especially parents, to both obtain and share information with school district leaders?

Parents can ask:



- 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 can ask:



- How can I help parents look beyond their own families’ 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 those who are frustrated, angry, or disgruntled?
- How does the district create a culture in which parents feel supported and comfortable enough to speak freely?

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. Taking action on behalf of a single child is “individual advocacy*.” While this is vital, the goal of the SEPAG is to look at systemic issues – that is, challenges and opportunities that affect more than one student or family.

An effective SEPAG invites, collects, and coordinates individual stories and perspectives from parents. It then 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 SEPAGs move from an individual issue to systemic change.

*Parents should raise concerns or questions about an individual student with the child’s case manager or the school principal.



“

Both parents and school professionals involved with a SEPAG need to drop their egos, fears, and agendas that don't go anywhere. It's not easy to do, and it takes time and patience on both sides. But when parent advisors bring well-organized insight and suggestions to me, we can work together as a team to set priorities and get results.

”

– School District Leader

There are three important elements of this story that resulted in successful resolution:

- 1 The individual issue – one child bullying at lunch – was reframed and validated as a systemic issue. The problem was larger than a single disruptive child – it reflected an unmet need for many.
- 2 A collaborative meeting environment encouraged parents, school leaders, and community members to speak freely, but with an eye toward serving the advisory function.
- 3 Parent advisors and school leaders used well-structured collaboration. Parents offered vital input and ideas. When the first solution was not viable, participants continued the conversation until the group found a solution – in this case, one that was “budget neutral.”

From Individual Perspective to Systemic Action

A SEPAG outreach meeting brought together parents, the district supervisor of special education, and school personnel for a meeting at which a community professional spoke about social skills. During the Q&A, a parent voiced concerns that her child was getting into fights, both at home and in the classroom. Others shared similar concerns.

A topic-focused meeting, facilitated by a community speaker, made it easy to reframe and validate these individual issues as systemic. The issue was not “a disruptive bully,” but an unmet need for social skills support in the lunchroom. The SEPAG identified the issue as a systemic one, clearly affecting multiple children.

Since the meeting was structured around the topic of social skills, participants already had a framework for identifying the problem. Discussion led to a number of possible solutions, including offering social skills group sessions for children during school lunch hour. However, school leadership indicated that staffing wouldn't be available within the short term when it was needed.

The group did some brainstorming and one parent suggested inviting local college students majoring in Special Education to serve as interns during lunch to facilitate social learning. District leaders were immediately responsive. The group was able to take input from parents, identify a systemic challenge, propose a range of solutions, and agree on an approach. The District Supervisor reached out to the local university and now interns are holding social skills groups with children at district schools during lunch hour.

“

Our SEPAG lets parents voice concerns and connect with the school and community to learn and communicate in friendly settings – and it goes beyond that. Our core group meets regularly with our District Supervisor to discuss bigger-picture issues that parents share, and suggest solutions that make the most of school and community resources.

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– Parent member of a SEPAG

CHAPTER 2 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- SEPAGs should be parent-driven and parent-led.
- SEPAGs need – and should value – parent input.
- The goal of the SEPAG is to look at “system issues” – that is, challenges and opportunities that affect larger groups of students.
- Conversations and brainstorming can help the SEPAG find a creative solution that can benefit children, parents, schools, and community.
- Effective SEPAGs 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 SEPAG

There are more than 600 school districts in New Jersey. Just as each one is unique, each SEPAG is unique. Some districts have a long and successful track record of seeking and using parental input to improve special education. Other districts are utilizing parental input for the first time. Whatever its history, a well-structured SEPAG can lay the foundation for taking advantage of the positive influence of parental input, and can be a vehicle for effective communication and change.

It takes time, effort, and patience to build an effective, sustainable SEPAG. The best SEPAGs are those that move beyond compliance – that is, simply having a SEPAG and holding meetings – to true collaboration around the needs of students with disabilities and the school community.



READERS WILL LEARN:

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

SEPAG “Quick Start Guide” FOR PARENTS



Parents can reach out to school district leaders – typically the Superintendent, Board President, or Director of Special Services – to ask if the district has a SEPAG.

