SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS:

A Guide for Minnesota Local Special Education Advisory Councils

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Supported through funding from the Minnesota Department of Education, this project supports and encourages local SEACs as they endeavor to increase the effective involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making.

The modules are intended to facilitate action on the part of the SEAC. Most include information, discussion questions, and an action planning tool that provides at least one example of how to apply the content of the module to a local SEAC's individual needs.

PACER Center Executive Director: Paula Goldberg

THE CURRICULUM IS DIVIDED INTO 12 TRAINING MODULES:

Module 1	**Background and Basics**
Module 2	**Strategies for Cooperatives, Intermediate School Districts, Charter Schools, and Correctional Facilities**
Module 3	**Who Are SEAC Members and What Do They Do?**
Module 4	**Recruiting and Retaining Members**
Module 5	**Determining the SEAC's Mission and Developing the Mission Statement**
Module 6	**Strategies for Providing Information in the School District and Community**
Module 7	**Strategies for Effectiveness within SEAC -- What SEAC Members Need to Know**
Module 8	**Strategies for Effectiveness within a SEAC - Leadership and Partnership**
Module 9	**Funding**
Module 10	**Operational Guidelines (Bylaws)**
Module 11	**Running a Meeting**
Module 12	**Prioritizing Needs and Setting Goals**

- Module 1, "Background and Basics," lays the foundation you will need to understand and benefit from the strategies in the other 11 modules.
- Each module may be used alone or in conjunction with any of the other modules.
- The modules may be used in any order a local SEAC finds most useful for its own purposes.

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MODULE 1 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

BACKGROUND AND BASICS

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS MODULE ARE TO:

- Explain why a functioning SEAC is needed in every school district or cooperative of districts in Minnesota
- Clarify the purpose and function of a local SEAC
- Identify potential benefits of an effective SEAC

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Background and Basics" are located at the end of this module.

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> **"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child that must the community want, for all its children." - John Dewey**

Although local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs) have been required for many years in Minnesota, recent surveys indicate people at the local level have varying degrees of understanding about the purpose and function of SEACs. There is also significant variability regarding the reported effectiveness of SEACs.

I. WHY SEAC'S ARE NEEDED

A. FEDERAL LEGISLATION AND RESEARCH SUPPORT PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION MAKING.

- More than 30 years of research shows that when parents are actively engaged at home and as advocates and decision makers at schools and in the community, their children do better in school and the schools improve.

- With increasing expectations and challenges to provide quality special education that leads to meaningful post-school outcomes, parent input at a policymaking level is more important than ever before.

- Parent involvement and parent-professional collaboration have long been recognized as being key factors in improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Congressional "Findings" in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 acknowledges the need for collaboration in making systemwide change:

"Systemic change benefiting all students, including children with disabilities, requires the involvement of

- states,
- local educational agencies,
- parents,
- individuals with disabilities and their families,
- teachers and other service providers, and
- other interested individuals and organizations

to develop and implement comprehensive strategies that improve educational results for children with disabilities.

State educational agencies, in partnership with:

- local educational agencies,
- parents of children with disabilities,
- and other individuals and organizations,

are in the best position to improve education for children with disabilities and to address their special needs."

The mechanism put in place to provide the opportunity for collaboration to take place is the state-level Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP).

IDEA includes the following requirement:

- States must establish advisory panels to provide guidance on special education and related services.

- Members must be individuals who are involved in educating children with disabilities, including parents of children with disabilities, and individuals with disabilities. (Section 1412(a)(21))

- Minnesota's SEAP provides advice on the education of children and youth with disabilities. The purpose of the council is to provide broad-based input into Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) staff regarding policies and issues related to children and youth with disabilities from birth through age 21.

B. MINNESOTA LAW REQUIRES LOCAL SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCILS

Minnesota also recognizes the need for collaboration at the local level and shows its commitment to parent involvement by mandating local special education parent advisory committees through state statute. Many school districts indicate they would implement a special education advisory council solely on the basis of "best practice." Minnesota's legal requirement gives all districts or cooperatives the responsibility and authority to ensure parents have the opportunity to be involved.

The local Parent Advisory Council is most commonly referred to as the Special Education Advisory Council, or SEAC. However, some localities refer to their council as the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) or Special Education Community Advisory Council (SECAC), or other name. Regardless of the title, these groups must fulfill the requirements of the Minnesota statute.

Sec. 8. Minnesota Statutes 2004, section 125A.24 (Parent Advisory Councils)

In order to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making, school districts must have a special education advisory council that is incorporated into the district's special education system plan.

(1) This advisory council may be established either for individual districts or in cooperation with other districts who are members of the same special education cooperative.

(2) A district may set up this council as a subgroup of an existing board, council, or committee.

(3) At least half of the designated council members must be parents of students with a disability.

When a nonpublic school is located in the district, the council must include at least one member who is a parent of a nonpublic school student with a disability, or an employee of a nonpublic school if no parent of a nonpublic school student with a disability is available to serve.

Each local council must meet no less than once each year. The number of members, frequency of meetings, and operational procedures are to be locally determined.

(For more information about the "locally determined" components of the local SEAC, see Modules 3 and 10.)

To further clarify expectations about implementation at the local level, the MDE disseminated a 2001 memorandum that included the following guidance to school districts:

- A [Parent Advisory Council (PAC)] must be established for each school district, either locally or in conjunction with a special education cooperative. It is possible to use an existing committee (or subcommittee of a larger group) to meet this requirement. However, the membership must meet the provision cited above and have express responsibility for advising local policy and decision makers on special education issues.

- While there are no stated requirements for size or composition, at least 50 percent of the designated council members must be parents of students with a disability.

- For special education monitoring requirements there must be written agendas and minutes available that reflect the council's advisory actions.

- Although parent advisory councils do not have the powers of school boards, they do have authority over their own activities and are responsible for advising the district about special education policy and decisions.

- PACs are intended to increase the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making.

II. WHAT IS AN ADVISORY COUNCIL?

A. IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "ADVISORY" AND "GOVERNING" BOARDS, COUNCILS, AND COMMITTEES.

- Advisory, in terms of committees, means having or exercising power to advise. Advice may be defined as opinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem or as a proposal for an appropriate course of action counsel.

- Advisory groups provide guidance rather than governance.

- Advisory groups do not have any formal authority to issue directives. They do not set policy but may make recommendations regarding policy. The advice may or may not be heeded by the board, which has the decision making authority.

The question naturally arises, "If someone else is still going to make all the decisions, what difference does my involvement on the SEAC make?"

- Advice and recommendations can and should influence decision making and policymaking by the formal board members.

- Contributions of the advisory members, who have personal experience as well as unique knowledge and skills in a particular area, serve to complement the knowledge and skills of the formal board members as they make decisions regarding related policy.

Advisory groups are not:

- *Boards of directors:* Individuals who have legal liability and statutory and financial responsibility to stakeholders and constituents, and maintain organizational control

- *User groups:* Consumers organized to provide input regarding specific services or products

- *Focus groups:* Individuals who meet specific demographic criteria and are brought together by the organization to discuss or evaluate a particular topic

SEACs may wish to utilize focus or user groups as part of other goal-related activities, but the SEAC itself should not function as a focus group. Focus and user groups provide input and feedback to be utilized by the advisory council's members in making recommendations to policy and decision makers.

"Research indicates that the fastest way to lose members of an advisory committee is to ignore their input and recommendations. An effective advisory group elicits values and acts on the input of its membership." (Merrill Associates, "Developing Effective Advisory Committees," merrillassociates.com, 2007)

Many local SEACs struggle with the challenge of developing a process that culminates in recommendations being made that influence decisions at the school district level. A common complaint is that members may feel they are not expected to actually contribute ideas, but rather to be passive participants who may serve to endorse decisions that have already been made. As one school staff SEAC member commented in a recent survey, "Our local SEAC has spent a lot of time on bylaws and membership. Where I would love the focus to be is to actually 'advise' the director. It ends up being presentations about programs where everything has already been decided. The SEAC has no input. I would love to help with this issue."

By understanding the relationship of the SEAC to the governing board, an advisory council can influence decision making at a systemwide level.

B. ADVISORY GROUPS ALWAYS FUNCTION IN RELATIONSHIP TO A GOVERNING BOARD.

To function in an actual advisory capacity, it is important to understand the relationship of your group to the governing board. For the local SEAC, the governing board is the local school district board of education, or in the case of a special education cooperative, the boards of education of the participating districts, unless there is another formal structure.

SEACs give advice or provide guidance to the school board in different ways:

- The special education director may serve as a liaison carrying the advice and guidance of the advisory group to the school district administration and board of directors.

- A school board member may have an identified relationship to the SEAC, bringing requests for guidance to the SEAC and taking its advice and recommendations back to the school board.

- The SEAC may provide recommendations directly to the board through written communication or through an in-person presentation to the board.

The group's bylaws or operational procedures should indicate how the guidance will be given. (See options and ideas in Module 10.)

III. EFFECTIVE SEACS PROVIDE MANY BENEFITS

PACER Center has gathered information from special education directors, parent members, and others through a variety of means, including surveys, interviews, and research. The following benefits are those most commonly cited.

A. BENEFITS OF AN EFFECTIVE SEAC TO PARENT MEMBERS

1. Knowledge gained about district programs and services may benefit their own or another family's child.

2. Contributing to others may give added value and meaning to their own personal experience.

3. Witnessing positive change as a result of their input and influence is rewarding and motivating.

4. They learn new skills that may transfer to other areas of advocacy and leadership.

5. They gain a big-picture perspective.

6. They find opportunities to network and build relationships with other families with similar life experiences.

7. They may develop positive and helpful relationships with school staff.

B. BENEFITS OF AN EFFECTIVE SEAC TO PROFESSIONALS

1. Viewing issues from a variety of perspectives may increase their effectiveness working with families and other staff.

2. They gain a better understanding of the concerns and constraints of families and learn helpful ways to address them.

3. They gain knowledge about various disabilities, programs, and resources beyond their own area of expertise.

4. They make professional networking connections.

5. They increase development of leadership and communication skills.

C. MUTUAL BENEFITS OF AN EFFECTIVE SEAC

1. Parents and school personnel gain more accurate and positive views about each other's attitudes, intentions and abilities.

2. More parents are equipped to act as advocates for and supporters of public schools and programs.

3. Parent input helps keep things real and relevant, which may result in more practical and identifiable outcomes.

4. Members feel more invested in the school system.

5. Parents can advocate for system and program change in ways that staff cannot.

6. The presence and active participation of parents helps keep the focus of discussions on children, which may lead to more family-centered practices.

7. Advice received and implemented by decision makers may lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Local SEACs advise school districts on the development of programs and services to meet the special educational needs of children and families. By sharing their unique perspective of what it is like to use these services, parents can help the district to be more effective. As a result, outcomes for children with disabilities should improve.

"Families contribute integrity to policy group work by providing reality based, culturally relevant information from a unique perspective. In addition, families influence the political and policymaking process in ways that other policy workers and/or system administrators cannot." (Koyanag, Ce Feres-Merchant, D (2000) found in MCMHJJ Program Brief Dec. 2002)

Educational research supports a correlation between high expectations and high outcomes. This is true for SEACs as well. Setting the bar high for structuring and implementing the activities of the local SEAC, rather than following only the minimum requirements of the law, will increase the probability for meaningful and positive outcomes. (See "Indicators of a Quality SEAC Checklist" in Section VI.) The remaining 11 modules will provide guidance and suggestions for initiating and sustaining an effective local SEAC.

IV. FOR DISCUSSION

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Have parents had increased involvement in district policymaking and decision making as a result of the work of our SEAC?

- In what ways does our SEAC involve parents in policymaking and decision making activities?

- What is our SEAC's governing board? What is our relationship to it?

- What is our SEAC's process for providing guidance to our governing board?

- Is the process working well for us? Are there ways we can strengthen the relationship and increase our effectiveness?

- Does our SEAC have written agendas and meeting minutes?

- Do the minutes reflect advisory actions?

- Have we experienced the benefits described for parents, professionals, and the school community? If not, why not?

- What mutual benefits have we seen?

> **"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."**
> **- Margaret Mead**

V. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- PHP-c174 Top Ten Tips to Energize Your SEAC

SEAC STATUTE

125A.24, Minnesota Statutes 2007
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125A.24 PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS

In order to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making, school districts must have a special education advisory council that is incorporated into the district's special education system plan.

(1) This advisory council may be established either for individual districts or in cooperation with other districts who are members of the same special education cooperative.

(2) A district may set up this council as a subgroup of an existing board, council, or committee.

(3) At least half of the designated council members must be parents of students with a disability. When a nonpublic school is located in the district, the council must include at least one member who is a parent of a nonpublic school student with a disability, or an employee of a nonpublic school if no parent of a nonpublic school student with a disability is available to serve. Each local council must meet no less than once each year. The number of members, frequency of meetings, and operational procedures are to be locally determined.

INDICATORS OF A QUALITY SEAC CHECKLIST (EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCILS (SEACS), 2003, MN*TAFS AND MDE)

Identify SEAC minimum requirements; Move beyond the minimum requirements

In order to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in making recommendations regarding special education policy issues, school districts must have a special education advisory council that is incorporated into the district's special education system. MS125A.24

CFL MONITORING CRITERIA	MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS	INDICATORS OF A QUALITY SEAC
1. Minutes of meetings 2. Parent as facilitator or co-facilitator	❑ SEAC meetings have written minutes ❑ SEAC meetings are facilitated or co-facilitated by a parent	❑ SEAC minutes document the actions/growth of the group ❑ SEAC minutes are disseminated, as appropriate, to interested individuals and/or groups ❑ SEAC parent facilitators act in authentic leadership roles

STATUTE: MS 125A.24

1. This advisory council may be established for either individual districts or in cooperation with other districts who are members of the same special education cooperative.

2. A district may set up this council as a subgroup of an existing board, council, or committee.

3. At least half of the designated council members must be parents of students with a disability. The number of members, frequency of meetings, and operational procedures are to be locally determined.

4. The purpose of the council is to advise the school board or comparable governing board for a cooperative

5. The council must meet on at least an annual basis.

6. The council must submit its recommendations, if any, to its governing board

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS

❏ SEAC in place

❏ SEAC stands alone

❏ SEAC as a subgroup

❏ At least half the SEAC membership is parents

❏ Offer advice to the school board or governing board

❏ SEAC meets on an annual basis

❏ Recommendations, if any, are submitted

INDICATORS OF A QUALITY SEAC

❏ Council members advice and input is used to direct and establish policy

❏ SEAC addresses meaningful issues

❏ SEAC structure is based on needs of the community and students; and not on just what is easiest

❏ SEAC membership represents the diversity of the community

❏ SEAC membership represents a parent/ professional partnership

❏ SEAC meeting frequency is based on needs to be addressed

❏ SEAC goals and priorities are based on community input

❏ SEAC parent leaders are trained and supported

❏ SEAC advice and recommendations are considered by the governing board

❏ SEAC meets with the governing board annually

❏ SEAC meets as necessary to address goals and priorities

❏ A feedback loop exists regarding recommendations submitted

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Top Ten Tips to Energize Your SEAC (Special Education Advisory Council)

1. Reach out.	Ask members to reach out to people they know to build SEAC membership.
2. Develop a voice.	Help members effectively speak out on behalf of children with disabilities in your community.
3. Build relationships.	Encourage members to share their own stories, needs and lessons learned.
4. Seek diverse perspectives.	Diverse perspectives enrich discussions and decisions. Be intentional about the composition of the group. Actively recruit missing voices.
5. Ask questions.	You'll receive more valid information when you ask questions. See handout: Key Questions for SEAC Parent Leaders to Ask*.
6. Establish credibility.	List your SEAC's accomplishments. Include them on promotional brochures and present them to the school board.
7. Meet regularly.	Meetings should be regular, but not too frequent. People are busy. Use meeting time effectively.
8. Develop a mission.	Know where you are going and how you will get there.
9. Find a yearly focus.	Set annual priorities and specific goals to accomplish.
10. Celebrate results.	Make a noticeable difference, then celebrate! Recognizing results is energizing and contagious.

*Key Questions for SEAC Parent Leaders to Ask, PACER Center.

For additional support, visit mnseacinfo.org. Resources on the site include twelve online training modules as well as a direct link to PACER staff with SEAC expertise.

SEAC Web site:
www.mnseacinfo.org

PACER CENTER
CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES™

8161 Normandale Blvd
Minneapolis, MN 55437-1044
952.838.9000
952.838.0190 TTY
952.838.0199 fax
PACER@PACER.org

www.PACER.org

MODULE 2 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

STRATEGIES FOR COOPERATIVES, INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICTS, CHARTER SCHOOLS, AND CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Strategies for Cooperatives, Intermediate School Districts, Charter Schools, and Correctional Facilities" are located at the end of this module.

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Special Education Advisory Councils provide a regular forum to stimulate meaningful dialogue among the school districts, administrators, and parents. Cooperative and intermediate school districts, as well as charter schools and correctional facilities, have unique challenges and opportunities to fulfill the legislated mandate of having a local SEAC.

I. EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVES AND INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Minnesota allows school districts to band together as educational cooperatives or intermediate school districts. The SEAC statute also allows cooperatives or intermediate school districts to have a joint SEAC.

To foster an effective cooperative or intermediate SEAC:

LEARN HOW SPECIAL EDUCATION IS ORGANIZED.

- Is there one school board or a joint school board?

