



## Special Education Parent Advisory Council School Committee Report April 3, 2017

### **Acknowledgements**

- ❖ School Committee
- ❖ Dr. Joe Sawyer
- ❖ Meg Belsito
- ❖ Special Education Staff
- ❖ PTO Presidents' Council
- ❖ Parents and Caregivers

We appreciate this opportunity to present to the School Committee and Dr. Sawyer and are grateful for the continued cooperation and support we have received from the school community.

We would also like to thank Meg Belsito for generously meeting with both SEPAC board and community members this past year. She bravely attended our Meet and Greet in October, when she had just started as director. At that meeting parents and caregivers were honest, and sometimes emotional, about their current concerns and past experiences. Meg was gracious, open, and responsive to parent and caregiver comments and questions. She encouraged many parents and caregivers to contact her privately and told the group that she would look into the many issues raised. We thank Meg for her support and look forward to collaborating with her further to improve services for all special education students.

As always we are committed to listening and learning from our families, we have devised and recently distributed a new survey developed with input from parents and caregivers whose children receive special education services. This survey is more extensive than our introductory one last fall, with the goal of identifying problem areas in the system where families are struggling. We will summarize the survey results in a report and provide this feedback to Meg. We would like to thank all the families who responded to our surveys and participated in our events this past year.

## **SEPAC Board Members**

- ❖ Bashar Jarkasy, Co-President
- ❖ Sanjiv Lal, Co-President
- ❖ Colleen Corbett, Secretary and Communications Chair
- ❖ Rajesh Chug, Treasurer and Technology Expert
- ❖ Jill DeBender, Outreach Chair
- ❖ Blake Poggi, Membership Chair

As we presented to you last year, the current SEPAC board was created in the fall of 2015. We spent much of that first year introducing ourselves to the community and finding our footing. We created a Facebook Page, developed a survey to assess families interests and needs, held a successful Meet and Greet, and Basic Rights Workshop. We also attended trainings offered by MassPAC, the statewide organization that provides training and networking opportunities to Massachusetts Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), and realized that our infrastructure needed some shoring up. Our SEPAC toolbox was incomplete and we spent a good deal of time and resources updating and creating these key documents.

## **SEPAC Toolbox**

- ❖ Defined our mission statement
- ❖ Updated our by-laws
- ❖ Defined officer roles and responsibilities
- ❖ Created a brochure
- ❖ Determined an officer election schedule

Our Mission Statement: Shrewsbury Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) is a volunteer organization made up of parents and caregivers whose children receive special education services through Shrewsbury Public Schools. We were created under Massachusetts law and serve as a voice for parents by advising the Shrewsbury school administration and School Committee on matters related to the education of students with disabilities. The SEPAC provides a forum for parents and caregivers to share experiences and exchange information. Together, we work for understanding, respect, support and the appropriate education of all children with special needs in our community.

In addition to getting our SEPAC toolbox in order, we formalized a monthly meeting schedule. SEPAC meets at 7:00 pm on the last Monday of the month from September through May in the Media Center at Floral Street School. The board received valuable feedback from our membership about our need to improve outreach and communication about SEPAC, what we do, and when we meet.

## **Outreach and Communication**

- ❖ Advertise meetings and events via email, Facebook.
- ❖ Post meetings and events in the Community Bulletin.
- ❖ Post meetings and events in Principal newsletters.
- ❖ Always include our mission statement with postings.
- ❖ SEPAC members present and distribute our brochures at PTO meetings.

We have also greatly increased our presence on Facebook.

- ❖ 127 followers; daily updates including articles, trainings, workshops, member questions.
- ❖ Connecting and reposting content from MassPAC, neighboring PACs, and groups like Shrewsbury Moms of Special Kids.

## **Parent Participation and Involvement**

One of our goals is to increase parent and caregiver opportunities to participate in special education related events. Despite our increased outreach, we still encounter many parents and caregivers whose children are receiving special education services but who do not know about SEPAC. There are about 820 families in the district whose children receive special education services and our parent participation rate is about 7%. Under Massachusetts law [603 CMR 28:07 (4)] the district shall offer "membership to all parents of eligible students and other interested parties" to SEPAC. We would like to partner with the district to increase SEPAC awareness and involvement as follows:

- ❖ Link to information about SEPAC through Shrewsbury Public Schools Special Education webpage.
- ❖ We recommend that SEPAC brochures be offered to parents at all 504/IEP related meetings.
- ❖ We recommend that SEPAC brochures be sent in school mailings involving screenings and evaluations.

