

Albany SEPAC Annual Report to the Superintendent

(Special Education Parent Advisory Council)

2024-2025 School Year



Authored by SEPAC Officers & Committee Members, albanysepac@gmail.com

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, retired CSDA Special Education Teacher (Committee Member)

Tina Collymore, parent (Committee Member)

Mark Keegan, parent (Committee Member)

Reported within the Areas of Focus in our Mission Statement

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

1. COMMUNICATION - MEETINGS

District personnel who are not administrators are not named

- Quarterly and planning meetings with the Department of Special Education (3 meetings), where SEPAC shared areas of concern as seen in parent and community input section below
- SEPAC participated in the Parent Teacher Association Advocacy Council (PTAAC) Meetings
 - 6 meetings were held, including 3 with the Superintendent and 1 with Joe Karas, Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance
 - Topics discussed of relevance to SEPAC included equity in Speech Language Pathology services, greater access to the Superintendent for the Director of Special Education, desire to remove the Department of Special Education from direct reporting to the Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education on the organizational chart, and desire to use magnet school budget to support special education magnet students
- CSDA employees (4 meetings), to discuss teacher assistant training, math intervention, and special education programming

- Kate Theis, CSDA Human Resources Administrator, Elaine Griessler, CSDA Director of Special Ed, and Christina Lebrecht, CSDA Assistant Director of Elementary Special Education, to discuss Special Education staff hiring and retention, and how SEPAC can help
- Kate Wright, CSDA Fine Arts Supervisor and Elaine Griessler, CSDA Director of Special Ed, to discuss the CREATE art program and display of artwork of students with disabilities
- Joey DiPiazza, CSDA Transition Coordinator and Kathleen Pivacek, Care Manager Supervisor at Care Design NY, to discuss OPWDD services and OPWDD application process
- Dyslexia and Reading advocates, to discuss the recommendations of the NYS Dyslexia Task Force and the need for structured reading instruction
- Patricia Fahy, NY State Senator, and staff to discuss Early Intervention services in NY State
- Leslie Leslie, Massachusetts Federation for Children with Special Needs, to discuss Special Education Parent Advisory Council work in Massachusetts
- Joey DiPiazza, CSDA Transition Coordinator and Elaine Griessler, CSDA Director of Special Ed, to discuss after school programming for students with disabilities
- John Breitenbach and Brandi DeMeo, Living Resources and Joey DiPiazza, CSDA Transition Coordinator, to discuss growth and expansion efforts for after school programming for students with disabilities, including during extended school year
- Georgia Giannikouris Brandeis, NYC SEAC, to discuss Special Education Advisory Council work in NYC

2. COMMUNICATION - MEMBER FEEDBACK

- **Extended School Year (ESY)**
 - Desire for uniformity and clarity in ensuring that families and teachers across the district understand how students qualify for ESY
 - Desire for consideration of behavioral goals in addition to academic goals when determining eligibility
 - Desire to build and expand on recent implementation of the newly established ESY after school program for students with OPWDD eligibility
- **Magnet Schools**
 - Desire for magnet school budget to include support for Special Education students so they can be included and have equitable access to magnet school programming
- **Albany High School NYSAA students**
 - Desire to increase building level support for NYS Alternate Assessment students so they can access 9th period classes and afterschool programming if they do not

want early dismissal

- **Inclusive PE in AHS**
 - Desire to expand the successful inclusive PE pilot program to more students
- **Grow after school care options and after ESY care options for OPWDD-eligible students**
 - Desire for robust and sustainable programs comparable to those provided for general education students
 - Desire to expand to accommodate more students, and to expand to middle school students
- **Guidelines for students receiving support other than an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)**
 - Desire that they be standardized and accessible (via district website)
 - For 504 Plan application process
 - For obtaining Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and moving through the tiers
 - Desire for communication by the district about the current active review to improve this process
 - Expectations and process for progress monitoring
- **Desire for training and education for principals in how they can best support special education staff**
 - Principals in all buildings should be knowledgeable about students with disabilities and about how to provide a supportive environment for their special education staff
- **Desire for strengthening the team approach between families/ teachers/District for tracking and getting students signed up for OPWDD eligibility assistance**
 - SEPAC has been invited to assist with questions and signups, and will make a flyer
- **Desire for parent support groups or play groups for students with disabilities**
 - SEPAC continues to look for volunteers to support these projects

