

# Parent Groups in New Jersey

A Guide to Developing & Conducting an Effective Group

## QUICK FACTS

### The "P" in SEPAG

In a special education parent advisory group (SEPAG), "parent-led" means that parents, rather than school district staff, are responsible for the group's leadership, direction, and core activities. This approach ensures that the voices, concerns, and priorities of families are at the center of all activities and advisory efforts.



### Why Is Parent Leadership Important?

- Ensures that family voices drive change and improvement.
- Builds trust between families and schools.
- Creates a community of support and shared learning.



### Key characteristics of a parent-led group include:

**Setting Priorities:** Parents determine the agenda and focus areas based on the needs and concerns they observe within the community.

**Advisory Role:** While parents lead the group, their primary function is to advise the school district on systemic issues, policies, and programs affecting students with disabilities.

**Systemic Focus:** Rather than solving individual student issues, parent leaders facilitate the collection of community feedback to identify patterns and recommend district-wide improvements.

**Collaboration with Schools:** While parents lead, they work in partnership with school staff and administrators. The group provides feedback, shares experiences, and advises on improvements in special education.

**Inclusive Participation:** All parents are encouraged to join and contribute. Leadership roles and responsibilities are shared to reflect diverse perspectives. Topics, projects, and resources are chosen based on what families need most. The group creates a safe space for sharing concerns and celebrating successes.

**Partnership, Not Isolation:** Parent-led does not mean parents do everything alone; school district leaders still participate by providing data, resources, and support, while allowing parents to drive the mission.

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## Ways to Strengthen a Parent-Led SEPAG

### 1. Foster Meaningful Collaboration

- Build strong partnerships between parents, school staff, and district leaders.
- Encourage open dialogue and value all perspectives.
- Invite school board members and administrators to meetings to promote transparency and shared goals.

### 2. Prioritize Effective Communication

- Use multiple channels (newsletters, social media, emails) to keep families informed and engaged.
- Share meeting agendas and minutes widely and invite public input on topics.
- Provide clear summaries of issues, decisions, and next steps after each meeting.

### 3. Empower Parent Leadership

- Offer training and resources to help parents develop leadership and advocacy skills.
- Rotate leadership roles to include diverse voices and prevent burnout.
- Encourage parents to take initiative in setting agendas and leading projects.

### 4. Gather and Act on Parental Input

- Use surveys, needs assessments, and open forums to collect feedback from a broad range of families.
- Turn parent input into specific action items and communicate progress back to the group.

### 5. Structure for Success

- Establish clear group guidelines, roles, and responsibilities.
- Develop by-laws or operating procedures to ensure consistency and accountability.
- Schedule regular meetings and provide opportunities for all members to contribute.

### 6. Focus on Outreach and Inclusion

- Actively recruit new members, especially from underrepresented communities.
- Make meetings accessible (e.g., offer virtual options, translation, or childcare).
- Highlight the value of family-district partnership and celebrate group achievements.

### 7. Provide Tools and Resources

- Use organizational tools for meeting minutes, action planning, and collecting input (many are available from advocacy organizations).
- Share resources on special education topics, rights, and services to empower families.

### 8. Evaluate and Grow

- Regularly assess the group's effectiveness and seek feedback for improvement.
- Set goals and track progress toward them.
- Be flexible and adapt to the changing needs of families and the district.



## Parents and Caregivers are Important Contributors

- **Connection:** Serving as a bridge between families and the district to share concerns and suggestions. Actively engaging a diverse range of families to ensure all students' needs are represented.
- **Communication:** Organizing workshops, support groups, or informational meetings for other parents.
- **Coordination:** Meeting regularly with school officials to help plan and evaluate special education programs.



*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.*

For a complete guide to starting and supporting a SEPAG in your school, district, or community, visit the **START at the New Jersey Family Engagement Hub** (<https://njfehub.org/start/>)

Access the SPAN SEPAG Guide

