

Lincoln SEPAC



Parents as Partners

The Massachusetts Special Education Regulations (Chapter 766 / 71B) requires that each public school district have an operational Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC). In the past, Lincoln has had an active SEPAC, but parent leadership fell off and eventually the SEPAC was disbanded, leaving the district without one for several years.

Recently, several parents whose children are receiving special education services through Lincoln public schools became interested in reviving the SEPAC. We are excited to bring back what we see as a vital organization in our community to ensure the best programs for our children.

What is a SEPAC? This committee is open to all parents of children in the district who would like to volunteer to collaborate as a positive and solution-oriented advisory council. Other objectives include providing parent-to-parent support along with the sharing of resources. The SEPAC will liaise with the local administrators and parents on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students receiving special education. Members will meet regularly with school officials to help plan, develop and evaluate the district's special education programs.

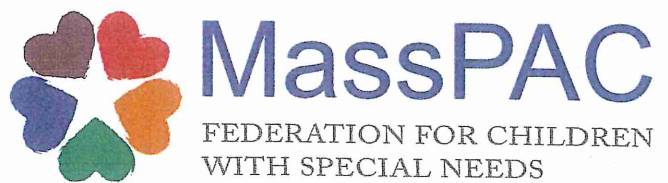
We will be collaborating with other local SEPACs in order to offer speakers and educational opportunities for faculty, parents and families. This will allow us to further widen our net for new ideas and approaches in the area of special education.

In an effort to better understand the needs of families receiving special education services both on the Lincoln and Hanscom campuses, we are developing a survey. Please look for the survey in the near future. We encourage you to participate to help shape the SEPAC to meet the needs and interests of our community. We strongly encourage anyone interested in issues facing children receiving special educational services to join us--your child does not need to be receiving special education services to be a part of this group!

Thank you in advance and we look forward to hearing from you.

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## **What School Committees Need to Know About Special Education Parent Advisory Councils**

### **What are Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs)?**

According to Massachusetts law, SEPACs are advisory councils to School Committees.

### **What does Massachusetts law say about SEPACs?**

*The school committee of any city, town, or school district shall establish a parent advisory council on special education. Membership shall be offered to all parents of children with disabilities and other interested parties. The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee's special education programs. The parent advisory council shall establish by-laws regarding officers and operational procedures. In the course of its duties under this section, the parent advisory council shall receive assistance from the school committee without charge, upon reasonable notice, and subject to the availability of staff and resources. M.G.L. c. 71B, § 3*

*Each school district shall conduct, in cooperation with the local parent advisory council, at least one workshop annually within the school district on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under the special education laws of the commonwealth and the federal government and shall make written materials explaining such rights available upon request. M.G.L. c. 71B, § 1*

### **Are SEPACs similar to PTAs or PTOs?**

Yes and no. SEPACs are similar to PTA/PTOs because they are parent-run. However, unlike PTA/PTOs, SEPACs are established in state statute and are internal school district organizations. Like School Committees, SEPACs are subject to the Open Meeting Law and Public Records Law.

### **How can School Committees and SEPACs communicate?**

Since each school district is unique, each School Committee and SEPAC can decide how best to communicate. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) "recommends that SEPACs develop procedures that result in at least annual written status reports to the Superintendent to share with the school committee."<sup>1</sup> In some districts, the SEPAC makes an annual presentation to School Committee, either in concert with the district administrator of special education or separately. In some districts, School Committees appoint a liaison to attend SEPAC meetings, and/or SEPACs appoint a liaison to attend School Committee meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> DESE Guidance for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/pac>



### **How can SEPACs help School Committees?**

Since SEPACs are led by parents of students with disabilities, SEPAC leaders often have broad knowledge of school district special education programs. SEPAC leaders can help School Committee members understand the special education process and can help School Committee members understand how district services and programs serve families. For example:

- Some SEPACs conduct district wide parent needs assessment surveys; results of these surveys can be reported to School Committees.
- Each district's special education programs are evaluated regularly by Massachusetts Program Quality Assurance's Coordinated Program Review (CPR). SEPAC leaders can help School Committees understand CPR findings.
- SEPACs typically sponsor informational workshops with invited speakers. School Committee members can attend these presentations to deepen their understanding of disabilities and special education.
- School Committees often wish to improve communication with families. SEPACs can help School Committees think about how to effectively reach and collaborate with families of students with disabilities.