## **Parent Education and Training**

As our 2015-2016 SEPAC survey results revealed, families were most interested in information about all aspects of the IEP process.

### **2015-2016 SEPAC Survey Results - Top Interests**

- ❖ 60% selected Parents' Guide to IEPs and 504s
- ❖ 54% IEP Goals and Objectives
- ❖ 50% Social Skills
- ❖ 48% Basic Rights and Special Education Law
- ❖ 48% Reading and Writing

Further, many parents and caregivers expressed the need to learn more about the IEP process, including how to prepare for a Team meeting, convey the needs of their children, and build a collaborative rapport with the Team and school representatives. Families also indicated they would like to learn more about the IEP document itself, such as goals and objectives and service delivery. Due to this focus on IEPs, our events this past year have included multiple informational and interactive workshops. We plan to explore the topics of social skills and reading and writing learning issues this coming year.

## **2016-2017 Events**

- ❖ *Meet and Greet with Special Education Director Meg Belsito* on 10/24/16 from 7:00 – 8:30 pm at Floral Street School Media Center. This was a wonderful opportunity for our community to meet and hear from our new director. The meeting was well attended and parents and caregivers were able to ask questions and share their concerns.
- ❖ *IEP 101 for Families* on Tuesday, 11/29/16 from 10:00 am – noon at the Shrewsbury Public Library. This workshop was designed for parents and caregivers to understand all sections of the IEP and the basic requirements for compliance under special education law for services and supports for students with disabilities. This workshop was co-hosted by Westborough SEPAC and presented by Melissa Carriveau, M.S.Ed. from Bay State Advocacy and a SEPAC member.
- ❖ Attorney Daniel Perlman on Wednesday, 3/8/17 from 7:00--9:00 pm at Algonquin Regional High School Library. The title of his presentation was *When you Disagree about an IEP: How to Effectively Resolve Special Education Conflicts*. This event was co-hosted by Northborough Southborough SEPAC and Westborough SEPAC.
- ❖ Kim Turgeon on Thursday, 3/16/17 from 7:00--8:30 pm at Floral Street School Media Center. The title of her presentation was *The Most Common Cause of OCD and Anxiety that Your Pediatrician Has Never Heard Of..... P.A.N.D.A.S.* Kim is a mom and teacher and discussed her experience with Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder with Streptococcal Infections (PANDAS). This event was co-hosted by Westborough SEPAC.
- ❖ *Eat Bread to Raise Dough* fundraiser at Panera Bread in Shrewsbury (White City Plaza) on 3/30/17 from 3:00--9:00 pm. To support SEPAC customers presented our flyer when they ordered. 46 flyers were collected and we made 15% of \$960 total sales, which is \$144. Thank you to all the families who participated.

- ❖ *Coffee and Connect* on Tuesday, 4/11/17 at Café Noir from 10:00 am – noon. As many of our members struggle to make evening meetings due to family demands and schedules, daytime gatherings can help members connect at a more convenient time.
- ❖ *Basic Rights Workshop* on Monday, 4/24/17 at 7:00 pm at Floral Street School Media Center. This workshop is provided through our MassPAC membership and presented by a representative from the Federation for Children with Special Needs. The workshop will provide an introduction to parental rights and responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Massachusetts Special Education Law. This workshop is designed to help parents learn to be effective partners with their child’s school to decide their child’s eligibility for special education, and to plan, make decisions, and monitor their child’s progress in school.
- ❖ *IEP 101 for Families* on Thursday, 5/11/17 from 7:00 – 9:00 pm at the Floral Street School Media Center. This workshop is designed to help parents and caregivers understand all sections of the IEP and the basic requirements for compliance under special education law for services and supports for students with disabilities. This workshop will be co-hosted by Westborough SEPAC and presented by Melissa Carriveau, M.S.Ed. from Bay State Advocacy and a SEPAC member.

### **Building Partnerships with Neighboring Communities**

Many of our events this past year were co-hosted by neighboring PACs. We are fortunate to be surrounded by active and established PACs who have generously allowed us to attend their meetings. We have learned from their experiences and developed relationships with them. These relationships have allowed us to pool our resources and co-host educational trainings and speakers. We will continue to develop these relationships in the coming year.