- If YES, make plans to attend the next meeting. Parents who are interested in a leadership role with the SEPAG, should find out how to become a member.
- If NO, work with district leaders to help get one started. Some districts have an active group that may include parents of students with disabilities, or a support group that performs some SEPAG functions, so there may be a need to assess the situation, and engage that group.

SEPAG “Quick Start Guide” FOR DISTRICTS



Districts starting a SEPAG can begin by reaching out to parent leaders, Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO), Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), and other parent-led organizations. Often, hosting a well-promoted introductory workshop or meeting – inviting all parents – can get the ball rolling.



Best Practice: Visit the [NJDOE OSEP website](#) and the [SPAN START Project website](#) for information and resources.

1

Develop an initial roster of potential SEPAG members. Seek representation from parents within the district who have children with different special needs, of different ages, in different schools, and in different types of programs, including public and private out-of-district programs.



Best Practice: It is important to be mindful of the various languages that may be used by the parents of the district and to be certain to consider religious, racial, cultural, and economic diversity to be sure the SEPAG reflects it.

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SEPAG

“Quick Start Guide”

FOR DISTRICTS

- *continued*

- ② Develop a short mission statement to guide the SEPAG’s work.
 -  Tools for Change: Sample mission statements from other SEPAG groups can be found in the Resources section of this guide.
 -  Best Practice: Encourage parental input from the start by engaging parents in writing the mission statement.
- ③ Set annual goals and objectives so that the SEPAG can prioritize its work.
 -  Tip: Remember, a SEPAG is a parent advisory group, focused on systems issues, not individual advocacy.
- ④ Plan different types of meetings. These may include “parent-led” group meetings; informational meetings regarding a special topic, with a speaker; “listening meetings” or parent forums held specifically to gather input; as well as meetings with school leaders (see Chapter 7, page 33 for more on this topic).
- ⑤ Develop a meeting schedule for the year. A suggested framework might be: monthly “parent-led” meetings; 4-5 informational outreach meetings with topic and speaker that bring together families and schools; and quarterly meetings with key district leaders to present input and suggestions.
 -  Tip: Hold meetings at a convenient time and a location that is accessible for people with disabilities. While it may be tempting to use a regular meeting date – for example, the first Tuesday of the month at 12 noon – some groups have found that it is better to hold meetings at different times and on different days so more parents can attend.
- ⑥ Establish basic ground rules for membership and activities.

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SEPAG “Quick Start Guide” FOR DISTRICTS - continued

- 7 Determine roles and responsibilities for SEPAG members. Tasks include taking minutes, preparing agendas, managing membership and contact information, and managing logistics (see Chapter 4, page 18, for more on this topic).



Tip: Some SEPAGs have developed descriptions of roles and responsibilities for members.

- 8 Consider the communication strategies the SEPAG will use to reach and engage parents from other groups, such as PTO, PTA, other SEPAGs, etc. (see Chapter 5, page 26, for more on this topic).



Tip: Create a simple print flyer to promote the SEPAG. Having a flyer or brochure can help to establish the SEPAG’s legitimacy and build awareness.

EFFECTIVE SEPAGS:



- Request opportunities to learn about the district, special services, and other school committees and groups.
- Get training in special education rights and policies with a focus on learning how to work in partnership with schools.
- Gain a basic understanding of school budgets, funding streams, federal and state laws and rules, local district policy and practices, and other system-level areas.
- Build relationships with PTA/PTO committees, special education teachers, and Child Study Teams.
- Connect with community resources, such as social services organizations, libraries, colleges and universities, recreational programs, and other organizations that can provide expertise and resources.

