

BUILDING BRIDGES *ROADMAP*

A step-by-step guide for
new SEPAG Parent Leaders



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Center for Effective
School Practices



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Acknowledgements

Why this Guide Was Created

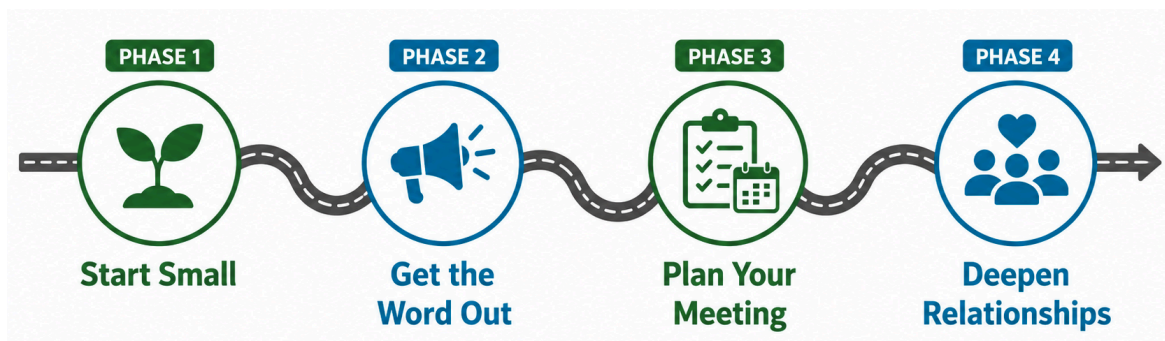
This roadmap was developed to support new parent leaders as they build, strengthen, and sustain their Special Education Parent Advisory Groups (SEPAGs). While every district is unique, parent leaders often navigate similar milestones and questions along the way. This roadmap was created to provide a practical, flexible framework that can be adapted to local needs while helping leaders move from planning to action.

This roadmap was developed collaboratively with members of The BRIDGE Initiative's Working Group, bringing together perspectives from SEPAG parent leadership and community experts. Throughout the development process, contributors shared ideas, drafted and reviewed content, and drew on their own experiences to help shape the framework, tools, and resources included throughout the roadmap. Their collaboration helped create a resource grounded in practical experience, meaningful partnership, and a shared commitment to strengthening family-school partnerships across New Jersey.

How to Use This Resource

This roadmap is designed to guide parent leaders through the process of developing or strengthening a Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG). Organized into four phases, it provides practical strategies, planning tools, templates, and reflection activities.

While the phases are presented in a logical sequence, every district is different. Use this roadmap flexibly: move at your own pace, revisit sections as needed, and adapt the activities to fit your community's goals and circumstances. Whether you are launching a new SEPAG or revitalizing an existing one, this resource is intended to support your work as a new leader.



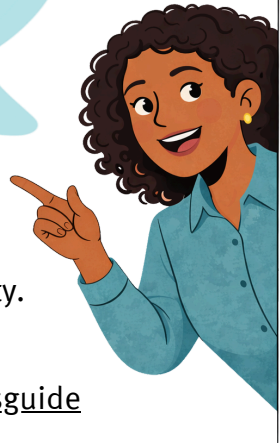
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Phase 1: Start Small

Suggested Pacing: 1-3 Weeks

“Have you visited The BRIDGE Initiative’s free resource library yet? visit cesp.rutgers.edu/bridge/portal”



1 LEARN MORE ABOUT SEPAGS

- ☐ Learn more about what a SEPAG is and its role within the special education community.

You may consider using the following resources to familiarize yourself:

- *Parent SEPAG Leadership: Where to Start* Guide go.rutgers.edu/newparentleadersguide
- *What is a SEPAG* one-page overview go.rutgers.edu/whatisasepag
- Sample mission statements from SPAN go.rutgers.edu/spanmissionstatements
 - Note: You do not need to create a mission statement at this stage, but reviewing examples can help give you a sense of the direction others SEPAGs have taken.