- Is there a shared special education director?

- Who employs the special education teachers (usually some are employed by the cooperative or the intermediate school district, while others are employed directly by member districts)?

- *Example:* "The SEAC recognizes the uniqueness of our SEAC in that there are three towns that make up the cooperative, each with its own school committees, but all sharing the same school administrators--a superintendent and special education director. To ensure that each town is equally represented, an individual from each town will serve on the executive committee. In this capacity, all members of the executive committee will be elected at the May meeting."

MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS INCLUDE:

- How will each district be represented by parents?

- How far will members need to drive for a meeting? How often?

- If a cooperative or intermediate district serves particular disability groups, how will these groups be represented?

- Who will appoint parents from each district? Will nominees be taken and approved by a district board or director?

- Will there be staff from each district?

- *Example:* "Each local school district may nominate a member. These nominations are given to the board of education. The intermediate school district board appoints members to the SEAC based on nominations. The board may appoint additional members to make sure that each disability group is represented."

The SEAC will discuss issues and make recommendations.

- Some issues and recommendations will affect all of special education and others will affect only an individual district. How will both be addressed?

Communication challenges to address:

- How will parent representatives communicate with their constituencies?

    - Some districts use Web sites, newsletters, or bulletins.

    - Some districts provide a list of SEAC members so they can be contacted by others with ideas and feedback.

- How will all parents learn about the SEAC and its activities? (See Module 6)

Intermediate School District Example: "We are organized in the format of a school board, parent, and staff advisory committee. Parents represent 50 percent or more of the members. We meet six times a year. Three times during the day at program sites and three times in the evening at the district office. We set yearly agendas and specific meeting agendas. It has worked wonderfully, and I believe members of the group feel it is very successful."

II. CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public school districts. As such, Minnesota statute requires each to have a SEAC. Unique challenges include the facts that charter schools often have smaller populations of children with disabilities and few families may live in the neighborhood of the school. (See Charter School handout with resources at the end of this module.)

To foster an effective charter school SEAC:

- Clarify the relationship of the SEAC to the governing board. Determine if the SEAC will be a stand-alone advisory group or a sub-committee of the board.

- Find out if your school has its own director of special education or shares a director with other schools.

- Address the common challenge of consistent attendance at SEAC meetings.

    - The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools suggests scheduling SEAC meetings for times when parents are already at the school for:

        - school board meetings

        - student activity nights

        - other scheduled events

    - *Example:* One charter school reports that it now schedules SEAC meetings on the same nights as conferences and back-to-school night. As a result, attendance has been good.

III. CORRECTIONS

Children with disabilities incarcerated in a juvenile justice facility also attend school at the facility. Each facility offers public school education including special education. Consequently, the educational component of the facility is required to have a SEAC.

"Family members who feel that their voice has been heard, that they have been respected, that their child has made progress, and that their child has been treated fairly, can be the best advocates that any correctional education program can have. They will support objective data by adding their personal testimonies when it is time to report on a program's or institution's impact." ("Working with Families of Children in the Juvenile Justice and Corrections Systems," The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk (NDTAC))

There are many unique challenges within the setting and structure of correctional facilities, including small populations within particular facilities; short duration of services in one location; and more frequent transitions between programs. While there are many challenges to address, the following strategies may prove helpful.

To foster an effective SEAC in a correctional facility:

- **Conduct parent outreach efforts.**

    - Consider defining "parent" more broadly. Family might include grandparents, foster parents, guardians, or guardian ad litems.

    - Identify, tap into, and build upon family strengths instead of focusing on the negatives.

    - Consider cultural differences, since more than half the residents in some facilities are racially and culturally diverse youth. Intentionally recruit a diverse group.

    - Inform parents about what a SEAC is and why it is required.

    - Highlight the opportunity to meet other parents and share what works and what doesn't.

- **Recognize and identify obstacles to participation and ways to address them.**

    - Parents may not want to participate due to feelings of shame or guilt that their child is in a correctional facility.

        - "Anxieties can readily be overcome when correctional education administrators demonstrate their genuine respect for family members, warmly welcome their collaboration, and generously provide support to make the partnership work." ("Working with Families of Children in the Juvenile Justice and Corrections Systems," NDTAC)

    - Often there is mistrust of the "system." Start slowly and build trust.

        - Establish good lines of communication.
            - Try more than once.
            - Use more than one method or strategy.

        - Provide accessible staff.

        - Put policies and procedures in writing.

- Use native language or interpreters.

- Acknowledge parent expertise on their own child.

- Provide helpful information in a timely manner.

- Facilities often are located a long distance from home.

- Consider assisting with transportation, child care, or lodging.

- Try alternative meeting options such as conference calls or video conferences.

- Tie the SEAC meeting to regularly scheduled visits to the facility.
  - Arizona's best practice is to schedule meetings during a monthly special weekend family day and to provide transportation or arrange car pools.
  - South Carolina's best practice is to schedule meetings on Family Program Focus Sundays.

- **Provide orientation about the SEAC's purpose and the role of parents.**

  - Identify shared goals between parents and the school.

  - Give examples of how parent input can make a difference.

  - Allow parents to share the struggles they've had with agencies and schools. This can lead to improved methods of delivering services.

  - Recognize and communicate that agreement is not always necessary.

- **Create a welcoming, culturally responsive environment.**

  - Present written materials in advance, in native languages, without jargon.

  - Limit the amount of reading and writing parents will have to do.

  - Provide qualified, onsite interpreters.

  - Explain all technical terms and acronyms.

  - Actively seek family expertise.

  - Identify a parent leader who may offer credibility.

- **Recruit additional nonparent members**

  - Consider inviting local service providers from child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, and special education to participate.

In summary, cooperative and intermediate school districts, charter schools, and correctional facilities have unique challenges and opportunities to fulfill the mandate of the statute.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Does our SEAC know who receives our advice?

- Does our SEAC membership reflect our district's, cooperative's, or school's makeup?

- How do we deal with issues that may cross local school district boundaries?

- What methods do we have in place to communicate with those we represent?

V. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

As a group, ask yourselves:

- What outcome do we want?

- How will we know we've achieved that outcome? (observable indicator)

- What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

- What help do we need to achieve this?

Using the discussion questions in Section IV or questions of your own, what next steps are necessary? Pick only one or two at a time.

Examples of outcomes:

- We have a representative membership.

- We have methods to communicate special education information across school district borders.

- We know who will receive our advice.

Example:

Outcome: SEAC members know to whom their advice or recommendations will be conveyed.

Observable Indicator: SEAC bylaws outline the established procedure.

Action:

- SEAC members will learn who makes policy and other decisions.

- SEAC will discuss methods of conveying recommendations to this person or entity.

- SEAC will chose effective methods and add them to the SEAC bylaws.

Help needed:

- Director of special education will inform members of the process for making decisions at each level (building, district, cooperative, etc.) and to whom recommendations will be made.

- District staff will add chosen methods to SEAC bylaws for distribution.

V. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- PHP-c176 Minnesota Charter Schools and Special Education Advisory Councils

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Minnesota Charter Schools and Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs)

Parent involvement and parent-professional collaboration have long been recognized as being key factors in improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Minnesota shows its commitment to parent involvement at the local level by mandating local special education parent advisory councils through state statute. Charter schools are public school districts, and as such, Minnesota statute requires each to have a special education advisory council (SEAC).

Like all SEACs, the charter school SEAC is responsible for giving advice about special education policy and decisions. This advice is given to the school's governing board. Each charter school is governed by a board of directors made up of parents, teachers, and community members elected by the school community. Parents and professionals can gain knowledge about the school, other parents, and school staff; contribute by sharing unique experiences; and have an opportunity to give advice and recommendations to school administrators.

There are a number of unique challenges for charter schools and their SEACs:

- Unlike other school districts, a charter school is the only school in the district. This means there will be a limited number of parents from which to draw SEAC members. Because of the small population and the structure of the school board, some parents and school professionals may be both SEAC members and governing board members.

- Often there is a greater distance for parents to come for meetings.

With those challenges in mind, here are some questions to ask if you are developing a SEAC at a charter school:

- If there is an overlap of members between the SEAC and the school's board, would it be most effective to form the SEAC as a subgroup of the governing board?

- A district's special education teachers are sometimes members of the SEAC. In the case of charter schools, many of the special education teachers work at the school only part time. How many teachers would be able to attend SEAC meetings and when?

- How often will the SEAC meet? Answering this question will help decide how much geographic territory it is logical to cover (how far people have to come and how often)

- Does your school have children with a wide range of disability categories? How will the SEAC achieve representation of a variety of disabilities?

The following are some tips for maintaining a SEAC at a charter school:

- Schedule SEAC meetings for times when parents are already at the school for:
  o school board meetings
  o student activity nights
  o other scheduled events
  o **Example:** One charter school schedules SEAC meetings on the same nights as conferences and back-to-school night. A SEAC member reports, "Attendance has been good."

More information on SEACs may be found at mnseacinfo.org. Developed by PACER Center under partial funding from the Minnesota Department of Education, this Web site contains 12 training modules for parents and school districts to use to form and maintain effective SEACs.

MODULE 3 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

WHO ARE SEAC MEMBERS AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

THIS MODULE ADDRESSES SEAC

- Membership
- Member roles and responsibilities

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Who Are SEAC Members and What Do They Do?" are located at the end of this module.

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A SEAC is only as effective as its members. Having the right mix of people and making sure they know what they're expected to do will help a SEAC succeed in its mission.

I. SEAC MEMBERSHIP

The Minnesota statute mandating parent advisory councils specifies that at least half of the designated council members must be parents of students with disabilities. In addition, if a private school is located in the district, the council must include at least one member who is a parent of a private school student with a disability (or a private school employee if no parent is available).

Note the word "designated." This implies that a person who happens to show up for a meeting is not necessarily a "member." The local SEAC will want to make decisions regarding how it will officially designate members (see Module 10). The SEAC may well have parents who participate, observe, or help with activities but who are not members.

The statute leaves it up to the local SEAC to determine who the designated members other than parents will be.

One Minnesota school district describes its requirements this way: The SEAC shall consist of a minimum of eight and a maximum of 12 persons. At least half of the designated council members must be parents of children with disabilities. About one fourth of the representatives will include students receiving special education services, individuals with a disability, or representatives of community agencies. About one fourth will be members of the staff of the school district.

In a 2004 – 2005 PACER survey of special education directors, 29 districts indicated that members are selected from a pool of volunteers while 10 indicated that members are selected to represent a disability, a school building or district, or an age group.

II. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

While all designated members share some common responsibilities, such as coming to the meetings, other members will have specific roles and responsibilities, depending on whom they represent.

PARENTS

The statute is clear that the overall role and responsibility for parent members is to advise the school district (see Module 1). Parents will consider issues and then will recommend, suggest, guide, and advise. It is not the role of parent members to advocate or plead for an individual case, position, or point of view.

Primary parent roles and responsibilities include:

- Becoming familiar with the school district structure and policies
- Gaining and maintaining a good working knowledge of special education law
- Helping set priorities for improving services
- Focusing on systems change rather than individual children
- Assisting the district in identifying problems and recommending solutions
- Helping the district effectively incorporate family involvement and participation strategies
- Helping to build community awareness of special education
- Working collaboratively with other members
- Listening
- Sharing knowledge and skills
- Asking questions
- Participating in discussions
- Participating in developing priorities
- Attending meetings regularly
- Contributing perspective and expertise
- Voicing agreement or disagreement when the group seeks consensus

Additional roles and responsibilities may include:

- Serving as chair or co-chair
- Serving on a SEAC subcommittee
- Assisting in identifying and mentoring new members
- Representing SEAC on other district committees (budget, hiring, interagency, building, curriculum)
- Contributing personal skills to SEAC activities, such as writing, organizing, photographing
- Representing a group (disability group, age group, school building) by:
    - Talking to other families in that group regularly
    - Making your phone number or e-mail available to group members
    - Listening carefully to understand their service needs and ideas
    - Repeating what you hear them saying to make sure you understood
    - Listening for gaps in services to take back to the SEAC
    - Finding a method to report back to your group

SEACs usually include nonparent members. In survey feedback, for example, one district reported that its membership composition included a general education teacher, county social worker, rehabilitation counselor, and a student, as well as parents.

SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS

Suggested roles and responsibilities for school professionals include:

- **Special education director**

    - Asking parents about their experiences, concerns, and priorities

    - Assisting chairperson to develop agenda

    - Providing administrative support (printing and mailing SEAC materials, providing meeting room and interpreters)

    - Serving as liaison between SEAC and superintendent and/or school board

    - Participating in SEAC discussions and responding to members' questions or requests for information

    - Listening actively

    - Attending SEAC meetings

    - Providing and clarifying information about the district (special education policy updates, performance and outcome data)

    - Ensuring that input from the SEAC is communicated to the governing board

- **Other school professionals**

    - Making presentations to SEAC on specific topics

    - Representing a specific group such as special education teachers, regular education teachers, building administrators, related services personnel

    - Serving as consultants on particular issues

OTHER COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL DISTRICT MEMBERS:

Suggested roles and responsibilities for other community and school district members include:

- Community agencies: sharing information, expertise, community resources, and needs

- Adults or older students with disabilities: sharing perspectives

A SEAC typically will have a chairperson (see Module 10 for guidelines on choosing a chairperson). This person usually, but not always, is a parent who works collaboratively with the special education director. This collaboration can take different shapes.

- One special education director says: "We rotate between parent and staff as chairperson. One year the chair is a parent and the vice-chair is a staff person. The next year the staff person moves up to chair and a new parent is the vice-chair, and so on. This way people are more prepared for the role of chairperson."

- Another special education director notes, "I sure can tell the change in climate this year with two parents chairing the meetings versus myself chairing them for the previous two years. The meetings are much more meaningful now. Parents stay afterwards and talk. They develop the agenda. I just have a topic called the Director's Comments."

SEAC CHAIRPERSON:

Roles and responsibilities for the SEAC chairperson include:

- Drafting agenda collaboratively with special education director or other school district representative

- Running the meeting following parliamentary or other agreed upon procedures (See Module 11)

- Implementing bylaws

- Facilitating meeting discussions by resolving roadblocks, summarizing points, calming emotions, keeping spirit positive, staying focused and productive

- Promoting collaboration between all members, district administration, and school board

- Delegating responsibilities, such as subcommittees

- Facilitating the study of issues; summarizing input and decisions; leading development of advice statement

- Providing leadership

- Promoting collaboration

- Serving as SEAC spokesperson to the public

- Mentoring new members

Parents are the experts on their children. Schools have the educational expertise. By working together, parents and schools can improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

III. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Are at least half of our members parents of children with disabilities?

- Do parents make up half the attendees as each of our meetings?

- Are members' roles and responsibilities clear?

- Are we clear on who is a designated member?

IV. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

As a group, ask yourselves:

- What outcome do we want?

- How will we know we've achieved that outcome? (observable indicator)

- What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

- What help do we need to achieve this?

Using the discussion questions in Section III, what next steps are necessary? Perhaps pick only one or two outcomes at a time.

Examples of outcomes:

- More active members on SEAC

- Clear guidelines on member roles and responsibilities

- Clear guidelines on designating members

Example of next steps for membership:

- *Outcome:* Clear guidelines for who is a designated member

- *Observable Indicator:* SEAC bylaws will include a definition of how a person is designated as a member.

- *Action:* The SEAC will appoint a subcommittee to study the options and make recommendations to the full council at the next meeting.

- *Help:* The district special education director will be a member of the subcommittee and set up the subcommittee meeting before the next SEAC meeting.

V. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- SEAC Parent Member Job Description Sample/Template

- SEAC Member Application Sample/Template

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent Member Job Description

Happy Hills School District SEAC Mission and Purpose

The Happy Hills School District SEAC
- Advises the Special Education Departm ent on cu rrent issues, program developm ent, parental concerns and involvement
- Serves as an advocate for high-quality special education programs
- Promotes communication between family, school, and community

Members of the SEAC are appointed/elected by the school board/special education director/other to voluntarily serve as representatives for a ___year term, with the opportunity to reapply for additional terms as described in the SEAC bylaws.

The council consists of approximately __ people, including parents, community representatives, and school staff. At least 50 percent of the members must be parents from diverse disability areas.

Primary Responsibilities

Review and abide by SEAC bylaws, including confidentiality of person-specific information shared in meetings or in SEAC-related activities.

Attend scheduled meetings (see schedule below): To remain in current standing, members are required to attend at least 50 percent of the meetings scheduled in a year. In addition, members share equally in the responsibility to serve on related SEAC subcommittees or task forces as needed.

Prepare for meetings: Read SEAC agendas, minutes, reports, and related materials. Provide requested input prior to meetings. Come prepared to discuss agenda items using relevant examples or supporting information.

Participate in meetings: Provide requested feedback. Contribute ideas for solutions. Identify barriers or challenges experienced by other families; represent family concerns; focus on student needs as a group, rather than on individual student concerns. Share personal experiences as they relate to decisions regarding policies and procedures; ask clarifying questions.

Encourage parent involvement and participation; participate in community awareness activities and information sharing with families in the district.

Work collaboratively with the school district or cooperative's special education director as well as other school personnel and SEAC parent and community members to fulfill the local SEAC's purpose and mission.

Meeting Schedule

The council is scheduled to meet ____times during the school year. Meetings will be held from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the school district office (address) on the third Tuesday of the month. The 2009/10 SEAC will meet in September, October, November, January, February, April, and May.

