

# **State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC)**

## **Virtual Meeting Conducted Utilizing Skype for Business**

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Thursday, May 21, 2020**

**Members in attendance:** Paul Barbato, Susan Colacello, Debbie Esposito, Barbara Gantwerk, Viviana Litovsky, Deborah Lynam, Andrea Moore, Kristy Ritvalsky, Leslie Rubinstein, Chris Shamburg

**Members not in attendance:** Vanessa Lombardo, Lynda Shanahan, Susan Vandermark, Kerri Walsifer

**Resource Representatives in attendance:** Donna Holzschuh, John Tkacz

**Resource Representatives not in attendance:** Dawn Mergen, Kelley Michalowski, Eva Scott

**Guests and members of the public:** Lauren Agoratus, Lauren English-Mezzino, Sol Heckelman, Peggy McDonald, Dominic Rota, Damian Petino, Kim Murray

#### **I. Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order by Deborah Lynam, Chair at 9:41 a.m.

#### **II. Acceptance of February Minutes**

The February minutes were reviewed and were approved unanimously with no corrections.

#### **III. Office of Special Education Updates**

Assistant Commissioner of Student Services, Dr. Peggy McDonald, thanked Kim Buxenbaum, Dominic Rota and Cathy Anthony for arranging virtual meeting and continuing to manage SSEAC upon Paul Fogarty's retirement. Dr. McDonald discussed the Department's cycle of being proactive and responsive during the pandemic – participating in interagency meetings, meetings with SPAN, and conducting meetings with the County Educational Specialists to ensure special education students are receiving the services in their IEPs as much as possible. Dr. McDonald encouraged those with questions and concerns to continue to reach out to the Department.

State Board Members were not on the call; therefore, there was no update.

Dr. Kim Buxenbaum updated the Council of the progress of the Mental Health Workgroup. Following the Governors announcement, the group is in the formation/planning stages. The resource guide being developed has been reviewed internally and externally in order to ensure that it is as user friendly as possible. The resource guide/toolkit is applicable to both special

education and general education students. It is designed to identify what the school district has available already and ways the school district can enhance their current toolkit. The goal is to place school districts in a position to help all students regarding mental health.

#### **IV. Presentation**

Dr. Kim Buxenbaum, Director of the Office of Special Education, and Dominic Rota, Director of the Office of Special Education Policy and Dispute Resolution provided updates regarding the Offices responses to COVID-19. Both Offices are operating business as usual and are being as responsive as possible to all stakeholders. The Offices want to hear from parents, school districts, and all other partners.

Some actions that have taken place:

- Virtual meetings with Special Education Directors across the state (divided into counties to manage the number) have been conducted, and continue to be conducted, to discuss the issues that school districts are encountering.
- Town hall meeting with SPAN.
- Call with DD Council to hear from families and students.
- Call with board members to gain an understanding from their perspective.
- Call with Approved Private School Districts to discuss virtual learning.
- Meeting with service providers to discuss challenges about the provisions of related services.

The adoption of emergency regulations to allow for related services to be delivered remotely was a huge win in ensuring students continue to receive what is outlined in their IEP.

It was brought to the attention of the Offices that certain school districts were requiring parents to sign waiver forms. Those districts were informed that the practice is not permitted.

Summer ESY program guidelines are actively being worked on and the Offices will be disseminating the information out to the school districts once it is available.

Council Member Barbara Gantwerk asked the Directors about initial evaluations and possible guidance. The Directors noted that there are many pieces to take into account such as licenses for Clinics and Agencies. The Directors stressed the importance of communication between parents and the school districts.

The Offices are working to be proactive regarding compensatory education in order to reduce the number of due process hearing filings. How can districts find ways to make up for the services lost?

The Offices are also currently reviewing re-opening plans for the Fall. School districts will have to follow CDC and medical professional recommendations and guidelines. Some of the current guidelines will be difficult for some of the special education population.

The Offices will continue to keep SSEAC in the loop as there are updates issued.

Dominic Rota also presented on Chapter 14 readoptions. Mr. Rota went before the State Board in March with proposed re adoption of the Chapter with minor technical, non-substantive, amendments to ensure rules remain in place. Public Comment is currently open until July 3, 2020.

## **V. Old Business**

There was no old business to discuss.

## **VI. New Business**

Barbara Gantwerk discussed Crip Camp, a documentary on the birth and development of the Disability Rights Movement. Believes it would be a good tool to incorporate into trainings.

Leslie Rubinstein inquired about Commissioner Repollet going to Kean University as President. Dr. Buxenbaum confirmed the news, but no departure date has been confirmed.

## **VII. Announcements**

The Offices are actively working to identify new SSEAC members.

## **VIII. Public Comment**

Public Comments can be submitted to [SpEdAdvisoryCouncil@doe.nj.gov](mailto:SpEdAdvisoryCouncil@doe.nj.gov)

## **IX. Adjournment**

The public portion of the meeting was adjourned at 11:06 a.m.

The next Council meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 17, 2020 at the Robert Wood Johnson Fitness and Wellness Center in Mercerville, New Jersey.