2 DETERMINE THE STATUS OF YOUR DISTRICT’S SEPAG

- ☐ Ask your friends and other parents/caregivers whether they are familiar with or involved in your district’s SEPAG.
- ☐ Check your district’s website for SEPAG information and leader contact details.
- ☐ Contact your Director of Special Services to inquire about the current status of the SEPAG, as they are typically the primary District Leader supporting the group.
 - Depending on their response, you may either ask how to join and support the existing group or express interest in partnering with other Leaders to further develop the SEPAG collaboratively.
 - You may consider using our sample email templates at the bottom of the linked page to guide this initial communication: go.rutgers.edu/parentstarterkit

3 IDENTIFY CO-LEADERS

While you will have District Leaders as built-in partners, connecting with other parents/caregivers can help make the process feel more manageable, collaborative, and enjoyable. You may consider the following ideas:

- ☐ Connect with other parents/caregivers in your community whose children receive special education or related services.
- ☐ Reach out to friends directly or post in local social media groups.
- ☐ Ask your Case Manager, Director of Special Services, or a member of your Child Study Team whether they know of other parents/caregivers who may be interested in getting involved. District Leaders are often able to help identify interested families.



→ Many successful SEPAGs grow from just one or two committed parents/caregivers working collaboratively with District Leaders.

→ Try not to focus on creating too many formal resources (such as bylaws or mission statements) at this stage. These materials are often most effective when developed collaboratively with both parent and district input after a stronger parent base has been established.

4 SCHEDULE AN INITIAL MEETING WITH YOUR DISTRICT LEADER(S)

- ☐ Schedule a virtual or in-person meeting with your District SEPAG Leader.
 - This meeting can help establish a healthy and collaborative working relationship. Use this time to express your interest in supporting the SEPAG and your willingness to work collaboratively with District Leaders.
- ☐ Create a brief agenda and share it with District Leaders ahead of time to outline key discussion points.
 - Ask them about creating a district email address for official SEPAG communication (e.g., districtsepag@districtemail.com).
 - Note: A district-supported email account can help support long-term sustainability. You may also consider creating a personal SEPAG email account if your district is unable to provide one.
- ☐ Before concluding the meeting, discuss next steps and establish a plan for ongoing communication and future meetings.

Phase 2: Get the Word Out

Suggested Pacing: 1-2 Weeks

1 CREATE A SIMPLE COMMUNITY SURVEY

☐ Create a brief survey to include with an announcement flyer (see step 2). Google Forms is widely used by SEPAGs across New Jersey for accessibility and ease of use. This survey will help you collect:

- Parent/caregiver names and email addresses
- Children's schools
- Preferred meeting days/times
- Preferred meeting format (virtual, in-person, or hybrid)
- Topics of interest
- Interest in supporting or joining the SEPAG leadership team

You may consider using our Google Form template here: go.rutgers.edu/parentinputsurvey.

- To learn more about using Google Forms, view our FAQs here: go.rutgers.edu/googleformsfaq

2 CREATE A SIMPLE FLYER

☐ Create a simple SEPAG flyer introducing your group, what a SEPAG is, and how families can connect. Canva is a free and user-friendly tool for creating flyers and other outreach materials.

- You may consider using one of our flyer templates, here: go.rutgers.edu/parentoutreach
- To learn more about using Canva, view our FAQs here: go.rutgers.edu/canvafaqs

3 SHARE YOUR INFORMATION BROADLY

☐ Ask Special Services to share your flyer using district communication channels, such as newsletters, text/email blasts, and the district SEPAG webpage. You may also consider:

- Asking school principals to share your flyer and SEPAG information with their individual school communities.
- Requesting that printed flyers be sent home in student backpacks, if appropriate.

☐ • Referencing our sample text snippets for inspiration, here: go.rutgers.edu/parentoutreach

Share your flyer and information on external platforms, including community social media pages (e.g., district and parent Facebook groups or Instagram pages).

Phase 3: Plan Your Meeting

Suggested Pacing: 2-4 Weeks

1 THINK ABOUT MEETING LOGISTICS

- ☐ Decide whether your meeting will be virtual, in-person, or hybrid.
 - For in-person meetings, consider using a shared district community space such as a library or media center. District Leaders can often help secure a space for the group, but be sure to ask how far in advance requests must be submitted.
 - You may consider referencing our kickoff meeting guidance, here: go.rutgers.edu/parentstarterkit
 - You may also consider reviewing our Zoom and Google Meet FAQs for guidance on using these common virtual meeting platforms: go.rutgers.edu/virtualmeetings

