



A Guide to Special Education Citizens Advisory Committees (SECAC)



Table of Contents

Introduction to Special Education Citizens Advisory Committees (SECAC)	
What is the purpose and function of a local SECAC?	3
Who can be a member of a SECAC?	3
Are local SECACs required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?	4
How is a SECAC different from a Parent Teacher Organization, an advocacy group, or a parent support group?	4
Engaging Parents and Building Community	
Why should parents get involved?	5
How can we build and maintain parent engagement?	5
What can the SECAC do to support diverse parent participation?	5
How can a SECAC build an outreach list for meetings and events?	6
Starting and Organizing a SECAC	
Checklist for Starting a SECAC	7
Setting Priorities	8
Roles and Responsibilities	9
Effective Meetings and Collaboration	
How can a SECAC organize effective meetings?	11
Does every meeting need an agenda?	11
How should minutes be written and used?	11
What are some good ground rules for meetings?	12
5 Tips for Strong Collaboration	12
Conflict Resolution and Advocacy	
Resolving Conflicts and Disagreements	14
How SECACs Decide to Take Action	14
How can a SECAC make its case for change?	15
Monitoring and Evaluation	
How can a SECAC assess the impact of its work?	15
Indicators of a Quality Local SECAC	16
What is the difference between an 'individual issue' and a 'systemic issue'?	16
Growth and Sustainability	
Strategies for Strength and Growth	17
Best Practice	19
Other Helpful Resources	19
Benefits and Outcomes	
What are the benefits of an effective SECAC?	20

Introduction to Special Education Citizens Advisory Committees (SECAC)

A local Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee, or SECAC, is a district-level, parent-driven group that provides input to the local school district on system-level challenges in special education and related services.

What is the purpose and function of a local SECAC?

A local SECAC provides direct input to school district leaders about policies, programs, practices, and services that have an impact on students with disabilities and their families. Its purpose is to advise, advocate, and offer guidance, not to decide policy. An effective SECAC can increase the proactive, productive involvement of families by inviting their input in ways that can be used to shape local special education policy. An effective SECAC that uses parental input can:

- Help improve educational outcomes and well-being for all students, including those with disabilities.
- Help identify unmet needs.
- Help shape the development of programs, services, and policies; as well as improve district culture.



These groups are advisory. SECACs do not have formal authority to issue directives or set policy. Rather, they make recommendations and provide guidance that can be used by decision makers and local leaders.

Who can be a member of a SECAC?

Parents are the core members of a SECAC. Members might include:

- Parents of children with disabilities who may have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan
- School leaders, including District or County Supervisors of Special Services and/or members of the Board of Education
- Teachers, Child Study Team members, related services professionals, and other school staff
- Students and former students
- Adults with disabilities
- School staff with disabilities
- Representatives from charter schools
- Advocates for children who are homeless or in foster care
- Advocates for children who are in correctional facilities, nursing homes, or hospitals
- Advocates for immigrant and migrant children
- Any parent or community member committed to improving education in the district



SECAC membership and procedures should be as inclusive as possible. Parents do not need special training or background knowledge to be a member of a SECAC. In states that require local SECACs, the make-up of the group may be described in statute or regulations.

Are local SECACs required by IDEA?

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires that each state establish and maintain a statewide Special Education Advisory Council, for the purpose of advising the state's special education staff regarding the education of all eligible children with disabilities. This is Special Education State Advisory Committee (SESAC) here in Maryland. This is NOT the same as a local SECAC.

Local SECACs are not required under IDEA, but a growing number of states have required them. Even in states where they are not required, progressive school leaders have established them as a way to improve programs and services, and respond to input from parent leaders.

How is a SECAC different from a PTO, an advocacy group, or parent support group?

Parents come together for many reasons—support, friendship, event planning, advocacy, information, and active response. While each of these purposes is important, a SECAC is NOT:

- an advocacy group, which focuses on upholding rights for children and advocating for change from outside the system;
- a limited effort focused on a single issue or immediate concern; or
- a Special Education Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) or Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which might plan carnivals, classroom activities, fundraisers, or other events.



Photo from the Prince George's County SECAC [website](#).

Engaging Parents and Building Community

Why should parents get involved?

Participation in a SECAC offers the opportunity to raise questions, voice concerns, and provide direct input to school leadership and influence policy and program decisions.

