



Albany SEPAC Annual Report to the Superintendent **(Special Education Parent Advisory Council)** **2023-2024 School Year**

Authored by SEPAC Officers & Committee Members, admin@albanysepac.org

Becky Zimmerman, parent (Co-Chair)

Mary Nolan, retired CSDA Speech Language Pathologist (Co-Chair)

Charise Parris, parent (Secretary)

Shannon Reed-LaVigne, parent (Parent Member at Large)

Maureen Aromi, CSDA Speech Language Pathologist (Staff Member at Large)

Melissa Baer Bourgeois, past CSDA parent (Committee Member)

Amy Wilson, CSDA Special Education Teacher (Committee Member)

Reported within the Areas of Focus in our Mission Statement

[SEPAC Mission Statement, Purpose, and Areas of Focus](#)

1. COMMUNICATION - MEETINGS

- Quarterly and planning with the Department of Special Education (5 meetings), where SEPAC shared areas of concern as seen in parent and community input section below
- Superintendent Hochreiter (1 meeting) & with the Department of Special Education (1 meeting) where SEPAC shared areas of concern around the pay rate for special education teaching assistants, and equity and inclusion
- SEPAC participated in CSDA PTA Leaders Meetings
 - Meetings alternated with the Superintendent (4) and without the Superintendent (4)
 - Topics discussed of relevance to SEPAC were inclusion and access, particularly for people who use mobility devices
- Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance Joe Karas, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Instruction Lori McKenna, and the Special Education Department (1 meeting), to discuss the Special Education funding and budget

- Elementary ELA Supervisor Elizabeth Morphy (1 meeting) to discuss reading initiatives and reading interventions
- ENL advocate (1 meeting) to discuss needs and how SEPAC can support ENL learners who require or may require special education services
- CPSE (Committee for Preschool Special Education) Chair - Erin St. Louis (1 meeting) to learn about special education preschool challenges, especially the waitlist for preschool services and shortage of providers
- Buffalo, NY SEPAC to learn how other SEPACs operate (1 meeting)

2. COMMUNICATION - MEMBER FEEDBACK

- Americans with Disabilities Act
 - Despite buildings being in compliance, difficulties remain for those with mobility issues
- Transportation
 - Late buses, particularly for late start (9am) elementary schools
 - Highly disruptive for Special Education students and faculty/staff
 - Would be helpful if GPS tracker is correlated with the driver/route, not with a specific vehicle
 - Raise awareness for special education parents and special education teachers of the bus trackers and how to use the First View and Traverse 360 apps
- Transition
 - Between program levels
 - Explore opportunity for information and experience sharing among and between current and former high school (14-21) parents
 - Desire to ensure that 504 Plans are followed consistently in middle and high school
- Inclusion
 - Desire to build on Inclusive Schooling training and see it implemented in Special and General Education classrooms
- Other CSDA Departments Intersecting with the Special Education Department
 - Desire to increase awareness of, and to better serve, the needs of Special Education students and Special Education faculty and staff within the following

- ENL Department
 - Transportation Department
 - Pupil Personnel Services Department
 - Human Resources Department
 - Maintenance & Operations Department
- After school care options for OPWDD-eligible students
 - Desire for robust and sustainable programs comparable to those provided for general education students
- ESY (Extended School Year)
 - Parent desire to return to pre-Covid full day ESY programming (5h)
 - Many other districts have adopted the same model of a shorter ESY day
 - Desire for after school care during ESY
- Guidelines for students receiving support other than an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)
 - Standardized and accessible (via district website)
 - For 504 Plan application process
 - For MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Supports) process
 - Expectations and process for progress monitoring
- Addressing Reading Deficits
 - Desire to use NWEA MAP Reading Fluency dyslexia screener and provide early support for at risk students
 - Continue building close collaboration between reading teachers and Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs)
- Desire for all CSDA schools to have a sensory or de-escalation space
- Special Education Teaching Assistants (TAs)
 - Staffing
 - Not enough staff
 - Inadequate pay
 - Lack of a pay differential for Special Education TAs
 - Application barrier due to costs for fingerprinting and test
 - De-escalation training
 - Training Barriers

- Difficulty in finding substitutes to fill in when staff gets trained
- Difficulty incentivizing training
- Special Education Faculty & Staff Team Meeting Time
 - Want time together like General Education teams to embed academic, language and motor strategies across settings, share information across settings
 - Can't meet during weekly teacher PD time because so many classroom staff are subs

3. RESOURCES

- SEPAC held 7 virtual program meetings during the school year
 - [Program Meeting Minutes](#)
- SEPAC officers provided support for families
 - Sitting in on eligibility, IEP, and 504 meetings
 - Providing advice and resources to families preparing for IEP meetings
 - Maintaining a Facebook page and website to share resources and information
 - Facebook page www.facebook.com/albanySEPAC
 - Launched webpage 9/2023, www.albanysepac.org
- One officer received training from the New York State Advocacy Institute, 9/21/23
 - Focus was how to build allies, advocate, and follow up with elected officials/organizations
- Provided Autism Resources in simple and visual terms for ENL families
[Autism Resources in Visual and Simple Terms](#)
- SEPAC Membership - 19 people; 82 on email list

4. PROGRAMMING EVENTS AND PROJECTS

- SEPAC Events & Projects
 - In person meet & greets
 - Albany High School (11/4/23)
 - Albany Public Library, Pine Hills Branch (5/18/24)
 - Building Use

- SEPAC is working with Assistant Superintendent of Business & Finance, Joe Karas, on how we can partner with the district for permission to use district buildings
- Quiet Space
 - SEPAC provided a Quiet Space at 3 CSDA schools where students with disabilities and their families were invited to use a quiet space during an evening school-wide event (ASH 3/12/24, NSES 3/21/24, DCS 6/5/24)
- Second Annual SEPAC HERO awards
 - SEPAC solicited nominations from the CSDA community and recognized 65 School District employees as Special Education HEROes for excellence in Special Education ([Special Education HEROes](#))
- CSDA Events
 - Autism Fair (3/26/24)
 - SEPAC information table
 - Night in the Garden at Myers Middle School (5/7/24)
 - SEPAC provided a sensory activity, painting with vegetables
- Community Events
 - SEPAC information table at the City of Albany Department of Recreation Walk for Autism (4/20/24)
 - SEPAC information Table at Westland Hills Buddies Softball Game (6/2/24)
 - Albany High School Sidewalk Accessibility and Pedestrian Safety Awareness Campaign - SEPAC participation in AHS PTSA event (11/13/23)
- Volunteer Opportunities
 - Available for members at all the above programming

5. ADVOCACY

- Increase Preschool Special Education Funding - **ONGOING**
 - Letter-writing campaign in support of increasing State funding for preschool Special Education services
 - SEPAC collected and delivered 135 signed letters from community members to State legislators (5/21/24)
[Preschool Special Education Services Letter](#)
 - Letter to the Editor of the Albany Times Union (published 5/27/24) regarding the need to increase Preschool Special Education Funding, from the perspective of two former Preschool Special Education Providers (third article).

<https://www.timesunion.com/opinion/article/letters-19459674.php>

- Special Education Working Group - **ONGOING**
 - SEPAC asked Superintendent Hochreiter to form a working group to focus on Special Education
- District Communication focus groups - **COMPLETED**
 - SEPAC and special education students were represented (4/15/24)