### **SEPAC Participation**

- ❖ Youth Mental Health First Aid Training on 5/3 & 4, 2016
  - The goal of Youth Mental Health First Aid is to teach members of the public how to respond in a mental health emergency with youth and young adults and to offer support to a young person who appears to be in emotional distress until professional help is available.
  - Professionals from Shrewsbury Public Schools offered this 8-hour course that covered risk factors and warning signs for many common mental health disorders affecting adolescents, including anxiety,

- depression, psychosis, eating disorders, ADHD, disruptive behavioral disorders, and substance abuse.
- ❖ MassPAC training presented by Leslie M. Leslie, MassPAC Project Director on *Starting and Running a Special Education Parent Advisory Council*.
    - SEPAC officers attended two trainings by Leslie last May and June.
  - ❖ Hosted Sandra Fryc and Dale Magee at our 1/30/17 meeting to discuss the structural deficit in the school budget.
  - ❖ Shrewsbury Diversity Coalition Meeting on Special Needs in Focus on 2/4/17 at Shrewsbury Public Library.
    - Shrewsbury Diversity Coalition welcomes residents of Shrewsbury from all race, religion, and cultural backgrounds to come together and help make our children and schools be accepting and proud of our diversity through support, education and programs.
  - ❖ PTO Presidents' Council quarterly meeting with Dr. Sawyer on 2/14/17 at Town Hall.
  - ❖ Visions of Community conference (VOC2017) at Seaport World Trade Center in Boston on March 4, 2017.
    - Sponsored by the Federation for Children with Special Needs; the Vision of Community Conference is an annual celebration of inclusive communities across Massachusetts where the promises of laws such as MA Chapter 766, IDEA and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are becoming a true reality.
    - Keynote Speaker Dr. Paula Kluth, presented *Don't We Already Do Inclusion?*
    - Additional workshops attended include: Challenging Behaviors in Children with Developmental Disabilities, Serving on Groups that Make Decisions, and Sped Law Updates.
    - The conference celebrated our community partners, and offered workshops in 6 languages. It also provided an opportunity to visit exhibitors, network with friends – new and old; find free resources; and meet Federation staff.
  - ❖ SEPAC presentation at PTO meetings at Floral Street (3/8/17) and Coolidge Schools (4/6/17)

## **Areas of Concern**

### **Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Reduction Plan**

We would like to thank Dr. Sawyer, the School Committee, Mr. Collins and administrators for their work to outline how the budget gap will impact our schools. These are difficult decisions but, because of your transparency, our community has a better understanding of changes that may need to be made in programming and staff. You have provided detailed presentations throughout the year with opportunities for members of our community to participate. It was especially moving to hear from educators who reminded us, not only of the value of their programs, but of their dedication to teaching our kids.

We share in your hope that the Town Manager's updated budget, based on local and state funding, will result in fewer reductions. Most of our SEPAC families have lived in town long enough to recall cuts over several years resulting in growing class sizes. We are concerned about the impact of reductions on the quality of education for all Shrewsbury students. When teacher and clinician positions are lost and class and caseload sizes grow, children and adults experience stress. Students with special needs are especially vulnerable to setbacks in learning and social emotional wellbeing that are lasting and sometimes difficult to overcome, even after numbers are restored.

The community rallied in the past to support our schools and when we are called upon to act in the future, we will stand together, whether parents of general or special education students, to keep our schools at the high level we have come to expect.

## **2016-2017 SEPAC Survey**

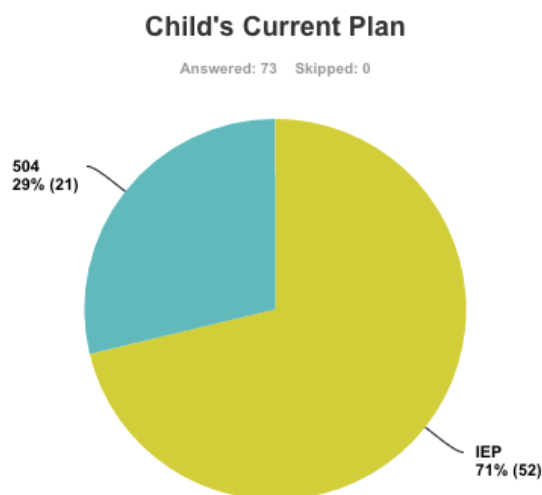
### **Goals**

Last year, our survey helped us connect with families and tailor our schedule and workshops to their needs. We are fortunate to have an involved group of parents and caregivers who inspired and contributed to the development of this year's survey.

