



Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council

May 19, 2025

Dr. Anna Nolin, Superintendent
Members of the Newton School Committee
Newton Public Schools
Newton Education Center
100 Walnut Street
Newton, MA 02460

RE: 2024-2025 Newton SEPAC End of Year Report

Dear Dr. Nolin and Members of the Newton School Committee,

On behalf of the special education parent/guardian community of Newton Public Schools, we respectfully submit the attached report, for your review.

Kindly,

The 2024-2025 Newton SEPAC Board



**2024-2025
End-of-Year Report
to the Newton School Committee**

May 19, 2025

To: The Newton School Committee: Rajeev Parlikar (Ward 1), Christopher Brezski (Chair, Ward 2), Anping Shen (Ward 3), Tamika Olszewski (Ward 4), Emily Prenner (Vice Chair, Ward 5), Paul Levy (Ward 6), Alicia Piedalue (Ward 7), Barry Greenstein (Ward 8), Mayor Ruthanne Fuller (*ex officio*); and Superintendent Anna Nolin

From: 2024-2025 Newton SE PAC Board Members: Jenny Klein-Sosa (Co-Chair), Sarah Riccardi-Swartz (Co-Chair), Eliza Spaulding (Co-Chair), Aileen Landau (Secretary), Jonathon Swersey (Treasurer), Jessie Damroth (At-Large), and Ani Ross Grubb (At-Large)

Cc: Casey Ngo-Miller, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services

Newton SEPAC 2024-2025 End-of-Year Report

What is the SEPAC?

Every School Committee in the Commonwealth is required to establish a Special Education Parent Advisory Council, per the Massachusetts General Laws, in part due to the legislative initiatives of Massachusetts Advocates for Children. The duties of the SEPAC include those noted below (M.G.L. c. 71B, 3):

“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...”

Other duties include meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development and evaluation of the district's special education programs; and collaborating with the district on their annual workshop on the rights of students, parents and guardians under state and federal law. The SEPAC is a self-governing public body which creates its own bylaws and operational procedures. A SEPAC is different from other parent groups in a school district such as a PTO, PTO Council, or School Council – a SEPAC does not represent families from one school, rather it represents all families of children with disabilities across the entire school district. The SEPAC is further differentiated from other parent groups in that its board is legislatively mandated to exist and interact with school district and City leadership in an advisory capacity.

2024-2025 Board Composition and School Liaisons

In accordance with the Newton SEPAC Bylaws¹, an election for the next school year's board is conducted in late spring. All nominees must be a parent or guardian of a student with a disability and/or special needs (either with or without an IEP or 504) enrolled in Newton Public Schools or Out of District placement. A board election was held in May 2024 which yielded 7 board members elected by majority vote, each to serve a one-year term (as per the Bylaws at that time). The elected group conferred and assigned Co-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, and At-Large roles, as follows.

- Co-Chair: Jenny Klein-Sosa
- Co-Chair: Sarah Riccardi-Swartz
- Co-Chair: Eliza Spaulding
- Secretary: Aileen Landau
- Treasurer: Jonathon Swersey
- At Large: Jessie Damroth
- At Large: Ani Ross Grubb

In addition to the board, other key leadership roles supported the year's work.

- SEPAC Election Coordinator: *vacant*
- School Committee Liaison to the SEPAC: Barry Greenstein

The position of SEPAC Liaison Coordinator continued to be unfilled during the 2024-2025 school year; therefore, responsibilities of this role were distributed among board members. At the writing of this report, the nomination and election process is currently underway for the 2025-2026 school year, and the next board will assume their roles on June 30, 2025.

¹ Newton SEPAC Bylaws (2025): <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y13eVmja4xf71wruySssDKIG6j-l8W6l/view>

Of the 22 Newton schools and out-of-district placements, a majority were represented by at least one SEPAC Liaison in 2024-2025. It should be noted that as this was the second consecutive year without a Liaison Coordinator, it continued to be difficult to identify volunteers to represent all schools. SEPAC Liaisons were instrumental in sharing information and resources and fostering community among families with children receiving special education services in Newton. At each school, SEPAC Liaisons meet regularly with administration, support special education staff, run support or informational groups for parents, include special education announcements in newsletters and ensure information about the SEPAC is distributed at school and at IEP/504 meetings. SEPAC Liaisons serve on all schools' PTO boards to ensure the needs of children with disabilities and their families are appropriately accommodated and included. They are also key links in the chain of communication between families and special education staff and administration.