### **How can School Committees reach out to SEPACs?**

School Committee members can find out who leads the district SEPAC by contacting the district administrator of special education. Some SEPACs and School Committees have successfully initiated their relationship by discussing ongoing SEPAC activities and by reflecting together on the state statute and DESE guidance on SEPACs.

### **How can School Committees learn more about SEPACs?**

MassPAC at the Federation for Children with Special Needs is the statewide organization providing information, training, and networking opportunities to Massachusetts special education parent advisory councils (SEPACs) and the professionals who collaborate with them. Check out our page on the Federation's website at [www.fcsn.org](http://www.fcsn.org) or contact us at [info@fcsn.org](mailto:info@fcsn.org).

The Massachusetts DESE has published comprehensive guidance on SEPACs, available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/SEPAC/>.



Massachusetts Department of  
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY  
EDUCATION

# GUIDANCE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Special Education Planning and Policy Development Office wishes to acknowledge the enormous contribution made by parents, PAC chairpersons, special education administrators, school committee members, school superintendents, and representatives of organizations involved in the special education field over the years. This guidance document has been awhile in development and the input of many individuals with different perspectives was critical in identifying the central themes emphasized in this guidance document.

This PAC guidance discusses a full range of topics relating to PACs – from examining their central purpose to identifying the characteristics and practices that help make PACs most successful. One key principal we hope that readers receive from this guidance is that *in order for PACs to be most effective in improving special education in the district, there must be true collaboration between the PAC and the school district leadership.*

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# INTRODUCTION

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This guidance document is designed to help Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) in Massachusetts to carry out their mission and duties– as defined in state laws and regulations. In particular, the aim of this guidance document is to ensure that every PAC operating in the state fully understands the capacity and potential that PACs have to collaborate with the school community to influence special education programs and policies in their school districts in real and valuable ways.

For over two decades, parents of children with disabilities in Massachusetts have made significant contributions to improving the education of their children through PACs. Since 1986, Massachusetts state law has required all public school districts to maintain a Parent Advisory Council open to all parents of students identified as eligible for special education, as well as other interested parties. We provide this guidance to PACs so that each and every PAC will have access to and knowledge of what the law allows them to do.

## What Does This New Guidance Document Provide?



- a clear, concise description of the basic requirements that apply to PACs;
- the key components to address in meeting those requirements; and
- some options for practices, activities and resources that might assist a PAC in making positive contributions to special education in their community.



# I. REQUIREMENTS FOR PACs IN MASSACHUSETTS LAW

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## A. Requirements in State Statute and Regulation

Special education parent advisory councils (PACs) have tremendous potential to have a positive impact on special education programs in a school district. PACs can provide invaluable activities for parents, and add an important voice to a school district's dialogue and decision-making.

First, for background, it is helpful to understand the recent history of laws relating to special education. There have been many changes since the early days of Chapter 766<sup>1</sup>, the state's 1972 special education legislation, and it is worthwhile to review changes in state and federal law to gain context and perspective.

Second, it is important to understand the context in which laws and regulations work together. In Massachusetts, for instance, the State Legislature enacts state laws or statutes, and then state agencies are charged with developing regulations that assist everyone in implementing the law. In this case, the Legislature passed the law, and then the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education promulgated accompanying regulations.

### The State Statute

The Massachusetts special education law, [Chapter 71B](#)<sup>2</sup> of the Massachusetts

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 766 – 1972 Massachusetts law (also known as 71B) guaranteeing all children a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 71B – Massachusetts special education law, also known as Chapter 766, <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/gl-71b-toc.htm>

General Laws, requires a school district to establish a PAC, and assigns both an advisory and a participatory function to the PAC.

The following is the excerpt from Section 3 of Chapter 71B that pertains to PACs:

*".... The school committee of any city, town, or school district shall establish a parent advisory council on special education. Membership shall be offered to all parents of children with disabilities and other interested parties. The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee's special education programs. The parent advisory council shall establish by-laws regarding officers and operational procedures. In the course of its duties under this section, the parent advisory council shall receive assistance from the school committee without charge, upon reasonable notice, and subject to the availability of staff and resources. ..."*

### The State Regulation

There is an accompanying state regulation that reiterates the language of the statute. ([See 603 CMR 28.07\(4\).](#))

Additionally, [603 CMR 28.03\(1\)\(a\)\(4\)](#) provides further guidance to PACs on their role with districts in providing

parent/guardian and student rights training, as follows:

*The district shall conduct, in cooperation with the parent advisory council, at least one workshop annually within the school district on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under state and federal special education laws.*

This guidance document is designed to help place these requirements in the context of many and varied school districts.