SAMPLE/TEMPLATE
School District Special Education Advisory Council
Application for Membership 2009/2010

Name: _____ Date: _____

Address: _____

E-mail: _____

Daytime Phone: _____ Evening Phone: _____

Please indicate which membership category (ies) you represent:

<u>Parent/Guardian Member</u>
Child's school: _____ Age or Grade: ____ Disability Category: _____

<u>School District Staff Member</u>
School: _____ Program Name: _____ Job Title: _____

<u>Community Member</u>
Organization/Agency: _____ Your Role: _____

Background and Qualifications

1.) Why are you interested in serving on the SEAC?

2.) What unique perspectives or skills can you contribute to the SEAC?

3.) What system-wide special education concerns would you like to see the SEAC address?

4.) Have you attended or visited a SEAC meeting? ____ Yes ____ No

5.) Have you read the SEAC job description and participation requirements? ____Yes ____No

Optional:
Please list any current or past participation in school building, district, or community service committees, programs, or activities:

If you were invited to submit this application, please indicate who referred you: _____

INSERT: "Deadline for Application is _____," *OR*
"Applications are accepted on an ongoing basis to fill openings as needed."

Please return this completed form via mail, e-mail or fax to:
Name (Director of Special Education);
School district address; fax number; e-mail address; phone number

MODULE 4 - SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

RECRUITING AND RETAINING MEMBERS

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Recruiting and Retaining Members" are located at the end of this module.

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This module will give suggestions to assist local SEACs with recruiting and retaining members. The materials, methods, and strategies your SEAC uses will be linked to your SEAC's membership guidelines. Becoming clear about the structure of your SEAC will guide your recruitment efforts. For example, if designated members will represent a disability group, then your materials and methods will be tailored to target that pool of potential members.

RECRUITING MEMBERS: WHO WILL THESE "MEMBERS" BE?

The Minnesota Statute (see Module 1) says:

- this is a "parent advisory council,"

- that the purpose of the council is to "increase the involvement of parents in district policy-making and decision making,"

- that "at least half of the designed council members must be parents of children with disabilities,"

- and that if there is a nonpublic school in the district, a parent or employee of a nonpublic school is required

The Statute also says that membership is an "operational procedure" and is "locally determined."

In a 2004-2005 survey of special education directors, comments on SEAC membership included:

- We take volunteers and nominations.

- Members apply through a district wide mailing and are then selected.

- We "recruit" but the parent group votes on candidates.

- We do both (volunteers and designated members).

- We chose individuals to represent particular school buildings.

- We chose individuals to represent a specific disability or age group.

- Our volunteers go through application process, the same as the district's other advisory committees.

PARENT MEMBERS

Parent members must make up at least half of the SEAC's membership. Parent members will all be volunteers, giving a significant aspect to recruitment and retention.

As a first step in developing parent recruitment materials and strategies, the SEAC will want to prepare answers to these questions:

- Why would a parent want to participate on your SEAC?

- What information do parents need in order to make the decision to join?

Why would a parent want to participate on a SEAC?

PACER has found through experience, research, and surveys, that certain benefits are often named. Some of the benefits are more personal benefits for the parent and their family such as the opportunity to:

- Be a good role model for their child

- Make a difference for their own child as well as other children in the district

- Form relationships with other families and district staff

- Learn skills and information that may help them work more effectively with the school district

- Become more knowledgeable about special education

- Feel good about making a contribution to the wider community. This happens in several ways by:

    - helping the school district understand parent perspectives

    - contributing in ways that may improve outcomes for children with disabilities and produces meaningful change

    - appreciating the opportunity to support local school professionals

SEAC participation can provide multiple benefits, to the family, to the school district and to the local community.

Prospective parent members will also need information in order to make the decision to join your SEAC.

To understand the big picture, parents will want to know:

- The purpose of the SEAC

- What the SEAC plans to accomplish

- What the SEAC accomplished last year

- Their roles and responsibilities

- Who they will represent

- Who, in addition to parents, serves on the SEAC

- Length of membership term

To understand the logistics, parents will want to know:

- How often the SEAC meets

- When the SEAC meets and for how long

- Who to contact for more information, including a SEAC parent member and special ed director

Your SEAC will want to have this information available in a format that can be used to develop outreach recruitment materials. (Please note that more information on many of these topics is included in other training modules in this series.)

Now, guided by your SEAC's definition of membership, your SEAC may move on to develop materials.

How will a SEAC decide what to include in the materials?

The potential benefit and other specific SEAC information you choose to include in your outreach materials will be determined by who you are specifically recruiting as potential members. For example, if you are recruiting parents of young children with disabilities, it may be most important to highlight the opportunity to learn skills and information to work effectively with the school district. All materials could include past SEAC accomplishments and the role and responsibilities of a SEAC member.

Once you decide who you want to recruit, what are some of the options for getting this information to potential members?

There are many different options for getting the news out. These include:

- Posting notices in newsletters, and area newspapers, and the district web site, school bulletin boards, and cable TV bulletin boards

- Writing a personal interest story regarding special education for the local newspaper, including information about SEAC and how to participate

- Developing public service announcements for local cable TV or radio

- Sending or mailing a letter about the SEAC to parents of all children with disabilities in the district

- Developing a recruitment brochure

While all of these methods are good, don't forget the most effective method! Research shows that the most productive way of encouraging someone to volunteer is through a personal invitation to participate.

Once a SEAC has determined who they want to recruit and has the materials ready for that specific group or audience, how might they get the names or addresses of those persons?

A key point to keep in mind is that SEACs are only as effective as their membership. Depending on which parents you are recruiting as members, potential methods may include:

- Gathering names of potential parent leaders by asking the following to provide names:

    - building principals

    - cultural liaisons

    - special education teachers in a variety of disability categories and a variety of age groups (and be sure in include underrepresented groups in your outreach efforts, such as parents of children with mental health concerns, and parents from diverse cultures)

    - Tapping into district parent information and support groups

    - Identifying potential members from outside the district. Community and church leaders may be helpful in identifying potential members, as well as private school principals.

- Seeking referrals from other advisory groups that include parents as representatives. These local groups include:

  - IEIC: Interagency Early Intervention Committee

  - CTIC: Community Transition Interagency Committee

  - PTA or school site councils

The law requires that at least half of the designated members must be parents of children with disabilities.

NON-PARENT MEMBERS

The most common non-parent members we find on SEACs include:

- School professionals (such as special education teachers, regular education teachers, administrators, related-service providers)

- Some of the school professionals may also be parents of children with disabilities. Note that when a school professional is also a parent of a child with a disability, it may be most appropriate to identify that person as a non-parent member.

- In addition to school professionals, some SEACs also include:

  - Community agency representatives such as a county social worker, public health nurse, and community educator

  - Older students with disabilities

  - Adults with disabilities

  - Members of other district advisory committees

  - School board members

When recruiting non-parent members, the benefits of participating and need for information is much the same as for parents.

How might a SEAC recruit non-parent members?

The methods of recruitment outlined above may also apply. In addition:

- The district special education director may appoint school staff to the SEAC.

- To recruit members, the district may publicize needs in staff newsletters and notices, or at staff inservice meetings.

- Other members may be recruited through school district connections with other community agencies, such as county social services or City Parks and Recreation.

Since non-parent members can be valuable members of an effective SEAC, it's important to remember to include them in your recruitment efforts.

RETAINING MEMBERS

What do SEAC members say is important to them? SEAC members want to:

- Feel valued

- To feel their contribution is worthwhile

- That they have a chance to speak and be heard

- Have a respectful listening and speaking environment

These aspects may be intangible, but they are very important to those who are busy, both parents and professionals. Common courtesy can go a long way in helping a member keep coming back.

A few more tips that SEACs may want to be *intentional* about include:

- Wear nametags, and use name tents if you meet around a large table or in a large room.

- Always post directions to the meeting room.

- Check to see if anyone needs accommodations for meeting participation.

- Be on the lookout for new people as they arrive, and introduce yourself informally before a meeting.

- You may want to offer to sit with someone who's new to SEAC.

- Make sure all acronyms used in discussions are defined.

- Intentionally invite everyone's participation in discussions.

- If you are going to be discussing written material at the meeting, it is very helpful to supply the materials to read before a meeting.

Many of these tips are very simple things to do, but it's important to keep implementing them even after your group is no longer new.

ORIENTATION

Orientation is another strategy to help retain new members. When one knows why one is there, how the group works, and what is hoped to be accomplished, one is more likely to return. What tips might a SEAC want to implement in regards to member orientation?

Orientation is handled in different ways by different SEACs. We have found that it is sometimes:

- Done at a separate meeting held annually

- Done at a meeting held in fall for new and returning members or held for a couple hours before the first fall meeting with a light meal

Orientation efforts may include:

- Introduction of all members

- Review of annual calendar

- Explaining the SEAC law

- Explaining the "advisory" role

- Review of roles and responsibilities
- Overview of bylaws
- Provision of notebook of materials or orientation manual

Orientation materials or notebook might include:

- A list of all members with contact information
- Copy of the SEAC statute
- The local SEAC's mission statement and operational guidelines
- Minutes of previous meetings
- A definition of the advisory role and responsibilities
- A list of commonly used acronyms to refer to during meetings

MENTORING

Mentoring is another strategy that may also encourage members to keep on coming.

Tips for mentoring include:

- Identify experienced members who would be willing to mentor new members.
- Include new members in casual conversations to check for understanding and give them an opportunity to ask questions that they may be reluctant to voice in a large group.
- Phone after the meeting to see if they need more information.

Information is powerful, and taking the NEXT STEPS gives you the opportunity to put that information to use.

DETERMINING THE SEAC'S MISSION AND DEVELOPING THE MISSION STATEMENT

serve as an advisory group to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in making recommendations regarding special education policy issues.

AN EFFECTIVE MISSION STATEMENT:

- Clarifies and communicates your destination
- Points you in the right direction
- Guides you in making decisions
- Helps you correct your course and stay on track

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Mission & Mission Statement" are located at the end of this module.

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Wondering about your SEAC's purpose and function? Think about it as a map to a destination.

Before you start a trip, you need to know where you are going. A clearly defined mission communicated through a well-crafted mission statement will serve as compass or, better yet, a Global Positioning System to your local SEAC. Whether you are a new SEAC embarking on the trip for the first time or an existing SEAC looking for a better route to your destination, you may benefit from applying the guidance in this module.

I. WHAT IS A MISSION STATEMENT?

A mission statement is "a summary describing the aims, values, and overall plan of an organization, or individual."

Mission comes from purpose and function. An advisory committee's purpose (reason for existence) and its function (task) are defined by state and local statute, regulations, and policies.

For example, the Minnesota Department of Education says the purpose and function of the local SEAC is to "serve as an advisory group to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in making recommendations regarding special education policy issues." A mission statement takes the form of a written, easy-to-remember sentence, short list of bullet points, or paragraph. It communicates the local group's unique interpretation of how it will approach its work in accomplishing the established purposes in light of its local needs and concerns.

For example, at the state level, the mission of the Special Education Advisory Panel is to "[a]dvise both the Divisions of Special Education Policy and Special Education Compliance & Assistance within the State Educational Agency on the education of children and youth with disabilities…Its purpose is to provide a broad base of input to the Department of Education staff regarding policies, procedures, and issues related to the education of children and youth with disabilities, ages birth through 21."

II. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

To lay the groundwork for developing or revising your SEAC's mission statement, your SEAC will want to investigate and determine:

- **How the SEAC fits into the big picture of the school district**

    - What are the shared concerns and goals between regular education and special education?

    - Are there other district advisory groups with parent representation? What is their function?

- **Who has decision making responsibility and authority to take action on particular requests or recommendations**

    - What level and kinds of decisions require governing board action?

    - What decision making authority has been delegated to administrators?

- **How decisions are made in the district**
  - What is the difference in the way site-based (building level) decisions are made from districtwide policy decisions?
  - What are the sequential steps to the adoption of revised or new policy?
  - At what point should the SEAC make its recommendations in order to be relevant and influential?

III. STRATEGIES TO EVALUATE AN EXISTING MISSION STATEMENT

If your SEAC currently has a mission statement, review it as a group and evaluate its appropriateness and effectiveness by answering the following questions:

- **Is it clear? Does it answer these questions:**
  - Who are we advising?
  - What are we advising about?
  - What is the desired outcome of our efforts?
- **Does it provide direction to the group?**
- **Does it reflect current conditions and realities—not what the purpose used to be, or what the group thinks the purpose should be, but rather the purpose the current group is committed to carrying out?**

After answering these questions, you have three options to consider:

1. Keep the mission statement as it is.
2. Make some minor revisions or additions.
3. Make major changes.

If you choose option three, the following suggestions may prove helpful for writing a new mission statement. If you choose option two, you may find some of the strategies useful in making revisions. In either case, select the ideas that will work for your group and list the steps your SEAC will take.

IV. STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP A SEAC MISSION STATEMENT

- Involve key players—parent leaders, special education director, chairperson(s), teachers, principals and other staff.
- Determine a timeline and write a specific plan of action.
- Obtain broad input from the larger group. You might, for example, send a written survey to be completed and returned before a meeting or have members complete it at the meeting. It might ask each person to complete statements such as "The purpose of our SEAC is to _____." You also may use a multiple-choice format to present possible mission components. Other options include using an "agree/disagree" format with elements of the mission statement, or prioritizing a list of items.
- Compile the results and look for areas of consensus to present to the group as a starting point for a draft.

- Appoint a small subcommittee or workgroup to refine the input and create a draft of the statement.

- Present the draft statement to the group for feedback.

   - Tip: E-mailing the information to members is a quick and efficient method that works for many groups, especially at the subcommittee level.

- Utilize a member with writing skills to wordsmith and finalize the statement.
   - Keep the message short enough to remember or derive a shorter, memorable version to use in communications.

- Present the statement to the SEAC for approval by consensus.

TIPS TO REMEMBER

- The process is as important as the product. Don't rush the process, but don't get mired in the details.

- Mission statements are broad by design. Detail-level information about the SEAC belongs in the bylaws and operational procedures.

- Stick with the timeline that was determined for completing this activity. Don't let the mission of the SEAC become writing the mission!

- **For additional group process strategies see Module 12, Section II.**

V. PUTTING THE SEAC MISSION STATEMENT TO USE

- Determine an action plan for how the mission statement will be implemented.

   - Display the concise mission statement in meetings and on printed materials such as ground rules, agendas, and minutes.

   - Include the statement on job descriptions, membership applications, and recruitment outreach.

The mission statement is like the gutter-bumpers in adaptive bowling. Having it in place keeps the ball out of the gutter and rolling towards the pins where it can connect and make an impact. For example,

- If items on the agenda don't fit with the mission statement, they might not belong there.

- If an activity doesn't fit the mission, it might more appropriately be conducted outside the SEAC.

VI. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

In addition to choosing strategies from this module to develop into the specific steps your SEAC will take to produce an effective mission statement, your group may find the following tools on the following pages helpful:

- Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

- Mission flow-chart template

- PHP- c153 Know Your School District

- School district organizational chart example 1

- School district organizational chart example 2

- Examples of local SEAC mission statements
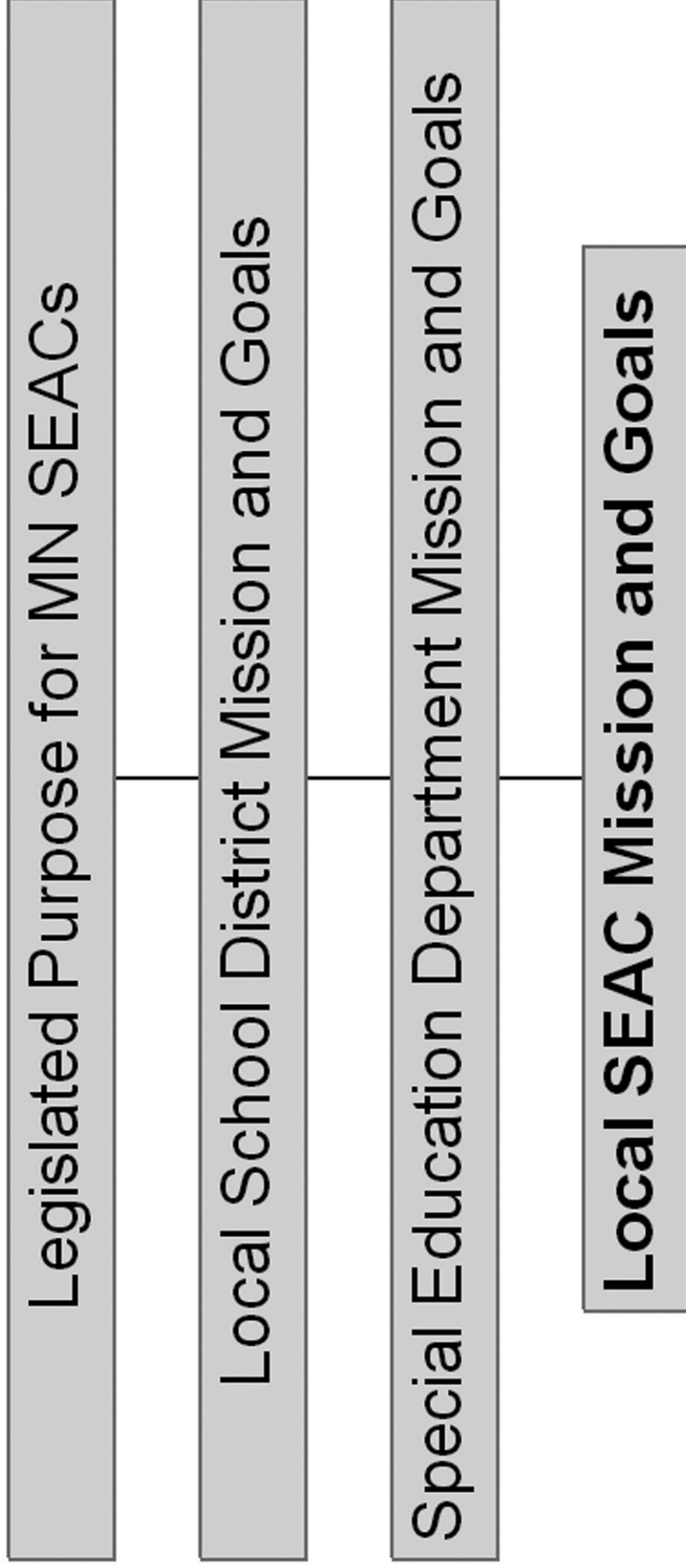
Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

SEAC Mission Flowchart

Legislated Purpose for MN SEACs

Local School District Mission and Goals

Special Education Department Mission and Goals

Local SEAC Mission and Goals

Know Your School District:
Tips for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs)

Becoming familiar with your school district will help you to be a more effective member of your local SEAC. Special education operates in relationship to regular education. By understanding how the SEAC and the special education program fit into the big picture of the school district, you may be able to more easily identify the shared concerns and goals between regular education and special education. The following information will help you understand some of the requirements your school district has to meet for all students.

