

State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC)/Stakeholder Meeting

Virtually on Microsoft Teams

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 19th, 2026

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Dr. Paul Barbato at 9:31 a.m.

Acceptance of Minutes

February 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. Damian Petino, Assistant Director of the Office of Special Education, updated SSEAC members on several items pertaining to the Office of Special Education.

Program Spotlight: Person Centered Planning in Schools and Transition (PCAST) IEP Family Workbooks

- Presenter: Bill Freeman, Coordinator of Secondary Transition, Office of Special Education

Standing Updates/Subcommittee Request: Indicator 3 and 7 – Achievement for Students with Disabilities (School Age and Preschool); Preschool Standing Updates

Presenters: Dr. Alexandra Pensiero, Coordinator of Federal and Local Reporting, Office of Special Education; Jennifer Nicosia, State Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator (Previously known as 619), Office of Special Education; Ilene Goy, Preschool Disabilities Specialist, Office of Special Education; Sriparna Bhattacharyya, Preschool Disabilities Specialist, 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.

The New Jersey Coalition for Learners submitted written public comment on behalf of parents, students, and educators statewide, raising concerns about the accessibility and effectiveness of special education enforcement systems in New Jersey. The Coalition identified challenges families face when navigating dispute resolution pathways, including facilitated IEP meetings, mediation, state complaints, and due process, particularly for those without legal representation. NJ Learners requested that NJ-SSEAC advise the NJDOE to measure and publicly report the full costs and outcomes of these systems.

Mr. Michael Nusbaum addressed the Council as a community advocate working with approximately 230 parents and advocates in his district who have signed a petition calling for an audit, sharing that conversations with families across New Jersey continue to reveal recurring patterns of concern in special education, including issues related to child find, delayed or denied evaluations, inappropriate services, misuse of prior written notice, and insufficient family partnership in the IEP process. Mr. Nusbaum described an attempt to file a systemic complaint with the NJDOE on behalf of the community, noting that the complaint was unable to move forward due to evidentiary threshold requirements, and he urged the Council to consider whether the current systemic complaint process is sufficiently responsive when large numbers of families independently report similar concerns. He requested that the DOE establish a stronger process for systemic complaints that treats credible, community-based reporting as meaningful grounds for investigation.

Jeannie O'Neal submitted a written public comment on behalf of families of students with disabilities across New Jersey, raising urgent concerns about how chronic absenteeism policies are being interpreted and applied when absences are related to a student's disability or medical needs. Ms. O'Neal described instances of punitive responses at the district level, including loss of credits, adverse transcript notations, and school avoidance. She emphasized the significant

mental health impact these practices are having on students with IEPs and 504 plans. She requested that NJ-SSEAC advise the NJDOE to issue clear statewide guidance explicitly protecting students with disabilities from attendance-based penalties for disability-related absences, and called for the development of model district policies, staff training materials, and parent-friendly communications explaining student rights and appeal processes. Ms. O'Neal also requested that chronic absenteeism data be disaggregated by disability status to identify disparities, and that annual reporting be established to track district-level implementation of accommodation-based attendance practices, expressing the community's readiness to collaborate with the Council and NJDOE toward timely and consistent statewide action.

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 12:14 p.m.

Following the public meeting, council members were asked to remain on the meeting to begin drafting their annual reports at subcommittee level.

Minute Appendix: Links Shared During Meeting

Several council members announced training and resource opportunities during the public meeting. The engagement committee captured these announcements and will distribute them via email following the meeting with corresponding links.

Organization	Resource / Event
New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA)	Special Education Summit 2026
BOGGS Center (NJPBSIS)	https://www.pbsisnj.org
Learning Resource Center – South (LRC-South)	https://go.rowan.edu/lrcsouthevents
New Jersey Preschool Inclusion Education Project (NJPIEP)	Preschool Inclusion Leadership Conference: Eventbrite Registration
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
BOGGS Center (PCAST)	PCAST Statewide Trainings: https://boggscenterregistration.rwjms.rutgers.edu/index.php/event/training
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/
Rutgers' Family Engagement Project (BRIDGE)	Family Engagement Events: https://cesp.rutgers.edu/bridge/events

Organization	Resource / Event
Benway School	2-Hour Training Featuring Dr. Sarah Allen: Building Skills vs. Managing Behavior: Underlying Skill Deficits and Strategies (In Person; Free)
Parent Literacy Summit	NJIDA/FDU/Decoding Dyslexia Parent Literacy Summit: Eventbrite Registration
NJTESOL-NJBE	Annual Spring Conference, May 19–21, 2026: https://njtesol-njbe.org
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network	SPAN Upcoming Events: Eventbrite
Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (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)	Resilience of Caregivers