Taken together, the statute and regulation essentially require the following:

- The district must take whatever steps are necessary to ensure there is a district-wide special education parent advisory council (PAC) in operation.
- The PAC shall offer membership to all parents of students found eligible for special education in the district, as well as other interested parties.
- The PAC is authorized to provide advice to the district regarding its special education programs and policies. The advice may include recommendations - verbally and/or in writing - to those parties in the district responsible for overseeing special education, including the special education director, the superintendent, and the school committee.
- The PAC is additionally authorized to meet at regular intervals with designated school officials and to engage in other activities which enable the PAC to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the district's special education programs.
- The PAC has authority to create by-laws, or rules, to help govern its duties, including rules for election of officers. By-laws may designate

operational procedures or specific policies and steps to follow in organizing activities for the PAC.

- School districts are charged with assisting the PAC in maintaining its operation and activities. School district assistance must be provided without charge, but is subject to the availability of staff and resources. The law envisions that there will be a good faith effort by the school district to provide assistance to the PAC. A PAC may engage in fundraising activities, but is not required to do so. If a PAC does engage in fundraising activities, it may include two categories of funds:

- Public Funds (*see next page*)
- Private Funds (*see below*)

**PRIVATE FUNDS:** Some or all members of a PAC may form a separate, private organization (for example, "Friends of the PAC") or work within the framework of an existing private organization to raise funds to support the PAC's role as an advisory body to the school committee. However, funds raised by this entity must be raised in the name of the private organization and not in the PAC's name. In addition, the responsibility for the privately-raised funds rests with the private organization's officers, who are subject to state and federal laws governing fundraising by private individuals and groups. A school committee has no oversight role with regard to privately-raised funds to support education-related activities, and there are no other restrictions on their use besides the state and federal fundraising laws.



**PUBLIC FUNDS:** Because a PAC is a public body established by a school committee, any funds raised or contributions received by a PAC are subject to the laws governing grants or gifts to the school committee. (M.G.L. chapter 44, section 53A and chapter 71, section 37A). This means funds raised by the PAC must be deposited with the municipal treasurer, held as a separate account, and become part of the district's End-of-Year Pup il and Financial Report.



In cooperation with the PAC, a district is required to hold at least one workshop annually within the district on the rights of parents/guardians and students in special education. Every district has received training information that must be included. However, some districts engage speakers or have created their own training incorporating the required information on the rights of parents/guardians in the special education process. Districts may include other topics for training, but must provide at least this training each year.

## **B. Additional Requirements**

There are other Massachusetts laws and regulations, which, though they do not refer directly to PACs, directly impact PACs—just as they impact many governmental entities.

The requirements of the state's [Open Meeting Law](#)<sup>1</sup>, for example, apply to PAC meetings since the PAC is considered an advisory council to the school committee, a governmental body. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office have both concluded that PACs are subject to the Open Meeting Law.

Because PACs must comply with the Open Meeting Law, they are required to post a notice about an upcoming meeting and allow interested members of the public to attend, as well as maintain minutes of their meetings to comply with the [Public Records Law](#). Additionally, the PAC may establish guidelines for attendance of non-PAC members, e.g., designating specific time for their participation or involvement in the meeting.

Other legal requirements or ramifications of laws, regulations, or rules that pertain to PACs include:

The State Ethics Commission has determined that PAC members—as voluntary advisors to the school district—are not deemed employees of municipalities, as defined in the state's conflict of interest law.

A school district is required to demonstrate that it has established a PAC upon request of ESE. In addition, a referral to ESE's [Problem Resolution System](#)<sup>2</sup> may be in order if a district has not established a PAC. Further, when ESE's [Program Quality Assurance \(PQA\)](#)<sup>3</sup> unit conducts a [Coordinated Program Review \(CPR\)](#)<sup>4</sup> to monitor and review a school district's compliance with special education regulations, it checks to confirm that a PAC is, in fact, operating. If no PAC is established, ESE will require the district to establish a PAC and may require additional corrective action, if necessary.

