

Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs)

Last year, in partnership with the Connecticut State Department of Education, the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC) piloted a program to support the development of Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs) in three Connecticut school districts. This year we are continuing this work to support other districts develop a SEAC. While other states have legislatively mandated such councils for every district, Connecticut law does not require these councils at the district level. District participation in this SEAC Program, requires a commitment from district leadership to work collaboratively with the council, and Boards of Education agree to receive advisory reports from the council to support their decision making on matters relate to students with disabilities and special education. To learn more, check out our SEAC video here:

Purpose: The Special Education Advisory Council shall advise the Board of Education on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities.

It is important to understand the distinction between “advisory” and “governing” boards, councils, and committees:

- Advisory, in terms of councils, means having or exercising power to advise. Advice may be defined as opinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem or as a proposal for an appropriate course of action counsel.
- Advisory groups provide guidance rather than governance.
- Advisory groups do not have any formal authority to issue directives. They do not set policy but may make recommendations regarding policy. The advice may or may not be heeded by the board, which has the decision-making authority.
- Advice and recommendations can and should influence decision making and policymaking by the formal board members.
- Contributions of the advisory members, who have personal experience as well as unique knowledge and skills in a particular area, serve to complement the knowledge and skills of the formal board members as they make decisions regarding related policy.

Special Education Advisory Councils:

- Provide parents, district and community stakeholders a formal voice to create positive outcomes for students with disabilities
- Develop and foster trust, collaboration and true partnership between parents, district staff and community members

Each Special Education Advisory Council Will:

- Annually host at least one workshop for parents regarding the special education process and rights
- Provide an annual written report to the Board of Education

Who serves on a Special Education Advisory Council?

- The membership must consist of at least 50% of parents of students with disabilities.
- The membership should be representative of the diversity within the district.
- Other members consist of district staff, including the Director of Special Education, and for some councils, community members.
- Each SEAC will determine specifics of their membership when they create their bylaws.

Why is this work important?

- When families, schools and communities work together to support learning, it improves student outcomes.

“Family Engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators and community partners to promote children’s learning and development from birth through college and career.” – [Full, Equal and Equitable Partnerships with Families: Connecticut’s Framework and Definition for Family Engagement](#)

What are the steps to start a Special Education Advisory Council?

- Meet with District and Parent Leadership to discuss what a SEAC is and does, and how CPAC will provide coaching and support throughout the process.
- Present to Board of Education to seek a resolution to approve creation of SEAC *
- Informal meeting with Special Education Director and Parent Leadership to plan timeline for development, recruitment and implementation of the work
- Host informational meeting for families, community and staff
- Create invitational letter for potential board members
- Recruit diverse membership of at least 50% parents *
- Schedule and secure location for at least 4 official council meetings and publish on school website and other designated areas *
- Hold initial council meeting to induct members and initiate council work and elect the executive board members. Option to create subcommittees *
- Co-Create by- laws and have council vote *
- Hold at least 4 meetings annually, posting minutes, agendas and schedule in compliance with open meeting laws *
- Set Council Priorities
- Hold Subcommittee meetings and workgroups as needed
- Write annual report and submit to Board of Education *
- Set Meeting schedule for following year *
- CPAC provides ongoing technical assistance and coaching in-person, by phone or email
- Host annual Workshop on Basic Rights in Special Education or other related topic to build capacity of families, community members and staff to advocate effectively *

* Note: The process and order of above steps are tailored to the needs of the district. An

* indicates that it is a requirement of the program.

SEAC Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the Purpose of a Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)?

A. To build full, equal and equitable partnerships between families, the school district and community partners, on a council that gives advisory opinions to the Board of Education on matters pertaining to the education and safety of students with disabilities

Q. What does the membership of the council look like?

A. The number of members varies in each district as determined by the council's bylaws and can change over time. In general, it is comprised of at least 50% parents of students with disabilities, the Director of Special Education or their designee, educators, related service providers, other administrators, special education students and community partners. Some councils have a representative of the Board of Education (BOE) as a non-voting member (because they would be voting to advise themselves) who fully participates and acts as a liaison between the SEAC and the BOE.

Q. How do these councils prevent turning meetings into a “gripe session”?

A. CPAC supports the development and training of the council and its members, providing structure and systems of communication and meeting facilitation in place. Additionally, the council uses Robert's Rules of Order to run the meetings, with agendas to keep the group on task. This is a council working on district-level change, not a support group to discuss personal issues. To meet the needs of those who need personal support, CPAC is a free resource. Additionally, districts often create a separate group as a support group and learning community.

Q. Why are SEACs required to follow open meeting laws?

A. SEACs are created through a resolution of the Board of Education and become an official entity of the district. Posting agendas and minutes informs the community and encourages them to attend and the transparency builds trust and accountability.

Q. How and when does the SEAC advise the Board of Education (BOE)?

A. At minimum, the SEAC must give the BOE an annual report of recommendations and advise the board when they are creating district policies throughout the year. Some Boards of Education have subcommittees for Special Education and the SEAC will

provide feedback as appropriate throughout the year. Boards of Education may also reach out to the SEAC for advisement as necessary.

If you would like to develop a Special Education Advisory Council in your district, contact:

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