Strategies to Build Parental Engagement

Even with the best of intentions, it may be challenging to get and keep a core group of parents engaged in the SEPAG. Smaller districts, urban districts, rural districts, and very diverse districts in which there are language and cultural differences may all face unique challenges. Here are some tips *for consideration* when addressing those challenges:

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

Quick Start Checklist for SEPAGs:

- Review information on the NJDOE website and SPAN's START Project website.
- Reach out to parents representing different schools, students with different needs and different ages, and various programs, including out-of-district programs.
- Work to ensure that the SEPAG reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the district.
- Develop a short mission statement based on input from parents.
- Develop annual goals and objectives.
- Schedule meetings, being sure to include a variety of meeting types throughout the year.
- Plan for quarterly meetings with key district leaders to provide input and suggestions.
- Establish meeting protocols and basic ground rules in collaborative settings and in meetings.
- Determine roles and responsibilities for SEPAG members.
- Identify multiple members who will take minutes, prepare agendas, manage membership and contact information, and manage logistics.
- Develop and utilize tools to reach and engage parents.



Our group started with two parents and a supportive District Supervisor. What's important is to get up and running and see where it takes you.

– Parent member of a SEPAG



CHAPTER 3 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- The START Project is a valued resource for local SEPAGs.
- The most effective SEPAGs have members who truly collaborate.
- A mission statement will help SEPAG members to stay focused.
- Varied meeting formats can be used to engage families in different ways.
- It is important to understand and honor 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 SEPAG.

4

COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Best practices indicate that when parents are involved as SEPAG leaders, it establishes trust, open communication, and group effectiveness.

At the same time, school district leadership and personnel play an important role in developing, growing, and sustaining a SEPAG. Best practices suggest that school leadership should support and partner with SEPAGs, rather than lead them.

A strong parent-directed/parent-led SEPAG can provide informed input that is useful to the district and is actionable. Honest discussion and creative problem-solving can generate solutions that improve services to students – in many cases, with little or no impact on school budgets and resources.



READERS WILL LEARN:

- Examples of successful partnerships.
- Essentials to strong partnerships between schools and parents.
- Considerations around resource allocation.
- Tips for strong collaboration and partnerships.
- Strategies for conflict resolution.
- Roles and responsibilities of parents and school leaders.

Partnerships...

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

Parent-Initiated Partnership:

- Several parents within a district **wanted** to participate in a SEPAG and, after investigating, found that there wasn't an active one in place.
- They reached out to school leaders, in this case, the Director of Special Services, who was receptive. She and her staff joined them for the SEPAG training that parents had arranged.
- The Director of Special Services, teachers, and other district staff attended outreach meetings and joined parents and community members to promote an environment in which everyone shared perspectives and respected opinions.
- Parent members of the SEPAG sometimes held "parent-led" 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 SEPAG 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 SEPAG had quarterly meetings with the Director of Special Services to share their work and findings. 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 SEPAG shared its work annually with the Board of Education.

District-Initiated Partnership:

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

Both approaches built capacity and resulted in sustainable SEPAGs that continued to work in partnership with the district. In both cases, the SEPAG 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 SEPAG name – Individuals who are members should be reminded not to publish information, articles, announcements, newspaper editorials, letters, or public testimonials under the SEPAG name without group consensus.
- Meeting participation – Commit to attend, set cell phones on vibrate, engage and collaborate.
- Boundaries – SEPAG members should commit to helping other parents follow the appropriate chain of command.

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 emotional responses. Instead, they should be encouraged to take a breath in order to get more information and context. Instead of saying *“No!”* or making an accusation, members should be curious and ask, *“Why is this important to the person sharing it?”* Members should try to understand and make sense of other perspectives. When trying to make sense of input, members should identify different perspectives: *“Could this problem be part of a larger issue? Let’s break it down together.”*
- Members must be cognizant of the tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language—this is important in a group setting.

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. Keep commitments or call ahead of time when attendance is not possible.
- Remember that building trust takes time and the continued work of the SEPAG establishes a track record for good input, dependability, and accountability.
- 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 by working together with the district on behalf of all students and families.
- The best solutions are the result of viewing things from different angles. Parents can ask “How can we help here?” and present input that’s packaged to help facilitate a solution. Doing so is empowering and reassures schools that active SEPAG parents want to work cooperatively.
- 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 SEPAG members and partners is essential and that “thank you” is vital.