The great benefit of participating in a local SECAC is that the individual needs of a child become part of ‘the big picture’ and can reach a broader community of children.



How can we build and maintain parent engagement?

Even with the best of intentions, it may be a challenge to get—and keep—a core group of parents engaged in the local SECAC. Smaller districts, geographically large districts, urban districts, very rural districts, and very diverse districts in which there are language and cultural differences each face unique challenges.

What can the SECAC do to support diverse parent participation?

- A SECAC can work to ensure that parents are able to fully participate in meetings and provide input effectively, simply by asking parents: **“What supports do you need in order to participate and attend meetings?”**
- Some SECAC groups have found that parents can better participate when districts offer **childcare, translation services** (including foreign languages, sign language, braille, etc.), **transportation assistance**, and **other supports** at meetings.
- Offer meetings at various times, and consider ways to invite input, such as hosting an **online meeting or conference call**.
- **Printed materials** (agendas, flyers, brochures), a **SECAC website**, and **social media** can be translated into other languages used in the community.

Examples of SECAC Topics to be Addressed



- Accessibility and location of programs
- After-school sports and clubs
- Before care and after care
- Bullying/School Climate
- Community-based learning
- Curriculum
- District policies and procedures
- District vision and future goals
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
- Extended school year services
- Funding issues and resource allocation
- Graduation
- IEPs, rights and responsibilities



- Inclusive education
- Out-of-district programs and services
- Professional development
- Reading programs
- Related services
- Scholarship opportunities
- Section 504
- Staffing
- Testing
- Transition from school to adult life
- Transportation
- Unified athletics



How can a SECAC build an outreach list for meetings and events?

SECACs can use outreach meetings to build a private list of email and phone contacts. It's important to reassure parents that their contact information is private and uphold that commitment.



Photo from the Prince George's County SECAC [website](#).

Starting and Organizing a SECAC

Checklist for Starting A SECAC:

- ✓ District leaders and parents looking to start a local SECAC can **meet to develop a plan**.
- ✓ Work with local and regional **parent leaders, PTOs, PTAs, and other parent-led organizations**.
- ✓ Consider hosting a well-promoted **introductory workshop or meeting**—inviting all parents—to get the ball rolling.
- ✓ Develop an initial **roster of potential SECAC members**. Seek representation from parents within the district who have children with different levels of need, of different ages, in different schools, and in different types of programs, including public, private, and out-of-district programs.
- ✓ Best Practice: Be certain to consider linguistic, religious, racial, cultural, and economic **diversity** to be sure the SECAC reflects it.
- ✓ Develop a short **mission statement** to guide the SECAC's work.
- ✓ Set **annual goals and objectives** so that the SECAC can prioritize its work.
- ✓ Plan **different types of meetings**. These may include 'parent only' group meetings; informational meetings with a speaker on a special topic; 'listening meetings' held specifically to gather input; as well as meetings with school leaders. (See Chapter 7 for more on this topic).
- ✓ Develop a **meeting schedule for the year**. A suggested framework might be: Monthly 'parent only' meetings; 4-5 informational outreach meetings, with topics and speakers that bring families and schools together; quarterly meetings with key district leaders to present input and suggestions.
- ✓ Every SECAC needs a foundation to describe how it will conduct business. Establish **basic ground rules, bylaws, a procedures manual, or other operating guidelines** to describe the scope of work.
- ✓ Determine **roles and responsibilities** for SECAC members and district staff. Tasks include taking minutes, preparing agendas, managing membership and contact information, and managing logistics. (See Chapter 4 for more on this topic).
- ✓ Best Practice: Some SECACs have developed '**job descriptions**' for members.
 - ✓ Consider the communication strategies the SECAC will use to reach and engage parents from other groups, such as the PTO and PTA. Tip: Create and print a simple print flyer and poster to promote the SECAC to help establish the SECAC's legitimacy and build awareness. Include information about the SECAC on the district's website and in digital communication to ALL families.
 - ✓ Consider training the members using Serving On Groups, which can be provided by The Parents' Place of Maryland.
- ✓ Consider using the **IEP process** and **annual review process** as a way to help inform parents about the SECAC process and the opportunity to get involved.



Setting Priorities

Establishing annual priorities is important for any group or organization. Doing so helps a SECAC direct its efforts and avoid taking on too many projects that could potentially overwhelm its membership, the local district, or the school board. Identifying one to three critical issues on which to focus during the year provides the opportunity to consider and make informed recommendations. It also leaves time to address other issues that arise during the ordinary course of doing business.