Since the PAC is a responsibility of the district, the district has authority to designate the PAC it supports and is not required to support other parent groups. A district may not disband the established PAC.

As for approved public or private day and residential special education programs, which include separately sited programs run by educational collaboratives, 603 CMR 18.05(4) addresses parent involve-

ment, under ["Required Policies and Procedures"](#). In these settings, schools have a written plan for involving parents, and have a Parents' Advisory Group. The Parents' Advisory Group is not exactly the same as a PAC and is authorized to advise the school on matters that pertain to the education, health, and safety of the students in the program.

Parents of students in out-of-district placements or collaboratives may join the PAC of the district of residence and a Parents' Advisory Group at their child's out-of-district placement, if desired.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Meeting Law – Massachusetts law which requires that meetings of all governmental bodies be announced 48 hours in advance, recorded by means of minutes, and open to the public, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIII/Chapter30A/Section20>

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<sup>2</sup> Problem Resolution System – The Massachusetts Problem Resolution System monitors local compliance with education requirements, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/prs>

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<sup>3</sup> Program Quality Assurance Services (PQA) – PQA manages the Problem Resolution System on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/>

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<sup>4</sup> Coordinated Program Review (CPR) – The Department oversees local compliance with education requirements through the Coordinated Program Review (CPR). Each school district and charter school in Massachusetts is scheduled to receive a CPR every six years and a mid-cycle special education follow-up visit three years after the CPR, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr/>

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## II. KEY COMPONENTS FOR OPERATING AN EFFECTIVE PAC

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### A. Effective Collaboration with the School Community

#### Identifying Parties with Common Interests

PACs are an integral part of the broader school community. Informing members of the school community about the purpose, value, and function of PACs is critical to gaining support for PAC activities and for initiating and sustaining collaborative efforts.

Working collaboratively, PACs and school districts can create a more responsive school environment. If the PAC decides to engage in collaborative efforts, it is helpful to remember that successful collaborative efforts grow out of shared goals and are maintained by strong communication and positive outcomes.

### B. Collaboration with Key Parties in the School District

A PAC is charged with "advising" the school committee on special education. From a practical standpoint, the special education administrator is pivotal in developing effective communication with the PAC. However, other leaders in the district may also be good collaboration partners.

#### Interacting with the Special Education Administrator

A good relationship between a PAC and a special education administrator will benefit both parties. By staying in touch about each others' concerns and questions, a special education administrator and a PAC can benefit mutually by finding out what's happening earlier rather than later, allowing each other to take action proactively,

when possible. A PAC may want to consider sponsoring a "Meet the Special Education Administrator" event in the fall, with one or more follow-up opportunities through-out the school year.

#### Interacting with the Superintendent and the School Committee

It is in the PAC's interest to understand how the district is organized and the relationship of the special education program with the overall educational program of the district. Communicating periodically with the superintendent as well as the special education administrator, therefore, can be helpful. These individuals can also help in determining how to communicate concerns or actions to the school committee. ESE recommends that PACs develop procedures that result in at least annual written status reports to the Superintendent to share with the school committee.

#### Interacting with school councils, PTOs, and the community at large

A PAC will become better known and develop more influence if it is "plugged into" the organizations and "infrastructure" of the school district. That means not only communicating with school officials, but also with other organizations— including the various school councils in a district and other parent-teacher organizations. If a PAC wishes to play a role within another school council or any parent-teacher organization affiliated with a particular school, often the PAC chairperson or members must take the initiative and express interest in participation. Once that happens, the chances for the PAC's representation on school-wide matters are likely to increase.

The same principle applies to a PAC's interactions with parent-teacher organizations, other school groups, and the community at large. The more ties that a PAC can establish with the community, the more it will be able to make connections on behalf of improving the district's special education options.

A PAC often can benefit from assuming the role of "liaison" between special education students and other segments of the school community. Often, a PAC can help educate other parents and the community at large about what special education is—and is not—in addition to helping educate people about disabilities.

### **C. Recommended Steps Toward Organizing an Effective PAC**

**1) Draft a Mission Statement**, preferably with as much participation of PAC members as possible. With the general framework of the PAC's work defined by regulation, the content of the Mission Statement should encompass what members believe is most important to them—in their advisory and participatory functions—for special education in the district.