5 Collaborate and create a climate of mutual respect.

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

Ideas Into Action: Reaching “Yes!” with District Leaders

Parent advisors can be a resource when district leaders face challenges in obtaining buy-in with district leadership:

Members of a SEPAG and school district leaders met with a group of parents who were seeking changes in the high school program for students in self-contained classrooms. They wanted their sons and daughters to either remain in, or return to, the local district for the transition years, but they felt the in-district program was lacking. It was housed in a single room with no windows or lockers, and most other students and teachers were unaware that the students were in the building. Working with the district, parents advocated change.

Today, thanks to a collaborative effort between the SEPAG and district leaders, students are visible in the school building. They read the daily announcements in the morning and are connecting with their school community in clubs and extra-curricular activities. They run a café where they sell coffee and baked items, and they walk the halls and receive high fives from classmates. The program now has a vocational room; students change classes for core subjects; a ‘Circle of Friends’ mentoring program has been put into place, and speech therapy services are provided at community-based worksites to help students generalize skills. Parents also worked with the district to help find worksites for students to job sample.

This success story illustrates the benefits of rich partnership and collaboration – empowered parent advisors can bridge gaps between families and the district when they’re focused on addressing unmet needs at the program and policy level. Open discussion that seeks to share perspectives can build understanding and reduce conflict while saving money and time. Rather than advocating for their individual child and potentially tying up funds with litigation, parents can help the district create change for many children and can be of service to their schools. That is the potential that SEPAG-school partnerships can deliver.

 Tip: SEPAGs can submit reports annually, or more often to the local Board of Education and in accordance with local practice might invite a member of the local Board of Education to attend SEPAG meetings, events, and trainings. That way, school leaders can better understand and respond to needs.

Strategies for Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a natural part of all partnerships, and should be expected in a SEPAG. Conflict is not a sign that things are not going well; in fact, conflict can increase understanding, build group cohesion, and expand viewpoints. However, 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 SEPAG 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 SEPAG.
- Develop and maintain knowledge of regulations pertaining to the special education process.
- Attend and participate in SEPAG 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, page 39).
- 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.



I always have special education codes and chains of command handy, in print or on my phone. That way I can provide information to parents and steer them to the right resources, while I am staying within bounds of my role as an advisor.



– Parent member of a SEPAG

SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD:

- Take care of meeting logistics, including an accessible location.
- Arrange services and supports for parents, grandparents and foster parents to ensure diverse participation (childcare, accessibility of meetings, translation services, etc.).
- Direct parents to appropriate personnel when individual concerns arise.
- Communicate information in accessible, varied formats to all parents and guardians to increase accessibility.
- Identify areas of concern to which SEPAG members can provide input.

CHAPTER 4 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- Effective SEPAGs depend on a real partnership.
- District leaders can support parent leaders.
- SEPAGs can offer input regarding resource allocation.
- Ground rules are important to collaboration.
- Well-managed conflict can strengthen collaboration.
- Mutual respect is a keystone of the SEPAG process and essential to its success.
- Parents and district leaders have different roles and responsibilities.

5

GATHERING PARENTAL INPUT THROUGH OUTREACH

If a good structure can be viewed as the engine of a SEPAG, input can be viewed as the “fuel” for change. A SEPAG’s work comes from input collected from parents, educators, and other sources. A SEPAG 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 SEPAG 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 SEPAG can use to reach parents, engage them, and invite input?

SEPAGs 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 be aware of the SEPAG and its function, and invited to provide input. SEPAGs do this through the development of effective, varied outreach and communication strategies (see sample on page 27).

READERS WILL LEARN:

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



COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR SEPAGS

- 1 District leadership can distribute information through various means of communication (e.g., email, flyers/brochures, text messages, phone calls) through multiple venues and platforms (e.g., Back-to-School Night, Parent-Teacher Conferences, and other events that draw parents).
- 2 Establish a web presence and provide clear ways for parents to contact SEPAG 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 SEPAGs 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 SEPAG website, and other resources.
- 4 Use texts, email, social media groups, private forums and other forms of electronic outreach.
- 5 Start a blog or forum on the SEPAG website to share ideas, articles, and best practices.
- 6 Ask SEPAG members to attend school and community events to increase parental awareness of the SEPAG and the opportunity to provide input.
- 7 Host a "listening night" for parents to talk to SEPAG members about their concerns, experiences, and ideas.
- 8 Establish a dedicated SEPAG email account that parents can use to send input.
- 9 Use surveys that can be posted to sites, shared through social media, emailed, or printed for distribution.
- 10 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.
- 11 Invite experts to present workshops and lectures on topics of interest to parents in the district.
- 12 Make sure that all information and outreach is provided in a family-friendly manner and, if possible, translated to reach as many as possible.

