

SEPAG Parent Meeting – Meeting Minutes

Date: October 6, 2026

Time: 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM

Meeting: SEPAG Parent Group Meeting

1. Purpose of SEPAG

The meeting opened with an overview of the purpose of the SEPAG parent group. SEPAG provides an opportunity for parents and school administration to work collaboratively, share information and experiences, ask questions, provide feedback, and discuss available school and community resources.

The group will meet monthly. In addition, the SEPAG committee meets separately with administration to discuss issues and suggestions raised by parents and identify ways to improve services and communication.

The group is intended for all parents, including parents of children with IEPs or 504 plans as well as parents who may simply want to learn more about available supports and the process for obtaining services.

Meetings may be offered at different times, including mornings and evenings, to make participation easier for working parents. The possibility of providing babysitting during meetings was also discussed.

2. Department of Special Education and Child Study Team

Ms. Lori Cohen, Director of the Department, explained that she oversees the department across both school buildings from Pre-K through 8th grade.

Hillside

- **Lauren Bulger:** Case manager for Pre-K–2 and the district social worker.
- **Cassandra Perez:** Case manager for grades 3–4 and school psychologist.

Tenakill

- **Ashley Ryan:** Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDTC) and case manager for 5th grade.
- **Emily Linick:** School psychologist and case manager for 6th grade.
- **Kira Cohen:** School psychologist and case manager for 8th grade.

- 7th grade is shared among the case managers.

For initial Child Study Team meetings, the required areas of expertise include a social worker, LDTC, and school psychologist.

The district's goal is to have case managers “loop” with students through grade levels when possible, allowing families to maintain continuity and avoid repeatedly having to explain their child's history and needs.

The case manager was described as the family's primary point of contact and the person who coordinates the student's team. Parents were encouraged to first communicate with the case manager regarding questions or concerns.

3. Related Services

The district reviewed its related service providers and explained the difference between direct and consultative services.

Speech

Hillside currently has:

- Ms. Schettino – full-time
- Ms. Rachlin – full-time
- Ms. Kupersmith – part-time, two days per week

Occupational Therapy

Ms. Nancy Saccoccio is the district's OT and serves both buildings.

The district explained that:

- **Direct service** involves the provider working directly with the student, individually or in a group.
- **Consultative service** may include classroom observation, consultation with teachers, developing resources, or helping staff carry over skills into the classroom.

The district uses a three-to-one model consisting of approximately three weeks of direct service followed by one week of indirect/consultative work.

OT Staffing

Parents raised concerns about whether the district has sufficient OT staffing to provide all services required by students.

The district explained that an OT assistant, Ms Allison Ho, resigned at the end of the summer. A contracted provider was brought in to assist Ms. Saccoccio, and a new part-time certified OT was hired to take over the previous caseload.

The district stated that students are entitled to their services and that services are legally required to be tracked. Parents were encouraged to first contact the service provider and then Ms. Cohen if they believe services are not being delivered.

A parent also raised concerns about past instances where OT services appeared on service records even though the child was absent from school. The discussion emphasized the importance of accurate tracking and communication regarding services.

4. Region 3 Shared Services

The district explained that some services are provided through Region 3, a shared-services arrangement involving Northern Valley-area school districts.

Services discussed included:

- Physical therapy
- Social skills services
- Behavioral support

Region 3 employees may provide services across multiple districts and buildings.

Regarding IEP meetings, Region 3 providers provide input to the IEP team, although scheduling may prevent them from attending every meeting in person.

5. Behavioral Support and Behaviorists

The district currently has:

- A district behaviorist
- A Region 3 behaviorist, Melanie Arnold
- Additional support from school psychologists and other staff

The district explained that Hillside receives behavioral support from the Region 3 behaviorist two days per week, while Ms. Barron provides support on a designated day and as needed.

The district acknowledged that additional behavioral staffing would be beneficial but noted budget and staffing considerations.

Proactive Rather Than Reactive Support

The district emphasized that its goal is to move toward **proactive behavioral support**, rather than only responding after a crisis occurs.

Behaviorists work with teachers and paraprofessionals to develop systems and strategies intended to prevent behavioral difficulties and support students before a crisis occurs.

School psychologists can also conduct FBAs and develop behavior plans.

Staff Training

The district discussed ongoing professional development for staff, including:

- Supporting special education students in general education settings
- Understanding disabilities
- Collecting behavioral data
- Implementing behavior plans
- Training paraprofessionals
- Individualized support from behaviorists for teachers and paraprofessionals when a student has a specific behavior plan

A mandatory full-faculty behavior training session was scheduled for October 12. Additional optional and required training sessions may occur throughout the school year.

6. I&RS, Literacy Plus, Math Plus and AAP

Parents requested clarification regarding the relationship between I&RS, PLUS programs, academic interventions, IEPs, and 504 plans.

I&RS

I&RS stands for **Intervention and Referral Services**.

The district clarified that I&RS is a **committee/process rather than a specific program**.

When a general education student is experiencing academic difficulties, the teacher may bring the concern to the I&RS committee. The team discusses possible interventions and monitors whether they are effective.

Interventions are generally monitored for approximately six to eight weeks.

Literacy Plus / Math Plus

These are small-group academic interventions provided during the school day.

The district explained that they are intended for general education students and that students who become classified and receive an IEP generally transition away from these general education intervention programs.

AAP

AAP stands for **Academic Assistance Program** and is an after-school academic support program.

