

The Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC) is piloting a program to support the development of Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs) in three Connecticut school districts. While states like Massachusetts and New Jersey have legislatively mandated such councils for every district, Connecticut law does not yet require these councils at the district level. Therefore, it is essential that district leaders are willing participants, committed to working in partnership with parents, for the success of this pilot program.

The Special Education Parent Advisory Council shall advise the district committees and board 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 committees, 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.

There are many benefits of and effective SEPAC for both parents and districts:

Districts benefit by:

- Viewing issues from a variety of perspectives to increase their effectiveness working with families and other staff
- Gaining a better understanding of the concerns and constraints of families and learning helpful ways to address them
- Gaining knowledge about various disabilities, programs, and resources beyond their own area of expertise
- Expanding professional networking connections
- Increasing development of leadership and communication skills

Parents benefit by:

- Having an avenue to influence policy and practices in their district, to create better outcomes for students with disabilities



- Gaining knowledge about district programs and services to benefit their own or another family's child
- Learning new skills that may transfer to other areas of advocacy and leadership while gaining a big-picture perspective
- Finding opportunities to network and build relationships with other families who share similar life experiences
- Developing positive relationships and meaningful partnerships with district staff and leaders

Mutual benefits:

- Parents and school personnel gain more accurate and positive views about each other's attitudes, intentions and abilities.
- More parents are equipped to act as advocates for and supporters of public schools and programs
- Parent input helps keep things real and relevant, which may result in more practical and identifiable outcomes.
- Members feel more invested in the school system.
- Parents can advocate for system and program change in ways that staff cannot.
- The presence and active participation of parents can help keep the focus of discussions on children, which may lead to more family-centered practices.
- Advice received and implemented by decision makers may lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

CPAC will support each district council to:

- Host an initial informational kickoff meeting about SEPACs for parents and other stakeholders
- Hold an orientation workshop for members (this may include a workshop with district specific information such as the BOE's Strategic Plan, or could be a separate meeting)
- Schedule meetings for the year, determining time, location and how to share information
- Conduct a needs assessment, such as a survey to parents of students with disabilities in district to inform the council
- The district shall conduct, in cooperation with the special education parent advisory council, at least one workshop annually within the school district on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under state and federal special education laws
- Create Bylaws

