

State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC)/Stakeholder Meeting

Virtually on Microsoft Teams

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 15th, 2026

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Dr. Paul Barbato at 9:32 a.m.

Acceptance of Minutes

November minutes were reviewed and approved.

Presentation(s)

Opening Remarks

Dr. Paul Barbato, Chairperson, welcomed members of the council, the New Jersey Department of Education, Stakeholders, and members of the public. Dr. Barbato reviewed NJ-SSEAC's bylaws as they pertain to council responsibilities, public meeting procedures, and engagement with the members of the public.

Presentation(s)

Standing Update: Office of Special Education Updates

- Presenter: Dr. Kimberly Murray, Director of the Office of Special Education, updated SSEAC members on several items pertaining to the Office of Special Education.

Program Spotlight/Subcommittee Request: All In Project Spotlight – New Jersey Inclusion Project

- Presenter: Michelle Gardner, Interim Chief Executive Officer, New Jersey All In and the New Jersey Inclusion Project (NJIP)

Standing Updates: Indicator 5 and 6 – Least Restrictive Environment and Current Initiatives

Presenters: Dr. Damian Petino, Assistant Director, Office of Special Education; Dr. Alexandra Pensiero, Coordinator of Federal and Local Special Education Reporting, Office of Special Education; Dr. Eileen Osieja, LRE Facilitator, Office of Special Education; Jennifer Nicosia, State Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator (619), Office of Special Education; Wendy Eufemia, State Coordinator of Deaf Education, Office of Special Education

Council Discussion –

Old Business

Council members were provided with a link to the Dispute Resolution Findings.

New Business

The Ad Hoc of the council informed the council members of upcoming meeting topics and agendas.

Priority subcommittees had the opportunity to provide updated information on their activities and discussions.

The Ad Hoc reminded the council of best practices for council priority committee explorations.

Announcements

Several council members announced training and resource opportunities during the public meeting. The engagement committee captured these announcements and sent them out in an email following the meeting with corresponding links.

Public Comment

The chairperson, Dr. Paul Barbato, verbally recited excerpts from the NJ-SSEAC bylaws regarding public comment procedures. He identified that the council would not comment during the public portion of the meeting. However, he reported that comments, concerns, and recommendations were to inform current and future work of the council.

Ms. Kai Collins, on behalf on NJ Learners, a statewide parent and educator coalition, submitted a public comment expressing concern that Special Education Parent Advisory Groups (SEPAGs), while required by state regulation, operate inconsistently and often without transparency or meaningful parent participation. They reported that many families experience gatekeeping, lack of access, and fear of retaliation, leaving SEPAGs unable to function as effective advisory bodies. The coalition emphasized that without statewide standards, data reporting requirements, and anti-retaliation protections, SEPAGs cannot fulfill IDEA's mandate for genuine stakeholder engagement. They urged the Council to recommend enforceable statewide SEPAG operating standards and improved oversight to strengthen family voice and accountability in special education.

Mr. Michael Nusbaum, a public-school educator and parent of a child with disabilities, shared concerns about systemic barriers to effective special education implementation in his community. He described patterns such as predetermined IEP decisions, inconsistent accommodation implementation, and a reliance on mediation or due process before collaboration occurs. Mr. Nusbaum also noted transparency issues and stated that some families receive professional advice suggesting relocation due to persistent challenges. He urged the Council to strengthen statewide oversight through improved parent feedback mechanisms, targeted monitoring, and expanded staff training to ensure earlier intervention and more collaborative practices.

The chairperson invited all public participants to provide further correspondence via email if they had not already done so. Dr. Barbato informed all participants that upon written receipt, someone from the Office of Special Education would contact them. Public comments and questions can be submitted to SpEdAdvisoryCouncil@doe.nj.gov.

Adjournment

The public portion of the meeting was adjourned at 1:04 p.m.

