



# SEPTAs Bring Together Schools and Special Families

by Marilyn Ferdinand

If you are a parent of a special-needs child, numerous challenges and opportunities await you over the course of your child's education. Fortunately, you don't have to go it alone. In many places across the country, parents of special-needs children have formed Special Education PTAs (SEPTAs) and created communities of support. SEPTAs provide information, networking opportunities, social interactions, and advocacy tools for parents of special-needs children at all grade levels.

## What exactly is a SEPTA?

A SEPTA is a PTA that brings together people who are interested in special education and special-needs children. The primary aim of SEPTAs is to ensure that children with special needs receive an education that allows them to reach their full potential. SEPTAs also help connect parents, families, and teachers of special-needs children so they can share their experiences and knowledge.

The main difference between a SEPTA and a regular PTA is that a SEPTA offers presentations for parents of kids with disabilities, says Chris McCluskey, who helped form the Farmington SEPTA, in Farmington, Connecticut, five years ago. McCluskey serves as the treasurer for both the Farmington SEPTA and the Connecticut SEPTA Council, which comprises seven SEPTAs. "We have our regular PTA business meeting and then one- to two-hour presentations on whatever is of interest—autism, attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities," explains McCluskey.

## Information and advocacy

SEPTAs provide parents with essential information about special education, including information about identification and placement procedures for children with special needs. Some SEPTAs provide resource guides and donate special education materials to their local public libraries. In addition, SEPTAs work to inform legislators, school boards, and communities about the importance of special education programs. They advocate for children with special needs and those children's right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

## Support from a social network

SEPTAs also hold social events at which parents can get to know each other and form a support system. "[At the Farmington SEPTA,] we have had bowling events for all the families," says McCluskey. "Our events for younger children have included a 'sensory social' that allows them an opportunity for physical play, like making art with finger paints."

The Farmington SEPTA averages about 30 members, who have children in grade levels from kindergarten through high school. Recruitment occurs through word of mouth, an e-mail list, and distribution of fliers to all schools in the district.

When creating their calendars of events, SEPTAs, like regular PTAs, take into consideration their members' schedules. "We recognize that parents of kids with special needs have so many time commitments that some parents can't keep up with regular PTA involvement," says McCluskey. "We publish our schedule for the entire year to help them decide what they want to do."

## Learn More

Learn about **PTA's position on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** at [www.pta.org/ia\\_issues.html](http://www.pta.org/ia_issues.html). You'll also find links to several organizations that provide resources for parents of special-needs children.

**Internet Resources for Special Children** ([www.irsc.org](http://www.irsc.org)) and **Uniquely Gifted** ([www.uniquelygifted.org](http://www.uniquelygifted.org)) have links to a wide variety of resources on specific disorders and disabilities, special education, legal issues, products and services, recreation and sports, and more.

Since SEPTAs are not meant to be substitutes for regular PTAs, McCluskey encourages SEPTA members to be members of their schools' PTAs as well. She also encourages regular PTAs to reach out to SEPTAs and parents of special-needs children. PTAs and SEPTAs must work together, McCluskey says, to ensure that all children benefit from PTA efforts. **OC**

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