Preschool:

NECP

Kris Ferreira, Jacquelyn Orleck

Elementary Schools:

Angier

Leigh Janczak

Bowen

Seema Joshi, Jordyne Wu

Burr

Eliza Spaulding

Cabot

Anna Claeys

Countryside

Janet Jackson, Sahar Zaheer

Franklin

Yael Mito

Horace Mann

Erica Remi

Lincoln Eliot

Winko An

Mason Rice

Kenneth Cheah, Linda Liu

Memorial-Spaulding

Jenny Klein-Sosa

Peirce

Elizabeth Scott

Underwood

Katherine Bilbo

Ward

Tabatha Flores

Williams

vacant

Zervas

Maureen Forry-Sorrell, Jacquelyne Orleck

Middle Schools:

Bigelow

Rocio Calvo

Brown

Cara Colgate

Day

Spencer Poole

Oak Hill

Seema Joshi, Niranjana Potnis, Jenny Klein-Sosa, Julie Swersey,
Tammy Tsikar

High Schools:

Newton North

Annette Nedeljkovic

Newton South

Irene Margolin-Katz, Viktoria Shad

Central High

vacant

Out-of-District:

Hannah Schuwarz

Values and Goal Setting

The Newton SEPAC board strives to work collaboratively with NPS toward realizing the district's core values of ensuring academic excellence, educational equity, and social and emotional well-being for all students. We entered the 2024-2025 school year with continued commitment to supporting Newton Public Schools (NPS) toward becoming an anti-ableist and disability-affirming school district. We continued to advocate strongly for policies and practices that respect and reflect students with disabilities by encouraging leaders to 1) elevate voices from disabled individuals in decision-making, 2) provide professional development opportunities for educators and administrators in disability-affirming practices and evidence-based approaches, 3) creating school environments and curricula with universal design principles at the forefront, and 4) ensuring that all disabled students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans provide equitable access to the curriculum and are implemented with fidelity over time.

Summer Work

In summer 2024, the board began the work of identifying shared priorities and developing goals for the year. A clear unifying sentiment shared by all board members was that there was work to be done toward ensuring that all NPS classrooms would foster a sense of belonging, understanding, and acceptance for every student. We shared the belief that accomplishing true and meaningful inclusion for students with disabilities requires a common understanding of what "ableism" looks like in our district, as well as a top-down commitment from district leadership to challenge it. In addition, we affirmed that the SEPAC board and the special education parent/guardian community must work in collaborative partnership with district leaders and the School Committee around policy development and procedural changes that affect students with disabilities in unique ways. Board members shared a desire for increased transparency, clarity, and standardization around NPS's policies and practices related to many issues, including medically complex needs, extended time-outs and seclusion, Extended School Year eligibility, the new IEP form, and reporting and responding to bullying and discrimination against students with disabilities. We all felt strongly that data about our special education population should be made public early and be referenced often in districtwide decision-making. We further agreed on the importance of encouraging accountability from district leaders for improving all students' inclusive environment, while also ensuring that all disabled students' IEPs/504s are implemented with fidelity and at a level of rigor and quality that is beyond the statutory minimum. And we also acknowledged that our SEPAC family community has felt less united in recent years, given the many stressors families have experienced (e.g., the abrupt discontinuation of UOD, the teachers' strike, budget challenges, etc.). We expressed a desire to build relationships, share knowledge and learnings, and find avenues for reaching out to and socializing more often with one another. After gathering this information internally, the board engaged the larger SEPAC community to seek and incorporate their feedback in next steps.

2024-2025 SEPAC Family Survey

In August 2024, the board put out a SEPAC Family Survey to gain a better understanding of our community's priorities. Participation was limited to only parents or guardians of currently enrolled NPS students, in an effort to capture real-time perspectives from families engaging with NPS at this time. There were 147 respondents to the survey. Each individual reported having at least one currently enrolled NPS student, 89% of whom had a current IEP. Respondents' demographic details and priorities are listed below. Results from this survey were shared at Newton SEPAC open board meetings and discussed with the Office of Student Services (OSS).

Demographics

- Levels/placements reported for all students in the household
 - 56% NPS preschool or elementary school
 - 20% NPS middle school
 - 28% NPS high school
 - 7% in Out of District placement
- IEP/504 involvement
 - 89% had at least one student with an IEP (+/- 504, evaluation ongoing)

- 16% had a student with a 504 (9 respondents with both)
 - 4% were engaged in the eval process
- Transportation
 - 18% used NPS van services
 - 9% used yellow bus
- Other
 - 3% METCO
 - 5% NPS Staff members
- Gender identification of respondents' students
 - 56% had at least one female student
 - 55% had at least one male student
 - 3% had at least one non-binary or gender fluid student
 - 6% declined to say
- Race of respondents' students
 - 62% white or caucasian
 - 12% asian
 - 11% black or african american
 - 9% hispanic/latino
- Household income
 - 21% less than \$75K
 - 32% between \$75K and \$150K
 - 38% between \$150 and \$500K
 - 9% \$500K or higher