**2) Establish by-laws** that define important policies and procedures of the PAC, such as:

- the methods of selection of officers;
- the duties and terms of the officers;
- how meetings will be conducted (by *Robert's Rules of Order*, for example);
- budgetary and financial rules and responsibilities;
- rules for raising PAC funds to use for PAC activities;
- how often the PAC will meet; and,
- where the PAC will meet.

**3) Set and post agenda of PAC meetings regularly.** Establish a calendar of PAC meetings and activities for the upcoming year that includes dates, times, and locations. The PAC can then share the calendar with any potential PAC members, the special education administrator, and all interested parties in the district. If possible, the PAC meetings can be held on a regular day, such as "the first Tuesday of the month," to make it easier to attract attendees. Also, the PAC should get its scheduled events included on the school district's main calendar so others in the school system can see them.

**4) Develop an annual budget for the PAC.** First, before the start of a new school year, PAC leaders should determine what funding, if any, the school district can and will provide for the year. Second, the PAC should decide what, if any, funds it may want to raise on its own for any purposes. Third, the PAC should set and plan its budget for the year based on funds that will be available to it during the year.

**5) Develop a system of practices for communicating about the PAC to parents of students with disabilities and for interacting with other important constituencies.** The PAC's means of communication are an important aspect to a PAC's success. Hence, the PAC's leaders should consider at the start of a year how communications to various audiences will be handled, including, for example, finding out if it is possible to have postings about the PAC on the school district's website. Also, the PAC should consider how it will interact with other school groups and community groups, and how such communications and interactions may assist in furthering the mission of the PAC.



# III. PAC ACTIVITIES: TAPPING THE STRENGTH OF THE PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

## A. Encouraging Parent Turnout

In many districts, it is an ongoing challenge to attract a sizeable group of parents to participate in the PAC. Often, a handful of parents comprise the core of the PAC, and PAC leaders spend a good share of their time trying to inform parents and get them involved in the council in any way. The reality is that not only do PACs offer information, support, activities, and resources to new parent members who join, but also, the more parents who become members, the more potential the PAC has to have greater impact in the district. However, even if a PAC serves a very small number of members, its mere existence—and the opportunities it offers to those parents who choose to participate—is important.

Because students' IEPs are confidential and a PAC chairperson cannot simply obtain a list of these students' names due to confidentiality, sometimes it helps to work out arrangements with the special education administrator to reach families. For example, in some districts, PACs are able to request that the special education administrator mail out materials produced by the PAC—such as newsletters, or training announcements—to all families of students with disabilities. In other districts, PAC information is distributed to families at IEP meetings. By taking this approach, the PAC can ensure that it has informed every family of a child with a disability, while also protecting the confidentiality of all students.

### Possible Practices to Encourage Turnout of Parents

- Provide new parents, whenever appropriate, with a "Welcome Packet" that includes introductory information, including a list of good resources.
- Partner with the district preschool coordinator to organize a "coffee" for all parents of preschool children in the district, to provide them with information about the PAC and with introductory information about special education in general.
- Establish subcommittees of the PAC, when appropriate, to encourage parents to address specific concerns they've identified as priorities. This not only could increase efficiency, but could also help individual parents to focus on areas of greatest interest to them.
- Produce a "Parent Information Brochure" in collaboration with the district that includes contact information and resources relating to special education that are useful to parents. Consider including information on recreation, advocacy, and camps for students with disabilities.



## **B. Making the PAC Visible: Outreach**

A PAC can engage in outreach by using various methods. Taking advantage of internal communications or publications within a district is one avenue. Using publicity outside the district is another avenue. A PAC can use the local newspaper or cable channel to run announcements of its meetings or to report on its activities. It can request that its meetings be mentioned in school emails and newsletters, on a school district's website, or via a district's telephone announcement system. It can collaborate with PTOs and other community and school organizations to sponsor high-interest events that guarantee a large turnout. It can request to distribute information on Back-to-School Night, and can participate in community events such as Town Day. Many PACs have established websites.

Frequent, positive, and well-presented information about the PAC and its accomplishments is helpful in keeping the PAC visible, thus reaching new parents.

Some PACs have found that a brochure can be an effective means of explaining the PAC's purpose, spreading the word about the group, and recruiting new members. Brochures typically include a definition of the PAC, a list of its goals and mission statement, membership information, accomplishments, and contact names and numbers.

