

Webinar Recap: Supporting SEPAGs: Practical Guidance for District Leaders

Tuesday, June 4th, 2026, 1:00pm-1:45pm

Supporting SEPAGs: Practical Guidance for District Leaders provided practical strategies for supporting effective and sustainable Special Education Parent Advisory Groups (SEPAGs). The webinar focused on increasing parent engagement, gathering meaningful input from families and community members, and creating systems that support long-term sustainability and trust. Drawing from The BRIDGE Initiative’s research and direct work with SEPAGs across New Jersey, the session highlighted ways districts can strengthen family engagement even when formal parent leadership structures are still developing.

This recap summarizes key ideas presented during the event and is intended as a resource for district leaders.

The Foundation: What is a SEPAG?

SEPAGs look different from district to district, and the same group will evolve over time as participation and needs change. At their core, SEPAGs create opportunities for families and school personnel to exchange information, share ideas, build relationships, and provide input on issues affecting students with disabilities. Effective SEPAGs foster productive, collaborative partnerships by bringing together district and parent perspectives.

Engaging Parents: Building Parent Buy-In & Promoting Participation

Meaningful engagement rarely happens by accident. Families are more likely to participate when districts make involvement accessible, communicate clearly, and provide opportunities that match different levels of interest, availability, and experience. Rather than expecting families to immediately take on leadership roles, districts can create multiple pathways for participation that help build confidence, trust, and connection over time.

- Lower barriers to involvement by providing multiple ways for families to engage.
- Communicate clearly using plain language and provide translations or interpretation services as needed.
- Leverage trusted district contacts, including teachers, case managers, and Child Study Team members, to promote participation through everyday interactions.
- Use multiple communication channels and outreach methods.
- Clearly communicate the purpose and value of participation so families understand how their involvement can make a difference.

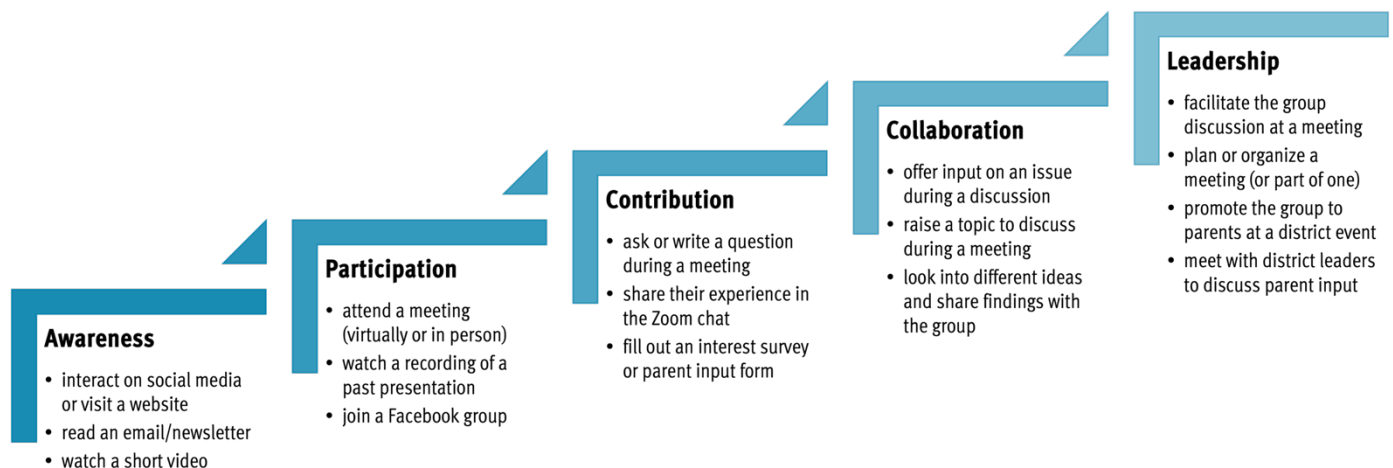


Figure 1. Ladder of Leadership: Examples of scaffolded opportunities for family participation and leadership

Gathering Input: Collecting Feedback & Ideas

- Seek feedback through multiple channels, including surveys, suggestion forms, virtual meeting tools, and informal conversations.
- Make it easy for families to provide input both during and between meetings.
- Gather information about family priorities, experiences, and barriers to participation.
- Identify themes and patterns across feedback to inform district planning and decision-making.
- Maintain a focus on systems, programs, and services rather than individual student concerns.

Building a Cycle of Trust & Credibility

Families are more likely to remain engaged when they understand how their feedback is being used. Trust is strengthened when districts acknowledge input, communicate actions taken, explain limitations transparently, and recognize parent contributions. Even when a suggestion cannot be implemented, thoughtful follow-up helps families feel heard and encourages future participation.

Sustaining Impact: Ensuring Collaboration & Trust

- Document meeting materials, agendas, outreach resources, survey tools, and key contacts.
- Preserve successful engagement and communication practices.
- Create systems that reduce reliance on any single parent leader or staff member.
- Continuously identify opportunities for new families to become involved.
- Maintain credibility through consistency, transparency, and follow-through.

Meeting records

Agendas, attendance logs, notes, slides, recordings.

Making these available online is a good way to archive these and make them accessible to others!

Outreach templates

Emails, flyers, and invitation language refined over time. Keep what got results; retire what didn't.

Survey tools & results

Feedback instruments and their outcomes. These save significant time when planning future input cycles.

Roster & contacts

Parent participants, staff champions, presenters, and community partners — with notes on roles and relationships.

What worked

Channels, timing, and formats that drove engagement — and notes on what to stop throwing effort at.

Operating norms

How the group is structured, how often it meets, and how decisions get made.

Figure 2. What to Document

