



# SEPAC SOMA's Annual Report 2022-2023

Prepared by Beth Cosentino, SEPAC SOMA President,  
with the SEPAC SOMA Executive Board  
July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023

# ANNUAL REPORT: 2022-2023 SEPAC SOMA

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N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.2(h)

Goals, 2022-2023

Mission Statement

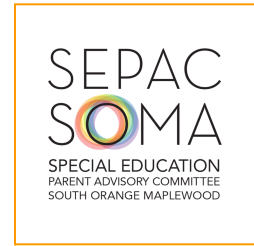
Board Members, 2022-2023; 2023-2024

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## Introduction and Goal Review

The **Special Education Parent Advisory Committee of the South Orange & Maplewood School District (SEPAC SOMA)** is committed to working with families, the school district and the wider community for the betterment of all students. The SEPAC Board works year-round to be available to parents for their input and to support them by providing resources and information for parents to have a greater understanding of special education. The input that is collected throughout the year informs the board to where the systemic issues lie and those issues are brought to the administration with recommendations and urgency.



In this comprehensive narrative Annual Report for the 2022-2023 School Year, we explain the work that was done which helped us accomplish our goals and what we have learned to move us forward in the new school year.

### Goals for the 2022-2023 School Year

1. Provide multiple avenues for parents and caregivers to give input regarding special education in our district.
2. Foster relationships throughout the district and the community for there to be a greater understanding of what SEPAC SOMA is and how it can be a resource for others.
3. Create subcommittees to address specific concerns of parents and caregivers for them to have an outlet to assist the SEPAC board in looking for solutions that can be shared with our partners.

## Executive Board Members, Special Education Liaisons, SEPAC Members

The SEPAC SOMA Executive Board consists of seven volunteer parents who have children attending schools in and out of the district. It is a working board and all have responsibilities to make it an effective group.



- **The President, Beth Cosentino**, led the group by creating agendas, corresponding with administrators, writing advisory letters, coordinating and hosting meetings and being available to SEPAC members and anyone in the community interested in helping special education students. Beth also served on the Presidents' Council.
- **The Vice President of Community Outreach, Lindsey Stone**, coordinated an on-boarding for the special education liaisons at the start of the school year, spoke with parents throughout the community during the year and was a stand-in liaison and facilitator for Montrose Early Childhood Center.

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- **The Vice President of Family Support, Ann Leeb**, was in contact with individual parents to help them understand their rights and advise them on next steps for advocating for their children. Ann, a former SEPAC President, was the OOD liaison, coordinated the OOD Cup Chat and the JESPY House Transition Meeting.
- **The Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Nicole Josey**, met monthly with Dr. Gilbert, Assistant Superintendent of Access & Equity, to bring attention to the concerns of students with disabilities as they related to being provided an accessible and equitable education. Nicole coordinated and moderated the annual Race & Special Education meeting, advised parents as the Clinton liaison and served on the Presidents' Council.
- **The Vice President of Policy Initiatives, Michelle Reback** (July - Dec, 2022), initiated and led the work on the Sensory Activation Vehicle, did outreach to the BOE Candidates for the 2022 election, assisted families with understanding their rights in the special education process and provided input and insight on agendas for administrator meetings; **Will Meyer**, (Jan - June, 2023) read and advised on all policies that were up for review and kept SEPAC updated on policy-related concerns for students with disabilities. Will attended all BOE meetings, stepped in to speak on behalf of the board, and was the co-chair for the 2023 Nominating Committee.
- **The Vice President of Programming remained empty** for the entirety of the 2022-2023 year and at the end of the year meeting in June, the SEPAC members present voted to abolish the position.
- **The Communications Officer, Kelly Mortimer**, created and distributed all announcements, oversaw SEPAC on social media, took meeting notes and coordinated with the liaisons and communication officers at all schools. As the liaison for SOMS, Kelly advised parents; she also served on the Presidents' Council and coordinated all of the middle school and high school SEPAC meetings/events.
- **Ex Officio, previous SEPAC President, Malia Herman**, served in an advisory role to the Board, providing input and insight. Malia was the point-of-contact for the 2022 Annual BOE Candidate Responses to SEPAC Questionnaire and co-chaired the 2023 Nominating Committee.

The **Special Education Liaisons**, in total fourteen, were at all schools, except for the preschool program and Montrose Early Childhood Center. The liaisons had multiple duties, including being available to answer parents' questions about special education, attending their home schools' PTA/HSA meetings to give updates on SEPAC, sharing information from SEPAC to their schools' communities via Facebook and PTA/HSA weekly newsletters, and relaying concerns from their school communities to the executive board.

