

**A Parent's Guide to
Special Education Advisory Councils**

SEAC

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Introduction

Minnesota parents of children who are in special education may participate on special education advisory councils (SEACs) in their local school districts. This booklet describes what these groups are, how they operate, and how parents can contribute effectively to their local council.

WHAT IS A SEAC?

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A SEAC (pronounced “seek”) is a group that provides input on special education issues to its local school district. Its purpose is to advise and advocate, not to decide policy. Minnesota law requires each school district in the state to have a SEAC, although it does not specify how the groups should be organized or what duties they should perform. As a result, each SEAC may have a unique mission and structure. (See “What the Law Says” on page 5.)

WHY ARE SEACs IMPORTANT?.....

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.

WHY MIGHT I WANT TO PARTICIPATE ON A SEAC?.....

Parents give many reasons for joining a SEAC, including these:

- I may be able to help other families and children with disabilities in my school district.
- I can share what I've learned since my child began his education.
- I can support the school professionals in my district.
- I will be a good role model for my child.
- I feel good when I make a contribution to this community.
- I will learn information and skills that may help me work more effectively with my school district.
- I will meet others with similar goals, both parents and school professionals.
- I may build positive relationships with others in my district.
- I will become more knowledgeable about special education.
- By sharing my unique perspective and insights as a parent, I may help the school district work more effectively with families and improve outcomes for children.

What the Law Says

Minnesota law requires each school district in the state to have a special education advisory council (SEAC). Here is what the statute says:

125A.24 PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS......

In order to increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policy making 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.

Rest of bill can be found at: http://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/bin/bldbill.php?bill=H0141.1&session_year=2005&session_number=1

HOW DO I FIND MY LOCAL SEAC?.....

Call your school district's special education director and ask when and where the group meets next. If you are not sure how to reach your district, call PACER Center.

HOW DO I JOIN MY LOCAL SEAC?.....

Each school district determines SEAC membership differently. Some SEACs ask for applicants and appoint members; others use volunteer members. Your district's special education director can explain how your SEAC works.

Before you join a SEAC, you may want to attend a meeting to learn more about the group. Meetings are open to the public. You may want to ask or observe:

- What is the written mission of this SEAC?
- Are there any bylaws? May I see them?
- How often does the SEAC meet? When? Where?
- How does one become a member?
- How long does a member serve?
- Whom does the council advise? How often? What is done with the advice?
- Who runs or chairs the meeting?
- Who sets the agenda?
- Is there an orientation for new members?
- Do additional committees or work groups meet outside of the regular meeting times?
- Who serves on this council besides parents?
- Are there annual reports or past meeting minutes I could read?
- Whom could I contact for more information?

You also may want to ask yourself these questions before joining a SEAC:

- Am I able to set aside the needs of my own child and look at the “big picture” in my district? Would my feelings (such as anger or anxiety or sadness) make me less effective than I’d want to be? Can I set aside my own emotional issues?
- Is it a good use of my skills and time?
- What talents or strengths could I bring to this group?
- Can I commit the necessary time?
- Could my participation make a difference for children and families?

HOW DO I FIND MY ROLE ON THE SEAC?.....

Once you’ve joined your local SEAC, it will take time and patience to become a truly effective participant. These techniques can help you find your unique place in the group.

- Ask yourself if you feel welcome there. If not, what can you do to improve the situation?
- Be willing to listen at first. Learn about the people, the issues, the programs, and background information before offering advice or opinions.
- Be willing to say, “I don’t know yet” or “I need more information in order to comment about that issue.”
- Ask questions about anything you don’t understand. If acronyms are used, ask if there is a list of acronyms and definitions to which you could refer. Ask where you could find information covered at a previous meeting.
- Think about your personal skills and how they might best be used. Are you a writer, speaker, computer expert,

or technology professional? Are you politically savvy? Are you well organized, perceptive, verbal, and caring? SEACs can make use of all of these skills.

- Learn all you can about your school district’s structure, policy, and administration.
- Do your homework. Read materials provided to participants.
- Come prepared to contribute.
- Develop an understanding of the “big picture” issues facing the district, beyond those of your own child and family.

HOW CAN I HELP MY SEAC TO BE EFFECTIVE?

