

State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC)/Stakeholder Meeting

Virtually on Microsoft Teams

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, September 18th, 2025

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Dr. Paul Barbato at 9:32 a.m.

Acceptance of Minutes

June minutes were reviewed and approved.

Presentation(s)

Opening Remarks

Dr. Paul Barbato, Chairperson, welcomed members of the council, the New Jersey Department of Education, Stakeholders, and members of the public. Dr. Barbato reviewed NJ-SSEAC's bylaws as they pertain to council responsibilities, public meeting procedures, and engagement with the members of the public. Dr. Barbato illustrated our theme for the 2025-2026 year, which is "Collaborating for Collective Impact".

Presentation(s)

Office of Special Education Updates

- Presenter: Dr. Kimberly A. Murray, Director of the Office of Special Education, updated SSEAC members on several items pertaining to the Office of Special Education.

How the Assistive Technology Center at The College of New Jersey Supports School Districts in New Jersey (TCNJ-AT)

- Presenters: Madison Bronstein, M.S. CCC-SLP, Assistive Technology and Accessibility Specialist; Vanessa Lombardo, M. Ed., Director of the Assistive Technology Center; Dr. Sarah Monaco, Project Manager Co-Lead

What's New? An Overview of the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR), Local Special Education Profiles and Determinations

- Dr. Damian Petino, Assistant Director, Office of Special Education; Dr. Alexandra Pensiero, Coordinator of Federal and Local Reporting, Office of Special Education

Council Discussion –

Old Business

Council members were reminded to submit their information into the shared repository for council members, including their biographies, headshots, and contact information.

Council members were provided with a link to the Dispute Resolution Findings.

New Business

The Chairperson and Vice Chairperson proposed to open the NJ-SSEAC By-Laws. They requested that any interested council members could reach out to participate on the by law subcommittee. The chair moved to a formal vote to open the bylaws. The following individuals motioned for approval:

- 1st Motion: Amanda Villamar
- 2nd Motion: Dorothy McMullen

The council and members of the public were informed about changes to council membership based on recent new appointments, resignations, and retirements. This includes four new appointees by the State Board of Education, four new state resource members, and two new state-represented organizations.

The Ad Hoc informed the council members of upcoming meeting topics and agendas.

Members of the council were invited to join the engagement and bylaw committee. They were informed that these committees are voluntary and separate from priority subcommittees.

Each subcommittee had participated in a planning summer institute where they drafted priorities and a work plan to investigate these areas of unmet needs for students with disabilities in New Jersey. Each work plan was presented for full council review and approval. The following information provides the lists of subcommittees and the individuals who motioned for full approval from the council to begin exploration within each of the priority topic areas:

- Priority 1: Least Restrictive Environment
 - Presenter: Christina Battiato
 - 1st Motion for Approval: Amanda Villamar
 - 2nd Motion for Approval: Elizabeth Alves
- Priority 2: Family Engagement
 - Presenter: Stefanie Babits
 - 1st Motion for Approval: Jocelyn Gottlieb
 - 2nd Motion for Approval: Christina Battiato
- Priority 3: Tiered System of Support for Early Literacy and Behavior
 - 1st Motion for Approval: Joshua Carlani
 - 2nd Motion for Approval: Cynthia Defina
- Priority 4: Student Outcomes
 - Presenter: Irene LeVbre
 - Council members had a friendly amendment for consideration which was approved by the subcommittee.
 - 1st Motion for Approval: Rachel Ledden-Albadine
 - 2nd Motion for Approval: Jocelyn Gottlieb

The Ad Hoc reviewed best practices for subcommittee work.

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 announced training and resource opportunities during the public meeting. The engagement committee captured these announcements and sent them out in an email following the meeting with corresponding links.

Public Comment

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

An individual had written a public comment via email during the council's summer recess. The vice chairperson read the submission aloud. The statement highlighted perceived systemic issues within New Jersey's special education system, including barriers to due process, a misuse of the Least Restrictive Environment standard, and a lack of legal access for middle-income families. The statement emphasized the impact of these failures on their child's education and called for meaningful policy reform.

The same individual who wrote a public comment came to the public meeting to provide additional public comment. She informed the council that she has concerns regarding how parents and families navigate the special education dispute resolution process. She found the process to be discriminatory. She reported that with the dismantling of the Office of Civil Rights at the New Jersey Department of Education, she sees no end in sight. She believes the system is designed to protect the district rather than the child. In addition to her concern regarding dispute resolution, she expressed her interest in promoting Naples placements. She identified that this would positively impact access and the least restrictive environment. She suggested that the council consider incentives in curriculum, placement, certification, and especially when private schools (APSSDs) are not appropriate.

The chairperson invited all public participants to provide further correspondence via email if they had not done so already. Dr. Barbato informed all participants that, upon 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.

Adjournment

The public portion of the meeting was adjourned at 12:32 p.m.