What can the SEPAG do to support diverse parent participation?

A SEPAG can work to ensure that parents are able to fully participate in meetings and provide input effectively. Knowing what to do typically requires the SEPAG to ask parents, “What supports do you need in order to participate and attend meetings?”

- Some SEPAG groups have found that parents can better participate when they have 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 a hosting an online meeting or conference call.
- Printed materials (agendas, flyers, brochures), a SEPAG 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.

CHAPTER 5 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- 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 SEPAGs hold several types of meetings at different times and locations.
- SEPAGs 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 SEPAG hinges on its ability to shape the input it collects from parents into concrete issues and solutions, and to communicate it to district leaders in ways that lead to positive changes in services, policies, or programs.

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



I can do more on the school side if parents come to me with a clear agenda that identifies needs and priorities and lays out potential solutions. If the SEPAG can help identify the resources required and what they can provide and what they need to ask for, that's great. It also helps when parent advisors are informed about funding streams – they know what solutions are outside my constraints and can explore where and how they can help.

– School Leader



READERS WILL LEARN:

- Strategies for transforming input into action.
- Strategies for communicating input. Possible areas for input.
- Assessing the impact of the SEPAG's work.



TOOLS FOR CHANGE:

A problem-solving worksheet can be found in the back of this guide.



We don't address issues that are best resolved at the IEP level, but we found that parents were struggling with the transition process from 504 to IEP. That's an issue impacting many families [that] we could bring to the District Supervisor. And our SEPAG is involved in the solution – we've invited a Child Study Team leader to talk with parents at our next meeting so they better understand the forms and processes. That's a positive outcome.



– Parent member of a SEPAG

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 SEPAG can prompt input around certain topics by hosting an information forum. SEPAGs in New Jersey have addressed such areas as the following:

- District vision and future goals
- District policies and procedures
- Funding issues and resource allocation
- Staffing
- Professional development
- Accessibility and location of programs
- Inclusive education
- Out-of-district programs and services
- Transition from school to adult life
- IEPs, rights and responsibilities
- Section 504
- Related services
- Extended school year services
- Scholarship opportunities
- Unified athletics
- Transportation
- Driver education
- After-school sports
- Before care and after care

How can a SEPAG assess the impact of its work?

A critical best practice is to follow up on the input and solutions a SEPAG 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 SEPAG 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. What approaches to change seem to work best for the district and schools? How can the SEPAG better adjust its process and focus?

How can a SEPAG make its case for change?

SEPAGs 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.
- Sending letters of thanks and praise when services and supports are working well.
- Providing information to the local Board of Education.
- Offering to speak or present to the local Board of Education.



We continue to struggle with staffing issues and professional support. But we also had a surprise achievement with Unified Athletics, and we're focused now on identifying needs in a new after-care program – we're still growing our SEPAG, and we're happy that we've had successes.



– Parent member of a SEPAG

CHAPTER 6 TAKEAWAYS >>>

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

7

STRATEGIES FOR RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING

What formats should be used for SEPAG meetings?

Many SEPAGs find it best to use different meeting formats, based on the type of gathering and the goals. Some meetings may be “parent-led” meetings, while others might be parent and district meetings.

How can a SEPAG organize effective meetings?

Parent advisors have great empathy for each other’s challenges and busy schedules. It’s helpful to create a standardized approach to organizing meetings that can accommodate changing availability and needs.

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

Some SEPAGs find that a single meeting organizer works, while others divide the task among several parents. Checklists can help an organizer carry out or delegate tasks if necessary. A SEPAG can also assign one parent to start meetings with a welcome and introductions and to move the agenda along. It is critical that parent advisors 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.

