



APPLE Institute

Advancing Parent & Professional Leadership Education
May 18, 2026



What is FCSN's APPLE Institute?



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A.P.P.L.E. brings together family (SEPAC), school, and community leaders to form strong, collaborative teams within their school district. These teams work together to improve student outcomes, strengthen family–school relationships, and create more effective and inclusive district practices.



Research shows that when families, schools, and communities work together, students do better. A.P.P.L.E. is designed to turn that research into real action.



Our team

SEPAC Members

- Abby Hare
- Jess Perez Adams
- Liz Eldridge
- Sam Steiner
- Sara Krakauer

District special education leaders

- Idefonso Arellano - Director of Special Education
- Marisa MacDonald - Assistant Director of Special Education

Community partner

- Maria Teresa Nagel - Director of Immigrant Affairs for Somerville



Our Aspiration Statement

Pause with intention, listen, and collaborate to create a culture of belonging so students can thrive academically, socially and emotionally.



What we created

Massachusetts IEP Quick Start Guide

We created a Massachusetts IEP Quick Start Guide to help families understand their immediate rights, next steps, and role as equal members of the IEP Team.


The guide gives families plain-language information on:


- What an IEP is
- What to do if they have concerns about their child's progress
- Key Massachusetts special education timelines
- How to prepare for IEP meetings
- How to respond when they receive an IEP
- Where to go for help

We also expanded the SEPAC IEP Rights & Resources page into a broader family resource hub, with guides on the IEP process, timelines, eligibility, evaluations, Prior Written Notice, 504 plans, accommodations, and problem-solving in Somerville.



 <https://somervillesepac.wixsite.com/sepac/iep-rights-resources>

 **Translation was a priority:** The website and all resources are translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole so families can access information in the language that works best for them.



1. What is an IEP?

An **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is a legal document that describes the specific special education services, supports, and goals a school will provide for a student with a disability. It is designed to meet the student's unique needs so they can make progress in school.

To get an IEP, a student must be "eligible." This means they must have a disability that prevents them from making effective progress in school without specialized help.

Note: Under the "Child Find" law, the school district is legally required to identify and evaluate any child who may have a disability.

2. If You Have Concerns About Your Child's Progress

Not every struggle requires a formal evaluation. Use this decision path to find the right starting point:

Path A: General Academic or Social Concerns. If you notice your child is struggling with specific lessons, friendship dynamics, or general classroom behavior.

- **First Step:** Contact your child's classroom teacher.
- **What to ask:** "What supports are available in the general education classroom, and is my child currently receiving any Tier 2 interventions?"
- **Goal:** To see if small adjustments or extra help from the teacher can resolve the issue.

Path B: Suspected Disability or Need for Specialized Services. If you believe your child has a disability that requires specialized instruction or if general education supports are not enough.

- **The Action:** Request a formal **Special Education Evaluation**. This is a legal process specifically to determine if your child is eligible for an IEP.
- **How to start:** Write a letter or email to the School Special Education Coordinator, Principal, or Special Education Director.

Unsure which path to take? Every child and situation is unique. If you need help deciding or want to discuss your individual situation, you can always reach out to your school's administration or contact the **SEPAC** for guidance and support.

3. Key Timelines (Massachusetts)

- **5 School Days:** School sends consent forms after your written request.
- **30 School Working Days:** Evaluations must be completed by the school.
- **45 School Working Days:** Evaluations are finished, the Team meets, and an IEP is developed if your child is found eligible.
- **30 Calendar Days:** You have 30 days to respond to the proposed IEP (Accept, Reject, or Partially Accept).

4. Your Role on the Team

You are a **full Team member**, not a guest. You are the expert on your child.

Meeting Preparation: Review the attendance sheet to ensure all required members are present. You have the right to record meetings in Massachusetts, provided you give notice. To be collaborative, notify the Team chair in writing 48 hours in advance. If the district objects, ask for their own recording of the meeting or bring a dedicated note-taker.





- Share your child's strengths, interests, and your vision for their future.
- Advocate for a "Whole Child" approach: Ask for language that represents your child as a whole person. This means the IEP should be true to who they are, balancing their unique strengths and identity with a clear, honest description of their areas of challenge and specific support needs.
- You have the right to bring a support person or advocate.
- You can request an interpreter at no cost to you.

5. When You Get the IEP



You have three main options for responding:

1. **Accept in Full:** All services and goals begin immediately.
2. **Reject in Full:** No changes are made; the "Stay Put" rule applies (the school must keep the previous plan in place while you work out the disagreement).
3. **Accept in Part / Reject in Part:** Often the safest choice. The parts you accept start right away, while you continue to negotiate the parts you rejected (e.g., rejecting a specific goal, the frequency of a service, or a proposed change in placement while allowing the rest of the plan to move forward).