SECACs can set priorities as a facilitated activity with a discussion leader and a recorder who lists participants' responses on newsprint that is hung on the wall.

SECAC members are asked to:

- Identify needs related to the education of children with disabilities;
- Group identified needs by major categories, discussing whether any of the needs are the same or similar enough to be collapsed into one statement;
- Use markers to place checks next to their top five needs on the newsprint; and
- Discuss the five needs receiving the most checks to reach consensus on the top two to three needs on which the SECAC will focus during the operating year.

The process of coming to agreement on priorities is not simple. It requires the facilitator to continually check for agreement, and when a stalemate is reached on an issue, to move the group to the next issue or need that all members can support.

Once priorities are determined, they should be the focus of periodic reports to the school board. Remember that incremental change is still change, and some recommendations may not be fully implemented in a given timeframe. Subcommittees can be used to allow the SECAC to study an issue more closely.

It is important to work with school leaders to develop priorities and recommendations that include specific strategies and steps with reasonable timelines for completion.

An outline of dates on which progress will be reviewed and procedures for making needed changes to the plan should be included. This will provide a more valuable product for the school board than a long list of needs that have not been prioritized.

Roles and Responsibilities

All members should:

- Understand the function of a SECAC.
- Develop and maintain knowledge of regulations pertaining to the special education process.
- Attend and participate in SECAC meetings.



Parent members should:

- Participate in outreach that extends to the larger community.
- Record and distribute meeting minutes.
- Distribute information to families via a wide range of channels.
- Establish connections with school committees such as PTA/PTO and community resources.
- Attend and offer oversight/participation for activities and events. Explore meetings and events held in other districts.
- Seek representation from other schools in the district and connect with other parent leaders.



School district leaders should:

- Work to engage parents of students with disabilities.
- Arrange services and supports to ensure diverse participation (childcare, accessibility of meetings, translation services, etc.).
- Direct parents to appropriate personnel when individual concerns arise.
- Take responsibility for making communication and the flow of information accessible to all parents and guardians through varied formats to increase accessibility.
- Identify areas of concern at assigned schools and seek remedies working with the cooperation of staff in input of all stakeholders.



If a good structure can be viewed as the engine of a SECAC, input can be viewed as the ‘fuel’ for change. A SECAC’s work comes from input collected from parents, educators, and other sources. A SECAC can use this input to identify systemic issues and solutions.





What is parental input?

Input is simply information, and it comes from many sources and in many forms: **letters, proposals, comments, concerns, and even complaints**. Other forms of input might include **data** about the school district. An effective SECAC will invite input of as many forms as possible. Listen to parents and use input to advise the district on positive change.

What are some strategies a SECAC can use to reach parents, engage them, and invite input?

SECACs can tap into diverse sources and channels to gather information about issues affecting students with disabilities. Input can be obtained from a wide range of sources. It is vital that parents are aware of the SECAC and its function, and are invited to provide input. SECACs do this through the development of effective, varied outreach and communication strategies.

Communication Strategies:

- District leadership can distribute information through **various means of communication** (e.g., email, flyers/ brochures, text messages, social media, phone calls), through multiple venues and platforms (e.g., Back-to- School Night, Parent-Teacher Conferences, and other events that draw parents). 
- Districts can establish a **mobile friendly web presence** and provide clear ways for parents to contact SECAC members and provide input. This might be a page on the district's website, or a stand-alone website linked from the district's website. Some SECACs post information on PTO/PTA websites, and on community pages operated by the YMCA or other community groups. The website can also be a repository for information on basic rights, podcasts on special topics, archived webinars, taped teleconferences, and links to advocacy resources. 
- Take advantage of **social networking** to reach parents. Post minutes, information about meetings, links to the SECAC website, and other resources.
- Start a **blog or forum** on the SECAC website to share ideas, articles, and best practices.
- Ask SECAC members to **attend school and community events** to increase parental awareness of the SECAC and the opportunity to provide input.
- Host a '**Listening Night**' for parents to talk to SECAC members about their concerns, experiences, and ideas. 
- Establish a **dedicated SECAC email account** that parents can use to send input.
- **Use surveys** that can be posted to sites, shared through social media, emailed, or printed for distribution.
- **Jot down ideas and input from parents** during chance encounters (e.g., at the soccer game, in the parking lot, or at a school event.) Keep a notebook handy or send yourself a text message.
- **Invite experts to present workshops and lectures** on topics of interest to parents in the district. 
- Make sure that all information and outreach is provided in a **family-friendly manner** and, if possible, **translated** to reach as many as possible.

