

Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee
(CSEAC)

“The Power of Partnership”

A Resource
for
Local Special Education Advisory Committees
(SEAC) in Colorado

Overview for SEAC Members

and

Resource Guide for School District Special Education Directors

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Introduction

The purpose of this resource document is to provide information for local Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) members regarding their function and purpose. The Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) is a state-level committee mandated by federal and state law. While local SEACs are not required by law, the CSEAC encourages local school districts to establish one. Many school districts in Colorado and throughout the country use advisory committees to provide advice and recommendations to improve services for students with disabilities. This resource document is intended to assist local SEAC members and the local special education director in the development and implementation of an effective and efficient local SEAC.

The role of the local SEAC in shaping quality services for children with disabilities is critical and the benefits of creating one are extensive. Established local SEACs report increased involvement, strengthened communication and improved relationships among stakeholders. Local SEACs help ensure that students with special needs receive the most appropriate education. In many school districts, the local SEAC is used to provide suggestions to improve performance indicators from the State Performance Plan and services for students with disabilities. When district-wide collaboration improves, programming for students with and without disabilities is strengthened, setting the stage for improved student achievement.

This document is intended as a resource only. Every school district is unique and each SEAC must address the needs of their school district and stakeholders. The intent is to provide information for the development and organization of a local SEAC. Contributing information from the Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education has been utilized in the creation of this resource. Additional information is available for special education advisory members and educational agency staff at www.stateadvisorypanel.org.

Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee

The Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) is a state-level committee mandated by federal and state law. Members include parents of and individuals with disabilities, educational service providers, administrators and representatives from a variety of related agencies. Participation is statewide and representative of diverse disabilities. Members are interested in the quality of education received by children and youth with disabilities.

Vision

- All learners are respected and challenged with high expectations, their needs are met and student aspirations for success are fulfilled.

Mission

- Our mission is to actively represent children/youth with disabilities and impact decisions made on their behalf to enhance the quality of educational services.

CSEAC Focus

- Provides input and assistance to the State Board of Education (SBE)
- Advises the State Director of the Exceptional Student Services Unit (ESSU)
- Promotes communication, collaboration and partnership among educational service providers, children/youth, parents and administrators
- Serves as a liaison among parents of children with special needs, local educational agencies and the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the ESSU

How CSEAC Functions

CSEAC meets officially five times per year (including a planning meeting) to discuss and initiate action on annual goals and other matters of importance as it relates to meeting the unmet needs of children and youth with disabilities. We receive information on upcoming/current issues and provide advice on the development of policies and programs. Standing subcommittees are:

- **Communications** - Formulates and carries out plans to exchange information statewide.
- **Membership** - Searches for and proposes new committee members to serve for six years (three 2-year terms).
- **Public Policy and Legislation** - Stays abreast of and disseminates information affecting education of children and youth with disabilities through electronic mail to members.
- **Student Outcomes** - Advises on the development and implementation of the Colorado Special Education State Performance Plan.

Building a CSEAC and Local SEAC Network of Communication

Through the power of partnerships, the CSEAC is interested in building relationships with current local SEACs and supporting the formation of new ones within the state. CSEAC would like to continue to maintain an annual list that is current of all SEACs. Local SEACs are able to communicate by a specific listserv through CDE. Please report contact information to:

Colorado Special Educational Advisory Committee
Colorado Department of Education
Exceptional Student Services Unit
1560 Broadway, Suite 1100
Denver, CO 80202
Ramer_d@cde.state.co.us
Phone: 303-866-6943

Benefits of Stakeholder Collaboration

- Builds communication, partnering and trust between families and school districts
- Assists with district changes, policies and educational programming
- Works in partnership with other advisory groups in the district
- Increases student success through family and professional partnerships
- Supports school programs and professionals
- Builds positive relationships
- Creates understanding of school district structure, policies and administration
- Allows for sharing unique perspective

Local Special Education Advisory Committees

How SEAC Functions

Each district needs to define the role of its SEAC. The responsibility of the members is to advise and not to advocate for an individual position or agenda. *To advise* means to inform, counsel, recommend, suggest or guide. *To advocate* means to plead your case or position, to favor an individual case or argument. The function of an advisory committee is to provide advice based on data and good judgment. The following are possible duties and responsibilities of a local SEAC:

- Advise on special education related topics and goals at the district level, including the needs and priorities of students with disabilities
- Represent students with disabilities and impact educational decisions made on their behalf
- Advise district on developing and implementing educational programs
- Serve as a source of information between district and families