Priorities

- The **highest priorities** for respondents (defined as topics with $\geq 60\%$ of respondents rating "High" or "Medium"):
 - Budgeting and staffing for inclusive, high-quality special education services (86%)
 - Bullying and discrimination against students with disabilities (85%)
 - Creating a sense of belonging (80%)
 - New IEP form - elevating student voices and deepening IEP conversations (77%)
 - Addressing accessibility gaps in our schools (field trips, classrooms, playgrounds buildings, general ed curriculum, etc.) (76%)
 - Transitions between levels (PK to K, elementary to middle, middle to high) (71%)
 - Math, curriculum evaluation and course offerings (70%)
 - Literacy, including dyslexia screening and new curricula rollouts (69%)
 - Internet-enabled devices - considerations for students with disabilities (63%)
 - Hiring and retaining disabled educators (64%)
 - Becoming an anti-ableist school district - best practices and goal setting (61%)
- The **lowest priorities** for respondents (defined as topics with $\geq 25\%$ of respondents rating "Low" or "Not a priority right now"):
 - Hosting an Annual Awards Ceremony (37%)
 - Updating SEPAC bylaws (29%)
 - Challenges for medically complex students and their families (27%)
 - Transportation issues, improving communication re: driver/route (27%)
- Examples of write-in answers tied to certain higher priority domains:
 - Budgeting and staffing for inclusive, high-quality special education services
 - training and support for aides/BTs
 - Creating a sense of belonging
 - training for teachers and staff around disability awareness, inclusive, affirming practices and accommodations

Board Areas of Focus

The survey results, combined with the board's experiences as SEPAC leaders, guided the selection of goal areas for the year. The central areas of focus selected were:

- Strengthening relationships so the SEPAC community is considered during the decision-making process, rather than an afterthought
- Parent education and support (re: basic rights, strengthening the special education process, new IEP)
- Fostering a sense of belonging in all classrooms (e.g., anti-ableism work)
- Encouraging NPS to improve collaboration, communication, clarity, and standardization around policies and practices
- Improving transparency and placement in transitions (Pre-K to K, elementary to middle school, middle to high school) and supporting students as they navigate major disruptions to their routines
- Advocacy for budgeting/staffing for high quality special education services
- Updating SEPAC bylaws

Request for NPS to Provide Yearly Public Data Review on Students with Disabilities

For the last several years, the Newton SEPAC's End of Year reports have included a detailed overview of publicly accessible data describing many aspects of our students with disabilities. We have shared trend analyses on enrollment, placements, attendance/absenteeism, social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and indicators of post-secondary success. We have seen these analyses referenced by NPS administration in public meetings on multiple occasions, and we appreciate that our 2023-2024 End-of-Year report was incorporated as a component of the data package utilized during NPS's recent strategic planning process. This tells us that the information we have presented has been useful.

While these analysis tools can be used by the public to search for specific points of information, there are significant limitations to how easily and comprehensively data can be pulled together in this way. First, only a subset of the information that the district submits yearly to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is available via public facing tools. Of the data published, only a subset is disaggregated for students with disabilities and displayed in charts and graphs. An even more limited set of data can be compared with other student groups (e.g., non-disabled), between different schools within a district, and among peer districts (e.g., neighboring towns, demographically similar student populations). While it is meaningful for parent/guardian-led groups like ours to engage in data analysis using these tools, it is a cumbersome process that is constrained by the lack of access to the full scope of data that the district retains. NPS has the capacity to access the entirety of their internal datasets with ease, and to analyze all subgroups with precision, without the limitations and constraints of public data tools.

This is why we have coupled our sharing of data analyses with requests for NPS to *adopt a regular process by which they examine characteristics of our disabled student population and share this information publicly at the beginning of each school year*. This past fall, the Office of Student Services (OSS) provided a selected set of data in their overview presented to School Committee², for which we were grateful. We would like to request that this data review be expanded to contain a broader summary of information, and for this to become a formalized, regular practice every fall. It is vital for our community to understand the demographics, progress, and outcomes of our students with disabilities over time. We also believe that for our School Committee to make informed decisions regarding our students in special education, they must understand the students they serve, as well as the current state of staffing, servicing, and programming available to these students. *A thorough public data review and presentation about our students with disabilities, given at the start of each school year, will set the stage for decision makers to keep students with disabilities in mind during public discourse on policies and procedures.*

² OSS Update, October 2024: https://drive.google.com/file/d/148ptDP5iXNKR_3mqyTnU8_alGtcDeV7y/view?usp=share_link

As a start, we respectfully suggest the following data be shared *in trend format* (over the most recent 5 years):

- Enrollment for students with disabilities, by districtwide grade level, and also by school, with comparison to all students
- Percentages of students in each federal disability category, districtwide
- Rates of overlap between disability status and other subgroups (economically disadvantaged, ELL, and racial subgroups)
- Estimated *future* enrollment for students with disabilities, as a standard part of the yearly Enrollment Analysis Report
- Special education staffing by position/category, by school
- Percent proficiency in core academic content areas (ELA, mathematics, science), by grade, by school, for disabled and non-disabled
- Rates of attendance/absenteeism, by grade, by school, for disabled and non-disabled
- Indicators of social and emotional well-being (YRBS, Panorama, Suicide risk surveys, etc.), by disabled and non-disabled
- Percent enrolled in AP coursework, by disabled and non-disabled
- Percent of graduating students with disabilities who have completed MassCore, as compared to non-disabled
- Rates of physical restraints and time-outs, by disabled and non-disabled, by school
- Rates of reports and investigations of bullying and discrimination against students with disabilities
- Rates of general education students identified by screening as high-risk for dyslexia, by school
- Percent of students with disabilities qualifying for Extended School Year
- Number of eligibility evaluation requests and percent of those requests resulting in IEP/504 eligibility
- Number of Out of District (OOD) placements and related costs

Advisory Efforts

A key role of the SEPAC is to serve in an advisory capacity for Newton Public Schools and the School Committee, and to represent the needs of our special education students and families in collaboration with other related organizations. Below are some ways in which we fulfilled our legislative advisory mandate this year, keeping the needs of students with disabilities at the center.