3. RESOURCES

- SEPAC held 6 virtual program meetings during the school year
 - [10/17/24 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
 - [11/14/24 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
 - [1/16/25 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
 - [2/13/25 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
 - [4/3/25 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
 - [6/5/25 SEPAC Program Meeting Notes](#)
- 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
 - Webpage, www.albanysepac.org
- One Officer received training from The Arc NY
 - Focus was Special Education Law and Advocacy
- SEPAC Membership - 60 people; plus 72 on email list; 186 followers on Facebook
- [2024 - 2025 Balance Sheet](#)
- [SEPAC Bylaws Amended 6/5/25](#)

4. PROGRAMMING EVENTS & PROJECTS

- SEPAC Events & Projects
 - SEPAC held two In person meet & greets at Albany High School (9/14/24 and 5/3/25)
- SEPAC had information tables at Back to School Nights at NSES, MMS, Myers, NAMS, PHES, ASH, TOAST, Roots, AHES (summer celebration and safety day), DCS, SPA
- Third Annual SEPAC HERO awards
 - SEPAC solicited nominations from the CSDA community and recognized 85 School District employees as Special Education HEROes for excellence in Special Education
 - [2025 SEPAC HEROes Poster](#)
- CSDA Events
 - Autism Fair (4/1/25)
 - SEPAC provided volunteers and an information table at the Autism Fair
- Community Events
 - SEPAC information table at the City of Albany Department of Recreation Walk for Autism (4/19/25)
- Volunteer Opportunities
 - Available for members at all the above programming
 - One member collected and shared Capital District summer opportunities for students with disabilities
- SEPAC collaborated with the Special Ed Department by advertising CSDA Teaching Assistant job fairs on our Facebook page and in communications with our email list and membership list

5. ADVOCACY

- As a follow up to our work last year on Preschool Special Education, we determined that the best place to start addressing the current lack of services is the Early Intervention System, which serves children from birth to 3 years of age
 - We requested a meeting with State Senator Pat Fahy to discuss this issue
 - At the meeting, SEPAC advocated for improved funding for Early Intervention services
 - Senator Fahy agreed to propose a task force on reimbursement for Early Intervention Services [NYS Bill S1222](#) - **ONGOING**
 - For this meeting, SEPAC obtained and shared with Senator Fahy a letter of support from two Capital Region area psychologists
- At our meeting with State Senator Pat Fahy, the Senator also proposed legislation to mandate SEPACs in NYS ([NYS Bill S7826](#)) - **ONGOING**
 - This legislation is scheduled to be addressed during the next legislative session
- As part of our effort to support the expansion of after school opportunities for students with disabilities, SEPAC met with Living Resources and the Department of Special Education - **COMPLETED**
 - After school summer programming for OPWDD students attending ESY became available for the first time for the summer 2025 session
- Special Education Teaching Assistants (TAs) - **ONGOING**
 - SEPAC has discussed with the Special Ed Department concerns about TA hiring and retention. Ongoing challenges are inadequate pay, lack of pay differential for special education TAs, and application barriers due to costs for fingerprinting and certification.
 - SEPAC is in ongoing discussions with the Human Resources Department and Special Ed about providing financial assistance to assist substitute TAs with the costs of certification
- In response to parent requests for help applying for Section 504 accommodations, SEPAC requested that additional guidance be added to the District's website - **ONGOING**
 - The district improved the 504 Section of the webpage
 - SEPAC will add a sample letter template to our webpage
- Special Education Working Group - **ONGOING**
 - SEPAC has been advocating for Superintendent Hochreiter to form a working group to focus on Special Education for the past few years
 - In the most recent data, 2023-2024, over 11% of Albany students have an IEP and there should be a holistic focus on this significant part of our school population and the staff who support them

6. GOALS & OBJECTIVES FOR 2025-2026

- A SEPAC Officer led our board through a Management by Objective process in order to establish goals and objectives for SEPAC for the 2025-2026 school year
 - Over the course of the year, Officers generated a long list of priorities that were narrowed down to three based on the following factors:
 - Achievable within one year
 - Measurable
 - Would impact the most people
 - Had an Officer who will take the lead
 - Relevant to our mission
 - Our three priority areas for 2025-2026 will be advocacy, interface with stakeholders, and family support
 - Some of our objectives within these areas are:
 - Identifying liaisons for each school building, redesigning and expanding our website, organizing an annual family support conference, and increasing our advocacy efforts

7. OTHER UPDATES

- SEPAC made several administrative changes this year
 - Changed our email address
 - Created logo tablecloths for use at school and community events
 - Updated our bylaws to better reflect our operating procedures
 - Created logo T-shirts for SEPAC officers to wear at school and community events