Minute Appendix: Links Shared During Meeting

BOGGS Center (Person Centered Approach to Successful Transition (PCAST))	PCAST Statewide trainings are listed here: https://boggscenterregistration.rwjms.rutgers.edu/index.php/event/training
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network	In November, Carolyn Hayer, Executive Director of SPAN, was honored as the Keynote Speaker and Seeds of Greatness Honoree at MyGOAL's 17th Annual Autism Gala, alongside her son Chris Hayer. Their speeches celebrated gratitude, hope, and the power of inclusivity, highlighting the dedication of SPAN's team in empowering families and children to reach their full potential. Carolyn expressed pride in the staff's ongoing work across New Jersey and the nation. In December, SPAN brought together family engagement professionals, parent leaders, and staff for a two-day Be Strong Families Parent Café Host Training at the DCF Office of Training and Professional Development in New Brunswick. The event was supported by the Division of Family Development and SPAN's NJ Inclusive Child Care Project. New Jersey has taken an important step to address chronic absenteeism with the creation of a statewide Chronic Absenteeism Task Force. We are pleased to have been appointed a member of the Task Force. By elevating attendance as a shared responsibility, the Legislature highlights the need for coordinated, data-informed solutions. SPAN looks forward to contributing diverse family perspectives shaped by decades of service and engagement with families across communities. To see upcoming events and workshops: SPAN Parent Advocacy Network Events - 20 Upcoming Activities and Tickets Eventbrite Subscribe to our Bridge Newsletter to stay up to date on news, events, and trainings happening at SPAN: SPAN Parent Advocacy Network : Sign Up to Stay in Touch
NJDOE Office of Student Support Services	Save the Dates (see Flyer): An interactive webinar series to provide an overview of New Jersey's Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS). Drs. Foster and Lekwa will outline the foundational components of NJTSS and demonstrate how they can be applied to meet I&RS requirements. Participants will explore Guiding Success: The New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) and Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) in New Jersey Schools. Presenters will introduce an exciting opportunity for districts to participate in an upcoming Community of Practice.

	• Part One: Connecting the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports and Intervention & Referral Services (December 4th, 2025) • Part Two: March 5th, 2026 • Part Three: April 29th, 2026
New Jersey Association of Special Education Partner Schools	2025-2026 Parent Webinar Series: https://linktr.ee/NJASEPS
New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA)	NJPSA/FEA/PCG Special Education Summit: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vxlhOAOX4MPszZXCt4dAXgUGWWyiF6KM/view?usp=sharing
New Jersey Preschool Inclusion Education Project (NJPIEP)	Preschool Inclusion Leadership Conference: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/preschool-inclusion-leadership-conference-tickets-1974971791794?aff=oddtcreator
New Jersey Inclusion Project (All In)	New Jersey Inclusion Project (NJIP): https://www.allinforinclusiveed.org/njip
National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)	NIEER Inclusion Study Flyer: https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:b0395dfe-aea8-4ba9-949d-eaf97ea952a5
TCNJ's Assistive Technology Project	https://www.youtube.com/@ATCenterTCNJ
TCNJ's DeafBlind TA Project	https://njcsed.tcnj.edu/programs/new-jersey-center-on-deafblindness/
Benway School	2-Hour Training Featuring Dr. Sarah Allen: Building Skills vs. Managing Behavior: Underlying Skill Deficits and Strategies (In Person; Free): https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSflIVYr0Dtb4IkVZYGZN_g394Pcb9KeAukNB6gfvhEaIdOEgQ/viewform?usp=header

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (NJ Department of Labor, DOL)	https://nj.gov/labor/career-services/special-services/individuals-with-disabilities/src.shtml
New Jersey Council for Exceptional Children (NJCEC)	https://njcec.org/conference
New Jersey Association of Special Education Partner Schools (NJASEPS)	Assessing Functional Life Skills for Individuals with Autism & Other Developmental Disabilities: https://asah.growthzoneapp.com/ap/Events/Register/R1F0ocoURC0CX