Effective Meetings and Collaboration

How can a SECAC organize effective meetings?

It's helpful to use a standardized approach when organizing meetings that can accommodate changing availability and needs.

Bring together several SECAC members to create generic checklists of 'to-dos' for different meeting formats. The items on the checklist should reflect the SECAC's unique needs and be organized so that parent leaders can work efficiently.

Some SECACs find that a single meeting organizer works, while others divide the task among several members. Checklists can help an organizer carry out or delegate tasks if necessary. A SECAC can also assign one member to start meetings with a welcome and introductions and to move the agenda along. It is critical that parents have clear roles and sustainable tools for making efficient meetings happen. It is important to start and close meetings on time, and to stop discussion when it is time to move on to another item on the agenda.

Does every meeting need an agenda?

Yes. An agenda should reflect ongoing work as well as new efforts. It should be made available in advance of every meeting. The agenda should allow adequate time for parental input. Keep a list of topics that are off the agenda so they can be addressed at a later time, either at the end of the meeting or at a subsequent meeting.

How should minutes be written and used?

Every SECAC should record the minutes of its meetings. Some SECACs have set up templates for capturing minutes at a meeting and for publishing minutes via email and online. It is a good idea to establish a role for taking minutes. Some SECACs appoint a **secretary** to take all meeting minutes, while other SECACs rotate the task so that one person isn't responsible for every meeting.

Minutes can be a great source for reviewing input or potential resources, so aim to capture details. Record names of individuals and the input, concerns, or questions they provided to the meeting, and follow up with them to provide or obtain more information, if possible.

Publish minutes from meetings that reinforce the purpose and goals, and emphasize positive results. Be sure to record progress on issues: who raised an issue, what solutions and resources are available, who is responsible for actions, and whether an item is outstanding. Good minutes will:

- Present summaries that inform readers about topics so that they are knowledgeable and want to learn more and participate.
- Focus on successful outcomes, note whether an issue needs more work, offer a call to action, and include a way to contact the SECAC.
- Include information about upcoming meetings and topics.

What are some good ground rules for meetings?

- It's a good practice to **document meeting ground rules** and, depending on context, **read essential ones aloud** as a meeting starts or include them at the top of meeting agendas.
- **Ask for full participation:** cell phones off, avoid cross talk, and listen without interrupting.
- Start and end meetings **on time** and **pace agendas** so that there is time for all agenda items
- **Protect personally identifiable information** so that information published in minutes or announcements will be presented from a group perspective (e.g., "the issue was raised," not "Jane Doe said").

Be clear that the **SECAC is not a parent support group**. The SECAC can help steer parents with individual concerns to the right resources following the appropriate chain of command.

5 Tips for Strong Collaboration

1) **Develop and use ground rules that can help all partners in a collaboration know what to expect and develop trust. Some areas to consider are:**

- *Confidentiality* – Parents need to be able to share concerns with the confidence that their input will not include personally identifiable information.
- *Use of SECAC name* – Individuals who are members should be reminded not to publish information, articles, announcements, newspaper editorials, letters, or public testimonials under the SECAC name without group consensus.
- *Meeting participation* – Commit to attend, turn cell phones off, and be present and collaborative.
- *Boundaries* – SECAC members should commit to helping other parents follow the appropriate chain of command, and should seek to serve as liaisons or individual advisors.



2) **Agree to listen carefully and without judgment.**

- Parents and district leaders must listen to each other with full attention and avoid interrupting.
- Whether engaged in problem-solving or attending a meeting, members should avoid the temptation to generate or share a response before someone else is finished talking.
- Members should not present information without welcoming questions and further examination. Instead, members might say, "My understanding of this issue is.... Can you share your perspective?"
- Members should avoid judgment and emotional responses. Instead, they should be encouraged to take a breath in order to get more information and context.



3) **Work to establish mutual trust and accountability.**

- Collaboration is a group effort—multiple voices must come together for the sake of action. Regular attendance should be valued and depended upon.
- Respect and appreciation of members is important, along with valuing people for their expertise and perspective.
- Stay true to the spirit of collaboration, working together as peers with diverse strengths and skills. Courtesy and friendliness in that working relationship is essential.



