

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

## Virtual Meeting Conducted Utilizing Microsoft Teams

### Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025

**Members (in attendance):** Dr. Paul Barbato, Elizabeth Alves, Dr. Dorothy McMullen, Jocelyn Gottlieb, Dr. Cynthia DeFina, Dr. Peggy McDonald, Scott Longazel, Dr. Pamela Brillante, John Worthington, Dr. Harold Abraham\*, Dr. Jennifer Vecchiarelli, Sonya Bertini, Amanda Villamar, Gladasia Trotman

**Members (not in attendance):** *All appointed council members were in attendance*

**Resource Representatives (in attendance):** Melissa Shukis (DCF), Amy Gallagher (McKinney-Vento), LeddenAlbadine Rachel (DOH), Luiz Periera (OSSS), Rakima Stokes-Little (DOC), Irene Le Febvre (NJSBA)

**Resource Representatives (not in attendance):** Donna Holzschuh (YJC, previously JJC), Carolyn Hayer (SPAN), Jessica Cubberley (CBVI)

**Guests from the NJ Department of Education (in attendance):** Dr. Damian Petino, Alexandra Pensiero, Joseph Dalia, Gillespie Tracy, Goy Ilene, Pearce Melissa, Maradiaga Essence, Adam Kendler, Jaime Jackett, Haake Barbara, Sarah Schiffelbein, Eileen Osieja, Jennifer Nicosia, JoAnn Johnson, Chinwe Osondu, Christina Orozco, Sandra A Gogerty, Iris DeVaughn, Brett Bersano, Jolie Battista

**Guests and Stakeholders from the Public (in attendance):** Lauren Agoratus, Beth Cosentino, Luke Babits, Rose C\*\*, JSF\*\*, Jessica Cervone, Jo\*\*, Sandra Gonda, Mackenzie DiMaria, Sharon Staszak, Amy Marini, Ashley Dalia, Meghann Bierly, R Borenstein\*\*, Renay Zamoot, Ellen Woodcock, Christie Knapp, Sean Murphy, Jen Hanson, Kai Collins, Marah\*\*, acv\*\*, Corinne Catalano, Julie Macleod, Jennifer Duer

\*Partial attendance is defined as less than 75% of the meeting, as reflected in the SSEAC ByLaws (Article VI(7)). Partial attendance does not count as being present.

\*\*The following members of the public were identified based on the name/number reflected upon accessing the meeting.

### Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Dr. Paul Barbato at 9:33 a.m.

## **Approvals – Minutes**

The February minutes were reviewed and approved (1<sup>st</sup> Motion: Harold Abraham; 2<sup>nd</sup>: Pamela Brillante).

The March minutes were reviewed and approved (1<sup>st</sup> Motion: John Worthington; 2<sup>nd</sup> Jocelyn Gottlieb).

## **Presentation(s)**

### *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.

### *Office of Special Education Standing Updates*

#### Indicator 8: Parent Involvement and Facilitation Results

- Presenter: Dr. Alexandra Pensiero, Federal Reporting and Engagement Specialist, Office of Special Education

#### 619 Preschool Updates

- Jennifer Nicosia, State Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator (ECSE/619), Office of Special Education; Ilene Goy, Preschool Specialist, Office of Special Education

#### Updates on the New Jersey Pathways to Postsecondary Success Grant (previously CIT-NJ)

- JoAnn Johnson, Transition Specialist, Office of Special Education

### *Council Work Plan Presentation Request*

#### Enhancing Preschool Practice: Collaboration Between NIEER and NJDOE OSE

- Presenter: Dr. Jennifer Duer, Assistant Research Professor, National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rutgers University

## **Council Recommendations and Work Plan**

#### Priority 1: Education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) with a Pre-K-2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Focus

- On behalf of this priority committee, Jocelyn Gottlieb presented the committee report. Recommendations were unanimously approved with friendly amendments.

#### Priority 2: Discipline and Social Emotional Learning for Students with Disabilities

- On behalf of this priority committee, John Worthington presented the committee report.
- Recommendations were not brought forth at this time. However, recommendations were made to maintain this priority for the 2025-2026 council year.

### Priority 3: Quality Instruction and Early Literacy

- On behalf of this priority committee, Dr. Pam Brillante presented the committee report.
- Recommendations were unanimously approved with friendly amendment.

### Priority 4: Secondary Transition

- An annual report was not submitted on behalf of this subcommittee. Therefore, no information was presented at this time.

## Council Discussion –

### Old Business

Council members engaged in a March meeting reflection open discussion to review the presentations and resources provided. The chairperson and vice chairperson facilitated and highlighted connections from the presentations to the council's subcommittee work.

The council members and members of the public were provided with a link to access the most recent dispute resolutions and findings.

### New Business

Council members were advised that there are four (4) vacancies on the council. They were notified of the application process and timeline (Deadline: May 30, 2025).

The Chairperson and Vice Chairperson presented the proposed amendments to the NJ-SSEAC By-Laws. Per *Article X. Amendments to By-Laws* "Amendments to...by-laws may be made by a majority vote at a regularly scheduled Advisory Council meeting, providing copies of the proposed amendments have been disseminated to all council members for review and comment at least fifteen (15) days prior to such a meeting." Council members were not required to vote at this time and will have 28 days to review the proposed amendments.

Stakeholders, council members, and members of the public were invited to complete the NJ-SSEAC meeting evaluation form following the formal portion of the meeting.

### Announcements

Several council members and stakeholders presented resources and opportunities at this time.

## 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.*

Jody Friedman submitted a written comment which was read aloud by Jocelyn Gottlieb, Assistant Chairperson. Her comments requesting that the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) update its website to list current SSEAC members, as the information has not been updated since 2022-23. She requested identification of departing members to clarify vacancies and recommended that broadcast memos regarding council vacancies be sent directly to all special education parent advisory groups (SEPAGs) statewide to ensure broader outreach for recruitment.

Kai Collins made oral public comment. She raised concerns about growing inequities in accessing the education dispute process. Collins reported that due process filings are increasing, reflecting a breakdown in district compliance and collaboration with families. Key issues identified include families facing financial barriers (paying thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars out-of-pocket) while districts have access to taxpayer-funded attorneys and legal insurance. Collins requested immediate administrative action to restore equity in dispute resolution and indicated their organization would forward specific reform proposals to the Council.

Meghann Bierly commented orally on the need for better coordination between organizations addressing special education issues, noting that many concerns are being addressed in silos. Bierly emphasized the importance of ensuring students with disabilities have access to evidence-based reading instruction and highlighted concerns about students being removed from reading programs or denied reading instruction in middle school and 18-21 programs. She offered to facilitate committee work and host parent discussion groups.

Sandra Gonda shared her experience orally with the council. Her comments were regarding IEP non-compliance in her son's district, reporting that his IEP has never been fully implemented throughout his public school career. She described lack of proper assessments, data monitoring, specialized learning plans, and absence of a SEPAG committee in their district. Despite seeking help from multiple advocacy organizations and hiring an attorney, the family continues to face intimidation and retaliation. The district is currently refusing to meet for her son's annual IEP meeting, and he lacks a required transition plan at age 16.

4. Jo (last name not provided) made public comment orally. She expressed appreciation for the Council's work and requested that meeting minutes be updated on the website, noting that the most recent posted minutes are from October 2024. As a parent of children with disabilities, Jo emphasized the importance of timely access to meeting minutes for families who cannot attend meetings in person.

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 1:04 p.m.