## **C. Participating in the Planning, Development, and Evaluation of Special Education Programs by Addressing the Substantive Priorities of Parents**

### **Needs Assessments**

A PAC chairperson must encourage the PAC to learn what the primary concerns

are among parents of students with disabilities in their community. Many PACs conduct some kind of "needs assessment" to identify the greatest areas of need.

Conducting formal and informal needs assessments, such as online or paper surveys or parent focus groups, serves several purposes. First, the PAC may ask questions regarding knowledge of the PAC's existence and reasons for joining the PAC. The answers to such questions will help PACs to refine recruiting strategies. For example, if parents are not involved because meetings are held during the day, a PAC may consider having occasional evening meetings to reach more parents.

Second, by looking at the results of a needs assessment, the PAC can then better determine which priorities its members believe are the best to focus on during a particular school year.

Third, information gathered from the needs assessment can be used to fulfill the PAC's regulatory responsibility to "participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school district's special education programs." Needs assessment data from the PAC can help the district provide valuable, detailed information to the state as part of both the Coordinated Program Review (CPR) process and the State Performance Plan (SPP)<sup>3</sup>. Information on the issues, concerns, and needs of the parents, staff, and administrators involved with special education can help the PAC and district work together for the benefit of students and families. For example, the PAC could

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<sup>3</sup> SPP – Massachusetts State Performance Plan. Using 20 Indicators to measure progress, the federal Office of Special Education Programs requires that each state produce annual performance plans and program performance reports on special education. The Massachusetts SPP includes baseline data, targets, and improvement activities for each indicator, [www.doe.mass.edu/sped/spp](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/spp).

partner with the district to engage professional development speakers in key areas of need.

In any circumstance, it can be helpful to attempt to integrate the PAC's concerns with the school councils' and the priorities and concerns of the school district as a whole. The PAC will benefit from having established itself as a familiar player with a knowledgeable perspective, more than presenting itself as a tiny, unknown entity from an isolated corner of the school system.

### **Creating Spin-off Groups, such as a Parent Support Group**

Often times, some of the parents who are interested in attending a PAC meeting have a desire to share concerns and feelings with other parents about their experiences and hard work in trying to get the best possible special education program in place for their son or daughter. Sometimes, one or more parents might want to find time to discuss their personal situations. While parents will undoubtedly refer to their own experiences at the PAC meeting, one option for giving them an avenue to voice and share concerns is to establish a group that meets separately from the PAC— a "Parent Support Group". That way, parents interested in this can have their needs met, while at the same time, the PAC meeting can remain sufficiently focused on its main advisory function.

Most PACs attempt, in some way, to provide information, resources, and support to parents of children with disabilities, as well as to the community at large.

### **Helping Parents Make the Contributions They Can**

Often, parents— particularly parents of children with disabilities— find it difficult to make time in their busy schedules to attend all the PAC meetings, or to take on all PAC tasks or assignments. However,

with a bit of extra communication between PAC leaders and parents, sometimes it is more possible than it might appear at first to find a way for an individual parent to make a contribution. PAC leaders have to try hard to meet parents *where they are*, rather than assuming that they are free to handle larger roles.

For example, try to match a parent's interests and talents with a job that needs to be done. People are more likely to volunteer if they feel competent from the start. Break down responsibilities as much as possible into time-limited tasks that may seem more manageable. One person can help send PAC announcements by email; another can bring refreshments to the meeting. A full year's calendar of PAC presentations can be put together if each speaker is contacted by a different volunteer. Other parents might contribute important feedback by participating in a PAC email group.

To help volunteers become comfortable with larger leadership roles, offer the opportunity to shadow the PAC chairperson or invite an interested parent to attend the PAC chairperson's meeting with the administrator of special education. Remember to publicly recognize everyone who donates time to help the PAC.

PACs across the state use their meetings for a wide variety of purposes and activities. Naturally, members use meetings to discuss concerns at the local level. In addition, PACs plan a n array of activities— ranging from inviting guest speakers on special education topics, to asking a school psychologist to give a talk on the WISC test, to work shops on laws and regulations.

The PAC can often take on an expanded role of helping educate parents and the school community about disabilities and special education. In addition to the annual training done in cooperation with the district on the rights and responsibilities

of parents or guardians or students and school districts in the special education process, the PAC can invite speakers and sponsor events and trainings aimed at other key topics in the area of special education.

## **D. Communicating with Non-English-Speaking Parents**

As the diversity of the school population in many districts increases, PACs have had to grow more proactive about attempting to reach out to and involve parents who do not speak English.