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. The 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?

As an advisory group, a SEPAG should record the minutes of its meetings. Some SEPAGs 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 SEPAGs appoint a secretary to take all meeting minutes, while other SEPAGs rotate the task so that one person isn't responsible for all types of meetings.

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 are transparent, reinforce the purpose and goals, and emphasize positive results.

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 SEPAG.
- Include information about upcoming meetings and topics.

How can a SEPAG reach agreement on action steps?

SEPAGs need processes for reaching agreement on action steps. Best practices suggest keeping these processes simple and straightforward.

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

Groups may want to explore different options and processes for reaching consensus and agreement. Two popular formats 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” 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 is through consensus. 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.

How can a SEPAG help new parents feel welcome?

An effective SEPAG 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 a few 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 SEPAGs have created a new member orientation process.



In our district, we have the special education administrators join our meetings. Sometimes we resolve issues immediately, other times, they leave the room if parents want to discuss something in confidence. We invite the special service staff as well as the Board of Education to our meeting, and open our meeting to other SEPAGs as well. Also, a SEPAG member serves on a special education subcommittee of our local Board of Education. Communication flows from the SEPAG to the Board and vice-versa.

– Parent SEPAG member



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 set to vibrate, 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.
- Be clear that protecting personally identifiable information is essential, that contact information gathered from parents is not shared with schools or the community, and 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 SEPAG is not a parent support group. Stress that SEPAGs can help steer parents with individual concerns to the right resources following the appropriate chain of command. Sometimes, though, an individual concern can help to identify a systemic issue.

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

SEPAGs can use outreach meetings to build a private list of email and phone contacts. SEPAGs are not required to share member and participant lists with the community. It's important to reassure parents that contact lists are private and uphold that commitment.

CHAPTER 7 TAKEAWAYS >>>

- Effective SEPAGs use a variety of meeting formats.
- Logistical checklists can help a SEPAG stay organized.
- All SEPAGs need a meeting leader or facilitator.
- It is important to have an agenda for every meeting.
- Minutes are a vital part of the work of a SEPAG. All SEPAG communications should respect privacy.
- A SEPAG 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.
- SEPAGs need a structure for decision-making: consensus and majority rule are two popular methods.
- SEPAGs need to use and expand outreach lists.

8

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTH AND GROWTH

Using best practices can help ensure that a SEPAG 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 SEPAGs 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

- continues

READERS WILL LEARN:

- Successful operations of SEPAGs .



- 💡 Tip: College and high school students may be a free or low-cost resource for childcare.

2 Compile and store materials created for the SEPAG.

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.
- SEPAG guidelines concerning meeting etiquette
- SEPAG 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 SEPAG flyer/brochure
- Link to the New Jersey Department of Education and other useful links

Tip: Protect information with appropriate access rights.

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

Regular SEPAG 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.

SEPAG 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 SEPAG and its purpose. SEPAGs 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.

SEPAG meetings with district leadership: Best practices call for a regular meeting in which parent advisors and school leadership explore systemic issues, suggestions, and solutions.

- Use partnership and efficiency skills to frame the meeting as a structured conversation, grounded in a clear agenda that reflects insightful work with systemic input.
- Recognize that relationships between parent advisors and district leaders are always unique. Meeting formats will differ, but a common thread is a feasible agenda and agreement on what the SEPAG hopes to achieve within a quarterly meeting.
- 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.

- continues

4 Develop relationships at all levels.

A local SEPAG can help foster partnership and collaboration with families, schools, and the community both locally and across districts.

- Encourage parents to sign up as representatives 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 SEPAG 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. SEPAGs that reach out to such groups find resources for programs and services and volunteer speakers for topic meetings.
- Encourage school staff and Child Study Teams to attend outreach meetings as a part of the group.
- Successful SEPAGs 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 SEPAG representative at local Board of Education public meetings.
- Ask the District Supervisor and school staff to join a SEPAG representative at a SPAN Parent/School Roundtable. These roundtables are facilitated by the SPAN START Project to network and support parent leaders by sharing strategies and tools for running SEPAGs collaboratively and effectively. Check START Upcoming Events for a roundtable in the county.

