Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee of Prince George's County meeting November 27, 2018

Board Members in attendance: W. Troy Sampson, chair; Jamie Anfenson-Comeau, secretary; Bonnie Razler, social media manager; Pamela Talley, community outreach manager. (Any others?)

Others in attendance: See Attendance Sheet

Mr. Sampson opened the meeting at ?6:30ish? p.m.

Trinell Bowman, executive director of special education provided an update from the special education department, including the Bullying Advisory Committee.

Mr. Sampson provided an update from SECAC and also parent support groups.

- The Family Support Center has a number of activities scheduled through the month of March, inlcuding Individualized Education talks for surrogate parents, Dads Night Out for fathers and male caregivers from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Jan. 16 & March 5, 2019, "Preparing for a Successful IEP Meeting" talks for parents new to special education and the Seventh Annual Family Empowerment Conference, scheduled for 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on March 23. All activities take place at the John Carroll Building.
-"Parents Helping Parents", a support group for parents of children with special needs, meets at 6:30 p.m. on the first Thursday of every month at the South Bowie Community Center.
-The Mom 2 Mom support group for mothers of children with autism and related special needs, is holding a discussion on "Foundation of One's Self (Knowing You)" from 1-3 p.m. on Dec. 8 at the One World Center for Autism. Childcare is available for a fee.

Mr. Sampson served as moderator for the evening's parent guest panel, which included parents Bonnie Razler, Chris Casey, Janie Payne, Liz Burley, Tjameika Davenport and Sarah Wayland.

Mr. Sampson asked the panelists *What are some of the struggles you faced raising children living with special needs and what lessons have you learned?*

Ms. Wayland spoke of her younger son with autism, who started school at the Frances Fuchs Early Childhood Center before moving to the autism program hosted at Paint Branch Elementary School. Third grade was a very difficult year for her son, and she spent much of her time helping him with his schoolwork, and it was damaging their relationship. She said that once she backed off and focused on their relationship, it became obvious that his school was not able to meet his needs and a nonpublic placement was found.
Ms. Payne said that when her daughter got sick, she realized all of the things that weren't working, and educated herself to become an advocate for her needs.
Mr. Sampson added that he and his wife learned that they had to educate themselves to become an effective advocate for their son.
Ms. Razler, a teacher, said she had to learn to back off and let people do their jobs – make sure they're doing their jobs, but then let them do it. She said she had to remember that learning is happening, but it is not necessarily going to look like she expects it to look.
Mr. Casey, who's son has ADHD, said he had to learn to trust his son's teachers and school that he was making progress. He said it is important to recognize that children with special needs have strengths as well as weaknesses.

Ms. Davenport said that her daughter has several medical issues, including epilepsy, autism and intellectual disability. She said that sometimes it can be difficult for her daughter to make educational progress when she's having 100+ seizures in a day. She said she has had to learn to walk a fine line between her daughter's medical issues and keeping her in school.

Mr. Sampson asked, *What are some of the triumphs or successes during this journey?*
Ms. Burley, a retired transition specialist for the school system, said that what happens with a child in one situation may not be what happens under other circumstances. She said it is also important to add a little humor and to remember that things take time. Repetition, reinforcement and sticking to your guns are important. She advised away from using food as a pacifier or reward.
Ms. Razler said that when her son came into her family at 8 months old, he had a number of challenges, including accepting her. Now she is "the sun in his solar system."
Ms. Payne said she used to dread getting a call from her daughter's school; now her daughter says school is amazing.
Ms. Burley cited her daughter's independence, adding that everybody loves her, she is a social butterfly, and 99.9% of the time is a joy to be around.
Ms. Davenport cited as a triumph having a great team around her daughter to help her be the best she can be.
Ms. Wayland said that early on, things looked pretty scary for her two sons, and at times she feared it was hopeless, but chipping away at the challenges a bit at a time and watching them become who they are is an amazing process. Her older son was nonverbal at age 5, but now is in college and has a scholarship. She said making sure he had his passions, science, addressed, helped.
Mr. Sampson said he and his wife wondered if their son would ever be able to be out on his own, but now he is working. He said that sometimes it may feel as though there is zero progress being made, but that children grow physically as well as mentally and they do progress towards independence.