4) **Try to see things from diverse perspectives.**

- Parent advisors can make a good start by committing to helping other parents and students with disabilities.
- The best solutions are the result of viewing things from different angles. Parents and district leaders can ask, “How can we help here?” and present input that’s packaged to help facilitate a
- Try phrases like, “That’s a good point,” “I appreciate that input,” and “What you say is interesting—where can we take this?”
- Remember that appreciating SECAC members and partners is essential and that “thank you” is vital.



5) **Collaboration requires mutual respect.**

- Learn from mistakes. Avoid holding grudges. Record and celebrate success.
- Keep working together to improve outcomes for children with disabilities.



Conflict Resolution and Advocacy

Resolving Conflicts and Disagreements

Conflict is a natural part of all partnerships and should be expected in a SECAC. Conflict is not a sign that things are not going well; in fact, conflict can increase understanding, build group cohesion, and expand viewpoints. But poorly managed conflict—or conflict that goes unresolved—can harm the partnership and erode trust. It is important that conflict be recognized and resolved in a positive manner, so that it can ultimately strengthen, not damage, relationships.

Here are some strategies to resolve conflict in a positive way:

- **Make building relationships the top priority.** Understanding the various points of view, not 'winning' the argument, should be the goal.
- **Don't get personal about the disagreement.** Focus on the issue, not the person.
- **Listen carefully to different ideas and ask questions.** Try to understand not only what a person is saying, but also why it matters to them.
- **Try to agree on some facts.** Conflict can move toward consensus as SECAC members add to the facts that all can agree on.
- **Focus on NOW.** Avoid the temptation to bring other issues and problems into the discussion.
- **Explore options together, without judgment.**
- **Know when to 'let go.'** Sometimes, it is best to 'agree to disagree' and come back to a conversation at another time.
- **Keep the interests of the children at the center of the discussion.**

How SECACs Decide to Take Action

In many cases, decision making is an ongoing process, and is likely to stretch over the course of several meetings. As the SECAC decides to take action, it will need to keep careful records of completed and outstanding items.

Two popular formats for reaching consensus and agreement are:

1. **Voting**—The most formal, and perhaps, the most familiar process is to vote. [Robert's Rules of Order](#) offers guidelines for meeting formats and 'rules' of conduct, including group decision-making. Robert's Rules of Order follows government models, where decisions are generally finalized by a majority vote.
2. **Consensus Decision Making**—A creative and dynamic way of coming to an acceptable agreement that everyone can support. Less formal than voting, it requires that discussion continue until all members of the group can agree.

How can a SECAC make its case for change?

SECACs use different strategies to make the case for system change based on the issue.

These include:

- Providing **copies of minutes** to school leaders to keep them apprised of developments.
- Sending **letters or reports** to school leaders summarizing issues and concerns and that identify the action needed.
- Sending **letters of thanks and praise** when services and supports are working well.
- Preparing an **annual report** and providing it to the local Board of Education.
- Offering to **speak or present to the local Board of Education**.

Monitoring and Evaluation

How can a SECAC assess the impact of its work?

A critical best practice is to follow up on the input and solutions a SECAC shares during meetings with school leaders.

Here are a few tips:

1. When an advisory meeting closes, minutes should indicate who raised what issue within the meeting, who is responsible for actions, and a timeline for activities and deliverables. If an action remains outstanding, carry it onto the agenda for the next meeting, and in the interim, explore any obstacles to action and ways to resolve them.
2. Define what evidence will show that input has been considered and whether it has had an impact. Indicators of success might include high attendance at a topic-focused speaker meeting, encouraging input from surveys, and positive feedback from parents and stakeholders about changes to new or existing services.
3. Publish meeting minutes that protect anonymity and focus on positive movement forward. Keep in mind that some of the issues and ideas a SECAC presents may not receive immediate support. Making change happen takes time and is a learning process. Celebrate victories—large and small—with parents and community.

Evaluate areas that are problematic and compare them with successful outcomes.