The focus of the new survey was to identify current strengths and concerns from the perspective of parents and caregivers whose children are on IEPs and 504 plans. We hope to understand current areas of need and to strengthen the partnership between families of students with disabilities and their schools.

Our survey is ongoing, we will leave it open through the end of the school year. We hope to hear from more families so that we can be sure that our final results are representative of everyone's experience.

## Demographics



Thank you to our survey participants. The 73 parents and caregivers who have responded thus far represent 6% of the 821 students on IEPs and 11% of students with 504 plans in Shrewsbury schools this year. We heard from families whose children attend every school in our district with the exception of Beal Early Childhood Center and every grade with the exception of first.

We asked parents and caregivers to report issues they felt interfered in their child's learning. We believe these descriptors reflect the range of challenges their children are experiencing in the classroom more specifically than their diagnoses alone. Many children, particularly on a 504 plan, may have one diagnosis but a cluster of associated symptoms as well as difficulties in particular areas of learning.

Issues reported differed between parents with children on IEPs and those whose children have a 504 plan. 59% of parents and caregivers in the IEP group reported difficulty with speech/language communication, 47% with attention/concentration, and 43% with organization/executive functioning. Respondents also indicated that issues with social skills/peer interactions (33%), processing speed (33%), written expression (33%), reading comprehension (31%), and math (31%) interfered in their students' learning.

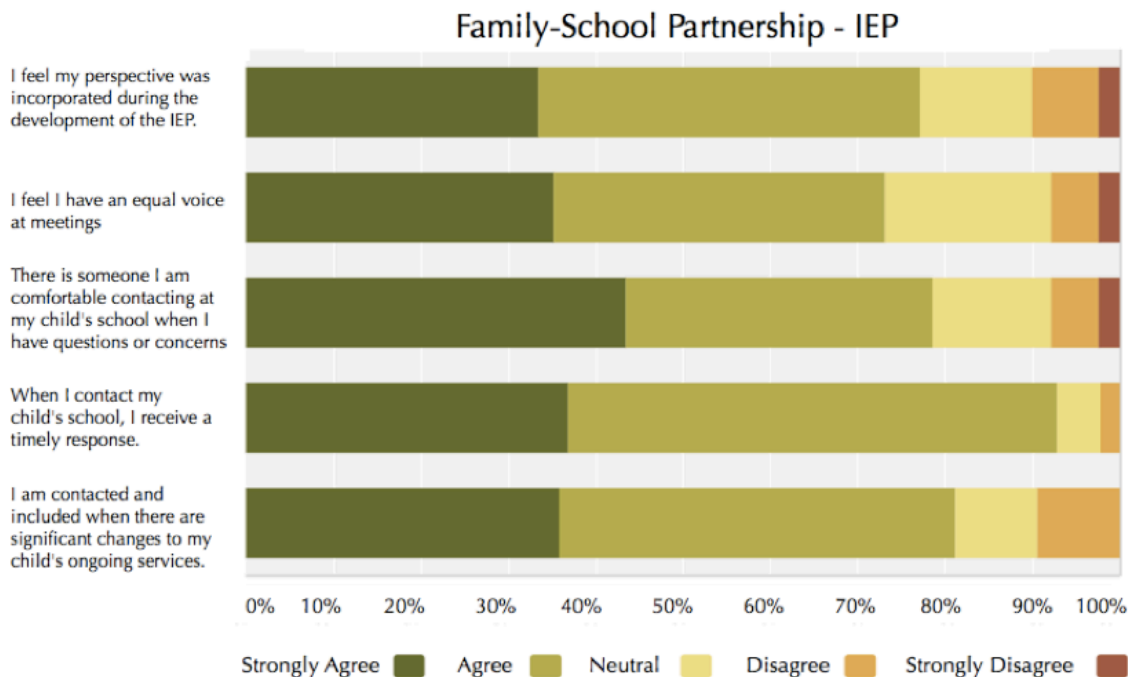


For children on 504 plans, attention/concentration was by far the most frequently selected concern (71%), followed by organization/executive functioning (50%), listening/following directions (33%) and anxiety (29%). Reading and writing issues were also endorsed by several parents (25%) in this 504 group.

