

# **State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC)/Stakeholder Meeting**

## **Virtual Meeting Conducted Utilizing Microsoft Teams**

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Thursday, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Members (in attendance):** Dr. Paul Barbato, Elizabeth Alves, Dr. Harold Abraham, John Worthington, Dr. Dorothy McMullen, Dr. Pamela Brillante, Jocelyn Gottlieb, Cynthia Defina, Dr. Eniola Ajaya, Peggy McDonald, Debbie Esposito, Scott Longazel, Dr. Carmen Henderson

**Members (not in attendance):** Dr. Lottie Watson

**Resource Representatives (in attendance):** Eva Scott (CBVI), Daniel Heitner (DOH), Kelley Michalowski (DCF), Toni Scott (DOL), Donna Holzschuh (JJC), Tamira Chapmen (McKinney-Vento), Pheobie Thomas (McKinney-Vento)

**Resource Representatives (not in attendance):** Tauheedah Hill (DOC)

**Proxy Representatives (in attendance):** Lori Alter, Rafeeza Shahabudeen, Jennifer Kaufman

**Proxy Representatives (not in attendance):** *Proxy Representatives were in attendance.*

**Guests from the NJ Department of Education (in attendance):** Kathleen Ehling, Kimberly Murray, Dr. Damian Petino, Ilene Goy, Erice Reid, Dr. Chinwe Osondu, Dr. Amanda Philp, Wendy Eufemia, Alexandra Pensiero, Janina Zak-Krasucki, Chinwe Osondu, Jenifer Spear, Christina Orozco, Adam Kendler, Louis Fair, Jamie Jackett, Kristen Gavinelli, Nanci Moore, Cynthia Hoenes-Saindon, Catherine Thomas, Jolie Battista, Sandra Gogerty, Tania Mongioi, Robert Haugh, Kerri Tomasello

**Stakeholders and Members of the Public (in attendance):** Fred Buglione, Julie Norflus-Good, Lauren Agoratus, Mushana K Dunham Bey, Aviva Gans, Harry Humphrey, Anjali Viswanath, Lisa Ford, Sean Murphy, Corinne G Catalano, “Jessica”, Peg Kinsell, Deborah Spitalnik, Stefanie Babits, Luke Babits

### **Call to Order**

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

### **Acceptance of Minutes**

January minutes were reviewed and were approved unanimously with no corrections.

### **Presentation(s)**

#### *Office of Special Education Updates*

Kimberly Murray, Director for the Office of Special Education, updated SSEAC members on several items pertaining to the Office of Special Education.

Office of Special Education Initiative, Projects and Promising Practices – *“Facilitated Individualized Education Programs (FIEPs)”*

- Presenter: Mrs. Cynthia Hoenes-Saindon, Special Education Ombudsman, Office of Special Education

District Spotlight from the Special Education in Action Newsletter – *“Inclusive Preschool Decision-Making Practices”* with Q&A

- Presenters: Mrs. Annie Corley-Hand, Principal of Mary Kay McMillin Early Childhood Center, and Mrs. Michele Gardner, Director of Berkeley Heights Public Schools Special Services Department

### **Council Priority in Focus: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

Council Priority Presentation - *“Priority II: LRE Introduction, Data and Monitoring Practices from the OSE”*

- Presenters: Dr. Damian Petino, Assistant Director, Mrs. Jennifer Spear, Monitor, and Mrs. Alexandra Pensiero, Federal Reporting and Engagement Specialist, Office of Special Education

*Office of Special Education Initiative and Promising Practices* - “NJETA: School-Age and Preschool - Then and Now”

- Presenters: Mr. Fred Buglione and Ms. Corinne Catalano, New Jersey Initiative for Addressing Inclusive Education (NJETA)

Council Priority Engagement – *“Priority II: LRE S-W-O-T Analysis and Input Activity”*

- The following questions were probed to the appointed council members. Questions were proposed by the NJ-SSEAC LRE Subcommittee. The facilitation of this engagement was conducted through the Mentimeter Platform. The following is the list of questions used throughout this engagement activity:
  - How do you define LRE?
  - State your role (parent, educator, administration, advocacy group, professional association, Institution of Higher Education, etc.)
  - In one word, state your physiological response to the term LRE.
  - On a scale of 1-10, how knowledgeable are you around LRE and the process of determining LRE?
  - S-W-O-T
    - Strengths: What is going well around LRE in NJ?
    - Weaknesses: What can we do better as a state?
    - Opportunities: Where is the recommended focus to address LRE? How does NJ move the needle from the 40-79% category and into the 80% or more?
    - Threats: What is impeding the LRE for students (the “Why” on what’s driving NJ to be consistently last or near last)?
  - What are the barriers to exploring or implementing best practices in LRE?

- How are districts calculating LRE? Are the full continuum of options and strategies included as part of the student's individualized plan considered when calculating the % of time in each placement? If so, how?
- Are teacher preparation programs, for both general education and special education teachers, incorporating content around LRE? If so, is it effective and how?
- How well are families engaged in the process of LRE determination? If they are not, provide a brief rationale?