Throughout the year, the executive board heard from SEPAC members who showed their dedication to disabled students by asking questions, raising awareness, and advocating for more inclusive practices. Parents found a shared sense of purpose with one another through a variety of meetings. By the end of the school year, SEPAC helped bring parents together with

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common interests, including 2e (Twice exceptional), Disability Rights Awareness, EBR (Evidence-Based Reading), High School-related concerns and Inclusive Practices.

The overall SEPAC membership (reported on the listserv) increased by 10% to 562 in the 2022-2023 School Year. In the upcoming sections, the numbers for attendance and participation of members are shared.

## Meetings and Activities

The 2022-2023 school year was the first one, since the pandemic began in March 2020, that SEPAC brought parents/guardians back to in-person meetings giving them the chance to connect in a way that was greatly missed for the previous two-and-a-half years. SEPAC continued to utilize an online platform to hold meetings that were topic-based presentations. These Zoom meetings were recorded and uploaded to SEPAC's Youtube channel to allow for greater opportunity for parents/guardians to have access to the information that came from the presentations. On SEPAC's website, along with links to the presentations, there are links to resources shared by the presenters. The executive board held nearly 20 meetings over the course of the year with district administrators and board of education members. During these meetings, discussions were held around the concerns that were raised which led to clarification and recommendations for improving outcomes. The need for clear timely communication was always part of the conversation.

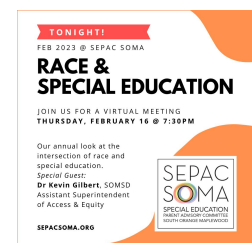
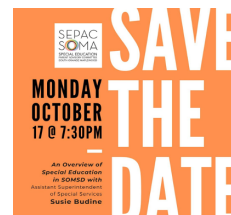
- Cup Chats

- Parent meetups (in-person)
- September 2022 - June 2023
- **9 Cup Chats**
- **120 attendees total**
- Locations: Elitist Coffee in South Orange, Leilo's Sweet Shop in West Orange, Maplewood's Memorial Park, South Orange's Meadowland Park



- Presentations

- BOE Presentation (hybrid)
- Virtual presentations (recorded)
- September 2022 - April 2023
- **9 Presentations**
- **340+ attendees total (plus, Youtube)**



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- Recordings\* are available on Youtube.com/@sepacsoma
- Recording links, with supplementary resources, are on SEPAC SOMA's website meeting page.

\* Beth Cosentino's SEPAC Presentation to the BOE (9/29/22) and Ms. Budine's Overview of Special Services in SOMSD (10/17/22) can be found on the SOMSD Youtube channel.



- Parent Workshops

- April & May
- **2 in-person events**
- **20 attendees total**
- Led by local professionals: Sarah Schwartz, Parenting Coach (Mindful Parenting) and Larissa Balik, OT (Defining Development)
- Locations: Dehart Community Center in Maplewood, Tuscan Dell in Maplewood



- End of the Year Wrap Up General Meeting

- In-person
- June 15
- **15 attendees**
- "Dope, Nope & Hope" attendee sharing
- Ms. Budine in attendance
- Voted in board members for 2023-2024 SY
- Location: District Meeting Room, 525 Academy



- Meetings with Administrators and BOE Members

- Dr. Taylor: Quarterly Meetings - October, February & July
- Ms. Budine: Ongoing - August, December, January, March, May
- Dr. Gilbert: Monthly with VP of DEI
- BOE Members: October, January, March



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF  
**South Orange  
& Maplewood.**

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## Community Engagement

The SEPAC Board, liaison and members were very active in the community throughout the year by connecting with parents and allies throughout Maplewood and South Orange. For as many opportunities as we could to increase awareness about the group, SEPAC showed up with our signature-orange tablecloth and brightly-colored signs for any passing parent, student, staff or community member to learn about the purpose and mission of the group.

### COMMUNITY OUTREACH ACTIVITIES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

- July/August: *Extended School Year Food Program*
- September/October: *Back-to-School Nights*
- October: *South Orange Community Day at South Orange Library*
- November: *Transition, High School to College - Matthew Endlich*
- November: *Sheena Collum's Fundraiser Birthday Party: Sensory Mobile Trailer*
- March/April: *Input Meetings for Maplewood Master Plan*
- March: *Paraprofessional Day - Appreciation Week*
- April: *Welcome to Middle School, MMS & SOMS*
- May: *Middle School in Action Nights, MMS & SOMS*
- May/June: *Kindergarten Orientations (not all)*

### Community Highlights

In July during the Extended School Year, when the day was longer than usual for compensatory education, SEPAC organized the **Extended School Year Food Program (ESYFP)** that mobilized over 20 SOMA community members who donated 70+ lunchables, 80+ fruit cups and 100 fruit crushers, plus more items, as well as picking up 5 breakfast and lunch packs from Maplecrest Park for a few students who requested more food to take home. The local SOMA Shares members were partners with SEPAC to help get the word out and collect food.