In comparison to the distribution of diagnoses reported in the Special Education and Pupil Personnel Department Overview and Budget Report in February of 2017, our sample appears to be small, but nonetheless representative of students on IEPs and 504 plans. Autism, developmental delay, ADHD/ADD and speech language delay were most frequently endorsed by IEP respondents while ADHD/ADD and/or generalized anxiety disorder were most frequently selected by respondents in the 504 group.

### Family-School Partnership

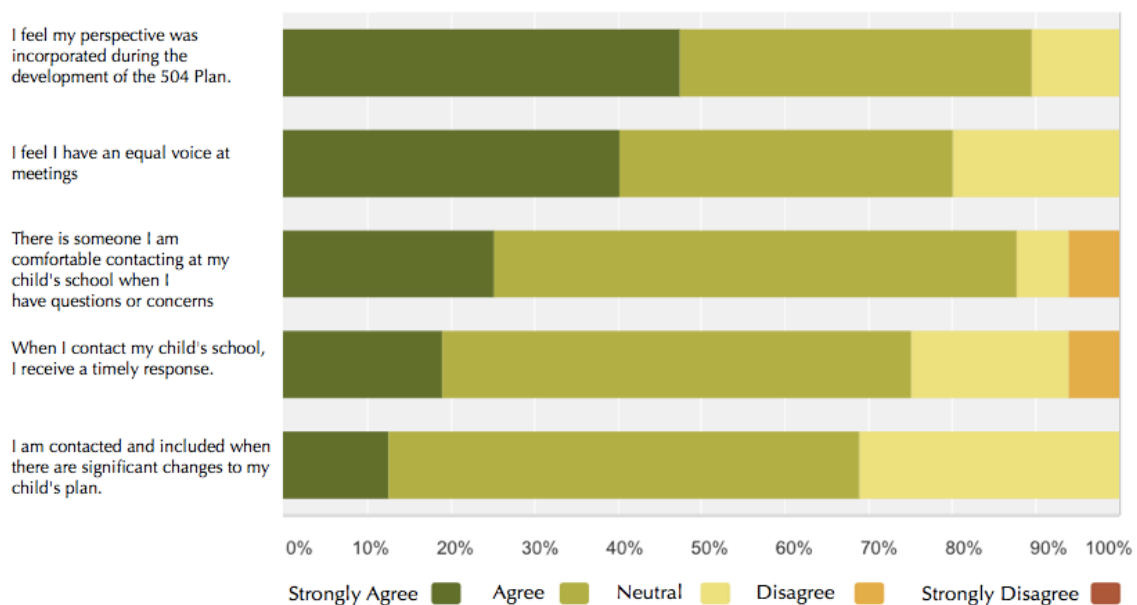
In this section, parents and caregivers were asked to rate their feelings regarding communication and inclusion in the Team process. Respondents indicated whether their children are on an IEP or a 504 plan and were divided into two groups accordingly.



Most respondents whose children were on an IEP felt that their perspective was incorporated during the development of the IEP, 78% agreed or strongly agreed, 12% were neutral, 7% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed. Most felt they had an equal voice at meetings 74% agreed or strongly agreed, 18% were neutral, 5%

disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed. When asked if there was someone they were comfortable contacting at their child's school when they had questions or concerns, 79% agreed or strongly agreed, 13% were neutral, 5% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. The majority of parents and caregivers felt they received a timely response when they contacted their child's school, 93% agree or strongly agree, 5% were neutral, 2% disagreed. Most respondents indicated they were contacted and included when there were significant changes to their child's ongoing services, 82% agreed or strongly agreed, 9% were neutral and 9% disagreed. Response time was an area of strength while having an equal voice at meetings was an area of concern.