6. Who Can Help?

Email: somervillesepac@gmail.com
Website: <https://somervillesepac.wixsite.com/sepac>
IEP Rights and Resources: <https://somervillesepac.wixsite.com/sepac/iep-rights-resources>
WhatsApp Group: <https://tinyurl.com/WhatsAppSEPAC>

 **Federation for Children With Special Needs** Website: <https://fcfn.org>
 **Massachusetts Advocates for Children** Website: <https://massadvocates.org>
Helpline: 617-357-8431

Disclaimer
The Somerville SEPAC and its board members are not attorneys. This document does not constitute legal advice. Special education law is complex; we recommend consulting with a professional advocate or attorney for specific legal concerns.

Last Updated: February 5, 2026

What we created

Anonymous parent/caregiver IEP meeting survey

Families can share feedback after IEP meetings about clarity, partnership, communication, whether their input was incorporated, and whether data was shared to support decisions.

What are families asked?

1. Preferred language
2. What school does your student attend? (optional)
3. I understand the special education process, my rights as a parent/caregiver, and the information shared.
4. The purpose of the meeting was stated clearly.
5. My input and concerns about my student were meaningfully incorporated into the development of the IEP.
6. I am treated as an equal and valued member of my child's IEP Team.
7. My student's special education team usually responds to my communication(s) within 2 to 3 school days or sooner.
8. Through a collaborative process, the team shares the data and observations that drive meaningful decisions regarding goals, services, and placement for my child.
9. Please share any suggestions that could improve the special education team process at your student's school or elaborate on any statements above.



HOW DID THIS GO?



Your feedback will help improve Special Education in SPS. Thank you!

