

A Guide to St. Mary's County's  
Citizen's Advisory Committee for  
Special Education (CACSE)

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## Introduction

Parents of children in St. Mary's County, Maryland, who receive special education may participate on the Citizens' Advisory Committee for Special Education (CACSE), as can stakeholders within the community. This booklet describes what the CACSE is, how it operates, and how parents and stakeholders can contribute effectively to the St. Mary's County Board of Education.

### What is CACSE?

The CACSE (pronounced "casey") is a group that provides input on special education issues to the Director of Special Education and the Board of Education for St. Mary's County. Its purpose is to advise and advocate, not to decide policy. Maryland law requires each County have a Citizens' advisory committee – they refer to them as Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committees (SECACs), although it does not specify how the groups should be organized or what duties they are to perform. See "What the Law Says" on page 4.

### Why is CACSE important?

CACSE advises and counsels the St. Mary's County Board of Education on matters pertaining to the provision of educational programs and related services to children and youth with disabilities of St. Mary's County.

The specific functions of the CACSE are:

- A. To advise and counsel the St. Mary's County Board of Education about the needs of children and youth with disabilities;
- B. To advise and counsel on the relevancy of educational programs and related services to meet the needs of children and youth with disabilities;
- C. To offer suggestions for the local proposed budget; and
- D. To study specific issues and concerns of the Board of Education, concerned citizens, and parents.

By sharing their unique perspective of what it is like to use these services, parents can help the district to be more effective. As a result, outcomes for children with disabilities should improve.

### Why might I want to participate on the CACSE?

Parents give many reasons for joining the CACSE, including these:

- I may be able to help other families and children with disabilities in St. Mary's County.
- I can share what I've learned since my child began his education.

- I can support the school professionals in St. Mary's County.
- I will be a good role model for my child.
- I feel good when I make a contribution to this community.
- I will learn information and skills that may help me work more effectively with St. Mary's County Public Schools.
- I will meet others with similar goals, both parents and school professionals.
- I may build positive relationships with others in St. Mary's County Public Schools.
- I will become more knowledgeable about special education.
- By sharing my unique perspective and insights as a parent, I may help St. Mary's County Public Schools work more effectively with families and improve outcomes for children.

## What the Law Says

Maryland law requires each county in Maryland to have a special education citizens' advisory committee (SECAC).

Here is what the law says:

### **13A.05.02.13.I Local Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committee.**

- 1) Each local school system shall establish a special education citizens' advisory committee to advise the local school system on the needs of students with disabilities within the jurisdiction.
- 2) The Department shall annually allocate federal funds to each local school system to support the activities of the local special education citizen advisory committee.
- 3) Each local school system shall submit a budget for the use of federal funds, consistent with §C(1)(a) of this regulation.

## How do I join the CACSE?

Membership of the CACSE consists of one representative and one alternate from each of the schools within St. Mary's County Public Schools, and one representative from the St. Mary's Association of Student Council (SMASC). Representatives and alternates shall be nominated, in writing, by the school principal, and the SMASC shall appoint their own representative. If you're interested in joining the CACSE as your school's representative, speak with your school's principal or special education department chairperson.

Membership may also include one person from various stakeholder community organizations, such as the St. Mary's County Council of PTA's, St. Mary's County Department of Social Services, The Center for Life Enrichment, St. Mary's County Health Department, the Arc of Southern Maryland, United Cerebral Palsy, and the Learning Disabilities Association of St. Mary's County.

Members are confirmed annually, in September, by the Board of Education, upon submission by the Executive Board of the CACSE from the member group. The membership term is September 1 through August 31. These confirmed members may vote on motions made during the CACSE process.

Before joining the CACSE, prospective members have questions about the CACSE function and member roles and responsibilities. Here are a few answers to frequently asked questions:

- Meetings are open to the public. Nonvoting members are always welcome to attend and participate.
- Our by-laws are available for review upon request.
- We meet on the 3rd Monday of each month at the Board of Education Meeting room on Moakley Street in Leonardtown, from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. The meeting schedule for the school year is determined at the start of each school year. When a regularly scheduled meeting day falls on a school holiday, the CACSE determines if they will not hold a meeting on that month, or if the meeting will be held on another mutually convenient day and time during the month.
- Memberships are 1 year long. Members are not limited to a 1 year membership, and may continue their membership for multiple years.
- The CACSE has an executive committee, made up of the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Secretary. The Chairperson typically chairs the meeting, and establishes the agenda with input from members.
- If it is determined by the CACSE to establish workgroups around specific topics, those groups can meet outside of the regular meeting times.
- The CACSE encourages participation from community based groups who also work with families of children with special needs.