### Family-School Partnership - 504

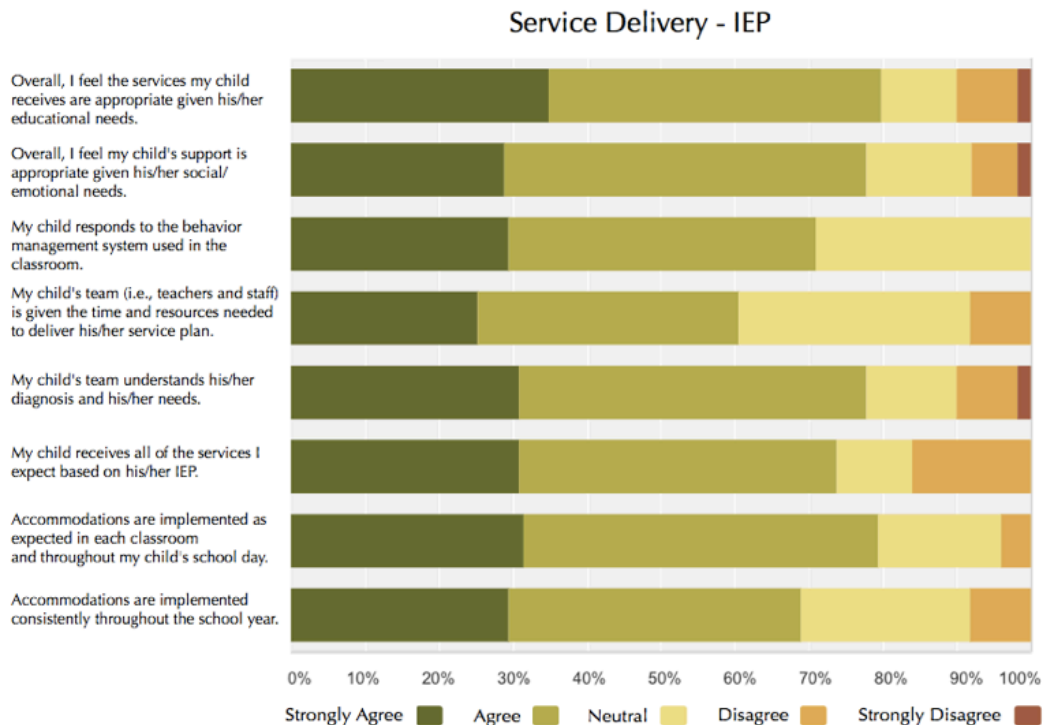


April 6, 2017

For families whose children were on 504 plans, overall, their rating of the partnership with schools was quite favorable. The majority of respondents felt their perspective was incorporated during the development of the plan, 89% agreed or strongly agreed, 11% were neutral and 0% disagreed. At meetings, most felt they had an equal voice, 80% agreed or strongly agreed and 20% were neutral. 88% of respondents indicated there was someone they were comfortable contacting at their child's school when they had questions or concerns, 6% were neutral, and 6% disagreed. 75% of parents and caregivers felt they received a timely response when they contacted their child's school, 19% were neutral, and 6% disagreed. When asked if they were contacted and included when there were significant changes to their child's ongoing services, 69% agreed or strongly agreed, 31%

