

SEPAC meeting minutes 1.17.2024

Meeting started at 11:04 am

Attendees: *Nick Markarian, Kristen Fox, Sean Siet, Stephanie Orr, Lisa Vitale, Jennifer White, David Shaw, Tim Salmon, Megan Lipset, Lindsay Pannucci, Bridget Schiraldo, Erica Fitzpatrick, Cara Ottillio-Cooper, Kim Fusca, Somya Bhatnagar*

1. Megan Lipset (ML) welcomed everyone as the new president of SEPAC, replacing Janice Corrado who is now a BOE member.

2. PEC President Lindsay Panucci (LP) shared the poster and postcard that was created in the fall to raise the awareness among the community that there are *two different special education parent support channels*: The PEC and the SEPAC. The poster and postcards describe the key goals of the PEC (create community) and the SEPAC (create change) within Bernards Township Special Services. The SEPAC is mandated by NJ law as an advisory council that shares input with the school district. It solicits feedback from the community; anyone is welcome to share their feedback. The PEC is a separate organization providing education and support to our special needs families. Because of the community's historic awareness of the PEC it behooves SEPAC to work in tandem with PEC, but their missions are separate. Both groups have an Executive Board and committee members. Both groups welcome the input (SEPAC) or participation (PEC) of the community at large.

LP spoke on how the two groups want to be a resource for parents with kids who are struggling with a range of symptoms, not just to the population with IEPs.

The postcards were handed out at the elementary schools at parent/teacher conferences, which led to a bump in website visits during the conference weeks. Case managers and principals have the postcards on hand.

Board member David Shaw (DS) suggested the postcards be given to the school counselors as well. There was general discussion regarding the need to clear up the misunderstanding that the SEPAC and PEC are for only more disabled students, and to continue educating all school staff (gen ed teachers, lunch aides etc.) about the existence of both groups and their areas of expertise. This is a key message the SEPAC and the PEC will share at the BOE presentation.

3. Special Services, PEC and SEPAC will be giving a presentation to the BOE on February 26th. Jean O'Connell (JO) and Special Services are currently working on the presentation. Will include the numbers of students served by Special Services, including comparing growth from 10 years ago and the enrollment data from the past 3 years. The aim is to show the program growth and development over the years. This will tie into the costs. She will also present highlights of the Programs. Superintendent Nick Markarian (NK) suggested highlighting success stories, and to create some more granular documents about the programs that can be attached to the BOE agenda to keep the presentation to a reasonable length.

Various SEPAC board members suggested:

- *Showing the monies provided through state funding and grants
- *Making clear that the range of services and the range of ages served is what makes our district different from others
- *The legal obligations to Special Ed
- *The savings we achieve by servicing students in house vs. out-of-district placements
- *The need for this to be an annual presentation.

4. Disability Awareness: SEPAC will get the Sensitivity Training date with cost info later this week and confirmed that the wellness survey accessibility ideas were shared with Special Services.

SEPAC shared the plans to create a sensory item donation event of gently used items from the community (eg. fidgets, bean bags chairs) to coincide with Disability Awareness/Autism Awareness month. SEPAC will coordinate with Special Services supervisors for a list of items and continue to plan how best to collect the items.

Director of curriculum Kristin Fox confirmed that she took a list of questions we provided for the teachers to reflect on the disability curriculum lessons they are piloting and turned it into a survey for the teachers. This feedback will be used for curriculum rewriting this summer.

5. Student Support Services Team: SEPAC inquired how I&RS has been going since the new Guide to Special Services was created for the district. Supervisor Lisa Vitale (LV) said that although attendance to the presentations on the new guide has been small, they sparked meaningful conversations with parents. LV expressed interest in more parent feedback meetings. SEPAC members agreed that we'd like open forums with Special Services, and suggested co-branding/sponsoring parent education events with time dedicated at the end for Q&A/comments. SEPAC would take questions in advance and monitor the chat for questions. Open forums would show the community that we are a united front and increase transparency.

JO suggested having in-person presentations with parents (especially new parents) by Program at the beginning of the year. This gives a background of what the program is. Half would be a presentation, and half would be open questions. SEPAC also suggested Special Services create a FAQ document for each program that could live on their website and be handed out.

We would like to pilot a co-branded event this year, with the goal of having a topic and date set before the February BOE meeting so we can announce the event at the meeting.

6. JO brought to our attention that a lot of parents need respite care, which goes beyond the school's responsibility, but the state has a very good resource called PerformCare. The school can make the initial contact for a family to PerformCare, but there are a lot of steps after the first contact, and parents can struggle with follow up. *Would SEPAC work together supporting them with Performcare?*

SEPAC suggested we could do our first combined program collaboration on Performcare, and agreed to follow up with Special Services on this.

There was then general discussion around PerformCare services, including helping families in cases of school refusal. Stephanie Orr (SO) explained how they monitor all student data around tardiness and absenteeism (not just for classified students) and analyze for trends (is it every Monday? etc.). In chronic cases the student is referred to I&RS and a plan is made.

7. Special Service Website revamp: Work continues on it, and they hope to have it live by the February 26th BOE meeting.

District plans to include easily accessible links to PEC and SEPAC pages. SEPAC will make their outside page more robust.

PEC is planning a custom blend creation event with Barrister coffee. Work-Based-Learning RHS students are working at Barrister coffee packaging grounds/beans.

8. Unified Sports expansion. We are expanding under the Unified Sports umbrella to include a Unified Leadership elective at RHS. Students who select that elective will receive credits toward their Career graduation credits. They will act as mentors by pushing into elective courses where they will be a mentor/buddy for a self-contained student. This will be piloted in the 24-25 school year and the course will be pass/fail for the mentor student.

Unified also does Unified Theater productions and SEPAC urged them to consider piloting this at WAMS.

9. Case Managers & Transition years. In a follow up to the Professional Development day Special Services had for their staff in the fall about improving transition years for classified students, they will be starting a new practice this spring JO referred to as a “round robin” meeting between case managers where they discuss every student so every case manager has the same information about students in the event case managers are reassigned or there is turn over and especially going from one school to the higher grade.

10. Camp Jumpstart. For the current 5th graders, Special Services will add some time for those students to get in the building and meet Special Services teachers/staff **IF** the construction being done at WAMS this summer ends in time. GOING FORWARD, they would like to create a “WAMS Ready” experience for classified rising 6th graders similar to the existing “Ridge Ready” summer experience. At “Ridge Ready” classified students are invited to come for 2 half days to meet the staff, learn about RHS etc. Whether this camp runs is always driven by the number of sign ups and there is a fee for participation.

11. School Start Time Feedback. SEPAC shared the issues that came up specifically for our community, including: bussing, after school therapies, and before and after care support for

special ed students. No decision has been made yet. NM said he hopes to have a decision made by the end of March, and there didn't seem to be a lot of support for the scenario that had the elementary schools starting at 9:30.

12. ESY and SLEOs. We would need to give the district some notice if we want SLEOs for ESY at every school. JO would need to review the costs, then NM would review the budget with the Board of Ed. SLEOs are paid per day. The SRO was already asked to stay for ESY at Ridge. Do we want the additional expense for elementary school students?

13. Before & After Care. NM wanted to clear up that the district has a legal obligation to provide support (e.g. aides) for any student that enrolls in before/after care. They cannot discriminate, although because it is set up to be unstructured "play" time, parents have to consider if it's the best situation for their child. The goal of the staff is to keep the kids safe.

Meeting ended at 1:12pm.

Next SEPAC District Meeting: April 10, 2024

Questions or comments on the minutes? Reach out to the SEPAC [here](#).