General Education Curriculum

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes it clear that students receiving special education services have a right to be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum. By knowing and understanding the curriculum being used in your district, your SEAC will be in a better position to suggest ways to make it more accessible to students with disabilities. Likewise, by being aware of any specialized education programs that are available to students in the district and the requirements for those programs, your SEAC can be more effective.

Policies and Procedures

Students who receive special education services are also part of the general education population. They are subject to the policies and procedures that govern all students in the district.

District policies are often published in booklets for students and on district Web sites. These policies may include:

- Absenteeism and tardiness
- Attendance area boundaries
- Attendance policies
- Bullying and harassment
- Deadlines for enrollment
- Graduation requirements
- School choice
- School discipline
- School year calendar
- Transportation

Policy Decisions

SEAC members have an important role in shaping policy decisions at the school district level. They can help identify issues, influence decisions, and improve school programs. They do not have to be education experts to ask good questions. By becoming involved in the SEAC, parents have the opportunity to move from advocating for their own children to advocating for all children in the district and working toward increased achievement for all students.

In order to understand how policy decisions are made in the school district, you may want to take time at your SEAC meeting to ask helpful questions such as:

- How are district policy decisions made?
- What steps are used to adopt new or revised district policies?
- At what point might a SEAC advisory recommendation be made in order to be relevant and effective in the process?
- Which kinds of decisions require governing board (school board) authority and approval and which are delegated to administration?

School District Responsibilities

School districts are required to submit performance data to the Minnesota Department of Education and to comply with periodic special education monitoring. By being aware of this accountability process, SEAC members can be more effective in their advisory role. Here are three major components of school district responsibilities.
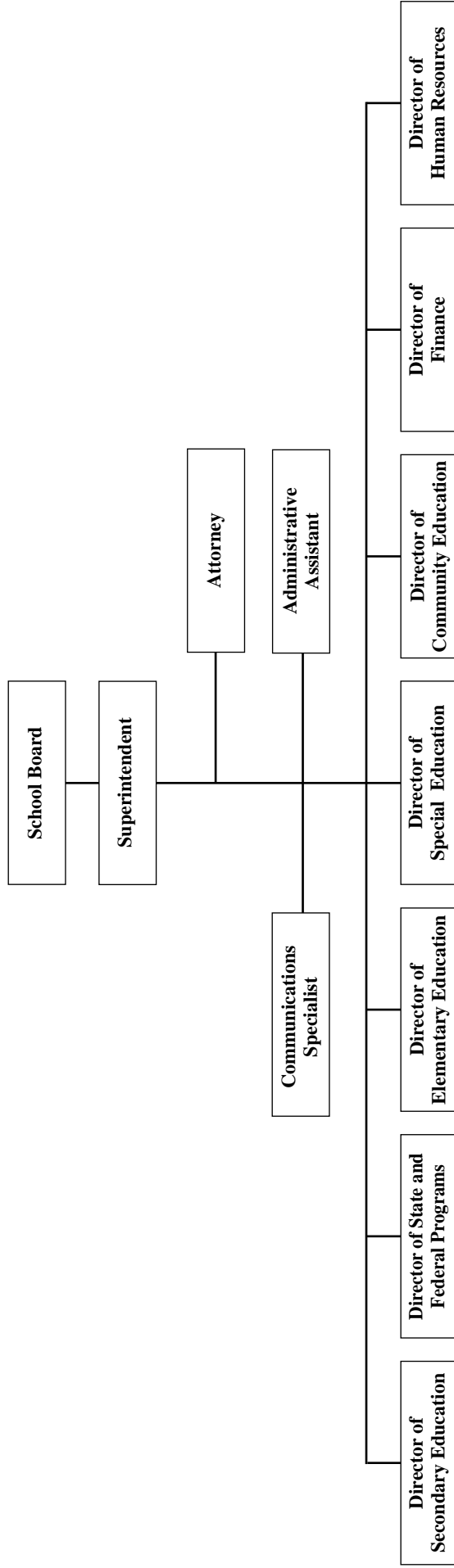
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT 196
Rosemount, Minnesota
Educating our students to reach their full potential

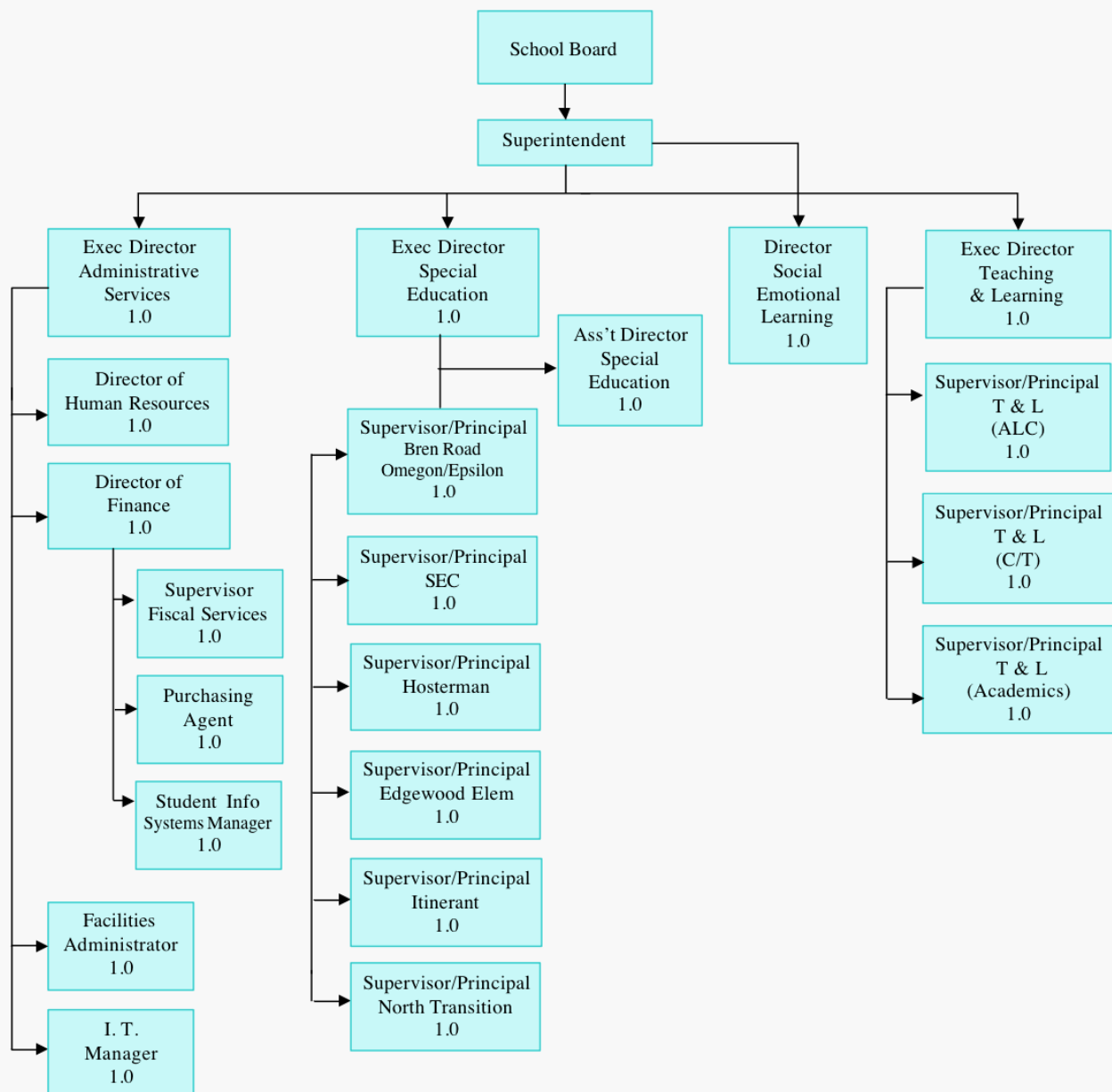Series Number ___301.4.5AR___ Adopted ___October 1989___ Revised ___July 2006___

Title ___Organization Chart___

School Board

Superintendent

Attorney

Administrative Assistant

Communications Specialist

Director of State and Federal Programs

Director of Elementary Education

Director of Special Education

Director of Community Education

Director of Finance

Director of Human Resources

Director of Secondary Education

Intermediate District 287

Organizational Chart
2008 — 2009

- School Board
  - Superintendent
    - Exec Director Administrative Services 1.0
      - Director of Human Resources 1.0
      - Director of Finance 1.0
        - Supervisor Fiscal Services 1.0
        - Purchasing Agent 1.0
        - Student Info Systems Manager 1.0
      - Facilities Administrator 1.0
      - I. T. Manager 1.0
    - Exec Director Special Education 1.0
      - Ass't Director Special Education 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal Bren Road Omegon/Epsilon 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal SEC 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal Hosterman 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal Edgewood Elem 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal Itinerant 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal North Transition 1.0
    - Director Social Emotional Learning 1.0
    - Exec Director Teaching & Learning 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal T & L (ALC) 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal T & L (C/T) 1.0
      - Supervisor/Principal T & L (Academics) 1.0

Board Approved — June 26, 2008

Examples of Local SEAC Mission Statements

Example 1: The mission of the SEAC is to empower parents of children with disabilities to be involved in district policy and decision making. The SEAC advises the district through the executive director of special education. The SEAC assists the district in identifying needs and by supporting the development and implementation of policies and practices to meet the needs of special education students and families in the district.

Example 2: Purpose: Represent the interests of district learners with disabilities from birth through age 21; advise the special education department on current issues, program development, parental concerns and involvement, and department priorities; serve as an advocate for high quality special education programs, and promote communication between family, school, and community, actively seeking input from students and parents.

Example 3: The purpose of the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) is to provide advice to the Goodhue County Education District and its member school district (Cannon Falls, Goodhue, Kenyon-Wanamingo, Red Wing and Zumbrota-Mazeppa) on their special education programs. The SEAC is made up of a majority of parents of students with disabilities and member school district staff.

Example 4: Bloomington has an active Special Education Community Advisory Council otherwise known as SECAC. The Council advises the director of student services regarding current issues, program development, parental concerns and involvement, and departmental priorities. Its mission is to provide input to the Bloomington Department of Special Education, to serve as a communication link with the Bloomington community at large, to advocate for high quality educational programs for all learners and to assure the implementation of the district and special education mission to all students in the Bloomington public schools.

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Strategies for Providing Information in the School District and Community"are located at the end of this module.

PACER CENTER

CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES™

Information is powerful.

An effective exchange of information is often the key to success for SEACs and the school districts they advise. This module will assist your SEAC in developing strategies for sharing information in the school district and community.

I. PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SEAC TO PARENTS AND STAFF IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

As you make plans to "get the word out" to the school community about the SEAC, it may be helpful to share the potential benefits of these information-sharing efforts with your group, as well as ideas for the types of information to share and methods to use.

BENEFITS

There are several benefits to promoting your local SEAC:

- Widespread knowledge of the SEAC elevates its status, which may attract more qualified members.

- High visibility and a positive reputation may provide the SEAC with more influence with the decision makers they advise.

- Accurate and timely information provides parents with the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the SEAC

INFORMATION TO PROVIDE

Information to disseminate about the SEAC may include:

- Purpose and Mission

- Past accomplishments and progress

- Annual goals and related activities

- Meeting dates, times, locations

- Designated member roster

- Visitor information

- Availability of meeting agendas and minutes

- Contact information

METHODS FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION:

SEACs and school districts utilize a variety of methods to provide information about the SEAC:

- **Place an article or a calendar item in the local community newspaper**

- **Place an article in school building level newsletters**
    - Example: See *School Building Level Newsletter: Rochester*
      located at the end of this module

Include a regular SEAC and/or Special Education column with SEAC news in a district-wide newsletter or create other communications.

- **Create a SEAC newsletter**

  - Example: "The parents edit a newsletter sponsored by the SEPAC that is sent to all families with a student on an IEP in the district. The newsletter is sent three times a year and is called, The Seeker." ISD 279

- **Provide a SEAC display table at back-to-school night, open houses, conference nights**

- **Create and distribute a SEAC brochure or SEAC bookmark**

- **Send flyers about SEAC-related upcoming events and opportunities for parent participation in weekly school-to-home folders**

- **Create an e-mail list for communication with parents, staff and other interested persons**

  - Example: http://www.district196.org/District/Departments/SpecialEducation/ EmailList/SignUp.cfm

- **Distribute SEAC notices, agendas and minutes to administrators, board members and the superintendent.**

  - In some districts, the superintendent's office assembles and distributes a "board packet" of materials.

- **Make an annual SEAC presentation to the school board:**

  - Some school districts videotape meetings and replay them on local cable TV where they are viewed by parents and others.

  - The annual presentation will be included in the school board meeting minutes, which are made available to the public

    Example: See *Minutes Of The Regular Meeting Of The Board Of Education Independent School District No. 271* located at the end of this module

- **Maintain a page on the school district Web site**

  - Provide information about the SEAC

  - Link your webpage to www.MNSEACInfo.org for increased visibility and additional resource links.

  - Example: http://isd742.org/specialeducation/adcouncil.html

II. PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE DISTRICT'S SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM AND RELATED RESOURCES TO PARENTS AND STAFF

Many SEACs are also involved in activities to provide information about the district's special education program as a whole.

BENEFITS

By providing timely, reliable information about the district's programs, policies, and procedures, you may see these additional benefits:

- Increased trust levels between parents and professionals

- Reduction in rumors based on misinformation

• More families' participation in the district's special education process.

INFORMATION TO PROVIDE

In addition to information about the SEAC itself, the SEAC may assist the district in providing the following types of information to parents and staff:

• Special education program and resource information

• Special education training opportunities for parents and staff

• Community-based services and supports for children with disabilities

METHODS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION:

The SEAC may want to use many of the same methods used to provide information about the **SEAC itself, such as newsletter articles, a Web page, and an e-mail listserv for parents. (See Section I) Additional ideas include:**

• **Host SEAC-sponsored "special education parent information nights."**

  - Example: "Our SEAC devotes the first hour of each meeting to explaining one disability area or program (such as Autism). Typically the presenters are a mixture of parents, staff and students. This month we had a presentation on our 18 to 21 year olds programs. Two staff and two students spoke and answered questions. SEAC members had their business meeting after the presentation."

• **Create a special education parent manual, notebook, or folder.**

  - Include special education district information and contacts for families as well as information about the SEAC and how parents can be involved and informed.

  - Examples: http://www.roseville.k12.mn.us/studentservices/specialed.cfm

NOTE: It is equally important to develop means by which parents can provide information about the provision of special education services in the district to the SEAC council and individual members. For more information on this topic, please see Module 12, Prioritizing Needs and Setting Goals.

III. PROVIDE INFORMATION TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

"Public sentiment is everything; with it nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed." - Abraham Lincoln

BENEFITS

• All citizens have a shared investment in special education through their tax dollars and want to know there is a positive return on their investment.

• For students with disabilities to have full and meaningful participation in the community, organizations must be made aware of their needs, the accommodations they may require, and the benefits to the organization and the community when all individuals are given the opportunity to be included.

• When community businesses are made aware of the potential benefits to their companies,

they may be more likely to provide work experiences and job opportunities to transition-age youth with disabilities.

INFORMATION TO PROVIDE

- **Special education success stories**

    - People are more inclined to support and invest in efforts when they can see real-life examples of positive outcomes.

    - Focus on the positive, and you'll see more of it.

    - Raise public awareness about needs by "putting a face" on the issues and challenges through family stories.

- **Helpful information and resources for families**

    - Include information about the SEAC and opportunities for parent and community member participation.

WAYS TO SHARE INFORMATION WITH THE COMMUNITY:

- Send ideas for success story and personal story articles to the local community newspaper.

