

SEPAG Drop-in Support Recap

Wednesday, September 16th, 2026 | 1:00pm-2:00pm

Thanks to everyone who joined! This week's conversation centered on some challenges that many SEPAGs share: increasing parent engagement, building productive relationships with district leaders, planning for leadership transitions, and finding ways for SEPAGs to have a meaningful impact.

Below are a few highlights and resources from the discussion.

Rethinking Parent Engagement

Several participants shared that getting families to attend SEPAG meetings continues to be difficult, even when groups are already using flyers, websites, QR codes, district communications, PTA meetings, and other outreach strategies. The conversation raised an important question: **Does family engagement always have to mean attending a meeting?**

Participants discussed other ways SEPAGs can build awareness and connect with families, including:

- Having a table at community events, resource fairs, Back-to-School Nights, or other school events
- Sharing information through your local PTAs/PTOs and with individual school principals
- Using social media groups, email lists, district-wide messages, and other communication channels consistently
- Creating welcome videos, brochures, team bios, and annual "save the date" materials
- Surveying families to learn what topics, resources, or events they actually want
- Participating in existing community events rather than always creating a separate SEPAG event

Another takeaway from the conversation was that participation can, *and typically does*, grow slowly. A few more families attending, responding to a survey, asking a question, or becoming aware of the SEPAG can all represent meaningful progress. As one of our staff members likes to say, "Baby steps!"

Working with District Leadership

Another major theme was how SEPAGs can strengthen collaboration with district leaders, especially when there has been administrative turnover or when productive conversations do not always lead to follow-through.

Participants discussed the value of:

- Establishing clear follow-up steps after meetings
- Setting timelines when appropriate
- Following up respectfully and consistently on commitments
- Involving additional district staff, such as special education supervisors, when helpful
- Documenting discussions and sharing meeting minutes or summaries
- Identifying smaller, achievable changes rather than expecting large systems changes all at once

The group also discussed how difficult it can be to measure a SEPAG's impact over time. Sometimes a change occurs after families raise a systemic issue, but it may not be clear whether the SEPAG directly caused the change. Our team recommends setting up regular lines of communication with district leaders (typically the Director of Special Education), and making the request early that any changes to district programming that were informed by SEPAG be shared with the group.

Our team also discussed that we can, and often do, help facilitate conversations between SEPAG leaders and district representatives. Having a neutral third party in the room can help groups establish shared goals, clarify roles, and identify practical next steps.

Planning for Leadership Transitions

One participant raised a question that many SEPAGs eventually face: How do we make it easier for a new parent leader to step into the role?

The group discussed creating a simple timeline or “playbook” showing recurring activities throughout the school year, for example:

- When to begin preparing for Back-to-School Night
- When annual outreach materials should be updated
- When to begin planning events
- Important awareness months or school-year milestones
- When to communicate with district leaders about upcoming activities

A participant kindly shared a SEPAG activity playbook they use within their group to organize activities and anticipate upcoming opportunities throughout the year.

Leadership transition and succession planning are areas BRIDGE is also continuing to explore as potential resources for SEPAG leaders. Stay tuned!

Community Partnerships & Resource Fairs

Participants shared examples of partnering with organizations that already have community connections and event-planning capacity. One example was a local special needs resource fair organized through a community library organization and police department, with the SEPAG and district special services participating as resource partners.

The discussion highlighted an important strategy: **SEPAGs do not always need to organize an entire event themselves.** Sometimes the most effective approach is to bring an idea to an existing community partner and participate in something they help organize.

The group also briefly discussed the challenges SEPAGs may face when they do not have their own budget. Participants shared examples of partnering with PTOs/PTAs or other community organizations when appropriate. Because district practices can vary, SEPAG leaders should talk with their district about what is permitted locally before pursuing fundraising or financial arrangements.

State-Level SEPAG Questions & Advocacy

Participants raised open questions about how SEPAG requirements are supported and monitored statewide.

One resource shared was the New Jersey State Special Education Advisory Council (NJ-SSEAC). Participants noted that NJ-SSEAC meetings are open to the public and include opportunities for public comment. Families and SEPAG leaders can attend meetings, speak during public comment, or submit comments.

To learn more visit: www.nj.gov/education/sseac/

New Tool Coming Soon: Arch

Participants also received an early introduction to Arch, a BRIDGE tool currently under development.

Arch is an AI-powered chatbot designed to help New Jersey families and educators find special education information from a curated library of vetted resources. Rather than searching the open internet, Arch draws only from resources selected by the BRIDGE team and provides citations so users can return to the original source.

Arch is still being tested, and BRIDGE is currently gathering feedback from small groups of parents and educators before expanding access. If you're interested in helping with our beta testing, come to an office hour or send us a message at cesp@gse.rutgers.edu

Join Us Next Time!

Drop-In Support is open to parent and district SEPAG leaders, as well as anyone interested in getting involved with their SEPAG. Bring a question, share an idea, join the conversation, or simply listen.

We'll continue meeting on Wednesdays at 1:00pm throughout September. We're also planning evening sessions for October to make Support more accessible - more details to come!

September 23 | September 30

No registration is required. To join a session, visit: go.rutgers.edu/fall2026supports

See you next week!

The RU-BRIDGE Team

Want to talk through your group's specific situation? Request a 1:1 office hour with a member of our staff:
go.rutgers.edu/sepagsupportofficehours