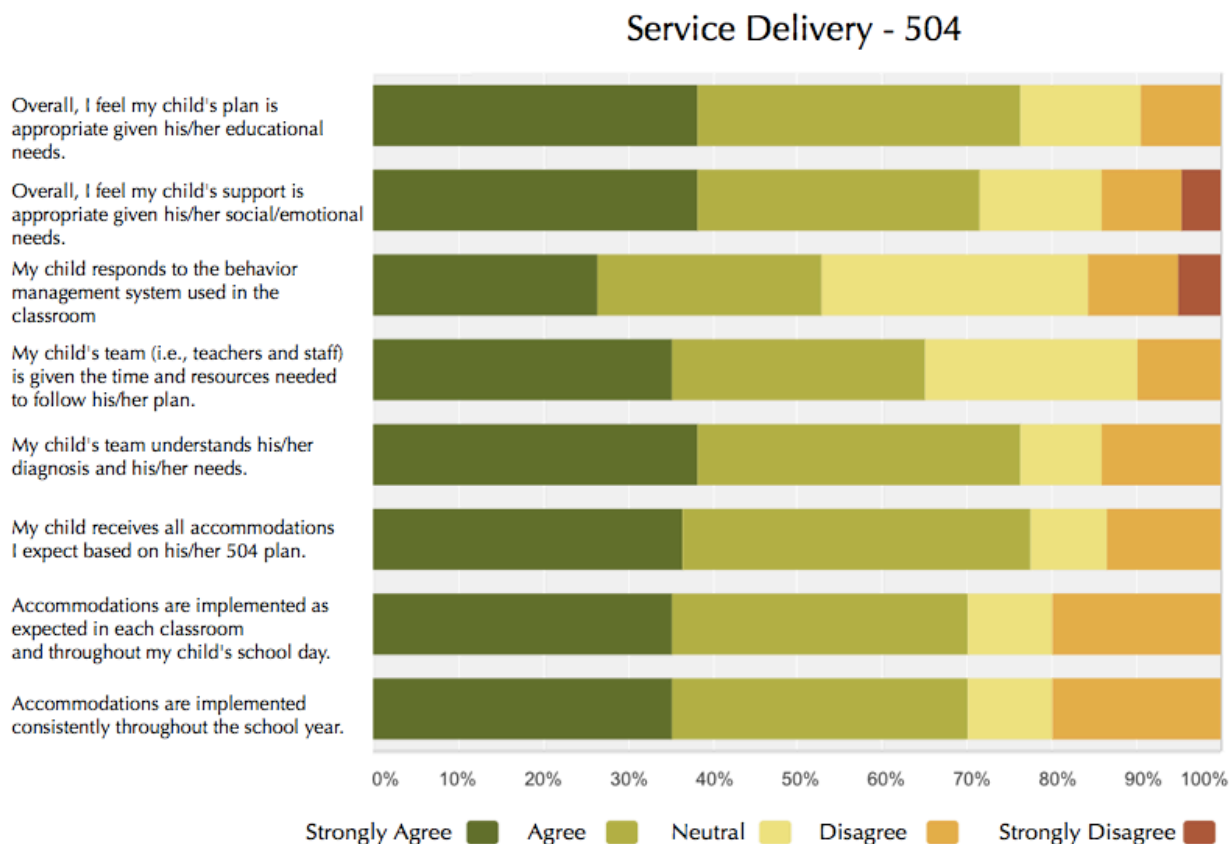
were neutral. Across questions, most parents and caregivers endorsed positive relationships with their schools and, of note, none strongly disagreed with the statements

## Service Delivery



The majority of survey respondents whose children were on IEPs felt the services their child received were appropriate given their educational needs. 80% agreed or strongly agreed, 10% were neutral, 8% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. Most felt their child's support was appropriate given his/her social/emotional needs; 78% agreed or strongly agreed, 14% were neutral, 6% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. Asked whether their child responded to the behavior management system used in the classroom, 71% agreed or strongly agreed, 29% were neutral, and none disagreed or strongly disagreed. In this block of statements, fewer respondents (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that their child's team (i.e., teachers and staff) was given the time and resources needed to deliver his/her service plan, 31% were neutral, and 8% disagreed. Most felt their child's team understood his/her diagnosis and his/her needs; 78% agreed or strongly agreed, 12% were neutral, 8% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. While 74% agreed or strongly agreed that their child received all of the services they expected based on his/her IEP, 10% were neutral and 16% disagreed. A greater number of parents and caregivers disagreed with this statement than with any others in service delivery highlighting an area of concern. Respondents were more confident that

accommodations were implemented as expected in each classroom and throughout their child's school day (80% agreed or disagreed, 16% were neutral, 4% disagreed) than in the consistency of services throughout the school year (70% agreed or strongly agreed, 22% were neutral, 8% disagreed).



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When averaged together, 74% of respondents in the IEP group and 70% of respondents in the 504 group agreed or strongly agreed with service delivery statements. Parents and caregivers of students with 504 plans had less confidence in their child's behavior plan and in the implementation of accommodations as expected in each classroom throughout the school day. More respondents felt their child's plan was appropriate given his/her educational needs (76% agreed or strongly agreed, 14% were neutral, 10% disagreed) than appropriate for his/her social/emotional needs (71% agreed or strongly agreed 14% were neutral 10% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed). Significantly fewer (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that their child responded to the behavior management system used in the classroom; 32% were neutral, 11% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed. Of note, parents and caregivers who felt their children did not respond to their behavior management system also felt their child's support was not appropriate given his/her

social/emotional needs. Respondents in this group felt somewhat less certain that their child's team (i.e., teachers and staff) were given the time and resources needed to deliver his/her service plan (65% agreed or strongly agreed, 25% were neutral, 10% disagreed). Asked whether their child's team understood his/her diagnosis and his/her needs, 76% agreed or strongly agreed, 9% were neutral and 14% disagreed.