## You also may want to ask yourself these questions when considering joining the CACSE:

- Am I able to set aside the needs of my own child and look at the “big picture” in my district? Would my feelings (such as anger or anxiety or sadness) make me less effective than I’d want to be? Can I set aside my own emotional issues?
- Is it a good use of my skills and time?
- What talents or strengths could I bring to this group?
- Can I commit the necessary time?
- Could my participation make a difference for children and families?

## How do I find my role on the CACSE?

Once you’ve joined the CACSE, it will take time and patience to become a truly effective participant. These techniques can help you find your unique place in the group.

- Ask yourself if you feel welcome there. If not, what can you do to improve the situation?
- Be willing to listen at first. Learn about the people, the issues, the programs, and background information before offering advice or opinions.
- Be willing to say, “I don’t know yet” or “I need more information in order to comment about that issue.”
- Ask questions about anything you don’t understand. If acronyms are used, ask if there is a list of acronyms and definitions to which you could refer. Ask where you could find information covered at a previous meeting.
- Think about your personal skills and how they might best be used. Are you a writer, speaker, computer expert, or technology professional? Are you politically savvy?
- Are you well organized, perceptive, verbal, and caring? The CACSE can make use of all of these skills.
- Learn all you can about your school district’s structure, policy, and administration.
- Do your homework. Read materials provided to participants.
- Come prepared to contribute.
- Develop an understanding of the “big picture” issues facing the district, beyond those of your own child and family.

## How can I help the CACSE to be effective?

You can help the CACSE be effective, useful, and valuable to the St. Mary’s County Public Schools in several ways:

Encourage the group to look at its mission statement (if one exists) and answer these questions: Does it provide direction for the group? Is it clear? Is there a need to write or rewrite a mission statement?

- Help clarify expectations. Do members expect only to give advice, or do some also expect the advice to be followed? How do members feel about this? Do expectations need to be examined or made clearer?
- Be sure members treat each other respectfully. Do parents listen to each other's unique perception and experience?
- Distinguish between long- and short-term goals. Does this distinction need to be defined and made clearer?
- Discuss how conflict is handled. Does the group look for consensus and solutions? Are different viewpoints valued?
- Help the group find the information it needs to make decisions.
- Suggest that the group adopt communication ground rules.
- Encourage diversity by including parents with the cultures, languages, and disabilities represented in your district.
- Be sure that meetings are run in a timely, organized way.
- Make and follow an agenda.
- Support productive decision making. Are conclusions reached by consensus, or do discussions continue with no resolution or closure?

## Dealing with Conflict

CACSE members come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. As a result, differences of opinion will inevitably arise. Through flexibility and compromise, your group can resolve its conflicts, reach consensus, strengthen relationships, and accomplish goals.

Here are some questions you and the other members may want to ask yourselves as you deal with differences of opinion:

- Am I contributing to the conflict or to a resolution?
- Are we being respectful to each other?
- Have we defined the problem before starting to propose solutions? (We may be disagreeing because we aren't solving the same "problem.")
- Are we staying within our mission or goal statement?
- Could I meet privately with the special education director about a particular CACSE issue?
- Are we talking about individual children or looking at services for all of them?
- Would it help if we brainstormed solutions, with no interruptions or evaluations until the list is complete?

## Conclusion

Maryland legislators realized the value of parent involvement in school district decision- and policy-making by requiring CACSEs. We offer these answers, tips, and suggestions to support parents as they participate on our CACSE. The CACSE can be an effective way for parents and school professionals to work together for the benefit of children with disabilities.

## CACSE Resources

VISIT PACER CENTER AT **WWW.MNSEACINFO.ORG** FOR:

- Keys to Success in the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent-School Partnership
- Increasing Parent Involvement on Special Education Committees, Councils, and Boards
- Disability-related Interagency, Special Education Council, and Committee Opportunities
- IEP (Individual Effectiveness Plan) for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)
- Key Questions for Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent Members to Ask
- Know Your School District: Tips for Parent Members of Local Special Education Advisory Councils (SEAC)

VISIT **HTTP://NICHCY.ORG** FOR:

*Serving on Boards and Committees*, National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 1998.

VISIT **WWW.FAMILYCENTEREDCARE.ORG** FOR:

*Words of Advice: A Guidebook for Families Serving as Advisors*, Thomas, Josie, and Jeppson, Elizabeth, Bethesda, MD: Institute for Family-Centered Care, 1997.

VISIT **WWW.EDUCATION.STATE.MN.US** FOR: *Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) Manual*, Minnesota Technical Assistance for Family Support and Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 2003.

Visit [www.marylandpublicschools.org](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org) for the Department of Special Education Technical Assistance Bulletin Number 11 and information on Facilitated IEP Services