The school year began with a new Personal Device Use policy in place, upon which the School Committee would vote at their first meeting of the year. The SEPAC board reviewed the draft policy language, and also received feedback from the community regarding the lack of parent/family participation in the development of this policy. We received concerns about whether and how exceptions would be made for students with disabilities who require access during the school day to personal electronic devices, such as cell phones, tablets, smartwatches, and internet- or Bluetooth enabled noise cancelling headphones. We conveyed this feedback to NPS, and updates were made to the policy.

Also within the first few weeks of the school year, NPS released its 2024-2025 Bridge Goals³ to the School Committee, with a vote scheduled in short order. The Newton SEPAC provided urgent feedback to leaders requesting that the needs of students with disabilities be included in the year's goals, even if they were considered interim (i.e., preceding development of a 5-year strategic plan). In particular, we encouraged NPS to explicitly include students with disabilities in efforts and outcome metrics intended to narrow achievement gaps. Some updates were made to the system-wide goals, consistent with our requests.

³ Newton Public Schools' 2024-2025 Bridge Goals:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NJIDbCQKICWVh_6L7JadAYh_GTUTBOKM/view?usp=share_link

Another challenging situation arose next, related to special education van transportation. Many students with disabilities have transportation written into their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as a service for which the school district is responsible under state and federal special education laws. When a concerning event related to special education van transportation was reported in the media, the SEPAC board immediately gathered questions from our community and shared these with NPS administration. We encouraged transparency from our district leaders to address families' concerns, and encouraged more clear and consistent oversight of third party vendor transportation companies. In addition, we requested that NPS find a solution that would allow parents and guardians to track the van movements for our most vulnerable students, to ensure their safety.

As described above, there were many difficult conversations between the SEPAC board and district administrators early this year, which tested the foundation for a productive working relationship going forward. In the wake of these events, new norms were established for collaborative partnership goals between the SEPAC board and Assistant Superintendent Casey Ngo-Miller and the Office of Student Services (OSS). In addition, Superintendent Nolin agreed to engage directly with the SEPAC board as well, through quarterly meetings, as an additional way to facilitate open dialogue and communication moving forward.

The next area of collective focus turned to accessibility considerations for students with disabilities in planning for field trips. This has long been an area of challenge, given inconsistencies across schools in the processes and practices of staff in decision-making about locations or activities chosen, requests or requirements for parent/guardian involvement and/or supervision during trips, and assistive supports and alternative options to allow students with disabilities to be fully included in all events. OSS solicited feedback from the SEPAC board on proposed updates to an internal guidance document being developed for staff. OSS also collaborated with the SEPAC board on the development of a field trip checklist that could be used in the planning process. These documents were still in the development phase at the time of this writing, however, the SEPAC board requested that once the documents are finalized and shared internally, they should also be shared publicly with families so they are made aware of the changes being implemented.

Over the last several years, the SEPAC board has also engaged with NPS administration around the rollout of the new IEP form⁴, which was required to be fully implemented statewide by fall 2024. NPS held a number of virtual parent information sessions about the new IEP during the summer before this school year, and they also held one in-person session in fall of 2024. In addition, the district began a new process this year of gathering parent concerns/feedback for IEP/504 Teams—via a google form that includes the following prompts:

- List your student's strengths, interests, and preferences.
- What do you see as an area of growth or a personal achievement for your student over the past year?
- Describe your priorities for growth and hopes for your student through the next year.
- Describe your hopes for your student and priorities for their learning over the next several years.
- What concerns or questions about your student's development/learning would you like to highlight for the team?

The intent of OSS's new google form is to collect parent/guardian perspectives more proactively, in advance of IEP Team meetings, so that family feedback may be more seamlessly incorporated into discussions. Over the course of this school year, the SEPAC board has heard from many parents who have experienced a smooth transition into using the new IEP form, including engaging in OSS's new system for gathering parent input. Some families, however, have expressed a desire for more information, therefore, we have encouraged OSS to consider hosting an additional parent information session. They noted this will be forthcoming.

Another topic of concern communicated by many parents and shared with OSS was the removal of the "Special Education Program Overview" from NPS's website. This document, also referred to as the "program guide," is a vital resource to families as they navigate transitions for their students between levels, from preschool to elementary, elementary to middle, and middle to high. Family feedback that has been consistently shared with the SEPAC board is that recommendations for student placement are often provided by IEP team members (staff) without additional descriptions of the full scope of inclusive and substantially separate special education programming that is available at different schools within the district. Therefore, this document is the only source of information that families have about districtwide programming to review before meetings. OSS shared that the

⁴ [DESE's IEP Improvement Project - Forms and Resources](#)

document was taken down from the NPS website due to an error in the descriptions of the language-based learning programs at the two high schools. It is our understanding that these errors are being fixed and that the entire document will be reformatted, with the bulk of work to happen this coming summer. We encourage OSS to complete these updates as soon as possible and return this important document to the website for families to reference as they navigate the IEP process.