In early October, four of our Board members had a table at the South Orange Community Day at the South Orange Library where we greeted and met more than 30 community members. We introduced SEPAC SOMA to residents, town officials and other local groups and businesses to expand the awareness of it. We especially enjoyed meeting clients from JESPY House who took interest in our group and the sensory fidgets we made available at our table. Positioned next to the Presidents' Council and SOMSD table, it was also a valuable opportunity to connect with district leadership in a non-formal setting.



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In November, SEPAC worked hand-in-hand with Village President Sheena Collum and Team to help raise money (nearly \$30,000) for the South Orange Village Alliance to purchase a **Sensory Activation Vehicle (SAV)**. Although SEPAC's purpose does not involve raising money, we took the opportunity to increase awareness of our group while serving a larger cause to provide a much-needed resource for our community. SAV will be available not only for SOMA community events, but also for the School District, PTAs and HSAs to use for their events throughout the year. We are grateful to former board member Michelle Reback for bringing the SAV to our attention, Sheena Collum for making it a reality and to all those who contributed.



April 5 is **Paraprofessional Appreciation Day** and for the 2022-2023 School Year it fell on Spring Break. This did not deter Vicky Bond, Marshall co-liaison whose advocacy for paras raised the level of awareness for all, nor any of the SEPAC Special Education Liaisons who organized their efforts with their schools and PTA/HSAs to celebrate the whole week before the break with Shout Outs, Thank you cards, Breakfasts and Luncheons. The entire school community got behind an effort of celebrating the paras who work closely with our students every day to help them GROW & THRIVE. We are so grateful to our paras.

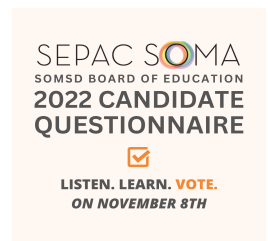


### Surveys and Parent Input

**2022 SEPAC SOMA Survey** In August 2022, the Executive Board created an input survey and used multiple channels to reach the wider community. Based on the results (90 participants) of the survey, we wrote our goals and decided on the types of meetings for the school year. In September 2022, we presented at the Board of Education meeting and shared our updated mission statement, 2022-2023 goals, plans for our meetings and introduced our executive board for the year.



**2022 SEPAC SOMA BOE Candidate Questionnaire** SEPAC SOMA continued its tradition of providing BOE Candidates the option to share their thoughts, experiences, and ideas by responding to four questions written by the executive board. This year was no different with the exception that prior to the questionnaire being sent out each of the 5 candidates requested the opportunity to hear directly from SEPAC to learn about special education in our school district. The Ex Officio, Malia Herman, was charged with meeting each person and providing them with the same information regarding special education in our district. This approach kept the sharing consistent from one candidate to the next.





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**Parent Input Form 2022-2023** The executive board recognized that parents have input they'd like to share anonymously so we created an input survey in order for them to do that. If requested, the VP of Family Support, Ann Leeb, connected with the parent to offer suggestions on ways to effectively advocate for their child. We found this form was not utilized to the extent we had hoped, but realized it's likely due to having other avenues for input, ie. Cup Chats and emailing us directly. We will continue to have it available for anyone who would prefer to share input in this manner for the 2023-2024 School Year.

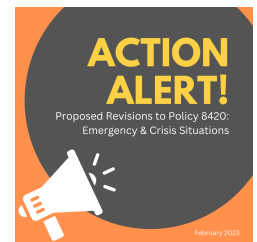


**EOY Parent Survey 2023** For the end of the year's last meeting wrap up, SEPAC always wants to know how the school year went and we ask: What is your Dope? (What went well?) What is your Nope? (What didn't go so well?) And What is your Hope? (What do you hope for your child?) This year, we sent out an input survey in order for parents to share their experiences and we learned that many valued their child's teachers as their Dope! We also heard that some parents were unsure of their role in IEP meetings and their child's school experience. As we move into the new school year, we will take what we learned to gear our meetings to support our fellow parents to feel more confident in their own advocacy skills.