- Educate participants on special education topics
- Provide a forum for parents and staff to share ideas
- Inform members of proposed legislation concerning special education
- Share district success stories while maintaining confidentiality
- Submit regular reports and recommendations to the superintendent for transmission to the local school board
- Stay abreast of national and state rules, regulations and policies regarding the education of students with disabilities
- Report special education information to other district committees (e.g., District/School Accountability Committees, etc.)
- Communicate and coordinate with SEAC to help create impact at state level

Role of School District Special Education Director

Although the role of the local special education director or representative in relation to the SEAC will vary among school districts, generally most directors assume the following roles:

- Provide a “state-of-the-school district” report at SEAC meetings
- Provide relevant and current information to SEAC
- Serve in an ad hoc capacity
- Assist with agenda development
- Report on relevant issues
- Report progress on indicators from the State Performance Plan
- Support the SEAC in carrying out its functions
- Report on performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments

Membership

It is important to create a committee that is reflective of the make-up of the district and community. A school district may create a membership form or maintain an open door policy where all are welcomed to learn and contribute. Local SEACs are encouraged to have an open forum inviting guests to attend meetings. Diverse membership representation may include:

- Parents with children in preschool, elementary, middle and high school
- General and special educators at various grade levels

- School board member
- Special education and general education administration
- Representation from charter schools
- Students receiving special education supports and services
- Adults with disabilities
- Related service personnel
- Community and interagency representatives such as ARC and the local McKinney-Vento Homeless Education liaison
- Representation of various disabilities
- Representation of various cultures and languages

Building Stakeholder Representation

One of the most significant contributions that each SEAC member makes is that of representing a constituency. The role of each SEAC member is advisory, not advocacy, in nature. The SEAC should consider methods that facilitate ongoing communication between members and the public. The following suggestions may be helpful when reaching out to stakeholder groups:

- Establish core planning group when developing a local SEAC
- Obtain recommendations for family recruitment from administrators, parent resource groups, disability organizations, participants in leadership trainings and other advisory boards
- Determine percentage of parents, professionals and community members
- Create and disseminate a SEAC brochure or flyer
- Distribute information at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings
- Communicate information to families through district website, newsletters, local TV channel, district emails, bulk district mailings, school distribution, other school groups, reverse calling system
- Develop and disseminate a survey on SEAC priorities
- Create a link from the school district website
- Provide opportunities for public input at the SEAC meetings
- Conduct presentation or discussion at other public meetings, events and conferences
- Invite stakeholder group representatives to meetings
- Meet at different schools within the school district

Diverse Representation

Increasing the involvement of parents on committees, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, is a frequent challenge for school district staff. Many school districts make a good faith effort to assemble diverse committees that are representative of the community population yet are struggling to attract a more diverse group of parents and service providers to advisory committees. Suggestions for increasing committee diversity may include:

- **Committed leadership:** Success depends upon the leadership within the school district. Leadership must commit resources and personnel time towards increasing diversity. It is essential to discuss with members before planning SEAC activities. A commitment to diversity must be a goal from the beginning. School districts need to try to recruit a diverse staff and provide ongoing professional development to increase awareness of diversity issues.
- **Go to the people first:** When getting started, personally contacting individuals face to face is the most effective way to increase participation. Convey that your interest in diverse representation is real and for the long term. Take steps to build networks and relationships between departments and diverse individuals and groups. Utilize school newspapers, district websites and community publications to seek diverse membership.
- **Identify formal and informal leadership within diverse communities:** Community leaders can help identify people who might be candidates for the SEAC. Engage in conversations with individuals or groups who are outside of education. Contact community-based organizations such as housing, economic development, human service agencies, health care representatives, professional and disability-related organizations, such as the Autism Society of Colorado, Rocky Mountain Down Syndrome Association, PEAK Parent Center, etc.

SEAC Operating Procedures

One of the key elements of a SEAC is operating procedures. This may include bylaws, a procedural manual, operating guidelines, norms or SEAC regulations. Every SEAC should have an understanding of its operating procedures.

The SEAC may revisit the operating procedures annually to determine if revisions are necessary. The operating procedures should reflect the school district's policies pertaining to the establishment, purpose and responsibilities of the SEAC. This includes information describing how the SEAC will conduct business and the structure of the organization. The operating procedures can serve as a comprehensive resource to provide information to the public about the role and responsibilities of the SEAC. Each district may consider all or some of the following procedures listed below.