    - Example: http://www.thisweeklive.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1317&Itemid=2

- Send news releases about upcoming SEAC events to local media.

- Place SEAC-related activities announcements in the community events calendar of local publications.

- Send "letters to the editor" recognizing and expressing appreciation to businesses and organizations who have provided opportunities for students with disabilities.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Your SEAC may want to consider the following questions as it develops a communications strategy:

- Do parents, school staff, and community members know our SEAC exists and understand its purpose?

- Do parents of students with disabilities have access to all the information they need to:

    - participate fully and meaningfully in the special education process?

    - have opportunities to be involved in district policymaking and decision making?

V. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

Using the discussion questions in Section IV, think about what next steps are necessary to achieve your goal. (Perhaps pick only one or two items to address at a time.)

As a group, ask yourselves:

- What outcome do we want?
- What objective measures (observable indicators) will show we've achieved that outcome?
- What action will we take to achieve that outcome?
- What help do we need to achieve this?

Here's an example of stating an outcome, recognizing indicators, determining action ste**ps, and identifying what help may be needed:**

- *Outcome:* Parents and staff will be informed about the SEAC's purpose and plan, including knowing where to go to find meeting dates, locations, and agendas.
- *Observable Indicator:* School newsletters and the district Web site include information about the SEAC.
- *Action:* A communications subcommittee will produce an article about the SEAC and will e-mail it to each principal, requesting inclusion in the next issue of the school's newsletter. The committee will determine what information will be included on the Web site and will develop a plan for how the information will be provided, approved, and posted.
- *Help:* A district staff person will be a member of the communications subcommittee and serve as a liaison with the school district office to coordinate submission of SEAC information to be added to the district's special education Web page.

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 271
Bloomington, Minnesota

November 26, 2007

|		
I.	ROLL CALL	Pursuant to due call and notice thereof, and there being a quorum present, the Board of Education of Independent School District No. 271, was called to order by Chair Maureen Bartolotta at 7:00 p.m. on November 26, 2007 in the Community Room at the Educational Services Center, 1350 West 106th Street, Bloomington, Minnesota.
	Members Present	Maureen Bartolotta, Chair; Maureen Peterson, Vice Chair; Chuck Walter, Clerk; Arlene Bush, Treasurer; Tim Culver, Mark Hibbs and Jim Sorum.
	Administration Present	Les Fujitake, Debra Fincham, Pat Geraghty, Rod Zivkovich, Tom Holton and Rick Kaufman.
	Attorney Present	Kingsley Holman. (There are no abstentions unless otherwise stated.)
II.	PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE	Recited.
III.	APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA	Mark Hibbs moved, Arlene Bush seconded, to approve the agenda. Motion carried unanimously.
IV.	RECOGNITION OF STUDENTS/ STAFF/PUBLIC	Dr. Debra Fincham introduced Paul Meyer, who will be the new principal at Olson Elementary School beginning in December. Mr. Meyer was a classroom teacher at Ridgeview Elementary School from 1999-2006. He was an intern in the ALC Summer Program in 2004 and served as the Principal for the 2007 ALC Summer program. Currently, he is a District K-5 Instructional Mentor. His education, experience, leadership skills and commitment to the District will serve him well as he moves to the Olson Elementary School Principal position. Mr. Meyer replaces Tim Case, who will retire at the end of December.
		Maureen Peterson moved, Arlene Bush seconded, that the School Board of Independent School District No. 271 approves the attached proclamation recognizing December 10, 2007, as Human Rights Day. Motion carried unanimously.
	Human Rights Day Proclamation	**Human Rights Day Proclamation**

WHEREAS, the Bloomington Public Schools join our Nation in recognizing December 10, 2007, as International Human Rights Day; and
WHEREAS, Bloomington recognizes the importance of acknowledging the diversity that exists in our community as we strive for autonomous participation in our community affairs; and
WHEREAS, the devastating impact of prejudice can be eliminated through the efforts of our schools and city in promoting human rights awareness; and
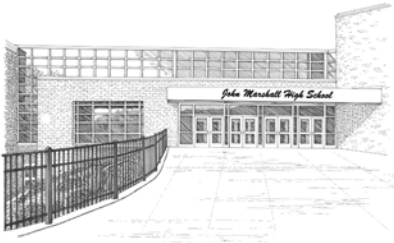
John Marshall High School Newsletter
1510 14 Street NW 328-5400
Over 49 Years of Excellence

May/June 2008

Dear Parents/Guardians:

Wow! Here we are entering the last full month of the 2007-2008 school year. The months of May and June bring the most exciting times and activities; most importantly, they bring a wonderful graduation ceremony.

We have had tremendous leadership from our senior class and they have been working with us to plan an outstanding graduation ceremony. Graduation this year will be at the John Marshall High School stadium at 7:00 p.m. on Friday, June 6, 2008. In the case of inclement weather conditions, graduation will be held at the field house on the campus of RCTC. Senior parents, you will be receiving a separate newsletter regarding all of the year-end senior activities.

During the 2007-2008 school year, many parents gave us the gift of their time again. Parents got involved in PTSA, parent advisories, band boosters, booster club, etc. I want to give a special *thank you* to all of our volunteers and to Linda Brockway for being our volunteer coordinator. Thanks to Jan Behrens, Janet Stammer, and Leann Cragun for serving on the Site Council.

I hope many of you had the chance to see the production of *Oklahoma* that Theatre JM performed. Once again, the talent of our students and directors was clearly on display. A special *thank you* has to go to Mr. Tim Goodmanson for coming to Rochester to work with our students on the set.

Finally, I want to give a special *thank you* to all of the seniors who lived through three years of construction and remodeling at John Marshall High School. The senior class never once complained about the noise, dust, or anything else that came with the project. As parents/guardians, you should be very proud of the character and patience your sons/daughters possess. Congratulations to all John Marshall seniors and their parents. Thank you for your support and for entrusting us with the education of your children.

Sincerely,

Rick Stirn
Principal

MODULE 7 - SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVENESS WITHIN SEAC - WHAT SEAC MEMBERS NEED TO KNOW

THIS MODULE WILL:

- Describe key sources of information for SEAC members
- Provide tips for how to access and utilize the information

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Strategies for Effectiveness within SEAC" are located at the end of this module.

PACER CENTER
CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES™

When PACER recently surveyed parents about the obstacles they face in serving on a local SEAC, many cited "lack of knowledge" as a major barrier.

Most SEAC members have experience with the special education system at an individual or specialized level, either as a parent or as a staff person with a specific area of responsibility. Many members, particularly parent and community members, may not fully understand the "big picture" of special education. To do the work of the SEAC, members need to shift from focusing on immediate solutions for individual student needs to focusing on long-range, big-picture systems change for all children receiving special education services in the district.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE BIG-PICTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: FEDERAL AND STATE SPECIAL EDUCATION LAWS, REGULATIONS, AND PROMISING OR BEST PRACTICES

To acquire a big-picture view of special education, SEAC members will need to gain a working knowledge of how the system operates as a whole, including special education law, regulations, policies, and promising or best practices.

It's important to keep in mind that parents and other SEAC members do not need to become experts in special education, but rather need to gradually and continually increase their knowledge through a variety of learning opportunities.

The following resources supply accurate information at the federal and state level to provide a reliable basis from which the SEAC may provide advice to the school district:

1. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP) IDEA Web site: http://idea.ed.gov/explore/home

2. North Central Regional Resource Center (NCRRC), funded by OSEP, assists state education agencies in the systemic improvement of education programs, practices, and policies that affect children and youth with disabilities. The NCRRC Web site: http://www.rrfcnetwork.org/ncrrc, provides national and regional information on a variety of topics of interest to SEACs

3. Minnesota Department of Education special education Web site: http://www.education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Special_Education/index.html

4. Minnesota special education rules: https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=3525

5. Minnesota's Total Special Education Systems (TSES) Manual, http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Compliance_and_Assistance/SpecEd_Guide/013295, designed to assist districts and local education agencies in achieving compliance with special education mandates and funding requirements

6. PACER Center, Minnesota's federally funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI), provides information, training, and support for families of children and youth with any disability from birth through 21 years old. Parents and professionals can find publications, workshops, and other resources at www.PACER.org. Go to www.mnseacinfo.org/speced/index.asp for direct links to special education Internet resources.

7. The Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE), http://www.fape.org, is a Web site with educational information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

II. UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Becoming familiar with the school district will help SEAC members become more effective. School districts are required to submit performance data to the Minnesota Department of Education and to comply with periodic special education monitoring.

These activities generate reports that provide current district-specific information:

1. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has reporting requirements for school districts. A school report card is issued for each school and school district each year. To access these report cards, go to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Web site at http://education.state.mn.us. At the top of the page, click on "Academic Excellence," then scroll down to "School Report Cards." Search by school or district. The report cards provide the following:

    - Student population and demographics

    - Attendance rate

    - Graduation rate

    - Report on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

    - District ranking for the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA)
       and the Basic Skills Test (BST)

2. IDEA requires each state to have a performance plan that sets targets in the state's efforts to implement the requirements and purposes of IDEA. Local school districts provide data to the MDE. The statewide data on yearly progress toward established indicators is reported in the State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR). (See Module 12.) School district data profiles are available on the MDE Web site.

3. Each school district is periodically monitored by the MDE's division of special education compliance and assistance. SEACs may ask the special education director when the district was monitored and ask to see the results.

4. Local school districts develop and maintain written policies and procedures for regular education as well as for special education. The policies may be available on the school district Web site or through the school district administrative office.

5. For additional resources and strategies for finding and using local school district information, see Module 6.

III. KEEPING CURRENT

Despite your best efforts, you will never know everything. Just about the time you think you have finally mastered a topic, the law or regulation or need will change! What was effective five years ago may no longer be an option. Technological advances and research may lead districts in new directions. In order to provide reliable and relevant advice to the district, SEAC members will need to continually access a stream of information regarding both the big picture of special education and the local district. This need may be addressed in the following ways:

- The SEAC may provide in-service training opportunities to SEAC members. For example, one local SEAC paid for one parent member and one professional member of the SEAC to attend the Council for Exceptional Children's International Conference when it met in Minneapolis.

- The special education director or administrator may invite parent members to attend selected staff in-service training opportunities related to SEAC concerns.

- Parent members may wish to invite a staff member to attend parent information and support group events.

- SEAC members can increase their knowledge by periodically attending workshops and conferences offered by disability advocacy organizations. To access PACER's free workshop opportunities, visit www.PACER.org/workshops/index.htm.

- The Special education director or administrator may create a SEAC member e-mail list and forward items of interest and concern.

- SEAC members can sign up for a variety of e-mail updates through the MDE Web site. PACER Center and other disability organizations also send newsletters and e-mail updates about a variety of topics, including legislative issues.

- Add the local SEAC Web site link to the mnseacinfo.org Web site and connect with other SEACs to share information and training opportunities.

- Learn to access needed information by asking key questions. See to Module 8 for developing the skill to ask questions. See Section VI of this module for additional resources.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Do SEAC members focus on the big picture of special education rather than on specific needs of individual students?

- Do SEAC members have a working knowledge of special education?

- Does the SEAC have a plan for increasing the knowledge base of SEAC members?

- Does the SEAC know how to find the information we need to do our work?

- Are relevant questions from SEAC members welcomed, encouraged, and responded to with the requested information?

- Are SEAC members up to date on district special education concerns?

V. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

As a group, ask yourselves:

- What outcome do we want?

- How will we know when we've achieved that outcome?

- What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

- What help do we need to achieve this?

Using the discussion questions in Section IV or questions of your own, what next steps are necessary? Pick only one or two at a time to address.

Examples of outcomes:

- SEAC members will exhibit a working knowledge of special education in SEAC meeting discussions.

- SEAC members will have up-to-date information regarding the school district's special education program.

Example of next steps for increasing SEAC knowledge:

- *Outcome:* SEAC members will have up-to-date information regarding the school district special education program.

- *Observable Indicator:* When surveyed at the end of each school year, SEAC members will indicate they received the information they needed.

- *Action:* Special education updates will be included on each meeting agenda.

- *Help:* The district special education director or other designated administrator will prepare updates to be presented at each SEAC meeting.

VI. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- PHP-c120 Key Questions for Parent Leaders to Ask

- PHP-c153 Know Your School District

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Key Questions for Parent Leaders to Ask

PARENT LEADERSHIP

Someone once said, "Forget the answers; focus on asking the right questions." Influential leaders who bring about change are not necessarily the people who have the right answers. Effective leaders do, however, share this common trait: they ask the right questions.

If you are a parent of a child receiving special education services and serve as a representative on your school district's special education advisory committee, knowing what questions to ask is essential to your effectiveness.

Rather than stating opinions and positions prematurely, try asking a well-timed key question. Offering a conclusive statement usually results in *agree versus disagree* dialogue. A good question, on the other hand, engages people and sets the direction for a focused discussion of the issue. And often, as a group works together to come up with an answer, a common vision for needed change emerges.

When working as a member of a school district committee, the timing of questions and the way they are asked is important as well. Delivering questions in an *us versus them* manner may close down communication, as will questions asked with a hidden agenda or motive. It may be helpful to prioritize your concerns and carefully select questions which will open communication in a targeted area. Be ready to ask your questions at an appropriate time. A thoughtful question sincerely asked will be perceived not as a threat, but as an invitation to work together in finding solutions to common concerns.

To help get you started, here is a list of possible questions to consider:

General Questions

Does our district currently face any major issues?

Do these issues affect the education of students with disabilities?

How can our SEAC help?

How is our district addressing the issue of Response to Intervention (RTI)? How might this affect students with disabilities?

How many children receive special education services in our district?

What percentage of children are in regular education settings most of the time? Special settings? Separate sites?

Have these percentages changed? Why?

Comparison Questions

What are the student suspension rates in our district?

What percentage of students suspended are children with disabilities?

What percentage of children in our district graduate on time?

What percentage of children with disabilities graduate on time?

How do these rates and percentages compare to other districts in the state and nationally?

What is the school district budget? The Special Education budget?

How has this changed in the last few years?

Special Education Accountability

- How many complaints/hearings has our district had over the past two years? How were they resolved?

- Does our district currently have any areas they are required to address with corrective action plans?

- How does our district measure post-school outcomes for students with disabilities?

- How does our district survey parent

Know Your School District:
Tips for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs)

Becoming familiar with your school district will help you to be a more effective member of your local SEAC. Special education operates in relationship to regular education. By understanding how the SEAC and the special education program fit into the big picture of the school district, you may be able to more easily identify the shared concerns and goals between regular education and special education. The following information will help you understand some of the requirements your school district has to meet for all students.

General Education Curriculum

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes it clear that students receiving special education services have a right to be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum. By knowing and understanding the curriculum being used in your district, your SEAC will be in a better position to suggest ways to make it more accessible to students with disabilities. Likewise, by being aware of any specialized education programs that are available to students in the district and the requirements for those programs, your SEAC can be more effective.

Policies and Procedures

Students who receive special education services are also part of the general education population. They are subject to the policies and procedures that govern all students in the district.

District policies are often published in booklets for students and on district Web sites. These policies may include:

- Absenteeism and tardiness
- Attendance area boundaries
- Attendance policies
- Bullying and harassment
- Deadlines for enrollment

- Graduation requirements
- School choice
- School discipline
- School year calendar
- Transportation

Policy Decisions

SEAC members have an important role in shaping policy decisions at the school district level. They can help identify issues, influence decisions, and improve school programs. They do not have to be education experts to ask good questions. By becoming involved in the SEAC, parents have the opportunity to move from advocating for their own children to advocating for all children in the district and working toward increased achievement for all students.

In order to understand how policy decisions are made in the school district, you may want to take time at your SEAC meeting to ask helpful questions such as:

- How are district policy decisions made?
- What steps are used to adopt new or revised district policies?
- At what point might a SEAC advisory recommendation be made in order to be relevant and effective in the process?
- Which kinds of decisions require governing board (school board) authority and approval and which are delegated to administration?

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School districts are required to submit performance data to the Minnesota Department of Education and to comply with periodic special education monitoring. By being aware of this accountability process, SEAC members can be more effective in their advisory role. Here are three major components of school district responsibilities.

MODULE 8 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVENESS WITHIN A SEAC - LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Strategies for Effectiveness within a SEAC: Leadership & Partnership" are located at the end of this module.

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> **"It's easy to get good players. Gettin' 'em to play together
> – that's the hard part." - Casey Stengel**

According to the Minnesota statute, at least half of the SEAC members must be parents of students with disabilities. That leaves up to half of the members who will not share that experience. Through working together and sharing their unique perspectives, parents and other SEAC members can help the district be more effective in improving outcomes for children with disabilities.

By developing and utilizing leadership and partnership skills, SEAC members will be more effective in accomplishing the SEAC's goals. Some parents and other members will come with leadership skills while others may need to develop additional skills.

I. DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

A. ESSENTIAL SEAC LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Personal skills:

- having a long-range, big-picture perspective on systems change
- being willing to become informed on issues
- acknowledging that each person has valuable information and perspectives to share
- being able to use personal experience constructively
- being able to see beyond own experiences
- being concerned about more than one issue
- being comfortable speaking in a group

Organizational skills:

- understanding of role and responsibilities
- keeping commitments such as attending meetings
- coming to meetings prepared to participate and contribute
- using data to support decisions

Communication skills:

- treating other members with respect even when disagreeing
- honoring confidentiality
- being willing to receive feedback from others
- being able to listen to differing opinions
- being willing to negotiate workable solutions without compromising principles
- focusing on the issues, not personalities
- valuing and recognizing the contributions of others

B. STEPS TO DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS

- commit to participation, growth, and change

- participate in the group regularly

- observe others who demonstrate leadership skills and behaviors

- receive positive feedback and support from a mentor

- practice leadership skills (see list above)

- grow stronger and more confident as a leader

- become a model for others

In addition, parent members may find it helpful to utilize the "Individual Effectiveness Plan (IEP) for Parent Leaders." (pdf) This tool will help you assess your parent leadership skills and track your improvement.

"Meaningful parent leadership occurs when parents gain the knowledge and skills to function in meaningful leadership roles and represent a 'parent voice' to help shape the direction of their families, programs and communities. Parent leadership is successfully achieved when parents and professionals build effective partnerships and share responsibility, expertise, and leadership in decisions being made that affect families and communities." National Parent Leadership Month Toolkit, 2003

* Adapted from research done by Parents Anonymous, Inc., 1998.

II. DEVELOPING SEAC PARTNERSHIP SKILLS

Productive partnerships between SEAC members do not just happen. Time, effort, leadership, and patience are needed to build effective partnership skills.

A. VIEW THE SEAC AS A BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

The "business" of the local SEAC is to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making.

As partners, SEAC members:

- have the same overall purpose or goal (Module 1)

- have individual roles and a clear understanding of each (Module 3)

- educate themselves about their particular business (Module 7)

- have a business plan (Module 5, 12)

- work within an agreed upon structure (Modules 2, 4, 6, 10, 11)

- have methods to measure effectiveness

- bring different skills and information to the endeavor

- make the effort to communicate clearly

- deal with conflict and use problem-solving strategies early

B. RECOGNIZE AND VALUE THE DIFFERENT SKILLS AND PERSPECTIVES OF SEAC PARTNERS

- Members represent a variety of interests and perspectives drawn from experience with different disabilities, ages, cultures, and training opportunities.

- Educators have chosen the career of educating children with disabilities. They receive formal training to prepare for their roles. Educators have experience working with many different children in the school setting.

- Parents live with their child with disabilities and have a lifelong involvement with him or her. They usually did not choose this role but have a long-term commitment to their child's success. Parents usually have experience working with one child in many different settings.

- School personnel are employed by a government agency. They have government resources to draw upon and are also subject to government limitations and authority.

- Parents are constituents of the elected school board and are taxpayers in the district.

- Educators have knowledge about curriculum and educational methodology.

- Parents may have in-depth knowledge and experience with a particular type of disability.

- Parent knowledge and opinions are unique and valuable.

- Both parent and school expertise and perspectives are necessary for an effective SEAC.

C. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND RESPECTFULLY WITH SEAC PARTNERS

Here are some tips to consider:

- Set ground rules as a group, such as:

    - We will not interrupt each other

    - All discussion is confidential

- Consider what "you" can do to communicate more clearly, not what "they" could do. Remember the adage, "The only person I can change is me."

- Separate the problem from the person. "Be hard on the problem, but soft on the people." --Roger Fisher, author of "Getting to Yes."

- Gather information. Use data and facts rather than opinions (or label opinion as opinion when given).

- Manage your emotions. Cool heads and warm hearts make the best decisions.

- Be specific. Instead of saying, "This doesn't work," state the specific problem, such as, "When children move from elementary to middle school, there is no open house to introduce children to the new school."

- Ask questions if unfamiliar terms or acronyms are used.

- End a meeting by summarizing the outcomes.

- Use phrases such as:

    - Please explain…

    - I think I heard you say… Is that right?

    - Could you rephrase that so I'm sure I understand?

    - "This will"… instead of "I think." For example, say, "Voting on this will allow us to move to the next step" instead of "I think we should vote on this."

- "You could"… instead of "you should." For example, say, "You could schedule our next meeting for the afternoon so more people can attend" instead of "You should schedule our next meeting for the afternoon."

D. DEAL WITH DISAGREEMENT AND CONFLICT APPROPRIATELY

Parents and school personnel will not always agree; parents will not always agree with other parents; staff members may not always agree with each other. Having conflicts is normal and natural. Members come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Differences of opinion will inevitably arise. When handled well and resolved correctly, disagreements or conflicts may ultimately lead to more positive outcomes for children.

Lay the groundwork for productive SEAC discussions by incorporating these suggestions:

- Clearly define a problem and then focus energy and discussion on possible remedies or solutions.

- Realize that neither parents nor professionals have all the answers.

- Base discussions on facts and data rather than opinions or emotions.

- Make sure facts are accurate rather than making assumptions.

- Stay in the present; don't dwell on the past.

- Assume good faith on the part of the other.

- Listen carefully.

- Try to take the other's perspective in order to understand the issue from his or her point of view.

- Separate the problem from the person.

- Disagree without being disagreeable.

- Accept responsibility for your own part of the problem, issue, or solution.

- Apologize whenever appropriate.

- Do not talk about the conflict outside of the meeting.

Disagreements are inevitable. When encountering them, personally consider these questions:

- Is this topic of discussion relevant to our mission or goal statement?

- Have we defined the problem before starting to propose solutions? (Members may be disagreeing because they aren't solving the same problem.)

- Would it help if we brainstormed solutions, with no interruptions or evaluations until the list is complete?

- Are we being respectful to one another?

- Am I contributing to the conflict or to a resolution?

- Would it be more appropriate to meet privately with the special education director about a particular SEAC issue?

As SEACs address concerns and attempt to find solutions to problems, disagreements and conflicts may arise. To address this issue, some groups find it helpful to proactively determine a problem-solving model to implement in SEAC meetings.

Here is an example of one SEAC's model:

- Describe the problem clearly.
- Encourage input from all SEAC members.
- Brainstorm (without evaluating the ideas).
- Choose a solution by consensus rather than voting.
- Develop a plan to carry out the solution, including who is responsible to do what by when.
- Put that plan in writing.
- Include a timeline and criteria to measure progress and evaluate success.
- Conduct follow up activities.

III. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Do we take the time to understand the perspectives of other members?
- What communication ground rules could we establish?
- Are we effective in dealing with disagreements?
- Do we define a problem clearly before we try to solve it?
- In what ways can we intentionally encourage leadership skills?

IV. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

As a group, ask yourselves:

• What outcome do we want?

• How will we know we've achieved that outcome? (observable indicator)

• What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

• What help do we need to achieve this?

Using the discussion questions in Section III or questions of your own, what next steps are necessary? Pick only one or two at a time.

Examples of outcomes:

• Members increase leadership skills.

• We have an established process to deal with conflict.

• We take time to clearly understand the perspectives of others.

Example:

• *Outcome:* SEAC will have an established method for dealing with conflict.

• *Observable Indicator:* SEAC manual outlines the established procedure, which is carried out in SEAC meetings.

• *Action:*

   - Selected SEAC member will research options of problem-solving models

   - Member will e-mail three options to members to read and consider for discussion at the next SEAC meeting.

   - SEAC will select or adapt a problem-solving model.

   - SEAC will add this model to the SEAC manual.

• *Help needed:*

   - District special education office will make copies of the three options for each member to use at the meeting.

   - District special education office will add the chosen model to the manual.

V. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

In addition to using information from this module to increase leadership and partnership in your SEAC, your group may find the following resources on the following pages helpful:

• PHP-c 151 Keys to Success In the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent-School Partnership

• PHP-c154 IEP (Individual Effectiveness Plan) for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?
Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?
What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?
What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Keys to Success In the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent-School Partnership

School Partners

When individuals or groups join together to work toward a common goal, a partnership is formed. Successfully reaching the goal requires mutual cooperation and a sharing of responsibilities. While carried out in different ways, the principles used to satisfy personal and business partnerships are much the same.

In this important venture, the common goal is the successful development and education of children with disabilities in your school district. Years of research show that the more families are actively involved in the education of their children, the more successful the child will be in school and in life.

In the parent-school partnership, there is little opportunity for choice in the selection of partners. Partners can, however, choose to think and act in ways that will promote a positive partnership. A productive parent-school partnership will pay big dividends for its primary beneficiaries—your school district's children.

Partnership Essentials

Good Communication

- Be a good listener. Give your full and complete attention. Try not to interrupt. Don't begin formulating your response while the other person is still talking.

- When upset or confused, rather than making statements of accusations, ask questions. Resist making snap judgments based on what is possibly limited information. Ask school staff to explain things using words you understand.

- Remember that our tone of voice, facial expression, and body language often speak louder than our words.

- Label opinions as opinions. If someone states an opinion as fact, rather than

arguing, ask for the data (factual information) to support it.

- Use "we" language as much as possible. The education of children is a team effort. "You" language can cause the person being addressed to feel defensive, rather than cooperative.

Honesty, Accountability, and Trust

- Give and expect complete and accurate information.

- Keep your commitments. If you can't make a meeting, call ahead of time.

- Keep confidential information confidential. When school staff trusts you with information, honor that trust by using the information appropriately.

- Complete trust is developed over time. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Respect

- Treat others with the same level of consideration and respect you desire and expect from them.

- As a member and partner in the school community, respect the variety of needs and concerns of other students and staff members.

- Let people know when they are doing a good job.

Second Chances and Fresh Starts

- When mistakes are made, try to resolve them quickly and completely. Then wipe the slate clean and move forward. The goal is to direct the energy and effort in this partnership toward the successful education of children in your school district.

- Try to approach each new school year as an opportunity for a fresh start for all involved, regardless of past issues or conflicts.

IEP (Individual Effectiveness Plan) for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)

Goal #1: I will accurately determine my role and purpose as an advisory council member.

Benchmarks: Understands the reason for being selected or appointed, and the perspective to be represented (a particular disability category, an age group, or other demographic). Requests a job description. Clarifies expectations and anticipated outcomes. Requests and reads past meeting minutes.

Progress

Date: Date:

☐ Needs Improvement   ☐ Needs Improvement

☐ Making Good progress   ☐ Making Good progress

☐ Goal Met   ☐ Goal Met

Comments: _____   Comments:_____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

Goal #2: I will consider my ability to fully participate before I make a commitment.

Benchmarks: Asks for sufficient information up front to make an informed decision about opportunities. Identifies and obtains the supports needed to participate. Does not feel compelled to give immediate decisions to requests for help. Chooses to say "no" rather than to say "yes", and then not follow through. When a commitment has been made, follows it through to satisfactory completion.

Progress

Date: Date:

☐ Needs Improvement   ☐ Needs Improvement

☐ Making Good progress   ☐ Making Good progress

☐ Goal Met   ☐ Goal Met

Comments: _____   Comments:_____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

Goal #3: In advisory council work, I will shift my perspective from focusing on immediate solutions for individual children, to long-range, big-picture systems change for all children and families.

Benchmarks: Becomes informed about how the school system operates as a whole, including information on funding and legal requirements.

MODULE 9 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

FUNDING

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Funding" are located at the end of this module.

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SEAC members will benefit from a basic understanding of school district funding. The purpose of a SEAC is to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making. While funding may not drive policies and decisions affecting a school district, it certainly affects the direction of decisions and policies.

This training module will help SEAC members understand Minnesota's system of educational funding. It will provide a broad overview and a base for members to ask further questions of district staff.

SEAC members will want to be aware of which spending decisions are made at the school building level and which are made at the district level. It is also helpful to know when these decisions will be made so the SEAC can provide timely input. The SEAC may want to appoint a member to be part of a district budget committee or be present at school board meetings to give input from a special education perspective.

Please note that the information in this module applies primarily to local school districts and less directly to charter schools, Department of Corrections schools, cooperatives, and intermediate school districts. SEACs from these districts and schools may use the information in this module as a base for asking how their funding is determined.

I. LOCAL FUNDING

The primary responsibility for the education of each student rests with the student's district of residence. Within specific guidelines, each school district makes its own choices about how to spend the funds it receives.

- Local funds must be used to the extent necessary to meet the requirements of special education.
- Local funding is determined by local voters in a referendum.
- The funds are collected through property tax payments.
- The local school board is responsible for approving district budget decisions.

You might hear the term "cross subsidy." That term means that if funds from state and local sources are not sufficient to pay the costs of special education programs, districts must use other local general fund revenue (Minnesota Statute 125A.75 – 125A.79).

In a time of limited funding from all sources, school districts must prepare for the worst and hope for the best. In 2008, for example, several school districts laid off teachers but then were able to rehire a number of them after the Minnesota Legislature increased the per pupil funding by $51.

II. STATE FUNDING

STATE FUNDING FOR ALL STUDENTS

State funding provides general education revenue for all students, including students with disabilities.

- The amount is determined by the Minnesota Legislature.
- The state also provides compensatory aid to districts based on such factors as the numbers of students receiving free or reduced priced lunches and the number of English Language Learners.

STATE FUNDING FOR STUDENTS RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION

State funding for special education is provided in recognition that special education services are more costly than those provided to students as a whole.

- Appropriations are based on the concept of the "excess costs" of special education. The use of the term "excess cost" stems from the legislative assumption that the general education revenue provided for all students is being used to cover basic costs for each child (including those with disabilities) and the legislative desire to share the responsibility of these extra costs with local districts.

- The amount of special education aid is determined by the legislature.

- In Minnesota, funds for special education are provided to districts through a "percent reimbursement model." Districts are reimbursed for a certain percentage of allowable special education expenditures.

  Examples include:

    - 68 percent of the salaries of teachers and support service staff providing direct service to students

    - 100 percent of special transportation expenses

    - 52 percent of the amount for supplementary special education provided through a contract with an agency other than a school district

- Special education revenue varies based on reported expenditures.

State funding for charter schools is determined differently because there is no referendum and property tax base for these school districts. Minnesota Statute 124D.11 deals with revenue for charter schools.

III. FEDERAL FUNDING

Federal special education funds are intended to supplement – not to replace (supplant) – local funds.

- When special education legislation was first passed in 1975, the federal government was to provide 40 percent of the funding to the states. This level of funding has never been achieved, however. Currently it is at about 17 percent.

- The U.S. Congress determines the total amount of federal funding available for special education each year.

- Federal special education funds are based on allowable expenditures and distributed to states.

IV. RESOURCES

The Minnesota Department of Education has a helpful link, http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Program_Finance/Forecasts_Governors_Budget/index.html, for looking at district funding. A local SEAC may use this resource to look at district funding from year to year or to compare district funding to other state school districts or to state averages.

V. FUNDING REQUIREMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

School district funding comes with strings attached. Funding is tied to laws governing special education. The following chart gives an overview of which laws give requirements for special education. The accountability reports are the link between the laws and funding.

	LEGAL REQUIREMENTS	REPORTS/ACCOUNTABILITY	FUNDING
FEDERAL	IDEA	**The federal government:** • Receives and evaluates reports from states • Orders states to make corrections if out of compliance • May withhold funds from states if they don't comply	• Supplements state funds • Funds go to states • Amount determined by Congress • Administered by Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)
STATE	• IDEA • State statutes and special education rules	**The state:** • Reports yearly to OSEP • Must make corrections if out of compliance • Receives local school district reports, including expenditures • Investigates complaints • Orders districts to correct violations • Monitors districts on a four-year cycle • May withhold funds if districts do not comply	• Funds go to districts • Amount determined by state legislature • Administered by Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) • Provides state aids • Administers federal supplementary aid based on expenditures
LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT	• IDEA • State statutes and special education rules • School district policies	**Each local school district:** • Reports yearly to state • Is accountable to local school board • Makes corrections if found to be in violation through a complaint or monitoring	• Local funds determined by local voters • Receives aids from state • Receives local funds from taxation
CHARTER SCHOOLS	• Same as local school district	• Same as local school district	• Receive aids from state as above, but amount is calculated differently • No local funds • Excess costs may be billed back to the resident district

MODULE 10 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES (BYLAWS)

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Operational Guidelines (Bylaws)" are located at the end of this module.

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Operational guidelines, often called bylaws, give structure to a SEAC. Having a structure or framework for conducting SEAC business can help your SEAC be effective in an orderly and consistent manner. The bylaws will also help ensure continuity and stability from year to year as membership changes.

I. BYLAWS OVERVIEW

Bylaws are agreed upon ways of doing business. Each member should have a copy of the bylaws and be expected to follow them. Flexibility can either be built in or achieved through an amendment process. The bylaws should be updated or revised as needed to meet the needs of the group.

This training module will address components commonly found in SEAC bylaws. This is not an exhaustive list. Your SEAC may choose to add or delete components.

If your SEAC already has bylaws, you may want to review each component and see if your council sees a need for amendment. If your SEAC does not have bylaws, the components in this module will help your council discuss and determine guidelines that will be appropriate for your group.

The work of developing or revising bylaws might be a task for a subcommittee to complete and make recommendations for action to the full council.

II. BYLAW CONTENTS

Bylaws typically include the following information:

A. TITLE/NAME

For a variety of purposes, including credibility, clarity of purpose, and publicity, it is helpful for a local SEAC to have a title. If your school district has other advisory groups, you may want your SEAC's title to be consistent with them.

Examples:

- Prairieview Area Special Education Advisory Council (PASEAC)
- Tri-District Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)

In addition to the title itself, descriptive information may be included here in the bylaws. For example, "The Prairieview Area Special Education Advisory Council, PASEAC, is a special education parent advisory council serving the member districts of the Prairieview Area Special Education Cooperative."

