

Special Education Advisory Councils or Family Groups

Purpose: Every group is unique. This informational flyer provides school district staff and other interested parties with a simple outline for establishing a special education advisory council or family group. It highlights key factors to consider as a district begins this process.

Introduction

Special Education Advisory Councils and Family Groups are ways for families to give input and feedback to administrators and educators on how the special education system and process are working within their school/district.

Advisory Councils and Family Groups are specific to an entire school community or school district. It can be an umbrella organization of all schools within a district or can be school-specific. For the purpose of this document, the following terms are defined:

- A council is a specific type of group whose members are designated or selected to advise, administer, or make decisions, often on a strategic or broad level.
- A group is a general term for any collection of people, with no specific inherent purpose or structure implied.

Key Objectives

- **Elevate** the voice and experience of families
- **Collaborate** to enhance opportunities available both within and outside of schools for children with disabilities
- **Partner** with the community to encourage greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusion of children who have diverse needs
- **Create** a network of support for families that includes easy access to essential information
- **Identify** challenges and opportunities for improvement in policies, procedures, or practices.

What are the Benefits?

- Fosters collaboration and communication among families, educators, and communities
- Supports family and staff through ongoing training and information-sharing
- Promotes proactive problem-solving and shared goal-setting
- Provides a platform for discussing educational program ideas
- Encourages families to share and engage in their children's learning and development
- Supports improved student outcomes
- Demonstrates a district's commitment to respect, value, and include family perspective

Who Should be Involved?

- Family members and/or guardians of children who receive special education services
- Special and general education teachers, related service providers, and other school staff
- School board members
- Special education or pupil services director, principals, and other administration
- Private school representatives
- Representatives from community agencies and/or organizations
- General education parents
- Youth and self-advocates
- Other interested community members

What Could a Meeting Look Like?

This will vary depending on the needs of local families and educators. Below is an outline of key items to consider when planning an advisory council.

- Calendar: How often should you meet? (ie. monthly or quarterly)
- Time of meeting: (i.e., A typical meeting is 1 ½ hours in length and often held in the evening or lunch hour)
- Place of meeting: (i.e., administration office, school, or community location such as library, community room)
- Topics and activities are determined by the participants of the council or group

Possible Activities/Functions

- Arrange opportunities to learn about specific topics
- Provide input and/or feedback on the district's initiatives and plans
- Review and provide recommendations on policy and procedures
- Encourage and support positive home-school and family-teacher relationships
- Strengthening communication among families, schools, and the community
- Plan for networking and social opportunities

Why Should Families Get Involved?

- To better understand and navigate the special education system
- To communicate the perspectives and experiences of families to the Director of Special Education, or their designee
- To promote family-educator communication and collaboration
- To build shared understanding between families and educators
- To provide input into programs that affect children receiving special education services
- Advocate for positive change for your child and others

How do I Get An Advisory Council or Family Group Started?

- Contact your local CESA WSPEI Family-School Partnership Coordinator to start the conversation and receive the support you need to get a council up and running.
wspei.org/contact