

Rutgers & NJDOE: The BRIDGE Initiative

Building Resources for Inclusive Development and Growth in Education

Parent SEPAG Leadership

Where to Start



A Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG) is a collaboration among members of a school district and its parent community that facilitates the meaningful exchange of information, ideas, and input on matters affecting students with disabilities.



Acknowledgements

Why this Guide Was Created

This resource was developed in direct response to patterns that emerged through BRIDGE's ongoing work with new parent SEPAG leaders. It was designed to address common questions, recurring gaps in understanding, and consistent requests for clear, actionable information.

The content, structure, and scope were shaped based on feedback and requests from parent leaders themselves, several of whom contributed quotes and examples featured in the guide.

How to Use This Resource

This guide shares the most important information parents need when starting or leading a SEPAG. It focuses on the questions and challenges that come up most often, and it presents the information in a clear, organized way.

The content reflects the same foundational guidance BRIDGE provides through technical assistance. This guide allows that knowledge to be shared more broadly and used by parent leaders across districts.

This resource is available in both English and Spanish.

Suggested Citation

The BRIDGE Initiative, Center for Effective School Practices. (2026).
Developing Your SEPAG: Where to Start [Guide]. Rutgers University.

The Core Features of a SEPAG

Legally Recognized

SEPAGs are established in state law and have a formal role in advising the district on special educational programs (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.2(h)).

Systemic Perspective

SEPAGs focus on the experiences of all students receiving special services across the district, not just one school or program.

Equity-Focused

SEPAGs elevate underrepresented voices and work to improve access, inclusion, and outcomes for all students receiving special services.

Collaborative

SEPAG parent and district leaders engage in ongoing dialogue to assess programs, share perspectives, and collaborate on improving special education services and outcomes.

Why do SEPAGs Matter?

Benefits for Families:

- Builds families' knowledge base about the special education system and increases confidence in their ability to engage with it
- Provides an opportunity for families to share ideas and systemic concerns with administrators
- Connects families in similar circumstances and builds community
- Facilitates the sharing of information and resources
- Strengthens ongoing two-way communication between families and school districts

Benefits for Districts:

- Enhances communication and relationships with families
- Aligns decision-making with the needs and priorities of students and families
- Improves school climate and culture within special education and related services
- Increases the quality of special education program offerings for students with disabilities
- Builds district capacity to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities and their families

Organizing & Running Meetings

Getting the Word Out:

Whether still developing or well established, building visibility is key to growing your membership.

- **Start with simple marketing materials:** a clear, concise flyer can be shared in person or included in emails. Include who you are, what you do, when you meet, and how to get in touch.
- **Show up where families already are:** attend school-based events such as Back-to-School Night, fall Trunk-or-Treats, PTO meetings, or other community gatherings. Bring your materials with you.
- **Use word-of-mouth intentionally:** reach out to parents you know and encourage them to share information about your group.
- **Make information easy to find online:**
 - Ask your district leader for help posting your SEPAG's name, meeting dates, and contact information on the district website.
 - Consider creating your own website to highlight your work and share updates.
 - Use social media platforms to build community and share information.
- **Develop a consistent communication strategy with multiple channels:** consider creating a SEPAG email address for sharing information, and partner with your district leader to distribute flyers.



“Remember to keep an attendance sheet and to ask for emails so you can create your own mailing list.”


What happens at a SEPAG meeting?

Meetings typically blend learning and discussion. They may include a presentation on a topic of interest along with time for parents to discuss what they learned and what they're noticing in their schools. You have the flexibility to decide what format works best for your group.


If you're feeling stuck or overwhelmed, remember that your SEPAG should meet your community members where they are. Consider sending a survey or using a meeting to identify priorities and topic ideas. When group members are involved in decision-making, you're on the right track.

These examples show how other leaders organize their meetings to help you think about what might work best for your group:

- A presentation or speaker, followed by open discussions with the group (1-1.5 hours).
- Alternating meetings that include presentations with those that are solely discussion based.
- Meeting at a coffee shop (or other community location) before or after the workday to talk openly.
- Meeting with the whole group every-other month, and organizing community outings or special events a few times a year (special ed week, parent community nights, etc.).