You can help your SEAC be effective, useful, and valuable to the school district in several ways:

- Encourage the group to look at its mission statement (if one exists) and answer these questions: Does it provide direction for the group? Is it clear? Is there a need to write or rewrite a mission statement?
- Help clarify expectations. Do members expect only to give advice, or do some also expect the advice to be followed? How do members feel about this? Do expectations need to be examined or made more clear?
- Be sure members treat each other respectfully. Do parents listen to each other’s unique perception and experience?
- Distinguish between long- and short-term goals. Does this distinction need to be defined and made more clear?
- Discuss how conflict is handled. Does the group look for consensus and solutions? Are different viewpoints valued?

- Help the group find the information it needs to make decisions.
- Suggest that the group adopt communication ground rules.
- Encourage diversity by including parents with the cultures, languages, and disabilities represented in your district.
- Be sure that meetings are run in a timely, organized way. Making and following an agenda is effective.
- Support productive decision making. Are conclusions reached by consensus, or do discussions continue with no resolution or closure?

Missions and Goals

SEACs that have a clear mission and goals tend to be productive and effective. Here are some examples of mission and goal statements from Minnesota SEACs:

- Support, advocate, and advise on special education matters.
- To act as an advisory body to the district through the director of special education on behalf of students receiving special education services. SEAC will work toward the district mission to instill in each learner a passion for learning and a commitment to reach one's potential throughout life.
- We exist to advise the school district on matters relating to continuous program improvement efforts as they pertain to special education. We provide community-wide support to families with students from birth

through grade 12 in the school district's special education programs.

- Provide input into the decision making process of the special education department. Provide a communication link with the community at large. Advocate for high-quality educational programs for all learners. Assure the implementation of the district and special education mission to all students in the district.
- To advise the district on the education of children with disabilities. The essence of the council's purpose is to provide parents of children with disabilities input into the district regarding policies, practices, and issues related to the education of children and youth with disabilities.
- Advise the director on special education-related issues and engage in at least one substantial project each year to benefit students with disabilities.
- The long-term goal is to advocate for high quality programs and services necessary to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of all children with disabilities and their families. Each year the council also establishes a short-term goal.
- To seek advice from parents on district practice and policy relating to special education and to involve parents in decision making.
- To act as an advisory body to the district on behalf of students receiving special education services. The purpose of the SEAC is to improve the educational opportunities for students with disabilities working as partners in a collaborative relationship.
- To provide a forum for parents and staff to share ideas, identify concerns, and advise the district in order to improve services for children with disabilities.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT.....

SEAC members come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. As a result, differences of opinion will inevitably arise. Through flexibility and compromise, your group can resolve its conflicts, reach consensus, strengthen relationships, and accomplish goals.

Here are some questions you and the other members may want to ask yourselves as you deal with differences of opinion:

- Am I contributing to the conflict or to a resolution?
- Are we being respectful to each other?
- Have we defined the problem before starting to propose solutions? (We may be disagreeing because we aren't solving the same "problem.")
- Are we staying within our mission or goal statement?
- Could I meet privately with the special education director about a particular SEAC issue?
- Are we talking about individual children or looking at services for all of them?
- Would it help if we brainstormed solutions, with no interruptions or evaluations until the list is complete?

Conclusion

Minnesota legislators realized the value of parent involvement in school district decision- and policy-making by requiring SEACs. PACER offers these answers, tips, and suggestions to support parents as they participate on local special education advisory councils. SEACs can be an effective way for parents and school professionals to work together for the benefit of children with disabilities.

SEAC Resources

VISIT PACER CENTER AT WWW.MNSEACINFO.ORG FOR:

- Keys to Success in the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent-School Partnership
- Increasing Parent Involvement on Special Education Committees, Councils, and Boards
- Disability-related Interagency, Special Education Council, and Committee Opportunities
- IEP (Individual Effectiveness Plan) for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)
- Key Questions for Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent Members to Ask
- Know Your School District: Tips for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)

VISIT [HTTP://NICHCY.ORG](http://NICHCY.ORG) FOR:

- *Serving on Boards and Committees*, National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 1998.

VISIT WWW.FAMILYCENTEREDCARE.ORG FOR:

- *Words of Advice: A Guidebook for Families Serving as Advisors*, Thomas, Josie, and Jeppson, Elizabeth, Bethesda, MD: Institute for Family-Centered Care, 1997.

VISIT WWW.EDUCATION.STATE.MN.US FOR:

- *Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) Manual*, Minnesota Technical Assistance for Family Support and Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 2003.