B. MISSION

Bylaws provide a framework for accomplishing a SEAC's mission. The printed bylaws are a logical place to include the mission statement. Please refer to Module 5 for development and examples of a mission statement.

C. AUTHORITY AND PURPOSE

Minnesota Statue 125A.24 provides the authority under which a SEAC operates (see Module 1). According to the statute, the purpose of the council is to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making. A local SEAC may further define its purpose in the bylaws. With a clear purpose and mission, the SEAC can focus on accomplishing its goals.

Example: According to Minnesota Statute 125A.24, school districts must have a special education advisory council incorporated into the district's special education system plan.

The purpose of the Prairieview SEAC is to:

- increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policymaking and decision making

- advise the district on policy and decisions affecting and/or related to special education

- recommend priorities to be addressed by the district in their annual and long-term strategic plan

D. ADVICE: HOW IT WILL BE GIVEN AND TO WHOM

Because the purpose of the SEAC is to give advice to the school district, the operational guidelines are an appropriate place to define how this will be done.

Questions to answer include:

- To whom will the advice be given?

- Who will deliver the advice? How? When?

- Is there an optimal time of year for advice to have the most meaning?

Example: The SEAC shall advise the director of special education regarding current issues, program development, parental concerns, parental involvement, and departmental priorities. All SEAC recommendations must be made through the consensus of designated members. An annual report of council activities and recommendations shall be presented to the superintendent of schools and the board of education each spring.

Example: The SEAC will advise the cooperative's special education director who will bring an annual report including SEAC recommendations to the member districts' superintendents.

E. MEMBERSHIP

The Minnesota statute states that at least half of the designated members must be parents of children with disabilities. It also says that if any private schools are within the district, a parent or staff member of a private school must be a designated member. Beyond this, the definition and structure of membership is determined locally. There is a great deal of variety within Minnesota's school districts.

Module 3 addresses the composition of the council, including member roles and responsibilities. Module 4 addresses member recruitment. You may find it helpful to refer to these modules as you develop or revise membership guidelines.

Operational guidelines for membership will include the following:

- How will members be designated?

  - Will members be appointed (by whom?) or elected (by whom?), or will they be those who volunteer and come consistently?

  - Will members represent any district group, such as a particular disability or age group?

- Will there be a minimum and maximum number of designated members?

- Will there be nonparent designated members? If so, who? How will they be selected?

- What will be the length of term for designated members? Can a term be extended? How?

- How will designated members be replaced?

- Will meeting attendance be kept? Will designated members be required to attend a certain number of meetings? Will there be a process for excusing members?

- What are member responsibilities?

- How will the SEAC recruit members?

Example: Parent members are appointed by the special education director to closely represent the district's special education student population. The term of each member shall be two years and expire on June 30 of the second year. Appointments to the SEAC shall be staggered to assure that only one-third of the membership would terminate activities at the end of any given year. Members may reapply and be reappointed by the special education director. A member must attend at least half of the meetings held. Individuals who are not SEAC members are welcome to attend meetings and may address an issue on the agenda only after being recognized by the chair. The special education director or designee will attend each meeting. Additional district staff will be invited by the director on an as-needed basis.

F. LEADERSHIP

Clear leadership helps meetings run smoothly. Usually the leader is called the chairperson. SEACs often choose to have a chair and a co-chair to share duties or have a chair with a vice-chair to move into the chair position the following year.

Topics to consider for guidelines include:

- What will be the length of the term?

- How will leadership be appointed or elected?

- What are the leader's responsibilities (see Module 3)?

- Must the chairperson be a parent of a child with disabilities?

Example: The SEAC shall elect a chairperson and vice-chairperson who shall each serve a one-year term. The vice-chairperson will run meetings in the absence of the chairperson and will assume the responsibilities of the chairperson after his or her term has ended. Both will be parents of children with disabilities who will work cooperatively with the special education director to set the agenda for each meeting.

G. MEETINGS

When your SEAC looks at its mission and purpose, the logical question is, "how often must we meet to accomplish our mission and purpose?" The number of SEAC meetings is determined locally.

Discussion might include:

- How many times a year will we meet?

- What time of day? Will this vary?

- How long will each meeting be?

- Where will meetings be held? Will this vary?

- How will meetings be publicized to members and to the public?

Example: The Prairieview SEAC will meet eight times a year at the district center office. Meetings will be held the second Tuesday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m. and are open to the public. Members will be mailed minutes of the previous meeting along with a reminder of the next meeting date. Meetings will also be publicized on the district website and in building newsletters.

H. RULES OF PROCEDURE (RUNNING THE MEETINGS)

Well-run meetings usually accomplish more in less time. Topics that your SEAC may want to discuss for inclusion in bylaws include:

- Will the SEAC use Robert's Rules of Order or some other parliamentary procedure (see Module 11)?

- Who will set the agenda for each meeting?

- How might a member bring an item up for discussion?

- Who will keep minutes for the meetings?

- How will minutes be disseminated? To whom?

- Will a quorum be set for reaching consensus?

- Will members vote or move through consensus only?

- Will the SEAC establish other ground rules for such areas as confidentiality and respect?

Example: The Prairieview SEAC will operate under basic parliamentary procedures. The agenda will be set by the chairperson and the director of special education. Agendas will be timed so that meetings can be efficient and end on time. If an item requires more discussion, it may be carried over to the next meeting. If a member wishes to bring an item to the SEAC for discussion, he or she is encouraged to notify the chairperson and bring any information that might be helpful for the discussion. All members will be asked to limit their comments so that all have a chance to participate. The director of special education will ensure that minutes are taken by a staff person and distributed to all designated members. All decisions will be made by consensus. A quorum will consist of one-third of the designated members.

Having a written agenda and keeping minutes are essential elements for a SEAC. The Minnesota Department of Education special education monitors look at agendas and minutes as documentation that the SEAC is doing the work for which it is intended.

I. ELECTIONS

Some SEACs will have no elections and others will choose to elect members or chairpersons. Questions to consider include:

- Will a chairperson be elected or appointed? When? How?

- Will there be a nomination process? If so, how will it work?

- Who has the authority to vote in an election?

Example: The election of officers will take place at the first meeting of the school year. Officers will be elected by a simple majority of secret ballots cast by designated members. If an officer cannot complete his or her term, another election will be held.

J. ORIENTATION OF MEMBERS

Orientation is an important strategy for increasing the knowledge and effectiveness of SEAC members. It also helps with member retention. Please review Module 4 for ideas to incorporate in orientation efforts.

If your SEAC decides that an orientation process is helpful, it may be a component to include in bylaws.

Items to consider include:

- What should be covered in orientation?

- Will it be a separate meeting?

- Who will be asked to attend?

- When will orientation by held?

- Will it be covered in a written format rather than at a meeting?

- Who will prepare for and carry out the activity?

Example: Orientation will be held for new members at the beginning of the school year. It will take place before the first meeting of the year. The district SEAC notebook will be shared and questions will be encouraged.

K. SUBCOMMITTEES

Subcommittees may be formed to accomplish specific or time-limited tasks. They can save the SEAC time by delegating persons to study an issue and report recommendations back to the full SEAC. SEAC members are also sometimes asked to represent the SEAC on other district committees, task forces, or councils.

Your SEAC may want to ask:

- Who will appoint subcommittee members?

- Will the SEAC establish any standing subcommittees? If so, for what tasks?

- How many members must a subcommittee have?

Example: Subcommittees will be appointed by the chairperson as needed to carry out the work of the SEAC. Each subcommittee must have at least three members, one of whom may be a school staff member. The school district will solicit SEAC members to represent SEAC on other district committees as well.

L. BYLAWS AMENDMENT

Operational guidelines will naturally need to be updated periodically. Having a standardized method for this process helps change happen in an organized and clear manner.

Example: Amendments to the bylaws may be proposed by members and will be included in the meeting's minutes. A vote will be taken at the subsequent meeting and will require an affirmative vote by a majority of designated members, including the director of special education.

III. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module

As a group, ask yourselves: What outcome do we want?

• Determine whether or not SEAC bylaws are needed.

• Review existing bylaws and revise if necessary.

• Develop SEAC bylaws.

For example, if the outcome is that you want to review and revise your bylaws, the process might look like this:

Outcome: The SEAC will review and revise bylaws.

Observable indicator: SEAC bylaws are published and distributed by January to members and interested others.

Action:

• Chairperson will appoint two parents to a subcommittee to review bylaws.

• Director of special education will appoint one staff member to the subcommittee.

• Subcommittee will report back with recommendations by November.

• Members will discuss the recommendations at the November meeting.

• At the December meeting, consensus will be sought on each recommended change.

Help needed to achieve this:

• Copies of bylaws for each subcommittee member

• A place to meet

• Copies of changes for full council to consider

IV. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

In addition to using information from this module to develop your SEAC's bylaws, your group may find the following examples of SEAC operational guidelines on the following pages helpful:

• Bloomington SEAC Guidelines

• St. Cloud SEAC Operating Policies and Procedures

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?
Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?
What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?
What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Special Education Community Advisory Council Guidelines

MISSION: The mission of the Special Education Community Advisory Council (SECAC) is to:

1. Provide the Council input into the decision-making process of the Bloomington Department of Special Education.
2. Provide a communication link with the Bloomington Community at large.
3. Advocate for high quality educational programs for all learners.
4. Assure the implementation of the District and Special Education Mission to all students in the Bloomington Schools.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES:
1. The Council shall advise the Director of Student Services regarding current issues, program development, parental concerns and involvement, departmental priorities.
2. The Council shall have access to the Superintendent of Schools through the Director of Student Services.
3. SECAC members may serve, as Council representatives, on district-wide task forces and committees.
4. An annual report of committee activities and recommendations shall be presented to Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education.

MEMBERSHIP:
The Council shall be limited to 24 members and shall include parents of students with special educational needs, community and district staff. Parental representation shall be proportional to areas of disabilities.

MEETINGS:
The Special Education Community Advisory Council shall meet monthly, September through June, on Tuesdays. One-third of the council membership shall constitute a quorum. Meetings shall be limited to two hours in length and will be open to the public.

TERMS OF MEMBERSHIP:
Council members will serve an initial two-year term. The term in office shall start with the first meeting in September,. Those appointed during the year shall start their two-year term on the following September 1. Membership, thereafter, may continue on a yearly basis. Each Council member shall serve on a minimum of one subcommittee. The subcommittee will be established in accordance to a specific identified goal of the whole Council. A facilitator shall be selected for each subcommittee, whose responsibilities will include: arranging subcommittee meetings, reporting to the Council and providing a written year-end report.

ATTENDANCE REQUIREMENTS:
Members, who acquire two consecutive absences during a one-year term, will be asked to renew their commitment to the Council.

OPERATING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

ST. CLOUD AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 742
SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)
OPERATING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

PURPOSE

The Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) shall advise St. Cloud Area School District 742 on the education of children with disabilities. The essence of the Council's purpose is to provide a broad base of input to District 742 policies, practices, and issues related to the education of children and youth with disabilities who are between the ages of birth to twenty-one.

FUNCTIONS

The Special Education Advisory Council shall:
1. Advise the St. Cloud Area School District 742 of unmet needs within the District in the education of children with disabilities;
2. Advise District 742 in developing evaluations and reporting on data;
3. Advise District 742 in developing corrective action plans to address findings;
4. Advise District 742 in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services.

MEMBERSHIP

The SEAC shall be comprised of up to twenty (20) members appointed by the Director of Student Services/Special Education. A majority of the members must be individuals with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities. Membership on the council should closely represent the District population and be composed of individuals involved in, or concerned with the education of children with disabilities and may include:
1. Parents of children with disabilities;
2. Individuals with disabilities;
3. Teachers;
4. Representatives of institutions of higher education that prepare special education and related services personnel;
5. Local education officials;
6. Administrators of programs for children with disabilities;
7. Representatives of other District agencies involved in the financing or delivery of related services to children with disabilities;
8. Representatives of private schools and public charter schools;
9. Representative of a vocational, community, or business organization concerned with the provision of transition services to children with disabilities; and
10. Representative from area juvenile and correction agencies.

TERMS OF MEMBERSHIP
1. The term of each member shall be for four years and expire on June 30th of the fourth year. In cases where a replacement member has not been appointed, an existing member may continue into the next term until the new appointment is made.
2. Appointments to the SEAC shall be staggered to assure that only one fourth of the membership would terminate activities at the end of any given year.
3. Members in good standing may reapply and be reappointed at the discretion of the Director.

MEETINGS
The SEAC shall meet as often as necessary to conduct its business, but not less than four (4) times during each fiscal year at a time and place determined by the Director of Student Services/Special Education. Meetings are open to the public.

PARTICIPATION BY NON-COUNCIL MEMBERS
Individuals who are not SEAC members are welcome to attend meetings and may address an issue on the agenda only after being recognized by the Chair.

NOTICE OF MEETINGS
Notice of the Special Education Advisory Council meetings shall be shall be notified prior to the meeting. A central telephone information number of the Student Services/Special Education Department will also be listed in the announcement to assist individuals who wish additional information regarding meeting agendas.

QUORUM
A quorum shall consist of a majority of the current members.

COMPENSATION
Members of the Council shall serve without compensation but be reimbursed for reasonable and actual expenses incurred in attending meetings within the limits provided in State rules.

ATTENDANCE
Members are expected to attend meetings for the length of their tenure in order to represent their constituency, organization and/or agency, and to enhance the effectiveness of the Council. Should Council members be unable to participate in a meeting, it is their responsibility to notify the Department of Student Services/Special Education staff liaison of their anticipated absence. Notification is requested as early as possible but not later than 48 hours preceding the meeting.

If necessary, SEAC members may, for information purposes only, opt to send a substitute to meetings. If a substitute is sent to an Advisory Council meeting, it is the responsibility of that member to fully inform the substitute of the work of the Council and to also notify the Director of Student Services of the anticipated participation of the substitute. Since the work of the Advisory Council is dependent upon consistent participation of the members, it is anticipated that the use of substitutes by members will be limited. Substitutes may be reimbursed at the same level as Advisory Council members.

REPLACEMENT
Advisory Council members shall be replaced when the following occurs: the member sends a letter of resignation to the Director of Student Services/ Special Education or the member does not attend three meetings in one fiscal year. After two absences, the Director, or designee will contact the Advisory Council member to verify interest and ability to serve as a Special Education Advisory Council member.

MODIFICATIONS: Changes of Policies and Procedures
The members may review the operating policies and procedures of the Special Education Advisory Council and make recommendations to the Director or designee.

MODULE 11 – SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (SEAC)

RUNNING A MEETING

THIS MODULE WILL:

- Give an overview of running a meeting in general and voting in particular

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Running a Meeting"are located at the end of this module.

PACER CENTER

CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES™

Well-run meetings usually accomplish more in less time. Having a defined method to run a meeting provides an orderly and fair way to do business. This module will give an overview of running a meeting in general and voting in particular.

I. PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

The basic authority for parliamentary procedures is Robert's Rules of Order. SEACs often find that a modified version of this method is adequate and effective.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- The meeting is run by a chairperson.
- All members have equal rights.
- The minority has rights that must be protected.
- A full and open discussion of all items of business is a right for all members.
- Only one question is considered at a time.
- Discussion is directed to the chairperson, not to a fellow member.
- Members must be recognized or called upon by the chair before speaking.
- When voting, the motion to be voted upon should be clear to all.
- The majority vote decides an issue.

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

Adjourn: end the meeting

Agenda: order of doing business

Amend: make a change

Carried: a motion is passed

Discussion: when a motion has been made and seconded, the group can address the issue

Have the floor: permission to speak

Majority: more than half of the votes

Minutes: written record of meeting

Motion: a proposal by a member for the SEAC to take action

Obtain the floor: ask permission to speak

Quorum: the minimum number of members who must be present for business to proceed

Second: a member agrees to a motion made by another member

Secret ballot: members vote by casting secret votes on paper

Voice vote: members say "yes" or "no" to the motion

BASIC ORDER OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

1. A quorum is established.

2. The meeting is called to order. Attention is directed to the chairperson.

3. Minutes from the last meeting are read by members.

   - Members may suggest changes or "make an objection." The member will make a motion to change the minutes to reflect the change or correction.

   - The chair will look for someone to second the motion.

   - After the second, the chair will restate the motion and ask for a vote.

   - If the motion passes, the minutes will be amended. If it does not pass, then minutes are not amended.

   - When there are no further objections, the minutes are approved.

4. Reports from committees or officers are read.

5. Old or unfinished business is discussed.

6. New business is discussed.

7. Announcements are made.

8. The chair adjourns the meeting.

II. ALTERNATIVE TO VOTING

Voting means that the majority wins and the minority loses. Some SEACs have found that building consensus rather than using the win/lose model of voting is a better way to strengthen relationships. When a recommendation is labeled as "unanimous," for example, it may be more influential with decision makers. Some SEACs will pass along a recommendation only when it has consensus among members. On the other hand, building consensus may take more time than voting.

Consensus building encourages persons with differing opinions to produce mutually acceptable agreements. For a SEAC, consensus building would mean that all designated members agree on a recommendation to give to decision makers and policymakers.

People don't always agree, and consensus may not come easily on some issues (see Module 8). One model to overcome obstacles and build consensus is the Harvard Negotiation Project, which determined "Five Lasting Rules for Negotiating Anything."

Applying these rules to a SEAC to build consensus might look like this:

1. *Focus on goals instead of positions:* Rather than taking a position ("I want us to lobby the legislature for more money for special education"), think of the goal ("our district needs more money for special education.") There are many methods for achieving a goal.