5 Forge a network of communications channels.

- Set up social media accounts for the SEPAG.
- Request space on the district website, sites for local schools, and PTA/PTO sites.
- Set up a SEPAG email address that directs parents to SEPAG 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.

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 SEPAGs about what has worked for them and apply strategies that are a good fit for the district.

RESOURCES

New Jersey Department of Education

Division of Learning Supports and Specialized Services

- Office of Special Education Policy & Procedure

The office has a responsibility, under federal statutes and regulations, to operate a system of general supervision that monitors the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) by local education agencies (LEAs). The system is accountable for enforcing the requirements and for ensuring continuous improvement. The office supports the mission of the Department and the vision of the Division by providing leadership in establishing standards that promote improved outcomes for students with disabilities as well as consistency in the procedures public agencies implement for maintaining compliance with state and federal regulations. To accomplish the mission above, the OSEP oversees the following functions: monitoring, dispute resolution, complaint investigations, state and federal IDEA Part B grant applications and oversight, approvals of Approved Private Schools for Students with Disabilities, clinics, agencies and community transition programs, development policy, guidance, administrative code, and SEMI. The office also develops the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report in collaboration with NJOTSSS.

- Office of Special Education Professional Development

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), Office of Special Education Professional Development provides professional development, technical assistance, resources, and instructional materials to teachers, administrators, staff, and parents across the State. In addition, the Office provides support to districts seeking to implement the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) or to enhance multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that are already in place through the reinforcement of the frameworks' essential components, including but not limited to building capacity in Universal Design for Learning

(UDL) and Positive Behavior Supports (PBS). In representing the needs of students receiving special education services, the Office plans and implements professional development activities in areas related to providing the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), planning the transition of students with disabilities from school to adulthood, implementing high quality services for preschool and school-age children with disabilities, developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and accessing individual rights and entitlements.

The Office also funds four Learning Resource Centers (LRCs), strategically located across the state, that provide families of students with disabilities and the educational professionals who serve them with information, materials circulation, technical assistance, consultation, and production services.

[\(http://www.state.nj.us/education/specialed/\)](http://www.state.nj.us/education/specialed/)

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is committed to empowering families as advocates and partners in improving education, health, and mental health outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth. SPAN offers families, professionals, policy makers, and our parent center colleagues information, resources, support, and advocacy assistance that addresses effective parent involvement, child care, general and special education, dropout and bullying prevention, child welfare, health care, mental health, youth leadership, transition to adult life, incarcerated youth, military family support, violence prevention, and more.

[\(http://www.spanadvocacy.org/\)](http://www.spanadvocacy.org/)

SPAN Statewide Technical Assistance & Resource Team

The SPAN Statewide Technical Assistance & Resource Team (START) Project offers programs and services that support the engagement of families to improve outcomes for students. Assistance is available for developing and implementing parent groups in the school and community. START Project can facilitate a meeting with schools and parents that starts a conversation in a neutral setting.

RESOURCES *continued*

can also conduct onsite trainings and workshops tailored to the needs of each group. Districts can request technical assistance, resources, and information from SPAN and the SPAN START Project at any time.

The SPAN START Project holds regular Parent Leadership Roundtables that invite parent advisors, teachers, and district leaders to share feedback and educate each other about best practices for programs, services, and policies.

START Project [Email: START@spannj.org](mailto:START@spannj.org)

[START Project](#) website

For more strategies for running effective groups, check out these resources:

[Serving on Groups](#) (Sponsored by WI Parent Organizations and WI DOE)

[Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity Framework for Building Parent-School Relationships](#) (PDF)

[National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#)

[NJ PTA Official Website](#)

[NJ Department of Education](#)

[NJ Department of Education, Offices of Special Education](#)

[NJ Tiered System of Supports \(NJTSS\)](#)

[A framework of supports and interventions to improve student achievement](#)

[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.

