

Event Recap: Parent Voices in Action, The SEPAG Experience

Monday, December 8th, 2025, 7:00pm – 8:00pm

The *Parent Voices in Action: The SEPAG Experience* virtual panel brought together parent leaders from five Special Education Parent Advisory Groups (SEPAGs) for a lively, one-hour conversation. Panelists shared their experiences and ideas around three major themes: starting a SEPAG, focusing on systems-level change, and building strong SEPAG-district partnerships.



SEPAG Panelists Shamong IMPACT, *Kate McGill Armento & Danielle Scheuerer*
Roseland Borough SEPAC, *Cindy Sellito & Patti Franchino*
Collingswood-Oaklyn SEPAG, *Ali Haegele*
Hackettstown SEPAG, *Jill Adamec*
Voorhees SEPAG, *Jeanette Palermo & Patricia Boozer*

Moderator The BRIDGE Initiative, *Taylor Clough, MSW, LCSW*

Note: This recap summarizes insights from our panelists. These ideas are not intended to represent all groups, and The BRIDGE Initiative does not necessarily endorse the views expressed below.

Getting Started: Initial Steps in Building a SEPAG

Panelists shared that their groups started by connecting with a handful of families, identifying existing communication channels, and partnering with district staff willing to collaborate. A consistent message: no one begins this work as an expert. Strong SEPAGs grow from steady relationship-building, curiosity, and a commitment to supporting all families.



Recruitment & Outreach

- Try multiple recruitment avenues: back-to-school nights, ESY sessions, fall trunk-or-treat events
- Partner with the district for marketing efforts and access to school community communications
- Build a mailing list by collecting email addresses from interested parents and early meeting attendees



Structure & Roles

- Define and fill leadership roles, such as co-leaders, outreach specialists, or a small council or board
- Clarify the district's role, including how communication should work and what support is available
- Set up open and consistent communication channels with district administrators/SEPAG liaisons



Building Capacity

- Get to know the district's special education structures, services, and processes
- Shift from considering individual cases to a broader and more systemic, district-level focus
- Explore alternative meeting formats, like informal parent social outings, especially when turnout is low

Maintaining a Systemic Focus

Panelists emphasized that SEPAGs play a unique role: they address patterns and systems, not individual disputes. Personal experiences are welcomed as important data but are used to illuminate broader trends, as SEPAG discussions do not resolve case-specific concerns. By keeping this focus, SEPAGs help districts make changes that benefit many students, strengthening trust and participation over time.

Setting Expectations

- Keep messaging about the group's focus consistent across documents and communications
- Show slides at the start of meetings that reinforce your focus and set intentions
- Consider other opportunities for families to speak about specifics

Facilitating Discussions

- Have a set agenda and structured time for district-wide concerns
- When individual concerns come up, validate the experience while gently redirecting the focus
- Let families know how they can share individual concerns in other ways

Tracking & Elevating Patterns

- Keep a running list of concerns families share
- When issues come up repeatedly from multiple families, that signals a systemic concern
- Bring these patterns to the district with a solution-based mindset

Building Strong SEPAG-District Partnerships

Panelists shared strategies for fostering collaborative relationships with district leadership. The strongest partnerships are built on *transparency*, *consistency*, and *respect*, while keeping the group as parent led as possible.

Regular Communication

- Schedule regular check-ins with district administrators (e.g., the week after each SEPAG meeting)
- Meet periodically with your superintendent to discuss ideas and get approvals
- Give district staff advance notice of topics so they can prepare and contribute if invited

Showing Up

- Attend Board of Education meetings regularly to build visibility and credibility
- Present to the Board of Ed at least once a year, ideally alongside district staff
- Be present at school events (trunk or treats, back-to-school nights) to get the word out

Collaborative Opportunities

- Co-host events with the district (e.g., Inclusive Schools Week, Neurodiversity Celebration Week)
- Work with the district on surveys rather than sending them separately
- Invite district staff to share news or address concerns at the start of meetings

Expanding Relationships

- Consider connecting with other parent groups
- Identify champions in your school community (teachers, staff) and invite them to meetings
- Coordinate with the district on logistics to support the group, like scheduling, and communication

Audience Questions & Answers

- Do SEPAGs need to meet monthly?
 - > *No; meeting frequency and format depends on what works best for members and can evolve over time.*
- How do you decide on topics to focus on each year? Do you repeat topics?
 - > *Topics are selected based on parent interest and district input. Often, groups repeat major topics each year, such as reevaluation, transitions, or the IEP process, but not always.*
- Do members have to be parents with a child with an IEP or 504 Plan?
 - > *No: SEPAG membership is open to all families but most members tend to be parents of students receiving special education services.*