RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Center for Effective School Practices

BRIDGE
Facilitating Collaboration, Coordinated Support, and Systems Learning

SEPAG Leaders: Connect, Share, & Grow!

Tuesday, October 27th, 2026 | 10:00am & 6:00pm Sessions

Thank you to everyone who joined our morning and evening virtual conversations! Parent leaders and community members from across New Jersey shared experiences, celebrated successes, discussed challenges, and exchanged strategies for strengthening their SEPAGs. Although every group is different, many of the questions and lessons were familiar across districts.

Here are some ideas and resources from both sessions that other leaders may find useful.

Growing Parent Engagement: What's Working?

Increasing participation was one of the most common challenges. Even groups that regularly promote meetings may see only a few families attend. Participants encouraged looking beyond meeting attendance and creating multiple ways for families to learn about and connect with the SEPAG.

Ideas shared

- Offer hybrid meetings so families can participate in person or online.
- Ask principals to include SEPAG announcements in school newsletters; use district communications, email, Facebook, automated reminders, and other channels.
- Introduce the SEPAG at Back-to-School Nights, parent-teacher conferences, and other school events, using flyers or QR codes to help families connect.
- Let families know they can contribute in small ways—even occasional help, a question, or adding their perspective is valuable.
- Consider translation, language access, cultural differences, and families' comfort with participation to ensure all voices are given a seat at the table.

One leader reported that more than 30 people, both in person and online, attended a hybrid meeting after the group promoted a "meet the director" opportunity. This example shows how a timely topic and flexible ways to participate can help bring families together.

Participants also noted that finding people who are willing to join and take on leadership roles can be difficult. One group is hoping that changing what is expected of members will help. The conversation highlighted the value of inviting leadership gradually by starting with smaller asks, and of avoiding terms like "parent leader" in initial invitations, since the title can feel intimidating and discourage people from getting involved.

The takeaway: Consistent outreach and an understanding of your parent community matter more than any single meeting formula. Meet them where they are and get your information in front of them in varied ways.

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Understanding the SEPAG's Role & Finding Your Footing

Participants ranged from new leaders to families reviving previously inactive groups. A recurring question was what a SEPAG should actually do beyond offering informational presentations.

The discussion highlighted a SEPAG's systems-level advisory purpose: gathering family perspectives, identifying shared needs, and communicating priorities and recommendations to the district. Workshops are valuable, but listening to families should be the guiding force of the group's work. Participants encouraged each other to:

- Form a manageable parent leadership team to coordinate meetings and outreach.
- Use surveys, parent discussions, and informal conversations to identify priorities.
- Meet with district representatives to communicate recurring issues and opportunities for improvement.
- Adapt roles and procedures to your group's size, history, and capacity. Don't take on more than you are able or want to.

Building Productive Partnerships with District Leaders

Leaders spoke candidly about administrative turnover, the work involved in building and re-building trust, and the importance of staying focused on shared goals. Several also shared encouraging examples of collaboration:

- Invite a new special education director or child study team members to introduce themselves to families.
- Partner with district staff on family workshops, including an evening IEP workshop with childcare.
- Ask districts to make child study team contacts and service information easier to find.
- Provide district-wide information sessions about available programs and services.

One parent leader described how steady communication with a new district administrator helped establish trust over time. BRIDGE also reminded participants that its team can offer neutral facilitation and individualized support for family-district conversations.

Finding Opportunities for Parent Voice

Participants described ways families have contributed to broader school and community conversations, including introductions to the Boards of Education, strategic planning committees, and district leadership selection discussions.

Participants also shared ways SEPAGs have built relationships with their Boards of Education:

- Sending board members a SEPAG primer at the beginning of each school year.
- Advocating for a special education subcommittee and a board liaison, which one leader described as a (worthwhile) multi-year effort.
- Welcoming a board representative who attends SEPAG meetings as a liaison.

One group described hosting a candidate information forum where all school board candidates were invited to respond to community-submitted questions. Another group shared that their PTA has hosted a "meet the BOE candidates" event, which they felt gave their group a stronger voice in local elections.

Resources Shared

- **What Is a SEPAG?** — A short introduction to a SEPAG's purpose and role, available in English and Spanish.

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- **SEPAG Parent Leader Starter Kit** — Guides and tools for developing or strengthening a group, including the "Parent SEPAG Leadership: Where to Start" resource and the Building Bridges Roadmap resource.
- **SEPAG Organizer** — A customizable Google Sheets tool for contacts, meetings, attendance, leadership, and outreach.
- **Interactive NJ PRISE and Special Education Code** — Searchable reading aids that link to original source documents.
- **Include New Jersey** — A participant shared "10 Questions to Ask School Board Candidates on Inclusive Education."

For more free resources for SEPAG leaders, explore the BRIDGE resource portal.

Thanks for Coming - Let's Keep the Conversation Going!

Thank you to everyone who joined, asked questions, and shared their experiences!

BRIDGE offers both drop-in and 1:1 office hours where you can ask questions, brainstorm, and learn about best practices from across the state to support your group. Join us for drop-in office hours on Tuesdays at 12:00pm throughout November! If you'd like more individualized guidance, you can request a 1:1 office hour with a member of our staff by filling out this form.

For more upcoming events, free resources, and support opportunities, visit our website.

The RU-BRIDGE Team

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