Content for Operating Procedures (By-laws/Norms):

General

- SEAC name
- SEAC purpose
- School district policies regarding SEAC membership functions and procedures
- Relationship between the SEAC and school district director/representative
- Establishment of executive committee and subcommittees
- Voting procedures

Membership

- Process for an individual to be appointed to SEAC
- Number of members and the stakeholder groups they represent
- Membership tenure and term limits
- Quorum requirements
- Travel compensation
- Process for resigning
- Process for replacing a member
- Membership roles

Communication

- Establish methods for dissemination of information to the public and community
- Establish appointment procedures for SEAC leadership and officers
- Identify qualities for effective facilitation
- Use People First language
- Establish ground rules for discussion
- Respect others' ideas and feelings

- Participate and give others an opportunity to speak
- Listen carefully
 - If not understanding, ask for clarification
 - Work for a win/win situation
 - Seek a decision you can support

Meetings

- Determine provisions for persons with disabilities (e.g., interpreters)
- Determine frequency of meetings (e.g., monthly, quarterly, etc.)
- Establish the agenda for meetings
- Determine method for receiving public comment/input/questions
- Determine decision-making process (e.g., consensus, voting)
- Establish procedure for public meeting notice

Orientation/Annual Planning Meeting

One of the most useful activities for SEACs is an annual Orientation and Planning meeting. Orientation meetings can be a positive and beneficial experience for new, as well as, returning SEAC members. Plan to review the responsibilities of the committee and the existing school district policies governing the group. This meeting can provide an opportunity to summarize SEAC activities for the past year and celebrate accomplishments. Planning for the upcoming year increases capacity for effective change. In addition, conducting an orientation prior to, or in conjunction with, the annual planning meeting can provide a common level of knowledge for SEAC members.

Consideration for the Orientation and Planning session:

- Explanation of meeting purpose and process
- Discussion of participants' understanding regarding their role on SEAC
- Discussion of school district director's role on SEAC
- School district's policies related to SEAC
- Discussion and implementation of a consensus-building process
- A discussion of what "advisory" means to panel members
- Review operating procedures
- Brief historical background of SEAC's past accomplishments
- Review SEAC last annual report
- Update on current SEAC activities and involvement
- Assignment of SEAC members to serve in various roles

Setting Priorities

Establishing priorities is important for any group or organization. An identified purpose and function are critical factors in directing the decisions and actions of a SEAC. Each school district has its own unique challenges and structure. There are methods of building unity in SEAC membership that will assist an advisory committee in its efforts to provide guidance to the school district in serving children with disabilities. It is recommended that a SEAC not take on too many projects. Identifying three or four critical issues to address during the school year is reasonable. Below are three considerations that may assist in planning for this process.

- Conduct an annual meeting to provide orientation for new members. All SEAC members should attend to foster positive relationships and a team approach.
- At the annual meeting, decide on the priority issues SEAC will address during the year. These may be selected by using current data.
- Remember always to keep the focus on students with disabilities.

Consensus Building

It is recommended that SEACs use consensus decision-making rather than voting when the committee comes to an agreement on decisions. Consensus is a process for decision-making that involves all members and the final decision is one that all members can support.

When using consensus to reach decisions, committee members consider all perspectives and opinions. This provides a more effective way of making decisions when issues are complex and reaching decisions is difficult. Decisions through consensus will often be implemented faster and easier because all stakeholders have agreed to support decisions. Consensus allows members to disagree, have different perspectives, and educate the committee about their opinion rather than advocating positions. Each school district must experiment and then design the process that works best for its SEAC.

Common characteristics of consensus decision-making require that all members:

- Participate
- Are responsible for success
- Keep themselves informed
- Are open to being educated by each other
- Share a common understanding
- Consider multiple options
- Compromise
- Make decisions by modifying options
- Live with and support final decisions

Activities and Projects

Possible SEAC activities and projects may include:

- Develop resource directory
- Develop committee brochure
- Develop calendar of events
- Organize resource fair
- Advise on current issues
- Develop family trainings/workshops, including but not limited to: Special Education 101, Transition Services, Response to Intervention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Social Skills Building, Conflict Resolution, Bullying, Homework Help, Academic Instruction (Math, Reading), Disability Services, 504 vs. IEPs, Related Services (Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, etc.), Parenting 101
- Provide trainings and information for families with English Language Learner needs
- Establish peer programs within schools
- Awards, appreciations and recognitions for students, staff and community members
- Invite guest speakers, such as PEAK Parent Center and the THRIVE Center
- Plan an evening with legislators, school board members and administrators to discuss educational issues and concerns
- Organize a parent coffee gathering
- Participate in county/community mobilizing efforts
- Provide an electronic forum where families can post questions and receive information
- Sponsor family members to attend conferences with a staff member from their school
- Report information to School Board
- Translate information/documents for families
- Create family information binder or folder
- Develop strategies to sustain membership

SEAC Meetings

Some of the key factors impacting the success of SEAC meetings are leadership, attitudes, using data, planning, and development of agendas. The length of meetings should be dictated by the focus or purpose of the meeting. It is important that SEAC members view their participation and actions as impacting school district special education initiatives and programs. Following are strategies to consider when planning SEAC meetings:

- Use the executive committee or an established ad hoc committee to identify relevant issues for the agenda
- Receive input from the special education director and staff regarding agenda item
- Decide if meetings will be during the day, after school or in the evening – meeting times could be rotated to provide full participation
- Provide members with a copy of the agenda and materials with adequate time to review before the meeting
- Post meeting information on the district website to expand public awareness
- The SEAC's mission or vision statement could be stated at the top of the agenda
- The meeting location should be accessible for individuals with disabilities
- Consider a meeting location that offers options for children, such as a recreation center
- Consider travel, food, child care options for SEAC members (child care may be provided by high school students/groups or college students)
- Provide interpreters or translators, if necessary
- Provide technology options for members to participate, for example: Skype, conference call, webinar and other virtual options
- Establish a positive and collaborative environment where all members have a voice and feel respected

Planning the Meeting Agenda

- The meeting outcome and purpose should be stated at the beginning of the meeting
- Provide time for follow-up discussions from previous meeting
- Provide time for the special education director or representative to give a report on current issues
- Set specific time for each topic and stay within established timeline
- Indicate the type of action to be taken on each issue
- Follow established voting process (e.g., consensus building)
- Follow planned presentations with an opportunity for response
- Provide time for public comment, either in person or via a written form
- Identify recorder/secretary and a person to facilitate the meeting to maintain focus
- Schedule appropriate time for sub-committee or group work and reporting

- Adhere to agenda timelines
- Mail or email minutes from each meeting to members

Public Comment Ground Rules

- Provide notice of SEAC meetings in advance
- Determine if public comment will be provided orally or in written form
- Specify a time on the agenda for public comment and input
- Request guests who wish to make public comments to sign in and identify the topic for public comment.
- Maintain confidentiality and privacy standards
- Provide a verbal or visual prompt to guests who are making public comments, communicating when they have 1 minute before time is up.

Contents of SEAC Public Awareness Brochures

- Name of SEAC
- SEAC's purpose and responsibilities
- SEAC's priorities
- Meeting dates, times and location
- Public comment procedures
- List of membership
- Key individual contacts – phone number, fax, mail and e-mail addresses
- Highlighted activities and projects

Information for SEAC Members Presenting to Other Groups

- Create a script for members to follow
- Use PowerPoint
- Provide brochures for distribution
- Gather public information on comment sheets

Local SEAC Checklist

The following is a list of suggestions to consider when organizing your local SEAC.

- _____ Identify the SEAC mission, purpose and function
- _____ Determine the role of the special education director
- _____ Create a diverse membership
- _____ Build stakeholder representation
- _____ Establish operating procedures/bylaws/norms
- _____ Hold an orientation/annual planning meeting
- _____ Advertise meetings
- _____ Set priorities
- _____ Establish communication and consensus building strategies
- _____ Determine annual activities and projects
- _____ Review annual accomplishments and next steps
- _____ Join the local SEAC listserv through CDE

Resources

[Click here for additional information about the Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee.](#)

Phone: 303-866-6943

[Click here for additional information about the Colorado Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services Unit.](#)

Phone: 303-866-6943

[Click here for additional information about the PEAK Parent Center.](#)

Phone: 800-284-0251 or 719-531-9400

[Click here for additional information about the THRIVE Center.](#)

Phone: 303-365-2772

[Click here for additional information about Parent to Parent of Colorado \(P2P\).](#)

Phone: 877-472-7201

[Click here for additional information about the U.S. Department of Education.](#)

[Click here for additional information about the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs.](#)

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