“Meeting locations, formats, and styles will change over time. Don’t feel locked in!”



“Be realistic with your time and energy! Work towards sustainability, not burnout.”

Ask your group what they want to learn about.

Common topics include:

- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
- Section 504 Plans
- Emotion Regulation
- Learning Disabilities
- Neurodiversity
- Dyslexia
- Assistive Technology
- Related Services (Speech, Occupational, and Physical therapies)

District Advising

SEPAGs fulfill their advisory role by collecting and communicating shared experiences to highlight system-wide strengths and opportunities. Instead of resolving individual concerns, SEPAGs focus on identifying trends and reporting them to district leaders.

Example:

The Stars Hollow SEPAG meets monthly to discuss shared experiences across schools and programs. When multiple parents identified a common concern about unclear progress reports, parent leaders collected this feedback, documented common themes, and then presented this information to their district leadership. In response, staff were invited to attend a future meeting to explain the reports and clarify expectations, and the district revised the report language to improve accessibility.

Open discussion during meetings

Set aside time during meetings for structured or open-ended discussion. This is a primary method SEPAGs use to gather information from their group. Consider using guiding questions to focus the conversation and redirect as needed to ensure all voices have an opportunity to be heard.

Surveys

Send out surveys to gather feedback on specific topics or broader concerns. Surveys can be distributed through email, social media, or district communication channels. They allow families who cannot attend meetings to participate.

Email and social media messages

Check your SEPAG email and social media accounts regularly. Notice any common questions or themes that come up, and bring those insights to your meetings.

One-on-one conversations

Informal conversations before or after meetings, at school events, or within your community can surface important perspectives that may not emerge in a formal setting. Some parents may feel more comfortable talking with you 1-1 instead of in a group setting.



After gathering input, share a summary with your membership and explain how the feedback will be used. This builds trust and shows that parent voices are influencing the group's priorities and conversations with district leadership.

The Basics of Parent Leadership

SEPAG leadership looks different in every district, and can change over time! Based on feedback and common practice among established SEPAGs, several core leadership tasks typically include:

Organizing the Group

- Scheduling and hosting regular meetings
- Choosing topics and any speakers you would like to invite
- Coordinating logistics with the district (meeting space, virtual access, interpreters, childcare,...)
- Marketing the group (making flyers, posting on social media, attending back-to-school night,...)

Building Connections

- Collecting and updating parent contact information
- Welcoming new families and explaining the purpose of SEPAG
- Creating an environment where parents feel heard and respected

Listening and Gathering Input

- Collecting advisory input during meetings and through follow-up conversations
- Identifying common themes and priorities
- Staying curious about why families attend and what they hope to gain

Communicating with the District

- Sharing common, system-wide issues with district leaders through meetings, emails, or calls
- Collaborating regularly with your district leader (often the Director of Special Services)
- Keeping the focus on partnership and systems-level improvement



Questions to Consider as you Get Started

Does your district already have a SEPAG, or has it had one in the past?

This information can be a great starting place for new groups.

What purpose will your group serve? How would you define its core mission?

A mission statement can help anchor your group and keep your focus clear.

What structure could make participation accessible and sustainable?

Think realistically about meeting format, frequency, communication methods.

Who is your district leader or main point-of-contact?

Reach out and introduce yourself.

Do you want more help with your group?

“You don’t have to know everything at first, you just have to keep learning”



Support from the BRIDGE Initiative

BRIDGE can support your group in a variety of ways, including:

- Help planning meetings
- Creating surveys and flyers
- Drafting emails to presenters or district leaders
- Attending meetings virtually to speak to the group about SEPAG-related topics
- Consulting as needed via phone, zoom, or *during on-demand office hours*
- +more! Don't be afraid to ask. If we can help, we will.

BRIDGE Resource Portal

- Growing as we work with SEPAGs like yours and uncover additional needs!
 - Visit cesp.rutgers.edu/bridge

Request an Office Hour
go.rutgers.edu/sepagsupportofficehours



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