2 CREATE A FLYER WITH MEETING DETAILS

- ☐ Create and distribute a meeting flyer that includes the meeting date, time, location, and any virtual meeting information.
 - As with your general announcement flyer, you may consider:
 - Asking Special Services to share the flyer through district communication channels
 - Sharing the flyer through your own social networks and parent groups
 - Asking school principals to share the flyer within their school communities
 - You may consider using one of our flyer templates, here: go.rutgers.edu/parentoutreach

3 CREATE A SIMPLE AGENDA

- ☐ Create a simple agenda for your meeting.
 - At your first meeting, you (and your District Leader, if available) may:
 - Welcome families to the group
 - Introduce the purpose of a SEPAG
 - Facilitate an open discussion about family experiences, needs, and interests
 - You may also consider sharing copies of the “What Is a SEPAG?” one-page overview to help orient families to the group: go.rutgers.edu/whatisasepag
- ☐ Host your first meeting!

Phase 4: Deepen Relationships

Suggested Pacing: 2-4 Weeks

1 CONTINUE TO ENGAGE WITH DISTRICT LEADERS

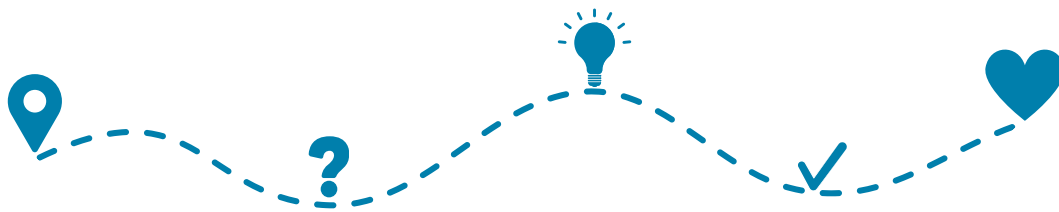
- ☐ Meet again with your District Leader(s) from the Special Services Department to reflect on your first meeting and continue planning collaboratively for the future of your SEPAG.
 - If you have not already done so, use this meeting to discuss:
 - How often you will meet with District Leaders to plan collaboratively and share parent input
 - How many SEPAG meetings you hope to hold throughout the remainder of the year
 - Any important planning considerations or constraints (for example, how far in advance space requests or meeting changes must be submitted)
 - Ongoing collaboration and open communication between Parent Leaders and District Leaders are central to a successful SEPAG. Continue prioritizing this relationship as your group grows.

2 CREATE A FLYER WITH MEETING DATES FOR THE YEAR

- ☐ Create and share a simple yearly save-the-date flyer based on decisions made collaboratively with other Parent and District Leaders.
 - You may consider using one of our flyer templates, here: go.rutgers.edu/parentoutreach

3 CREATE A SIMPLE ONGOING TO-DO LIST

- ☐ Create a shared to-do list for yourself, other Parent Leaders, and District Leaders (depending on your collaborative structure).
 - While your list may be small initially, responsibilities often grow over time. Starting an organized system early can help support communication, planning, and long-term sustainability.



CONGRATULATIONS ON BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR YOUR SEPAG!

Remember: progress takes time, and consistency with small steps forward is what matters most.

➤ **At this stage, you may have:**

- A parent co-leader or other supportive parents/caregivers involved
- A SEPAG email address or established communication system
- A strong start to a collaborative relationship with District Leaders
- Your first SEPAG meeting completed
- A basic plan for next steps

➤ **As a Parent Leader, you are not expected to:**

- Have all the answers
- Fix every problem
- Do everything at once or at the expense of your own well-being

➤ **As a Parent Leader, you are creating:**

- A safe, stigma-free, and judgment-free space for families
- A stronger voice for parents/caregivers
- A meaningful bridge between families and your district

If you ever feel discouraged, remember that your SEPAG serves an important purpose within your community. Your work is meaningful, impactful, and deeply valued!

SUPPORT FROM THE BRIDGE INITIATIVE

For individualized guidance from the BRIDGE Initiative's SEPAG Support Team, we welcome you to sign up for an Office Hour at the following link or by scanning the QR code below: go.rutgers.edu/sepagsupportofficehours

Office Hours are informal conversations where you can receive support:

- Planning meetings
- Creating materials
- Brainstorming ideas
- Navigating challenges
- Building sustainable practices

Consider joining our mailing list to stay up-to-date on new resources, support opportunities, trainings, and more!