Outreach will be more successful if the PACs understand the value systems, especially regarding involvement in schools and special education, of the diverse groups they are trying to reach. Efforts to reach out and involve parents who do not speak English and who are from diverse cultures, will benefit not only the PAC members but will also impact the work of the PAC and the advice it is able to give the district.

*For a list of websites offering detailed strategies on partnering with diverse families, see Appendix C.*

## **E. Assisting the District in Conducting the Required Annual Training**

Every school district in Massachusetts "shall conduct, in cooperation with the parent advisory council, at least one workshop annually within the school district on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under state and federal special education laws," according to state special education regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(a)(4). In many districts, this training has become an important event that people associate with the PAC, and that reinforces the image of the PAC as a source of valuable, helpful infor-

### **Possible Practices to Communicate with Non-English-Speaking Parents**

- PACs may identify parents who need an interpreter/translator and try to have one present at meetings, if possible, to allow a non-English-speaking parent to participate. PACs may discuss with the school district the resources that are available for interpreting/translating at PAC meetings or associated activities.
- PACs may identify PAC members who speak other languages and are willing to invite or reach out to non-English-speaking parents. Try to get PAC materials translated into multiple languages.
- Seasoned PACs recommend that a first step is to establish ongoing communication and discussion with the groups they are trying to reach, perhaps enlisting the help of school personnel or residents of the community. Such people can facilitate dialogue and provide the PAC with outreach strategies.



-mation for parents. Often, this training is held at the same PAC meeting at the same time each year— which can help ensure that people are aware of it and can plan accordingly.

Clearly, the intent of the regulation is for the district to work *with* the PAC to organize this training and for the two parties to collaborate on its planning and implementation. If the district is planning ahead, this training with the PAC should fit into its overall professional development plan for the school year.

One potential way to hold this event may be to arrange a training at the start of the school year that covers the required content on parents' rights, but also serves as a "kick-off" to the PAC's year. The training could include co-presentations by parents and the special education department, and could be followed by opportunities for the PAC to provide introductory information.

The PAC should include the date and time of the scheduled training on a PAC calendar that is made available to its membership, the public at large, and the school's special education administrator.

# IV. APPENDICES

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## Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

**Chapter 766** 1972 Massachusetts law (also known as Chapter 71B) guaranteeing all children a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

**Chapter 71B** Massachusetts special education law, also known as Chapter 766, <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/gl-71b-toc.htm>.

**Coordinated Program Review** (CPR) The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) oversees local compliance with education requirements through the Coordinated Program Review (CPR). Each school district and charter school in Massachusetts is scheduled to receive a CPR every six years and a mid-cycle special education follow-up visit three years after the CPR, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr>

**ESE** Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, <http://www.doe.mass.edu>

**Open Meeting Law** Massachusetts law which requires that meetings of all governmental bodies be announced 48 hours in advance, recorded by means of minutes, and open to the public, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIII/Chapter30A/Section20>

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**PAC** Special Education Parent Advisory Council

**Statute** The law. In Massachusetts, statute is enacted by the Massachusetts state legislature.

**SPP** Massachusetts State Performance Plan. Using 20 indicators to measure progress, the federal Office of Special Education Programs requires that each state produce annual performance plans and program performance reports on special education. The Massachusetts SPP includes baseline data, targets, and improvement activities for each indicator, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/spp>

**Problem Resolution System** The Massachusetts Problem Resolution System monitors local compliance with education requirements, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/prs>

**Program Quality Assurance Services (PQA)** manages the Problem Resolution System on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa>

**Regulation** Massachusetts state agencies, such as the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (ESE) develop, adopt, and amend regulations to assist everyone in implementing the statute.

**603 CMR 28.00** Massachusetts special education regulations, [www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr28.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr28.html)



## **Appendix B: Frequently Asked Questions**

### **1. Which school district personnel may be PAC members?**

School district personnel, including teachers and other service providers and school committee members, may be PAC members as "interested parties," subject to local policies; or if they are parents of children with special needs in that school district, they may be parent members of the PAC.

School district administrators who are not parents of children with special needs in the school district should not be PAC members, because that would put them in the position of advising themselves.

### **2. May school administrators attend PAC meetings?**

Because PAC meetings are subject to Open Meeting Law, school administrators may attend PAC meetings. In the spirit of effective collaboration, it is good practice to invite the administrator of special education to meetings of the PAC.

