RESOURCES FOR CREATING A PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL OVERVIEW OF KEY COMPONENTS

Why should parents get involved?
Participation in a **S**pecial **E**ducation **P**arent **A**dvisory **C**ouncil (**SEPAC**) offers opportunities to raise questions, voice concerns, and provide direct input to school leadership to positively 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. A SEPAC gives a mechanism for systemic concerns to be addressed by parents and community members in a proactive and productive way.

An effective SEPAC that uses parental input can:

- Help improve educational outcomes and well-being for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities
- Help identify unmet needs and provide vetted information about important topics
- Help shape the development of programs, services, and policies and improve district culture

SEPACs do not have formal authority to issue directives or set policy. These groups function in an advisory capacity. They make recommendations and provide guidance that can be used by decision makers and local leaders.

The school community can ask:

- How does the district bring a spirit of collaboration to the table?
- How does the district respond to 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?
- How do we ensure that there is diversity in our SEPAC?

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 in all situations?
- Does the district foster a culture in which parents feel supported and comfortable 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?

Talking Points for Interested SEPAC Participants:

1. SEPAC participation is an opportunity to have a parent's voice heard at the district level both for things going well and for things that need improvement.
2. SEPAC participation deals with a systemic look into the needs of the families/students served in the district. Individual situations are not discussed.
3. SEPAC participation can help parents better understand the issues facing school districts and the 'why' of some decision making.
4. SEPAC participation is a great way to get input from diverse populations.
5. SEPAC participation means the parents who are PAC members will hear input from other parents to be able to bring those concerns and successes back to the council for consideration.
6. SEPAC engagement can help district leaders address issues proactively to reduce complaints, disputes, and due process.

The National SEPAC Guide will provide you with a good overview and foundation to begin your discussion about forming a SEPAC in your district.
Advocacy in Action: A Guide to Local Special Education Parent Advisory Councils, Newark, NJ, Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2019.

Meaningful collaboration between school districts and parents is vital to try to work together for positive outcomes for students. Please feel free to contact us for any further information and assistance.

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