Indicators of a Quality Local SECAC

- SECAC structure is **based on need of the community** and students, not just what is easiest.
- SECAC **membership represents the diversity of the community**.
- SECAC **goals and priorities are based on community input**.
- SECAC **addresses meaningful issues**.
- SECAC **minutes document the actions/growth of the group**.
- SECAC **minutes are disseminated** to interested individuals and/or groups.
- SECAC **parent facilitators act in an authentic leadership role**.
- Council members' advice and **input is used to direct and establish policy**.
- SECAC **meeting frequency is based on needs** to be addressed.
- SECAC **parent leaders are trained** and supported.
- SECAC advice and **recommendations are considered by the Board of Education** or local governing board.
- SECAC **meets as necessary** to address goals and priorities.
- A **feedback loop exists** regarding recommendations submitted.



What is the difference between an 'individual issue' and a 'systemic issue'?

Often, parents bring a perspective to an issue that is based on personal experiences with their own child or a child they know. Taking action on behalf of a single child is 'individual advocacy'.

While this is vital, the goal of the SECAC is to look at **systemic issues**—that is, **challenges and opportunities that affect more than one student or family**.

An effective SECAC invites, collects, and coordinates individual stories and perspectives from parents. Then, it looks at this input to see patterns or trends that can be addressed through policies, programs, and services that have the potential to affect many students with disabilities. That is how SECACs move from an individual issue to systemic change.



Photo from the Howard County SECAC's [Facebook page](#).

Growth and Sustainability

Strategies for Strength and Growth

Establish annual priorities, goals, and meetings.

- Work with **district leaders to set priorities** for new or improved programs and services, based on input.
- Plan to write an **annual report** to the local Board of Education.
- Establish **resources within the school and community** to support engagement and participation. School and community can provide help with logistics such as:
 - Securing meeting spaces
 - Childcare during meetings
 - Transportation
 - Interpreters
 - Refreshments
- Participate in **Serving On Groups training** for members.
- Use a **website and other digital tools** to create a centralized knowledge base for standard documents and communications, including:
 - Membership rosters
 - Descriptions of roles and responsibilities
 - Bylaws (if applicable)
 - Templates for quarterly and annual reports
 - Templates for meeting formats, agendas, minutes, contact info, invitations, etc.
 - SECAC guidelines concerning meeting etiquette
 - SECAC new member orientation information
 - Lists of school and community resources
 - Special education regulations and laws
 - Surveys used to gather input
 - Print and online formats for a SECAC flyer/brochure
 - Links to the local, regional or county, State and US Department of Education

Use a variety of meeting formats geared to different goals.

- **Regular SECAC members-only meetings:** These meetings focus the agenda on organizing input, defining systemic issues, and collaborative problem-solving.
 - Include time to discuss outreach efforts, communications, and connections with schools and community.
- **SECAC meetings with district leadership:** Best practices call for a regular meeting in which parent advisors and school leadership explore systemic issues, suggestions, and solutions

- **SECAC meetings with a specific topic and guest speaker:** These meetings can attract parents who want to learn more about a particular topic, and are a great way to build awareness of the SECAC and its purpose. SECACs have invited speakers from outside the district to present on topics such as delayed readers, executive functioning, social skills, transition, and the IEP process, to name a few.
 - It is a good idea to share the names of possible guest speakers with district leaders before extending an invitation.

Develop relationships at all levels.

- A local SECAC can help **foster partnership and collaboration** with families, schools, the state's Parent Training and Information Center, and the community, both locally and across districts.
- **Encourage parents to sign up as a representative to other groups** in the school community.
- Embrace a **diverse** cross-section of parents, schools, and a range of disabilities. Be proactive—for example, if the SECAC lacks representation from high schools, make 'improving transition' part of the annual agenda.
- **Establish relationships with public service organizations:** libraries, intramural sports, police, transportation, faith-based groups, the PTI (PPMD) and others. SECACs that reach out to such groups find resources for programs and services and volunteer speakers for topic meetings
- Encourage **school staff and Child Study Teams** to attend outreach meetings as a part of the group.
- Successful SECACs have found that administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other educational professionals want to **connect with parents in a neutral, collaborative setting**. They can also serve as guest speakers on a number of topics.
- Assign a group member to serve as a **SECAC representative at local Board of Education** public meetings.

Forge a network of communications channels.

- Set up **social media accounts** for the SECAC.
- Request space on the **District website, sites for local schools, and PTA/PTO sites**.
- Set up a **SECAC email address** that directs parents to SECAC leaders.
- Create **private distribution lists for parents** of children of disabilities; remember that not all parents have email, but almost all will have phones, so text messaging can be a very useful tool.
- Ask the PTA/PTO to send out **email blasts**—they have generic lists for all parents.
- Give **printed materials** to Child Study Teams and special education staff for distribution.