### **3. May a school committee or school administrator disband a PAC?**

No. A school committee or school administrator may not disband an established PAC. The school district and the PAC are encouraged to cooperate in order to resolve issues. The ESE and the Massachusetts Association of Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (MassPAC) can provide helpful materials.

### **4. Who can vote at a PAC Meeting?**

PACs may address the issue of voting in their own By-Laws. Some PACs have found it effective to allow all members to vote, while taking a vote only if there is a "voting quorum" in which at least two thirds of the PAC members present are parents of children with special needs. Other PACs have defined "General Membership" and "Voting Membership" (see sample By-Laws in Appendix A).

### **5. Is the PAC membership list a public document?**

Since a PAC is an advisory group to a public body (the School Committee), the official PAC membership list of persons who have taken action to join is a public document.

### **6. May a PAC operate a private email list (for example, "LISTSERV") that is not open to the participation of school employees?**

No, all email communications of the PAC, including electronic mailing or distribution lists, are subject to Public Records Law.

### **7. May a school district adopt policies further defining the operations of a PAC?**

School districts may set reasonable operational policies such as notice for use of school buildings or access to school programs. However, the role of a PAC may not be limited in a manner inconsistent with state regulations regarding PACs, or with ESE PAC guidelines.

**8. May a school district direct PAC activities?**

No. A PAC directs its own activities in cooperation and collaboration with the school district.

**9. May a school district prohibit proposed PAC activities?**

The goals of the school district and the PAC should be in agreement; the instances should be few in which the school district would want to prohibit PAC activities. The school district may prohibit activities which do not comply with school district operating procedures or with regulations and laws.

**10. What authority may a school district maintain regarding PAC newsletters, public statements, correspondence, or reports?**

In general, PACs control their own publications and correspondence. However, a school district may establish reasonable guidelines for PAC publications and correspondence – i.e. establishing a time or manner of distribution and prohibiting defamatory statements. PACs are encouraged to use their own letterhead, and PACs may receive responses to mailings as long as confidentiality is assured where applicable. As the PAC's role is to 'advise' the school committee, the PAC determines the contents of its own reports to the school committee."

**11. Is there a process for a PAC to express concern about or appeal a school district decision?**

A PAC and a school district are strongly encouraged to resolve differences together. Open communication on all issues of concern to all parties is the best approach to problem-solving. However, if a PAC believes a school district is in non-compliance with special education regulations, a PAC should consult the Department of Education, and may access the Problem Resolution System.

## Appendix C: List of Websites Pertaining to PACs & Parent Involvement

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education / Special Education	<a href="http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/">http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/</a>
Massachusetts Association of Parent Advisory Councils	<a href="http://www.masspac.org/">http://www.masspac.org/</a>
Federation for Children with Special Needs	<a href="http://www.fcsn.org/">http://www.fcsn.org/</a>
Massachusetts Association of Special Education Administrators	<a href="http://www.asepage.org/">http://www.asepage.org/</a>
Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents	<a href="http://www.massupt.org/">http://www.massupt.org/</a>
Massachusetts Association of School Committees	<a href="http://www.masc.org/">http://www.masc.org/</a>
Massachusetts Open Meeting Law Guidelines	<a href="https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIII/Chapter30A/Section20">https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIII/Chapter30A/Section20</a>
Massachusetts Public Records Division	<a href="http://www.sec.state.ma.us/pre/preidx.htm">http://www.sec.state.ma.us/pre/preidx.htm</a>
Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association, Inc.	<a href="http://www.mssaa.org/">http://www.mssaa.org/</a>
Massachusetts SPED PACs online (c/o Concord SPED PAC website)	<a href="http://www.concordspedpac.org/Pacs-in-Mass.html">http://www.concordspedpac.org/Pacs-in-Mass.html</a>
National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt)	<a href="http://www.nccrest.org/about.html">http://www.nccrest.org/about.html</a>
National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools	<a href="http://www.sedl.org/connections/">http://www.sedl.org/connections/</a>
National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education	<a href="http://www.ncpie.org/">http://www.ncpie.org/</a>
National Network of Partnership Schools	<a href="http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/index.htm">http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/index.htm</a>
PALMS Project (Postsecondary Access for Latino Middle-Grades Students)	<a href="http://www.palmsproject.net/">http://www.palmsproject.net/</a>