2. *Separate the people from the problem:* Think of the person you are talking to as your partner and the problem you are trying to solve as the object. For example, if one person wants to testify at the legislature and another thinks writing a letter is much more effective (the people), refocus on partnering on a variety of ways to convince the legislature that special education needs increased funding (the object or problem).

3. *Focus on interests:* Parents and school professionals may have different interests. Similarly, parents of children with one type of disability may have different interests from parents of children who have another type of disability. The pursuit of one's interests can lead to taking a position (see #1). For example, parents of children with autism may be interested in using district resources to develop a video to help staff better understand the unique needs of children with autism, while other parents may be interested in using district resources to help staff learn to use positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). By focusing on mutual interests, the SEAC may learn that children with autism benefit greatly from a consistent use of PBIS.

4. *Invent options for mutual gain:* Examine each other's interests to come up with options where both parties gain. Using the example above, perhaps the SEAC will look for grant opportunities to pursue the video and free up district resources for PBIS. Parties can draft a list of how the SEAC may address both topics. Look for win-win outcomes.

5. *Use objective criteria:* Look at the facts in your SEAC's school district(s). Using the example above, how many children with autism are served? What behavior problems do our schools typically face? What grants are available to school districts?

Whether a SEAC decides on voting or building consensus is locally determined. The choice should be documented in the SEAC bylaws or operational guidelines and communicated to members and visitors.

III. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Your SEAC may want to discuss the following:

- What method will our SEAC use to run meetings?
- Is this method included in the operational guidelines?
- Should we use consensus rather than voting?

IV. NEXT STEPS

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module.

Using the above discussion questions or questions of your own, what next steps are necessary?

As a group, ask yourselves:

• What outcome do we want?

• What objective measures (observable indicators) will show we've achieved that outcome?

• What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

• What help do we need to achieve this?

Here's an example of stating an outcome, recognizing indicators, determining action steps, and identifying what help may be needed:

Outcome: Our SEAC will explore the concept of voting versus consensus and choose one method.

Observable Indicator: The SEAC manual outlines established agreement procedure.

Action:

• A subcommittee will explore the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

• The subcommittee will present a list of advantages and disadvantages and e-mail them to members prior to discussion at next meeting.

• SEAC will select or adapt an agreement procedure.

• SEAC will add this to SEAC manual.

Help needed:

• A district staff person will be a member of the subcommittee.

• District special education office will e-mail the advantages and disadvantages to each member to use at the meeting.

V. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

• Interactive Group Activities for Special Education Advisory Committee Meetings

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?

Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?

What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?

What *help* do we need to achieve this?

Interactive Group Activities for Special Education Advisory Committee Meetings

Effective advisory groups are concerned not only with accomplishing tasks, but also with promoting productive interaction among their members. The following ideas, adapted from commonly practiced collaborative-learning strategies[1], can facilitate group participation, problem solving, and evaluation of meeting outcomes.

Facilitate Group Participation

Many people are uncomfortable when they first join a group. Informal, relational meeting-starters can help create an atmosphere of openness, trust, and interaction. In the quest to be efficient, well-meaning groups may eliminate introductions or ice-breakers, but investing in those activities often leads to a more productive meeting. Informal activities might include:

Three-Step Interview

This activity works especially well with new groups. Before the meeting, prepare note cards with two or three "get acquainted" questions, or write the questions on a white board or flip chart. To begin the meeting, ask each member to team up with someone they don't know well. For each pair, ask the person with the birthday closest to that day's date to ask the interview questions. After a specified time, perhaps three minutes, ask participants to switch roles. Next, ask each pair to join up with another pair and take turns introducing the person they interviewed to the other members in the group.

Magic Wand Introductions

Pass a "magic wand" around the group and ask committee members to introduce themselves and to share, in a minute or less, one thing they would magically change for students receiving special education and why. This activity helps members learn about one another's perspectives and priorities while breaking the ice for more focused discussion and decision-making.

Facilitate Problem Solving

Special education advisory committees often make recommendations regarding possible solutions to problems. This work can be overwhelming, and the group may find itself spinning its wheels. One way to avoid that situation is by identifying and following a problem-solving process[2]. The following activities can be used to encourage active participation by all committee members.

Pass-a-Problem

Prior to the meeting, identify a concern or issue related to an agenda item. Write the "problem" on a card and attach it to the front of a folder. Depending on the size of the group, you may wish to have up to three "problems." Divide the committee into groups of no more than four people, give each group a folder, and ask them to write possible solutions to the stated problem. After a predetermined time, ask each group to place its list inside the folder and pass it to the next group. Without looking at the list inside the folder, the new group will compose its own list of solutions and add it to the folder. Continue until all groups have commented on all the problems. The folders can then be given to the group's leadership team or a subcommittee that will review and analyze the proposed solutions, consolidate or expand them as necessary, and choose the best two options to present to the large group at the next meeting.

[1]"Parents as Collaborative Leaders, Module 5." University of Vermont and PACER Center, 2008. uvm.edu/~pcl/modules.php.

[2]"SEAC Strategies for Success: An Online Guide for Minnesota Local Special Education Advisory Councils, Module 8." PACER Center, 2008. mnseacinfo.org/seacstrategies/index.asp.

PRIORITIZING NEEDS AND SETTING GOALS

Handouts, tools, and additional resources for "Prioritizing Needs and Setting Goals"are located at the end of this module.

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It is not uncommon for a local SEAC to struggle with moving beyond discussing information to taking action that leads to tangible outcomes. Often, because meeting time is limited and the number of meetings may be few, groups are tempted to start on the first project they think of without looking at broader needs and strategies. Free-flowing meetings based on topics for discussion may be pleasurable and even personally helpful for the small group of people who participate, but such meetings often do not have an impact on the special education system. Because a district's special education program is so complex, SEACs would do well to hone in on specific areas of need and set manageable annual goals.

I. DETERMINE THE ISSUES TO ADDRESS

To best determine which issues the SEAC will address, your group may want to do the following:

1. CONSIDER LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONDITIONS AND IDENTIFY ISSUES THAT ARE PARTICULARLY URGENT OR AT A CRITICAL POINT IN YOUR DISTRICT.

These may include:

- new school attendance boundaries
- new school buildings
- adoption of new curriculum
- levy and/or bond referendums
- creation of new programs
- corrective action plans

2. ASK THE GOVERNING BOARD AND ADMINISTRATION WHAT THEY NEED AND HOW YOU CAN HELP THEM.

3. REQUEST INPUT FROM SEAC MEMBERS AS WELL AS OTHER INDIVIDUALS IN THE DISTRICT.

Having a broad base of input will help you determine districtwide concerns, needs, and priorities.

- Input from a wide range of parents will give you the "big picture" view necessary to make recommendations. SEAC members represent the interests of all students with disabilities, not an individual child's interests or only those related to a particular disability. All aspects of diversity in the district—cultural, racial, and disability—should have representation.
- Staff and community members also have unique perspectives and valuable information to contribute based on their experiences with students and families.

4. CONSIDER WHAT SPECIFIC INFORMATION IS NEEDED.

Having a broad base of input will help you determine districtwide concerns, needs, and priorities.

- Evaluation of current programs and services.
- Identification of gaps in services and unmet needs.
- Input regarding recommendations under consideration for proposal.
  For example, if you could survey parents and ask, "If the district were to offer monthly parent information sessions, how likely would you be to participate?"

5. COLLECT FEEDBACK THROUGH A VARIETY OF METHODS.

- Solicit public comment at SEAC meetings.

  - Provide opportunities for public comment on the meeting agenda.

  - Publicize the purpose and process for collecting input, including how it will be responded to and used.

- Provide an e-mail address on the school district Web site where input may be sent to the SEAC.

  - You may want to indicate that the e-mail address is only for submitting ideas to the SEAC, and that no one will respond personally to the e-mail.

- Conduct focus groups related to targeted issues.

- Schedule a SEAC brainstorming session.

- Create and distribute paper and online surveys to district special education parents, staff, and students.

  - The SEAC may wish to use stakeholder surveys developed by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) for "districts to use in Traditional Review for the collection of qualitative data from parents of special education students, administrators, general and special educators and paraprofessionals." For a link to the surveys, see Section VII of this module.

TIP: By providing ways for individuals to voice their concerns, you may see a decrease in unconstructive criticism.

6. USE SPECIAL EDUCATION PERFORMANCE AND COMPLIANCE DATA FROM STATE AND FEDERAL MONITORING EFFORTS.

Go to the Web sites below for an explanation of each process and accompanying forms and reports:

- http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Compliance_and_Assistance/Special_Education_Monitoring/Self_Review/index.html

- http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Compliance_and_Assistance/Special_Education_Monitoring/Traditional_Review/index.html

- http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Compliance_and_Assistance/Federal_Communications/index.html: Each state must report annually to the public on the performance of each local educational agency (LEA) located in the state on the targets in the SPP under IDEA section 616(b)(2)(C)(ii)(l). In addition, each state must review LEA performance against targets in the state's SPP, determine if each LEA meets the requirements of the IDEA, and inform each LEA of its determination.

The state also shall report annually on its performance according to its SPP targets. This report is called the Part B APR. The Office of Special Education Programs issues a letter of determination in response to the states' SPP and APRs: www.pacer.org/letterofdetermination08.pdf

- The state Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) is involved in reviewing targets, strategies, and performance in the SPP and APR and may have concerns and goals that align with those at the local level.

- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) school report card data

For more information regarding how to use this data, see Module 7.

II. PRIORITIZE AREAS OF CONCERN

As a group, prioritize areas of concern to address and come to consensus about the top one to three issues (see Module 11).

Here are tips for doing so:

1. List concerns. You may want to use large flip-chart paper and post the lists on walls for all members to view and discuss.

2. Group similar items together and determine a common theme.

3. Rank the items. Among many possible ranking methods,

    here are some ideas to try:

    - If the group has fewer than 10 people, and the list has10 items or fewer, each member may be asked to individually rank the items and then share his or her reason for the top items. A facilitator can record comments on a flip chart. After all have spoken, check for agreement about the ranking.

    - For larger groups, give each member three to five colored dot stickers. Ask members to place their stickers by the items they see as the top priorities to address. Count dots to see if any natural consensus is revealed. Discuss and further clarify the top items. Rate the remaining items based on the number of dots. Ask for feedback from any member who is strongly opposed to a ranking. A neutral facilitator is helpful in this process.

    - For large groups, you may wish to break the list into categories and assign each category to a subgroup. Each subgroup can rank the items and report its top priority to the large group for discussion and agreement.

Example from "Local SEAC Survey":

"Our SEAC typically identifies one area of focus for each year, then researches the area and offers suggestions for improvement or development to the school district/teachers. This year the area was communication between school and home, especially targeting the years that students transition into a new building or program."

III. SET SEAC GOALS FOR TOP ISSUES

Once the group has come to consensus regarding the issues of highest concern, it is time to set annual SEAC goals to achieve desired outcomes. Ultimately, SEAC goals should lead to some kind of advice or recommendation regarding district special education policy.

In determining SEAC goals, it is helpful to keep the following guidelines in mind:

Once the group has come to consensusrding the issues of highest concern, it is time to set annual SEAC goals to achieve desired outcomes. Ultimately, SEAC goals should lead to it

- SEAC goals are most appropriate when they align with the SEAC's legislated purpose and function, which is to increase the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in district policy-making, and to advise the district about special education policy and decisions (see Module 1).

- SEAC goals are most effective when they align with the district's special education department mission and goals (see Module 5).

Goal-setting Tips:

1. SET SMART GOALS.

SMART is an acronym for the five characteristics of well-designed goals:

- *Specific:* Set out what is expected, when, and how much.

- *Measurable:* Milestones to measure progress help members stay motivated to complete the goals.

- *Attainable:* Realistic, yet require a bit of a stretch to achieve. Goals that are set too high or too low become meaningless.

- *Relevant:* Related to current realities, concerns, and needs. Individuals will be motivated to work toward goals they see value in achieving.

- *Time-bound:* Goals must have starting points, ending points, and fixed durations.

In an alternate version of SMART that's applicable when working in groups to achieve goals, "A" stands for "Agreed." Unless the group agrees on the value and importance of each

goal, it will be difficult to maintain the motivation required to carry out the commitment.

2. LIMIT THE NUMBER OF GOALS.

Many groups find two to four goals manageable. It is better to add goals later than it is to drop goals or not see them through to successful completion.

3. CONSIDER HAVING BOTH LONG-RANGE GOALS LEADING TO RECOMMENDATIONS AND SHORT-TERM GOALS LEADING TO TANGIBLE RESULTS.

Reaching short-range goals may provide motivation to stay with long-range goals, which may have less obvious and sometimes delayed outcomes.

SEAC goal example:

Unmeasurable goal: To serve parents by providing information, personal contact, and support for families.

SMART goal: The SEAC will appoint and train a volunteer parent-liaison assigned to each school building. The liaison's role and contact information will be publicized by September 2009 on the Web site and in a direct mailing to families of children receiving special education.

For more examples of SEAC goals, see Tools and Resources, Section VII.

For discussion:

- What are our long-range goals (two years or more)?

- What are our short-range goals (one year or less)?

- How many goals can we realistically address this year?

IV. DEVELOP A PLAN TO ACCOMPLISH GOALS

CREATE AN ACTION PLAN TO ACCOMPLISH GOALS.

- Determine your starting point and how progress will be measured.

- Lay out a plan of action. Consider using a technique called "backwards planning." Begin with the desired outcome and determine what must occur one step prior to make that possible. For example, if a goal's outcome is that "parents will have a district-specific special education manual to guide them through the process," the step prior to the final outcome may be to "post the manual on district's special education Web page and send a notice to all families with the link to the manual. Provide hard copies to each building's special education lead teacher." Working backward, determine "what needs to happen before we can do that?"

- Periodically measure and report progress.

- Create a plan for sharing results in the form of recommendations or advice. For example, a successful pilot plan to provide parent orientation and information nights for special education students transitioning to middle school may result in a SEAC recommendation to the school board that the district's special education policy includes a directive that all district middle schools provide such an event each September.

USE "ACTION AGENDAS" TO GUIDE MEETINGS AND MAKE THEM PRODUCTIVE.

- Next to each agenda item specify the presenter, the approximate time he or she will speak, and indicate I for Information, D for Discussion, or A for Action Required. Provide additional action-item columns to indicate who the action was "Assigned to" and the "Target Date" for completion. If agendas will go out prior to the meeting, it is helpful to include a "Prep" column as well, indicating specific documents to read, surveys to fill out, items to consider, or actions to complete prior to the meeting.

- Column headings for the agenda could include:
Item: Presenter: Time: Purpose (I, D or A): Prep; Decision/Outcome; Action Assigned to; Target Date

CREATE MEANINGFUL MEETING MINUTES BASED ON AGENDAS.

- Clear and specific agendas will simplify the process of taking and reporting meeting minutes, which are not only helpful, but also required by the MDE for accountability purposes.

- The information recorded for each agenda item during the meeting will form the basis for the meeting minutes.

- The meeting minutes will serve as a report to nonmembers, an updated action plan for members, and a starting point for the next meeting agenda.

V. CELEBRATE AND PUBLICIZE SUCCESS

Success breeds success. People like to be part of a winning team.

- Send thank you notes to everyone who contributed to the success of your project. Create a SEAC certificate of appreciation to present to key players. The Lakeville SEAC brought treats to the staff lounge in each school building to thank teachers for their work in making inclusion of children with disabilities successful that year.

- Write a thank you letter to the community and send it to the editor of the local paper.

- Create an annual report on the SEAC's accomplishments and submit it in writing and in person at a school board meeting. Several SEACs use a parent member to copresent the report with the special education director.

- Highlight past accomplishments in SEAC outreach materials.

VI. FOR DISCUSSION

For this section, you may choose to use the "Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet" located at the end of this module

As a group, ask yourselves:

- Have we identified concerns and needs using a broad base of input?

- Have we prioritized areas to address?

- Do we have SMART goals?

- Do we have concrete and specific action plans to meet our goals?

- Is our meeting time spent productively addressing our goals?

- How will we celebrate success?

Using the above discussion questions, what next steps are necessary? Perhaps pick only one or two at a time.

- What outcome do we want?

- How will we know we've achieved that outcome? (observable indicator)

- What action will we take to achieve that outcome?

- What help do we need to achieve this?

Examples of outcomes:

- Three clear, measurable goals to guide our work in the upcoming year.

- SEAC meeting minutes will identify actions that lead to policymaking and decision making recommendations and outcomes.

VII. TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- Effective Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs)
    - provides templates for an agenda format and action minutes

Next Steps: Action Planning Worksheet

What *outcome* do we want?
Observable Indicator: How will we know we've achieved that outcome?
What *action* will we take to achieve that outcome?
What *help* do we need to achieve this?

AGENDA FORMAT

Priority	Item	Intended Result	Time Limit

Action Minutes

Page _____ of _____

Team Members Present:

Today's Date _____

Recorder _____

Date/Time/Place of Next Meeting _____

Agenda Item	Person Initiating	Summary of Discussion/Task List	Action Decision	Person to Follow-up	Target Date Completion

Possible Agenda Items for Next Meeting

Odds and Ends List

ACTION PLAN

Date(s) Developed: _____

Goals	Objectives	Activities	Person Responsible	Target Date	Review Dates			Status