In March 2025, the School Committee voted to approve an NPS FY26 budget that exceeded the amount allocated by the City. The SEPAC board engaged in a number of efforts to advocate for sufficient funding to support the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. This included speaking at Public Comment during a School Committee meeting, attending meetings with peer organizations to coordinate advocacy efforts, and sharing concerns of families with students in special education directly to members of the School Committee, City Council, and other school and community leaders. Given the ongoing uncertainty about the FY26 NPS budget, and understanding that staffing cuts beyond those based on enrollment declines are possible, the Newton SEPAC continues to encourage transparency around special educator staff caseloads, staff-to-student ratios, and programmatic changes within special education going forward.

Committee Representation

As the district engages in planning and implementing system-wide initiatives, the SEPAC board continually seeks to offer input on behalf of students with disabilities, often as members of committees and working groups organized by district leaders. The following are some of the groups that included SEPAC board representatives this year.

Since August 2023, NPS has been developing the *Getting to Know You and Me* curriculum for elementary students, designed around anti-ableist, disability-affirming principles. The working group tasked with this initiative is led by Dr. Maria Kolbe, who assumed the role of Director of Multi-tiered Systems of Support at the end of last school year. The SEPAC board has maintained our presence in this group, with two current board members attending meetings regularly this school year, and observing one month's lesson as teachers taught it across classrooms and grades in one school. The role of SEPAC representation within the working group has been to include a wide range of perspectives and bring as many voices from our community as possible into the conversation. The curriculum was piloted at Angier Elementary School during the 2024-2025 school year, and it is our understanding that the curriculum is slated to be implemented across all elementary schools in the 2025-2026 school year.

This past fall, NPS engaged in a process to develop its *Portrait of a Learner*, a vision for "the essential competencies our students need to thrive in a rapidly evolving world."⁵ NPS engaged a range of stakeholders in this process, including educators, parents, students, community leaders, and two SEPAC board members. The 5 competencies chosen as highest priorities from this process were critical thinking, communication, empathy, adaptability, and a learner's mindset.

A SEPAC board representative also participated as a member of the NPS Strategic Planning Committee, along with a number of other staff, parents, students, and community representatives. NPS created this committee "to look at the District Bridge Goals and new Portrait of a Learner in an effort to develop the new five-year strategic plan that will be shared with the community in spring/summer 2025." One of the norms of the committee was to "honor the empty chair" - e.g. consider the perspectives of those who were not present in the meetings; as such, having a SEPAC board member on the committee enabled us to advocate for students with disabilities as we set NPS's new mission statement, core values, and vision.

A SEPAC board representative also attended all PTOC board meetings and gatherings of the general PTOC membership. The presence of a SEPAC representative provided an opportunity to share information related to special education and families with disabilities with the PTOC, and to relay information from the PTOC back to the SEPAC community. At this year's PTOC meetings, NPS proposed new guidelines for parent-led organizations in the district whose mission is to support students in the district (PTOs, Boosters). In response,

⁵ Newton Public Schools 2024-2025 Annual Report - <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mWyuLY5enQybf34clSBRpgxVFQZbhThy/view>

the SEPAC board delivered a statement to School Committee and NPS leaders clarifying that as a statutorily mandated advisory body, the SEPAC is not subject to the guidelines.

Finally, the SEPAC board also engaged with DESE this year as part of NPS's 3-year Integrated Monitoring Review, in an effort to share parent and guardian feedback related to special education in NPS.

Board Meetings and Bylaws Update

Open board meetings were held monthly, with a total of 9 of 10 meetings held at the date of this report. They were offered via Zoom on weeknight evenings. Board meetings were an opportunity to plan and discuss presentations, discuss community concerns, and disseminate information from NPS and other important resources. There were many constructive discussions on timely topics and the meetings offered a venue to gather feedback from the community. Topics of interest to the SEPAC community this year included accessibility (e.g., field trips, PTO events, physical buildings and spaces), difficulties with students' use of technological learning platforms (e.g., Schoology), Extended School Year (ESY) eligibility, and challenges with student transitions in the absence of information previously available in NPS's Special Education Program Overview document..

In addition, board representatives met with NPS's Office of Student Services leadership monthly throughout the school year. Meetings took place in-person and were attended by a SEPAC Chair and rotating SEPAC board members. NPS representation included Casey Ngo-Miller (Assistant Superintendent for Student Services), Maura Tynes (Director of Elementary Special Education), and Melissa Gamble (Director of Secondary Special Education and Special Services). Portions of some meetings were also attended by Dr. Anna Nolin, Dr. Gina Flanagan, and Christina Maryland. During these meetings we discussed community concerns, advised on a range of topics, and discussed upcoming events.