## **Council Discussion –**

### **Old Business**

Alexandra Pensiero, Council Ad Hoc, addressed the subcommittee by reporting March subcommittee break out sessions following the monthly NJ-SSEAC meeting.

### **New Business**

Dr. Paul Barbato read aloud the first new business item from the agenda. He reported that the June NJ-SSEAC meeting will be held as a hybrid event at the LRC Central in Trenton, New Jersey. The event space holds up to 55 people. Council members will have first right to attendance. *Access to the location and virtual links will be posted on the NJ-SSEAC webpage.*

Dr. Paul Barbato called upon council subcommittee members to report on their subcommittee activities from the month of January and/or February:

- *Mental Health and Students with Disabilities:* Dr. Cynthia Defina reported that they met earlier in the week and reported a focus on the New Jersey Mental Health Guide and the National recommendations for school-based mental health services. They also discussed the recent psych clearance bill. They were interested in doing a resource inventory including data available, both to address immediate and long-term mental health needs. They would also like to be informed of the devoted resources for identifying needs.
- *Least Restrictive Environment:* Mr. Scott Longazel reported that the LRE subcommittee developed the five questions that were addressed during today's engagement activity with the council and stakeholders. They are interested in using these comments to help develop a roadmap to address LRE with ideas and consider possible barriers, including the collections of metrics. The subcommittee identified a need to do further data mining. They also discussed the need to identify both local and state budgetary expenditures to address LRE. They are considering opportunities to link to higher education to consider an approach to the LRE work.
- *External Engagement:* Mrs. Jocelyn Gottlieb reported on the external engagement subcommittee. She identified a discussion on conducting outreach, specifically at the opportunity to table events. Her subcommittee would like to connect with Alexandra, the ad hoc, to address a list of questions. Additionally, they are

considering opportunities to link to other NJ-SSEAC priorities and subcommittees as part of their work.

## **Announcements**

A review of the stakeholder event announcements were read allowed by Dr. Paul Barbato, Council Chairperson, from the agenda.

## **Public Comment**

*The chairperson, Dr. Paul Barbato, verbally recited excerpts from the NJ-SSEAC bylaws regarding public comment procedures. He identified 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.*

A parent, Ms. Dunham Bey, sent in an email but was not present for public comment. Her email was read aloud by Dr. Barbato, Council Chairperson: “The e-mail that you received prior to the meeting addresses similar issues stated in prior emails. I will try to attend and speak by phone. If not, please read the following in its entirety. Apologies for grammatical errors in advance. My daughter’s district is doing a terrible job. There were missed opportunities within the district because of the lack of communication and collaboration, and XXX school did not assist in my child obtaining working papers or even partnership with colleges and university programs offered the district students. The XXX School did not do a good job communicating college and financial aid supports. It was not clear for a student with an IEP how the school would even properly assist with the transition to adulthood. They failed my child and are continuing to fail children or students with disabilities in transition plans which are insufficient and not appropriate. My daughter and her classmates for the graduation class of 2022 will become a part of statistics and educational literature about how the system has failed them in terms of learning loss. These students were pushed through to graduate on time. XXX.School District does not have a SEPAG. I have filed complaints. It's not known how they continue to be favorable. In closing, I've been in constant due process Pro Se since 2020. The OAL system is so broken I do not stand a chance and believe we parents and families are still awaiting honest and open accountability and transparency from these districts from the specialists. New Jersey children can't wait. See most of you at the 2023 NJCEC conference.”

Ms. Lauren Agoratus from Family Voices NJ spoke publicly, she stated” So, two quick things. First of all, I wanted to thank you for the recent guidance on psychiatric clearance. I'm writing my quarterly article for the New Jersey AARP, the American Academy Pediatrics. I will include this as a resource. And secondly, I think I mentioned that the last meeting that I attended, the 988 orientation and I was attending the listening session after the last CIACC meeting and it was confirmed. I am deeply concerned that the new hotline will call police, not mobile response for children. Resulting in unnecessary involvement with juvenile justice. Instead of getting help as a member of the perform care, apparently their work group, I just want to remind you that schools can call mobile response with parental consent. Thank you.”

Ms. Aviva Gans Rosenberg, from the American Physical Therapy Association of NJ (APTANJ) and especially the APTANJ Pediatric Special Interest Group, commented that “we are having a problem with physical therapists getting school certifications but it seems to be better. It was taking four or more months during the pandemic, it's down to about two months and one therapist says that she has been able to work with her county to accelerate it, so that's not really

an issue anymore. I was curious for the implementation team (SISEP) about the topics that we discussed last week. My questions are: How did they determine the readiness of a district to implement the specific program? And are there frameworks for this? And the last, the question or statement I have is, we know that most children function better in the least restrictive environment, including the general education setting and inclusion. Between the results of the education, is it maybe that New Jersey is a little bit more intensive on providing some services in and out of mainstream setting? When I speak to other physical therapists throughout the country, many of them are not providing the amount of services that we're providing. Thank you very much and thank you for all these wonderful presentations.”

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

### **Adjournment**

The public portion of the meeting was adjourned at 1:16 p.m.