## Actions and Advisory Recommendations

The purpose of SEPAC SOMA is to gather input from families related to special education and share that input with the district to improve policies, programs and practices. The SEPAC board president works with the executive board to create agendas for meetings with the administration based on this input. Throughout the year, we drafted numerous letters and comments to share with administrators and board of education members along with attending public speaks to raise the voice of the special education community. Below find a non-exhaustive, yet still thorough, list of our work for 2022-2023.



### Actions and advisory work:

- Attention to missing assistive technology devices for ABA classroom → **ACCOMPLISHED:** *The devices were found and delivered to the classroom.*
- Shout out to 3rd Grade inclusion classroom teachers at Clinton for sharing a best practice to explain inclusive communities at Back to School night → **INCREASED ACTION:** *Across the district during B2S Nights, more teachers in inclusion classrooms at*

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*the elementary school level were sharing information on inclusive communities in their classrooms.*

- Attention to the lack of consistent timely communication by case managers and supervisors → ONGOING: *SEPAC and parents across the district continued to bring this to the Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent and BOE members. Dr. Taylor has shared his dismay and disapproval of less than timely responses by district staff.*
- Attention to staffing shortages and lack of communication around the shortages to families → ONGOING: *SEPAC repeatedly requested clear communication and expectations to families around staffing shortages.*
- Attention to the lack of special education teachers in inclusion classrooms → ONGOING: *The SEPAC board asked, and will continue to ask, what measures have been taken to secure special education teachers across all schools and classrooms where there's a shortage as well as what is being done to ensure IEPs are in compliance.*
- Attention to lack of home instructors to support students who were unable to attend school in-district → SITUATION EVENTUALLY RESOLVED: *SEPAC members reported difficulty in securing home instructors for their children; after a delay, the administration was eventually able to fill these positions.*
- Questioning the continual issue with bullying and harassment for special education students and recognizing what influence school culture and climate have on HIB incidents → ONGOING: *SEPAC board repeatedly reminded the administration and the board of education members that students with disabilities are more often experiencing HIB than other students in the district; the widespread issue is directly related to marginalizing students who are 'different' and creating a sense of other, instead of making a concerted effort to be inclusive of disabled students.*
- Statement for Transgender Day to support and be an ally to transgender people in our schools and community → ONGOING SUPPORT: *SEPAC is an ally to all marginalized groups, including transgender people on Transgender Day and throughout the year.*
- Raising concerns around high school general education teachers not following IEPs and 504 Plans → ONGOING ISSUE: *SEPAC formed a special education subcommittee for Columbia HS to connect with more parents and to keep the administration aware of any systemic issues, including compliance to IEPs and 504s.*
- Questioning the lack of inclusion classrooms for every grade at all elementary schools → ONGOING ISSUE: *SEPAC repeatedly questioned the administration regarding the equity of not having inclusion classrooms available for all grades in all elementary schools.*

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- Raising concerns over elementary inclusion classroom behavioral management punitive tactics → ADDRESSED AND ONGOING: *SEPAC members reported to the SEPAC board who reported to the administration the concerns and frustration of archaic punitive measures being taken in some inclusion classes.*
- Requesting a SEPAC Liaison with the Board of Education to enable direct contact with the board → REQUEST FULFILLED: *During the January 2023 BOE meeting, Ex Officio Malia Herman represented the SEPAC board and reported on SEPAC's concerns-to-date during Public Comment and made the request for a SEPAC BOE Liaison. Later in the meeting it was determined one would be provided; at a subsequent meeting it was determined that board member, Dr. Qawi Teleford would be the SEPAC BOE Liaison.*
- Recommending age-appropriate Handle-with-Care training for preschool program staff, including paraprofessionals → RESOLVED & ONGOING: *In response to alleged reports of abuse and inappropriate management of dysregulated students at Montrose Early Childhood Center, additional HWC trainings were done for staff; SEPAC board will follow up to recommend that all new staff receive the training as well.*
- Recommending hiring paraprofessionals for self-contained and preschool program classrooms and hiring 'master veteran paras' to train new hires → ONGOING: *SEPAC board has suggested this recommendation for the last few years as a way to keep well-trained paras in the district and compensated appropriately for our students who require consistency and a specific level of expertise.*
- Questioning the robustness of the curriculum around disability rights movement → IMPROVED & ONGOING: *SEPAC member, Susan Nasberg-Abrams brought this to the administration and will continue to ask for more details on how the district is providing lessons on disability rights activism and the activists that led the fight.*
- Enquiring how 2e (Twice Exceptional = gifted with a disability) students' programs are being considered → ONGOING: *SEPAC member, Whitney Kidder, connected with the administration to learn more about how they intend to provide supports to 2e students.*
- Recommending Extended School Year dates be included in the District calendar → UNDER CONSIDERATION: *SEPAC looks forward to seeing the upcoming 2024-2025 District Calendar to see if the recommendation is included.*

### Reflection and Moving Forward

Over the course of one year, we successfully worked toward meeting our three goals that were shared in September 2022 by 1) providing multiple avenues for parents and caregivers to give

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input regarding special education in our district, 2) fostering relationships throughout the district and the community for there to be a greater understanding of what SEPAC SOMA is and how it can be a resource for others, and 3) creating subcommittees to address specific concerns of parents and caregivers for them to have an outlet to assist the SEPAC board in looking for solutions that can be shared with our partners.

