



Key Questions for Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent Members to Ask

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 are those who ask the right questions.

If you are a parent of a child receiving special education and serve as a representative on your school district’s Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC), knowing what questions to ask is essential to your ability to effect change.

Rather than stating opinions and positions prematurely, try asking a well-timed key question. Offering a conclusive statement usually results in an agree versus disagree dialogue. A good question, on the other hand, engages people and sets the direction for a focused discussion of the issue. 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 the school district council, the timing of questions and the manner in which they are asked is important as well. Having an “us versus them” perspective in the conversation may close down communication, as will questions that are posed with a hidden agenda or motive. It may be helpful to prioritize your concerns and carefully select questions that will open communication in specific areas. Be ready to ask your questions at an appropriate time. A thoughtful question that is sincerely asked will be perceived not as a threat, but as an invitation to work together and find 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 are the school district and special education budgets?
- How has this changed in the last few years?

Special Education Accountability

- How many complaints or 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 parental satisfaction with special education services?
- How does our district share information with families of students with disabilities?

While many councils do well in addressing these types of questions, some fail to consider the equally important follow-up questions. Gathering information is not an end in itself. To move forward on the path to a desired outcome, analytical questions will need to be asked by the council as well:

- How well is this working?
- Is there a better way to do this?
- What do we need to make change possible?

In order for the council to determine goals and create action plans, why and how follow-up questions are necessary. ‘Why’ questions, which get to the reason behind a course of action, enable the group to determine overall goals. ‘How’ questions help the group move from general goals to the specific steps needed to produce positive results.

When PACER surveyed parents about the obstacles they face when serving in advisory positions in their school district, many cited a “lack of knowledge” as a major barrier. To gain knowledge, it is very important to know how to ask questions. Your experience as the parent of a child who is the recipient of the services being delivered will help you identify solutions that are focused and relevant. By asking key questions, you may improve the way all children with disabilities receive support to succeed in school and in life.