Bylaws Update

During spring 2025, two SEPAC board members and one SEPAC community volunteer (Alena Reva) revised the SEPAC Bylaws. The bylaws had last been updated on April 5, 2017. Their work began by identifying a number of areas in need of attention, including voting procedures and board composition, and reviewing other SEPACs' Bylaws. They presented the first round of proposed changes during the April 8, 2025 SEPAC open board meeting. After this, Dan Heffernan, an attorney with Kotin, Crabtree & Strong, kindly reviewed the proposed changes and provided further feedback, which was presented at the May 6, 2025 SEPAC open board meeting. All SEPAC board members were offered the opportunity to provide feedback throughout the process, including participating in the final editing. On May 12, 2025, new Bylaws were voted upon electronically by the SEPAC board, and were approved (see Appendix A).

Potential Speaker Series

Throughout this year, the potential for NPS and SEPAC to develop a joint speaker series was discussed. The Office of Student Services communicated interest in working with the SEPAC board to scope out 2-3 presentations that would be organized together. A joint grant application was submitted to the Newton Schools Foundation to support this work, and a draft Memorandum of Understanding was discussed. In May 2025, the grant application was withdrawn by OSS, and planning for a speaker series was paused. The next SEPAC board is encouraged to continue conversations with administration around the potential to partner to develop a speaker series in the coming school year.

The following presentations were organized and hosted during the 2024-2025 school year:

- On October 24, 2024, Elaine Rabitt, a parent support specialist with the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) delivered a presentation entitled "Understanding Basic Rights in Special Education," which focused on evaluation, eligibility, and making sense of the IEP. It covered

understanding parental and student rights under special education law, understanding special education procedures, and aimed to help parents and caregivers be more active, collaborative participants in the team process.

- On March 25, 2025, Maria Stefano, Dominic Taliento, and Roberta Lewonis from the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services gave a “DDS 101” presentation. This presentation explained how DDS is structured to cover different regions of the state, what services they provide, eligibility for children and adults, support options for families, and information about the transition process to adult services at age 22.
- On May 14, 2025, Dr. Nadine Gaab, offered a presentation and Q&A for NPS families, entitled “Let’s Talk Reading! How children learn to read, and why creating a strong community is important.” This talk was designed to help families understand the stages of reading development, explore how different parts of the brain work together to make reading possible, understand what reading disabilities are, how we can spot early signs, and why early identification is so important, and discuss how we can work together as parents, teachers, and community members to create a supportive environment that nurtures a love for reading.

Looking to the Future: Collaboration Opportunities and Partnership Goals

In considering the review of our efforts throughout this and past school years, the SEPAC board encourages our district and city leaders, NPS educators and support staff, community members, residents, families, and students to consider the following guiding principles that shape our perspective:

- We must commit to creating a district-wide educational environment that **values, respects, and elevates all aspects of students’ many identities**, including physical disabilities, neurodiversity, learning differences, cognitive and developmental differences, and other unique experiences of life.
- We must have **high expectations** for every student with a disability to reach their fullest academic and social-emotional potential.
- We must ensure that every student with an IEP or 504 plan consistently receives the type(s) and intensity of supports that allow **full access to the general education curriculum** across all subjects, across all grade levels, and across all aspects of the school life experience.
- We must ensure that students with disabilities have **equitable access to rigorous, high level coursework** and the full range of classes offered to their peers; and we must remove barriers to this happening.
- We must **allocate the necessary resources** to ensure equity and excellence for all students with disabilities, with a bar set higher than meeting minimal compliance mandates.

In the next school year, referencing the principles above, the SEPAC will continue to partner with NPS leadership in efforts aimed at adopting an anti-ableist lens in developing and updating policies and practices across the district.

School Committee representatives who attend our gatherings are instrumental in conveying information both from and to the SEPAC. The SEPAC board has consistently requested to have all members of the School Committee rotate through attending SEPAC open board meetings, with the hopes of building upon their understanding of SEPAC families’ experiences, and giving each the opportunity to hear our community’s feedback directly. We hope this will remain a consideration next school year, especially as the composition of the School Committee will change significantly with a majority of seats turning over.

Caregiver-based community groups such as ELPAC (English Learners Parent Advisory Council), PTOC (Council for Parent Teacher Organizations), FORJ (Families Organizing for Racial Justice), METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity), and school PTOs (Parent Teacher Organizations) all serve an invaluable role in individual school communities and across the whole district. We look forward to continuing meaningful collaboration with these organizations.

SEPAC also prioritizes connecting our community members with one another. It can often be difficult for current parents and caregivers of students with IEPs and 504 plans to find and reach out to each other. For important reasons related to protecting students' confidentiality and privacy, parent contact lists are not shared within or between schools. Our SEPAC listserv is limited to those who opt-in by requesting to be included. We believe that to reach the most families and offer our caregiver-to-caregiver support, NPS and City leaders hold the key. Therefore, we would again like to request for SEPAC contact information to be biannually (fall and spring) included in the Superintendent's and the Mayor's email communications. We also continue to request for the Office of Student Services to ensure that all schools' IEP Team Leads provide a hard-copy SEPAC brochure to families at all IEP team meetings, in concert with the regular provision of the parental statement of rights document. Finally, an additional request is for NPS to open an opt-in mechanism through Parent Square for families of students with disabilities to connect with one another. We understand that it is indeed possible to create groups like this in a manner that preserves confidentiality, and we hope that NPS would consider using this tool—which, as of this school year, is in full use by all parents across the district—to assist with making important connections among families.