Mr. Sampson asked, *What advice or best practices do you have about the IEP process?*
Ms. Wayland said she worked hard to educate herself on the IEP process, and to collaborate with the school team, understanding that everyone brings a different perspective. Having a means of measuring the child's process is really very important.
Mr. Casey said it is really very important to have organizations that can help advocate for you during the IEP meeting. Understanding special education and familiarizing yourself with Wrightslaw is very important. Also, the Parent's Place of Maryland has programs for teaching parents to advocate for their child. He said it is important to know your stuff or have people with you who do.
Ms. Razler said if you don't understand something, speak up, ask questions and make sure you know your rights.
Mr. Casey said it is important to have a means of measuring a child's progress, and also to be familiar with special education on the state and national level. The Kirwan Commission looking into new funding formulas for Maryland public education has almost nothing on special education. He said it is important to talk with elected officials and advocate for individuals with special needs.
Ms. Burley said it is important to have someone with you in the IEP meetings, to help you keep track of things you otherwise may miss and to provide moral support. Make sure you ask questions.
Ms. Payne said it is important to do your homework, and make sure you understand the process.
Mr. Sampson said that sometimes you have to be aggressive about asking for evidence of progress. He said it is also important to have a paper trail of all communications, and to keep it together.

Mr. Sampson asked Ms. Burley, <u>What is transition? When should parents start thinking about transition?</u>
Ms. Burley said parents should start thinking about transitions the minute they walk into school. She

said you have to know what the destination is so you know how to prepare for it. You have to start early and bring in that training. Behaviors that are cute at 5 are not so cute at 15.
In Maryland, the development of a transition plan for students in special education is required at age 14; the federal government requires it by age 16. The transition plan is part of the IEP process.
Ms. Davenport, whose child is 13, said it is important to be mindful to separate ourselves from our children. Start to prepare for transition early, then start even earlier.
Ms. Wayland said that one of the difficult challenges for her was planning for different types of transitions, not knowing where her children would be as adults. She said she had to hope for the best but prepare for the worst. When you have to navigate both worlds, it's really hard, because you don't know what the outcome is going to be.
Mr. Sampson said he didn't wait on the process, but were diligent about getting ahead on transitions. The alternative, he said, is to be one of the adults with older children living with them and not knowing what will happen to them in the future.
Mr. Casey said that for those children anticipating going to college, check into the college's disability support office, because they can vary greatly in quality between colleges.
Ms. Burley said you have to know what resources are out there, and you have to know the requirements. To receive services in college, the student has to be willing to disclose their disability and describe what accommodations and supports they need, and has to follow the school's requirements. Colleges are only required to provide “reasonable accommodations”, however they define it, and so they will not likely give a student everything that was in their IEP, so it is important to know what the limits are.If they need DDA (Developmental Disabilities Administration) services, keep in mind that those do not take effect until the child turns 21.

One parent in the audience asked the panelists the question applied to why and how their children attend nonpublic placement.
Ms. Wayland said that her younger son had a lot of co-occurring challenges, that really required experts in a lot of different areas. She said she had to provide documentation that the school could not meet his needs. Everything needs to be in writing. It was a very organic process.
Mr. Casey said that you have to convince the IEP team, or provide independent evidence that the public school is not an appropriate situation. He said he could not stress how important having that information is.
Ms. Payne said that the Kennedy Krieger Institute will provide assessments, and Mr. Casey said other organizations will as well, but that it can be expensive.

Another parent asked where information regarding SECAC could be found.
Ms. Wayland replied that SECAC has a listserv, a website, a Facebook page and a Twitter account.

The parent of a young child with Down syndrome how to know if your expectations of a child with special needs are sufficient.
Ms. Burley said to start out where they are. A lot of times, language is an issue. Think about reinforcements, things that can be done around the house.
Ms. Wayland said that if a student is making progress and meeting their IEP goals easily, it is always possible to write new goals.
Ms. Burley said to make sure those goals are achievable, but if they master those goals, come up with new ones.
Ms. Razler said to trust your team, at first, you have to feel out what is appropriate. With young children, a lot of times, the IEP goals may not seem like academic goal, but they do help build the foundations.

A parent asked how to judge where a child is, do their grades accurately reflect their development?
Mr. Sampson said it is important to see the data that shows the child is achieving in that area.
Dr. Bowman said it is important to understand the grading policies involved, and also, if the student is receiving accommodations, those may be reflected in the grade.
Ms. Wayland said that sometimes you need an independent evaluation of the child's progress.

Mr. Sampson announced that there will be no meeting in December. The next SECAC meeting is Jan. 22, 2019, and the topic will be on transitions. Meeting closed at 8:20 p.m.