Parents and caregivers of students on 504 plans were split in response to questions regarding consistency of accommodations. While 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their child received all of the accommodations they expected based on his/her 504 plan and 9% were neutral, 14% disagreed. Similarly, 70% agreed or strongly agreed that accommodations were implemented as expected in each classroom and throughout their child's school day and 10% were neutral, but 20% disagreed. Many (70%) felt accommodations were implemented consistently throughout the school year and 10% were neutral, however, 20% disagreed. Parents and caregivers who were concerned about service delivery more often had students in upper middle and high school where a plan must be implemented by many different teachers and there are greater consequences when students struggle without accommodations.

### Link Between Partnership and Service Delivery

Among parents and caregivers who agreed or strongly agreed that their child's IEP services were appropriate given their educational needs, 90% felt their perspective was incorporated during the development of the plan, and 85% felt they had an equal voice at meetings. Of families who felt their perspectives were not incorporated into their child's IEP development, 50% felt their child's services were not appropriate given their educational needs and 50% felt their child's diagnosis was not understood.

### Comments

“We feel we are equal partners in our child's educational program and plan. The team is very responsive to concerns and accommodations necessary for our child to access the curriculum. Our child's needs are central to all decisions.”

“I feel that the teachers and staff who work with my child truly care for their wellbeing and want to see my child succeed.”

- ❖ *What do you feel is working best for your child?*
  - “Terrific teachers”
  - Adult support
  - Small groups, pull-out services
  - Great teamwork
  - Special education teachers are: caring, understanding, adaptable
  - Classroom environment accepting of student’s unique personality and needs
- ❖ *What changes could improve your student's educational experience?*
  - Increase communication, build relationships between schools and families
  - Increase understanding of child’s diagnosis
  - Additional resources for special education
  - Less homework
- ❖ *What suggestions do you have to strengthen the partnership between families and schools?*
  - Communication of progress on an ongoing basis
  - Mutually respectful relationship, increased trust, empathy
  - Behavioral intervention and additional support for emotional disabilities
  - Clearer information regarding the IEP process
  - Transition planning and meetings between parents and staff
  - School events celebrating diversity and acceptance

## Summary

Parents and caregivers provided positive feedback overall and gave us important insight into successes and difficulties in their experiences. Questions focused on family-school partnership and service delivery for students. Communication was the central theme in comments and used with equal frequency by respondents at opposite ends of the spectrum of satisfaction. Parents and caregivers who felt connected cited communication as a strength and were confident in the consistency of their child’s programming because of the feedback they received from staff. Respondents who felt their perspective had not been heard and who felt their children were not receiving appropriate services felt less “in the loop,” and believed that relationships and more regular communication were the keys to building a stronger partnership with their schools and an improved educational experience for their children.

Please stay tuned for a special report on building transitions based on our survey.

## Looking Forward

- ❖ Continue collaborating with Meg Belsito.
  - Share survey themes to address areas of concern.
  - Continue holding regular meetings with board and community members.
- ❖ Work to grow our membership by offering engaging workshops, speakers, and trainings, while actively recruiting parents and caregivers to join our board.
- ❖ Hold Officer Elections in May.
- ❖ Stay connected to our school community.
  - Attend School Committee meeting.
  - Attend PTO Presidents' Council meetings.
  - Make SEPAC presentations at PTO meetings.
- ❖ Continue to increase our presence and make connections on social media.
- ❖ Create new website over the summer.
- ❖ Continue partnering with neighboring PACs to host speakers and workshops.
- ❖ Continue looking for opportunities to fundraise in the community.

## SEPAC Goals

- ❖ Establish a vibrant forum for parents and caregivers in the Shrewsbury Special Education community.
- ❖ Offer multiple opportunities for families to socialize and participate in special education related topics at meetings, workshops, and coffee hours.
- ❖ Provide resources and assistance to parents to help them navigate the system and simplify challenges.
- ❖ Actively reach families and address their questions and concerns via social media and email.
- ❖ Build new avenues of communication and collaboration with school professionals and administrators.

Lastly, we hope to always stay true to our vision of SEPAC described by families:

- ❖ Sharing
- ❖ Guidance
- ❖ Resources
- ❖ Connections
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Empathy

**We believe in the power of parents working together to make an impact.**

Thank you for taking the time to read our feedback. We strive to be a positive, solution-oriented group and are eager to collaborate with the Shrewsbury School District to provide the best possible outcomes for all students.

Rajesh Chug, Colleen Corbett, Jill DeBender, Bahar Jarkasy, Sanjiv Lal, and Blake Poggi