The distinction between AAP and the in-school Literacy Plus/Math Plus programs was clarified during the discussion.

7. Referral and Evaluation Process

The district described the typical pathway as:

1. Classroom concern is identified.
2. Students may be referred to the I&RS committee.
3. Interventions are recommended.
4. Interventions are implemented and monitored.
5. If concerns continue, additional support or an evaluation may be considered.
6. A parent or teacher may request an evaluation.
7. An initial meeting is held to determine next steps.
8. If an evaluation is warranted, parental consent is required.

9. The district has 90 days to complete the evaluations.
10. Evaluation reports are provided 10 days before the eligibility meeting.
11. The eligibility meeting determines whether the student qualifies for special education services.
12. If eligible, the team typically proceeds to develop an IEP.

The district emphasized that parental consent is required before evaluations are conducted.

8. IEP Process and Parent Rights

The district reviewed several important aspects of the IEP process.

Parents were reminded about the parent-rights booklet, “**The Prize**,” and were encouraged to read it so they understand their rights and available options if they disagree with the district.

For an initial IEP, the district explained that the IEP cannot be implemented without the parent's agreement.

For an annual IEP review, however, if a parent does not formally disagree or file an appropriate objection, the IEP may go into effect after 15 days even if the parent has not signed it.

The district also explained that related service providers generally provide input to the IEP team and may attend meetings when scheduling permits.

9. IEP vs. 504

The group briefly discussed the distinction between an IEP and a 504 plan.

The district explained that a student may have a disability or classification but may not require specialized instruction. In those circumstances, a 504 plan or other supports may be appropriate depending on the student's functioning and needs.

A more detailed discussion of IEPs, 504 plans, eligibility, and related topics was deferred to a future SEPAG meeting.

10. Parent-Provided Paraprofessionals / Aides

Parents asked whether families can provide their own paraprofessional to support a child at school.

The district explained that there have been individual situations where the district permitted a parent-provided paraprofessional.

The district emphasized that:

- Each situation is considered individually.
- The student's needs and reason for requesting the support are considered.
- The district has allowed this in certain cases.
- It is not intended to become a regular practice going forward.

The district also acknowledged that there can be both benefits and challenges associated with parent-provided paraprofessionals.

Parents also raised questions about:

- How paraprofessionals are hired
- Their training
- How assignments are communicated to parents
- How parents know which paraprofessionals are working with their children

The district agreed that this topic warrants a more detailed discussion at a future meeting.

11. Behavioral Concerns and Out-of-District Placement

Parents asked about the circumstances under which a student's behavioral needs may become significant enough for the district to consider removing a student from the school or pursuing an out-of-district placement.

The question was not fully addressed during this meeting because of the complexity and importance of the topic.

Parents specifically asked:

- How severe behavioral needs must become before an out-of-district placement is considered

- How the district determines whether it has sufficient staff and resources to support a student
- How behaviorists become involved when behavioral concerns arise
- How behavioral challenges affect the student, classroom staff, and peers

The administration indicated that this would be an appropriate topic for a future meeting, potentially with a behaviorist present.

For students already receiving behavioral support, the district explained that teachers, parents, or providers can raise concerns and request additional behavioral consultation or observation.

12. Parent Questions and Concerns

Parents expressed a strong interest in better understanding the special education system and the range of supports available.

Topics raised included:

- Behavioral support
- FBAs and behavior plans
- Academic supports
- Special education services
- Push-in versus pull-out services
- The continuum of services
- Paraprofessional assignments and training
- Parent rights
- IEP and 504 processes
- How placement decisions are made
- How schools determine when additional services are needed

Parents emphasized that the special education system can feel complicated and that more education and transparency would help families understand how to advocate effectively for their children.

13. Future SEPAG Meeting Topics

Potential future topics identified during the meeting include:

1. **Behaviorist services and behavioral crisis response**
2. **FBA's and behavior plans**
3. **Paraprofessionals – roles, assignments, communication and training**
4. **IEP vs. 504**
5. **Academic supports within special education**
6. **Push-in vs. pull-out services**
7. **Continuum of special education services**
8. **Placement decisions and available options**
9. **Parent rights and advocacy**

The group discussed either continuing the broader special education presentation or bringing in a behaviorist for the next meeting. Both topics are expected to be addressed, although the order has not yet been determined.

14. Parent Education and Participation

Parents and administration discussed the importance of increasing parent participation in SEPAG meetings.

The district is exploring:

- Morning meetings
- Evening meetings
- Potential babysitting support
- Additional educational presentations
- Topics specifically requested by parents

The goal is to make the meetings accessible and useful to more families.

15. Action Items / Follow-Up

District / Administration

- Continue providing information and educational presentations through SEPAG.
- Consider a future meeting focused on behaviorist services and behavioral crisis response.
- Continue discussion of IEP/504 processes and parent rights.
- Provide additional information regarding paraprofessional roles, assignments and training.
- Continue monitoring and supporting related services and staffing.
- Continue exploring meeting times and potential childcare/babysitting options.

Parents

- Submit topics and questions for future SEPAG meetings.
- Contact the appropriate case manager regarding individual student concerns.
- Review parent-rights information, including “The Prize.”
- Participate in future educational sessions and provide feedback regarding SEPAG priorities.

16. Closing

The meeting concluded with appreciation for the strong parent participation and the willingness of parents to ask questions and provide feedback.

Administration encouraged parents to reach out with individual questions or concerns. The next SEPAG meeting date will be communicated by email.