Looking forward, our goals for 2023-2024 will expand on the work that we have done the previous year as well as building parents' capacity for a better understanding of special education and ways to successfully engage with educators.

Finally, SEPAC SOMA will once again provide meaningful ways and actionable steps to help create an inclusive environment where all students feel belonging and have success in every area of their educational journeys. We invite all who support the work that we do to reach out to us, attend our meetings, spread the word and join our group. We are a parent group that exists because of parents coming together to work for the betterment of all students in our school district. Everyone is welcome.

## Appendix

### Contact Information

General	Website - <a href="http://sepacsoma.org">sepacsoma.org</a>
Questions/Feedback	Email - <a href="mailto:info@sepacsoma.org">info@sepacsoma.org</a> <a href="#">Parent input survey</a>
Receive emails	<a href="#">Subscriber sign up</a>
Follow us	Facebook Page - <a href="https://facebook.com/sepacsoma">facebook.com/sepacsoma</a> Instagram - <a href="https://instagram.com/sepacsoma">instagram.com/sepacsoma</a>
Presentations	Youtube Channel - <a href="https://youtube.com/@sepacsoma">youtube.com/@sepacsoma</a> <a href="#">SEPAC Presentation at BOE</a> <a href="#">Ms. Budine Overview of Rights Presentation</a>

### **New Jersey Administrative Code, 6A:14-1.2(h)**

*“Each Board of Education shall ensure that a special education parent advisory group is in place in the district to provide input to the district on issues concerning students with disabilities.”*

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### Goals, 2022-2023 SY

1. Provide multiple avenues for parents and caregivers to give input regarding special education in our district.
2. Foster relationships throughout the district and the community for there to be a greater understanding of what SEPAC SOMA is and how it can be a resource for others.
3. Create subcommittees to address specific concerns of parents and caregivers for them to have an outlet to assist the SEPAC board in looking for solutions that can be shared with our partners.

### Mission Statement

In collaboration with the district and its commitment to excellence for all of our children, SEPAC SOMA will work for the understanding of, respect for, and support of every student with an Individualized Education Program, a Section 504 Plan or a special need in the South Orange & Maplewood School District. To that end, SEPAC SOMA will:

- Provide a forum to share and discuss matters of interest for parents or caregivers of students who receive special services.
- Provide input to the Board of Education and district administration on policies, programs and practices that impact students who receive special services.
- Advocate for the continual improvement of the district's programming as it relates to students with disabilities.

EXECUTIVE BOARD	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
President	Beth Cosentino	Beth Cosentino
Vice President of Community Outreach	Lindsey Stone	Lindsey Stone
Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	Nicole Josey	Vicky Bond
Vice President of Family Support	Ann Leeb	Amanda Harris
Vice President of Policy Initiatives	Michelle Reback (July - Dec) Will Meyer (Jan - June)	Will Meyer
Communications Officer	Kelly Mortimer	Kelly Mortimer
Ex Officio	Malia Herman	Malia Herman

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<b>SPECIAL ED LIAISONS</b>	<b>2022 - 2023</b>	<b>2023 - 2024</b>
Clinton	Nicole Josey	Nicole Josey
Delia Bolden	Greg Puglia	Vicky Bond
Marshall	Vicky Bond & Sarah Kono	Sarah Kono & Jessica York
Seth Boyden	Katie Kaplan	Whitney Kidder
South Mountain	Marissa Altabet	Mary Broydrick
Tuscan	Amanda Harris	Cristy Mendoza
Maplewood Middle	Amanda Cercone & Cristy Mendoza	Amanda Harris & Malia Herman
South Orange Middle	Kelly Mortimer	Susan Nasberg-Abrams & Lark Lasardo
Columbia High	Marian Raab	Marian Raab
Montrose Early Childhood Center	open	open
Preschool Sites	open	Amy Venero
Out of District	Katie Rumley & Ann Leeb/Malia Herman	Malia Herman