Best Practice:

- I. Ensure that communication about the SECAC is provided in **layman's terms and is translated into languages used by families in the district**.
- II. Offer **childcare, dinner, and/or assistance with transportation** for parents attending SECAC events and meetings.
- III. Hold **meetings at times when families would be at the school** for another meeting—for example, before or after a sporting event or school performance.
- IV. Use **digital conferencing tools and social media** so parents can participate from a remote location.
- V. Encourage a **multi-generational approach** to SECAC membership—invite parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles to attend together.
- VI. Reach out to **community organizations** and ask them to provide support to families who may want to participate.
- VII. Develop a **one-to-one mentor/buddy approach** to help build confidence and support for parents who may be new to the process.
- VIII. Identify **cultural and linguistic liaisons** at school who are people with whom parents can relate.
- IX. Ask parents to **recruit other parents**.
- X. Use **social media, texting, and automated phone services** to reach families.
- XI. Hold meetings at various times—**daytime, evenings, and weekends**—to accommodate a range of work schedules.
- XII. Invest in **person-to-person parent outreach**.
- XIII. Provide **simultaneous translation services** during meetings.

Other Helpful Resources

- [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) This website includes easy to use information about ESSA plans in every state.
- Beyond the Bake Sale Checklist: [‘How Well is Your School Bridging Racial, Class and Cultural Differences’](#)
- [Family Engagement Toolkit](#), California DOE
- [Minority Parent and Community Engagement: Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Closing the Gaps in Student Achievement](#)
- [National Center for Family and Community Connection with Schools](#)
- [National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#)
- [Parent Center Hub](#)
- [Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#)
- [Research on Parent Involvement with Diverse Families](#)
- [Robert's Rules of Order](#)
- [Serving on Groups](#)
- [Signetwork Family Engagement Resources](#) Select the ‘Family Engagement’ resource topic.

Benefits and Outcomes

What are the benefits of an effective SECAC?

- **Outreach** – Outreach can engage families of students with disabilities so that they are involved in helping to shape local special education programs and policies.
- **Positive relationships** – Effective SECACs engage parents and school leaders to establish shared goals and priorities that benefit students with disabilities. They connect with teachers, Child Study Teams, and community resources as sources of support for helping improve programs and services.
- **Collaborative problem solving** – SECACs thrive on team spirit and team action. While members bring varied perspectives, everyone shares a common mission: to improve outcomes for all students receiving special education services and support.
- **System change based on input** – A SECAC can communicate the needs of parents whose children receive special education and related services, and can advise school leaders on unmet needs identified through parental input.
- **A trusted source of information** – SECACs can strengthen the bridge between the school district and families. SECAC members who educate themselves about school policies and channels of communication can be an information source for parents who may need information, support, and resources from their school, and can steer them in the appropriate direction.
- **Information sharing** – SECACs can provide an opportunity for districts to share information with parents about instructional programs, professional development opportunities, and other matters related to special education.
- **Improved services and programs** – Changes that come about as a result of input from SECACs are responsive to the identified needs of the school community.
- **Deepened trusts** – Over time, as school leaders react and respond to input from the SECAC, trust builds and grows.



The School Community Can Ask:

- How does the district bring a spirit of collaboration to the table?
- How does the district respond to and follow up on parent input?
- How do staff and parents show respect for the perspectives and opinions of others?
- How does the structure and process of the SECAC allow all stakeholders, especially parents, to obtain and share information with school district leaders?

Parents Might Ask Themselves:

- How might I look beyond the experiences of my own child and family?
- Do I see that, by working to help other children with disabilities, I can help my own child?
- Can I see that my participation, large or small, can contribute to a larger vision and shared goals?



School Leaders Might Ask Themselves:

- How can I support families as they offer advice and guidance to improve local policy and practices?
- What information can I provide to parents to help them look beyond their own family's experiences to see the 'bigger picture?'
- How does our district demonstrate that it values parents' perspectives?
- How can I encourage and support input from families, even when they feel frustrated, angry, or disgruntled?
- Does the district foster a culture in which parents feel supported and comfortable enough to speak freely?
- How can the district provide support and structure to the group, while preserving parent leadership?