Finally, SEPAC continued efforts to keep our community connected with one another, by maintaining a google listserv, Facebook group, and website to communicate and provide information for members. The recruitment of a SEPAC Liaison Chair must be a high priority for next year's board. In the absence of a point person to bring all schools' Liaisons together, information pathways are less robust.

We are grateful for the opportunity to have served in our roles as SEPAC board members this year, and we hope for continued partnership and collaboration between SEPAC board and members, and the larger Newton community. We recommend that the incoming SEPAC board begin the year by surveying our parent community to determine highest priority goals going forward.

Recognition and Gratitude

We appreciate the opportunity to share our work with the Newton School Committee. The Newton SEPAC would not be a successful conduit for our families without the dedicated leaders of our City, our school district, our School Committee, our board, and of course, our tireless educators.

SEPAC annually collects nominations for the SEPAC Awards, which recognize NPS and Out of District teachers and staff who have played an exceptional role in the lives of students with disabilities this past academic year. We are still in the process of collecting nominations through May 19, 2025. Nominees will receive emails with nomination statements, and award certificates delivered to their schools.

Appendix A.

Newton SEPAC Bylaws

Newton SEPAC Bylaws

Approved May 12, 2025

Article I: Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council Bylaws

The name of this self-governed organization shall be the Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council also known as the Newton SEPAC. The organization may use either name in its official communications, documents, and activities. The Newton SEPAC is established pursuant to Massachusetts General Law Chapter 71B, Section 3 and 603 CMR 28.07(4), which requires the formation of a parent advisory council on special education in each school district.

Article II: Purpose of the Newton SEPAC

The purpose of the Newton SEPAC is to work for the understanding, respect, and support of students with special needs and their families in the Newton community. To that end, they will work to:

- Promote a community of parents and guardians of students with special needs, and provide a forum to share information.
- Advise the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services and Office of Student Services, School Committee, and Superintendent on the development, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of special education programs, and the health, safety, policies, and plans impacting students with special needs. This role will be fulfilled through regular meetings with the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services and Office of Student Services, regular contact with the School Committee and Superintendent, and an annual presentation to the School Committee and Superintendent on the status of special education in the district.
 - Assist the district in coordinating the presentation of at least one workshop annually on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under state and federal special education laws.
- Promote communication between Newton SEPAC members and local, state, and national organizations, councils and groups.
- Promote informational programs for the community to encourage awareness, understanding, and inclusion of students with special needs.
- Collaborate, when possible, with other parent and community groups to advance shared goals related to inclusion, equity, and student success.

Article III: Terms of Membership

Section A General Membership

General membership shall be open to any interested person.

Section B Voting Membership

Voting Membership shall be any general member who is a student (14-22 years old) or parent or guardian of a student with special needs, with or without an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan, who is enrolled in a Newton Public Schools (NPS) school or program or has NPS as their designated local educational authority.

Section C Board Eligibility

Parents or guardians of a student with special needs (age 3-22), with or without an IEP or 504 Plan, who is enrolled in an NPS school or program or has NPS as their designated local educational authority, may stand for board elections.

Section D Business Matters

Voting on business matters shall be limited to the current Board in order to perform its work on behalf of the Newton SEPAC community. Voting may take place at open or closed Board meetings, or by electronic communication, the results of which are to be announced at the following open Board meeting and recorded in the minutes. Motions with a simple majority will pass.

Article IV: Officers of the Newton SEPAC

Officers of the Newton SEPAC must be eligible voting members, are elected by the voting membership, and hold office for two years with the exception of the Chair Emeritus or Emeriti, who serves for one year. The term "Officer" may be used interchangeably with "Board Member." The Chair or Co-Chairs may serve three consecutive terms with a two-year term break before serving again. Officers are expected to attend open and closed Board meetings, and to strive for decision-making that focuses on collaboration and consensus-building. Officer responsibilities of the Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council are as follows:

- Chair or Co-Chairs (1-3):
 - Set open and closed Board meeting agendas.
 - Preside at all meetings of the Newton SEPAC.
 - Monitor and facilitate the activities of other Officers.
 - Act as liaison(s) with the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services and Office of Student Services, the School Committee, and the Superintendent.
 - Represent and speak on behalf of Newton SEPAC at School Committee meetings.
 - May appoint an eligible voting member as a Board member in the event of a preterm vacancy.
 - May create standing or ad hoc committees to further the purpose of the Newton SEPAC. Committee chairs must be voting members. Monitor and facilitate activities of committees.
- Secretary (1):
 - Record open and closed Board Meetings.
 - File all open Board meeting minutes on the SEPAC internal share drive and Newton SEPAC website. File all other SEPAC meeting minutes, including subcommittees on the SEPAC Google Drive.
 - Count and record all voting results in the current or following open Board meeting minutes.
- Treasurer (1):
 - Coordinate efforts to apply for grants, donations, reimbursements, or any other funds for which the Newton SEPAC may be eligible.
 - Manage an account for funds collected, donated, and spent for the Newton SEPAC.
 - Prepare and report financial statements at the request of the Chair(s).
 - Monitor Newton SEPAC compliance with the bylaws and relevant state and federal laws and regulations.
- Liaison Chair (1):
 - Work with individual schools to identify SEPAC liaison(s).
 - Facilitate communication between the Board and School Liaisons.
 - Communicate regularly with School Liaisons to support their activities.
 - In advance of Open Meetings, confirm attendance and gather updates from School Liaisons who cannot be present to report.
- Program Chair(s) (1-2):
 - Organize educational and community-building events related to the Newton SEPAC purpose and of broad interest to the SEPAC community.

- Coordinate with Newton Public Schools to ensure Newton SEPAC sponsored events are as accessible as possible for the community, including asking attendees for their accessibility needs and accommodating them to the best of the Board's ability.
- Maintain a log on the Newton SEPAC Google Drive of all SEPAC events and attendance.
- Communications Chair (1):
 - Check the Newton SEPAC email, Listserv, and social media account(s) regularly and respond to messages in a timely fashion.
 - Update the Newton SEPAC website.
 - Design promotions for Newton SEPAC events and initiatives.
 - Promote Newton SEPAC events and initiatives.
- Board Emeritus (1):
 - Board member from the immediately preceding term to serve as a resource to the current Board to support continuity of relationships, practices, and initiatives. Ideally this position is fulfilled by a former Chair but any role can fulfill this position.

Article V: School Liaisons

School Liaisons are appointed by the Board and should be designated for each school and one Liaison representing all Out of District placements. Ideally, the Liaison to each school will be a parent/guardian of a student attending the school. School Liaisons serve as a conduit between their school communities and the Newton SEPAC Board and as a parent/guardian resource for school administrators and parents/guardians of students with special needs in their school communities. In addition, they have the following responsibilities:

- At the beginning of each school year, introduce oneself to the Principal, Special Education team, parents/guardians, and PTO, explain your role, and share your contact information.
- Attend PTO and other relevant community meetings at the school(s) they represent.
- Report on school issues and events at Newton SEPAC Open Board Meetings.
- Distribute Newton SEPAC information and updates to school communications.

Article VI: Elections

Elections shall take place May to June. In the ballot, candidates shall state all role(s) in which they are willing to serve. Voting will be available electronically, in person, or hybrid. Elections must be held for a minimum of 7 days, and shall be decided by a simple majority of votes cast by the voting members. In the event of a tie, a runoff election will be held within 7 days. Following the election, Officers convene to decide their roles, with an immediate announcement to follow on Newton SEPAC communication channels. New officers shall take office on June 30.

Section A Nominating Committee

By September 30th, the incoming Chair or Co-Chairs will appoint a Nominating Committee of 1-3 parents or guardians of students with special needs, with or without an IEP or 504 Plan, who reside in Newton or whose students attend school in Newton. Throughout the year, the Nominating Committee will actively recruit for potential eligible Board members, maintaining a spreadsheet on the SEPAC internal share drive. May-June of election years, the Nominating Committee will run the election including soliciting for nominations, opening and closing the election, and announcing the election results.

Section B Removal of Officers

Any Officer who does not perform the duties of the office may be relieved of the position by a simple majority vote of the remaining officers in-person or by email.

Section C Resignation of Officers

An Officer may resign by submitting written notice to the Chair or Co-Chairs.

Article VII: Conflict of Interest

Any Officer who has a financial, personal, or official interest in, or conflict (or appearance of a conflict) with any matter pending before the Newton SEPAC, of such nature that it prevents or may prevent that Officer from acting on the matter in an impartial manner, will offer to the Board to voluntarily excuse themselves and refrain from discussion and voting on said item.

Article VIII: Meetings

Meetings are defined as any Newton SEPAC meeting, activity, or committee at which attendance is taken. A minimum of 6 open meetings shall be held annually. Notice of all open meetings and elections shall be posted on the Newton SEPAC Listserv, Newton SEPAC social media, and in school newsletters approximately 1 week in advance. Newton SEPAC does not operate under MA Open Meeting Law in accordance with [guidance from the MA Attorney General](#).

Article IX: Amendments

These bylaws may be amended by a simple majority of the voting members, cast either at an open meeting or electronically, but changes to these bylaws may not be voted upon in the same meeting as they were proposed. It is recommended that these bylaws be reviewed every 3-5 years or as laws governing SEPACs meaningfully change.

Article X: Robert's Rules of Order

The latest edition of Robert's Rules of Order may be used as a guide at the discretion of the Chair or Co-Chairs except where they conflict with these bylaws.

Appendix I: Relevant Laws

[MGL 71B: Children with Special Needs](#)

[34 CFR § 300.167: Special Education Advisory Panel](#)

[603 CMR 28.00: Special Education](#)