[Parent Café](#)

A number of states are using Community and Parent Café small group discussions to bring parents together. The goal is to directly engage parents in building the protective factors needed to promote healthy outcomes for their children.

[Robert’s Rules of Order](#)

Since 1876, Robert’s Rules of Order has served as a foundational guide for conducting meetings and making decisions as a group. The guide has been adapted for use across many types of organizations and groups, and multiple channels.



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Sample Mission Statements

1

Our mission is to facilitate communication among 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.

SEPAGs are required for all school districts in New Jersey. *N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.2(h)* states that: “Each board of education shall 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.”

The (district name) SEPAG offers the opportunity to raise questions, to voice your concerns, and to provide direct input to administrators regarding Special Services. SEPAGs also provide parents and families opportunities to learn about district programs, services and resources.

2

The mission of the (district name) SEPAG is to facilitate collaboration among students, parents, staff, the Board of Education, and the community in order to promote inclusion and understanding of, respect for, and support of all children with special needs in our community.

3

The (district name) Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG) is a state-mandated, 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 preschool through grade 12. We are parents of children with learning differences, we are willing to share our experience and information with you. The (district name) SEPAG 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 Group (SEPAG) 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.



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Sample Copy for a Flyer

SEPAG'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 in school activities.
- To advise on issues that affect the education, health, and safety of students with special needs.

Who should attend a SEPAG meeting?

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

What happens at a SEPAG 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 SEPAG.

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

- Volunteer to be a parent representative regarding issues and concerns raised at your individual school.
- Remember that SEPAG meetings are not the forum for a discussion about individual students or a child's IEP. Topics are limited to those with impact on all students or a group of students.
- SEPAG meetings may prove to be for parents only. There may be times when having children at the meeting would be inappropriate. This is a decision that the SEPAG members can make ahead of time based on the topics that are to be discussed.



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Sample SEPAG Bylaws

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

SEPAG 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 SEPAG 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 SEPAG website. Notices will be available in every school and will be distributed to parents, including those in out-of-district placements, via print and e-mail.

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

“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 SEPAG will work to ensure that membership reflects the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the 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 in another school district.



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Sample Action Sheet – Agenda and Minutes

Members Present: _____ Today's Date: _____
 Recorder: _____ 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	SEPAG	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/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	SEPAG	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 SEPAG leaders will reach out to local universities to find students interested in running social skills programs as interns.	DSS & TD SEPAG Co-Leader	Dec 12
SEPAG Input	SEPAG	SEPAG would like visible location on district website and on each school web- site, ability to share contact and meeting information.	SEPAG information will be posted on district and school websites. Parent reps of schools will check to make sure information is updated on school websites.	DSS will contact webmaster to add SEPAG 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 . 4 . 5 .			1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 .		



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

SEPAG Workshop Reflection

List possible topics for discussion at a SEPAG meeting.	Is this topic...		What are some ways that this issue can be addressed/resolved?
	Individual?	Systemic?	
	(address through IEP)	(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"/>	

- continues



TOOLS FOR CHANGE

SEPAG Workshop Reflection *(continued)*

What information do you still need?

With whom will you share the information you learned today?

Whom do you need to speak with to move forward with your local SEPAG?

What are your next steps?

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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REACHING ALL FAMILIES

- **Partnerships**
- **Family Engagement**
- **Collaboration**

TOGETHER! Families Can:

- ✓ **Make a Difference**
- ✓ **Improve Special Education Programs & Services**
- ✓ **Improve Student Outcomes**

Assistance is available to support the engagement of families to improve outcomes for students with disabilities:

For Parents and Parent Leaders

- Become informed and active participants in their children's education
- Partner with educators to improve programs and practices, such as inclusion, for students with disabilities
- Start or strengthen special education parent advisory and support groups

For Schools and Districts

- Engage diverse families to improve student achievement
- Enhance parent involvement through family-educator collaboration
- Facilitate partnerships by implementing parent advisory and support groups
- Mobilize parents to become partners in school improvement efforts

Contact the START-EPD Project for assistance and for training on any of these topics.

E-mail: start@spanadvocacy.org or call SPAN: (973) 642-8100.

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