<https://bit.ly/4cvNqTB>

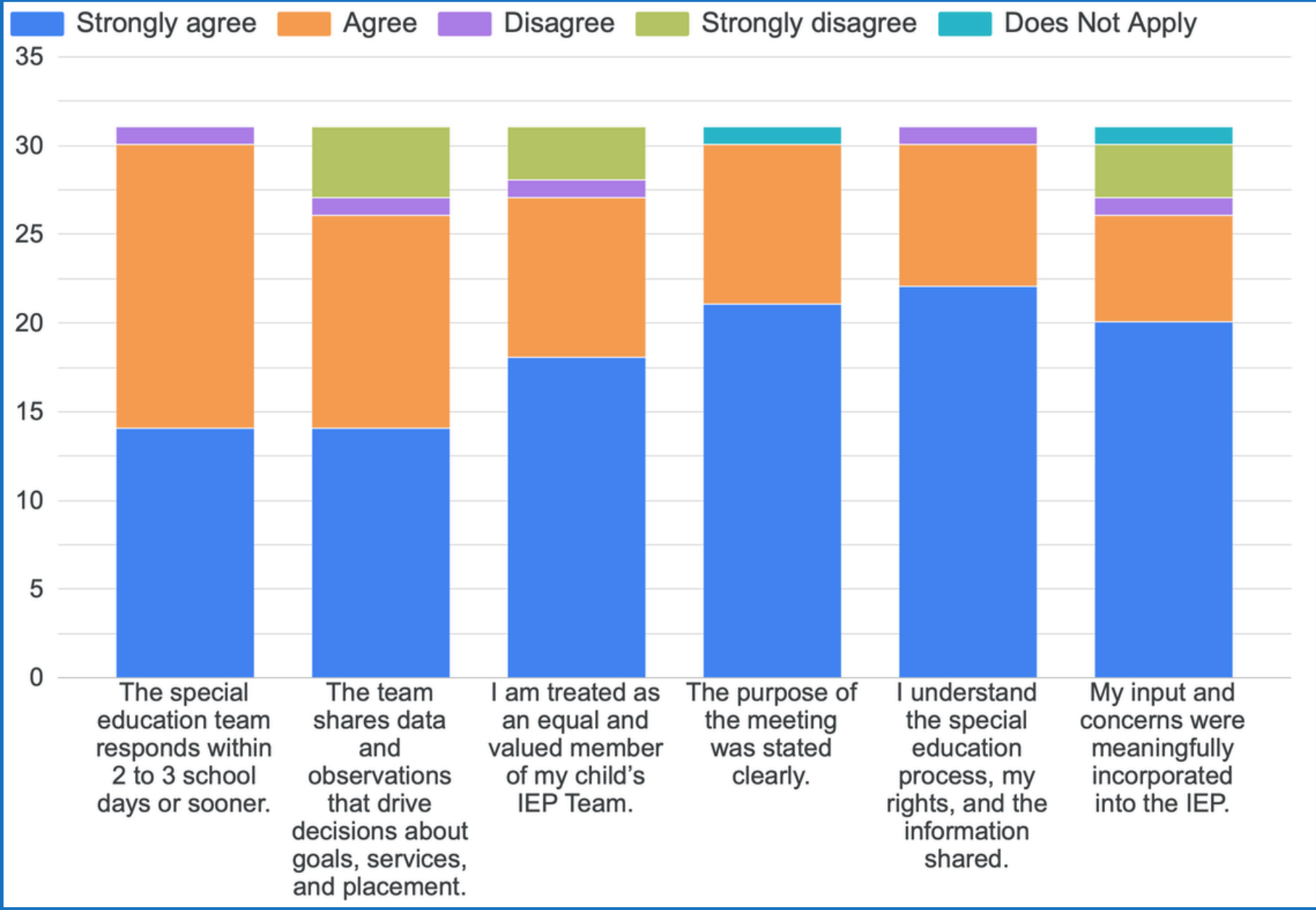


First month's survey data

March 27, 2026 - May 1, 2026

31 total responses **3** languages represented **7** schools represented

School	Responses
West Somerville Neighborhood School	11
John F Kennedy School	5
Winter Hill Community Innovation School	4
Albert F Argenziano School	3
Arthur D Healey School	3
Blank	3
Benjamin G Brown School	1
East Somerville Community School	1
Next Wave/ Full Circle	0
Out of District Placement	0
Somerville High School	0
Michael E Capuano School	0



View the live, interactive dashboard: <https://somervillesepac.wixsite.com/sepac/sps-caregiver-iep-meeting-survey-results>

What are we doing with this data?



We are using the first month of survey data to identify strengths, improve outreach, and turn family feedback into action.



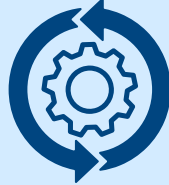
What the data is already showing

Clearly communicating the meeting purpose appears to be a strength.

Families showed strong agreement that the purpose of IEP meetings was clearly stated.

How we may use that finding

If this continues, we may replace this question with one that gives us deeper insight into where families need more clarity, collaboration, or follow-through.



Improvements already underway

Increase survey participation

First month results show multiple schools with no responses. Remind IEP Team Leads (ITLs) to share the anonymous survey after each IEP meeting and explain that it was developed in partnership with families through APPLE

Strengthen family understanding of the 504 process

Family feedback shows a need for clearer information about 504 plans, eligibility, and next steps.

Improve transparency around service delivery

The Special Education Department will consider ways to provide families with more frequent updates and clearer communication about how IEP services are being delivered and tracked.



The goal is not just to collect data. The goal is to use what we learn to improve outcomes for students and families



How we worked together

Progressive stacking

Progressive stacking means intentionally making space for voices that are often heard last, least, or not at all, so decisions are not shaped only by the people who speak first, most often, or already hold power.

For our APPLE Team, this means we:

- Prioritize family voices that may be missing or underrepresented.
- Use translation and accessibility to reduce barriers to participation.
- Use anonymous survey data to hear from families who may not speak publicly.
- Treat family experience as meaningful data.
- Review feedback monthly and turn it into action.
- Pivot as we learn more.

Co-Design

Co-design means creating solutions with the people most affected by them, not designing something first and asking for feedback after.

For our APPLE Team, this means we:

- Bring families and district staff together as partners.
- Use family experience to shape the tools, questions, and next steps.
- Create resources that respond to real needs families identify.
- Review data together and decide what action should follow.
- Keep improving the work as we learn more.



Why this matters: the project is not just a survey and a guide — it is a way to practice shared power, better listening, and visible follow-through.



What comes next

Monthly data review

Continue meeting monthly to review survey results, comments, response patterns, and school-level themes.

Pivot as we learn

Treat the first month as a starting point. We will adjust questions, outreach, supports, and priorities as more information comes in.

Actions from the data

Identify specific next steps based on recurring themes — especially around data-sharing, communication, and family partnership in IEP meetings.

Keep co-designing

Continue using progressive stacking and co-design so families most affected by the process help shape what changes next.

Close the loop

Share strengths, growth areas, and action steps publicly so families can see how feedback is being used.

Shared accountability

Use APPLE as a structure for sustained partnership between SEPAC, families, district staff, and the School Committee.

