



2025 Caregiver Survey Key Findings for Malden District Leadership and School Committee



A look at family experiences across Malden's Special Education system

Full written report included

Who We Are

SEPAC is a caregiver-led volunteer group dedicated to supporting families and partnering with the district as we all work to strengthen special education systems and services for students with disabilities.

Malden SEPAC Officers

- **Jackie Ecker**, President
- **Jessica Langton & Heather Barry**, Vice Presidents
- **Amanda Ceide**, Secretary
- **Marilyn Andrews**, Past President of Malden SEPAC
- **Salima Slimane**, Past President of Malden SEPAC and Parent Advisor
- **Imene Bouziane Saidi**, Past Vice President of Malden SEPAC and Parent Advisor



About the Survey

- SEPAC conducted this anonymous caregiver survey July–November 2025
- **Purpose:** understand family experiences with special education across Malden
- Designed to identify what is working well and where challenges are occurring
- **114 responses** across preschool through post-secondary programs



Limitations & Context

- Survey was distributed only through two channels:
 - Superintendent's **ParentSquare** messages to families of students with Individualized Education Program (IEPs) or 504s (~1,100 students)
 - SEPAC Facebook page
- Represents a **voluntary response sample**, not a districtwide survey
- 114 responses ≈ **10% of all Malden students with IEPs or 504 plans**
- Despite limitations, responses were highly detailed and consistent across grades



Who Responded

Families of students in:

- Grades 3-5 (**31%**) and Grades K-2 (**21.2%**) made up the largest groups of respondents
- Preschool (**9.7%**), Grades 6-8 (**14.2%**), High School families (**18.6%**), and Post-Secondary (**3.5%**)
- Most respondents were caregivers of students with IEPs (**86.4%**), with additional participation from families of students with 504 plans (**4.5%**) and those currently undergoing evaluation
- Types of Student Needs Reported:
 - Among the 111 families who answered this question:
 - **42.3%** identified **learning or academic needs**
 - **29.7%** identified **social-emotional or behavioral needs**
 - **19.8%** identified **communication needs**
 - Smaller percentages identified **sensory needs** or preferred not to specify

The Big Picture

- **Appreciation for Educators:** Families expressed **strong appreciation** for educators, highlighting their dedication, support, and commitment to fostering a positive learning environment for students with diverse needs.
- **47.8%** of caregivers reported feeling **very supported** as part of their child's educational team, and those families almost always pointed to specific adults who advocate, communicate, and show up for their children.
- **“His teacher is a good advocate and tries to get the resources he needs”**
 - Parent of a 3–5 grade student
- **“One-on-one language tutoring has made great progress for my child”**
 - Parent of a K–2 student
- **“The BRYT program at the HS helped keep my son in school while he struggled health-wise”**
 - Parent of a 9–12 student
- **“We are in an out of district placement and the team at that school is fantastic”**
 - Parent of a 6–8 grade student
- **“Our in-classroom teachers have always been above and beyond willing to work with and help our son. They listen and collaborate with me, and give great feedback”**
 - Parent of a 3-5 student

The Big Picture

System-Level Concerns: Alongside positive experiences, families described serious system-level issues that go beyond individual classrooms:

- More than half (**52.2%**) of caregivers did not select “very supported” when asked how supported they feel as part of their child’s educational team.
- **54.5%** feel included as equal Team partners, about **40%** do not or are unsure.
- Just **49.5%** feel their child’s progress is measured effectively, while **nearly half** say no or unsure.

Families connected these numbers to communication **gap** and lack of **transparency**, **inconsistent** IEP/504 implementation, procedural **concerns** that undermine trust and difficulty **accessing** services:

- “This year has to be the worst year yet, zero communication when services are missed... We have to go on fishing expeditions looking for information that the district is legally obligated to provide”
 - Parent of a grades 3–5 student
- “District does not follow through on what is in the IEP and then gives you the runaround when you question what is happening”,
 - Parent of a grades 6–8 student
- “None because they didn’t follow her IEP at all!!”
 - Parent of a grades 3–5 student

What's Working Well

- **Strong relationships with teachers and service providers**
 - Teachers, Paras, SLPs, Counselors, and Tutors are repeatedly praised.
- **Effective specialized instruction/interventions when delivered, such as:**
 - Small-group reading/math
 - Predictable routines
 - Social groups
 - Behavior support programs
 - Visual supports
- **Positive program experiences such as:**
 - RISE (Recognizing Individual Success Everyday)
 - BRYT (Bridge for Resilient Youth in Transition)
 - School Adjustment Counselor/liaison
 - Quality preschool classrooms
- **Consistency when staff are well-trained and communicative:**
 - Families emphasized that positive experiences come **from the people and programs when they function reliably**, not from the system itself.



Challenges Families Face

INCONSISTENT OR MISSING IEP/504 IMPLEMENTATION

Families repeatedly reported that services written into plans are **not delivered, started late, reduced without explanation, or implemented unevenly** across classrooms, **lack of access to required curriculum modifications or specialized instruction:**

- “Not following IEP, no clear responses on how accommodations are given. I don’t see them happening across subjects and staff.”
- Following the services put into an IEP!” (as the parent’s top concern)
- “Lack of curriculum implementation across subjects and staff.”
- “Teachers need more help implementing instructional supports”
- “The special education department is too top heavy and there are no professional development opportunities for inexperienced special education teachers”

GAPS IN QUALIFIED AND CONSISTENT STAFFING

Families across grade levels reported that **staffing shortages limit access** to required services, contribute to missed or delayed instruction, and weaken day-to-day consistency.

- Reports of **predetermination, rushed or confusing meetings, and difficulty accessing records or data.**
- Caregivers described feeling **dismissed, interrupted, or discouraged** from advocating.
- Caregivers noted that lack of qualified special educators, related service providers, and paraprofessionals directly affects student progress.
- Families emphasized that even when classrooms are “fully staffed,” insufficient training, turnover, and lack of specialized expertise create challenges.
- “Fully staffed, however severe lack of staff training and follow up.”
- “Lack of speech therapist and time given to kids with them and the time it takes to get anything done. Everything takes 6 weeks or more.”

Challenges Families Face

COMMUNICATION GAPS

Families consistently link low support to **poor communication, late or missing information, and unclear points of contact**. Many describe difficulty getting updates on evaluations, progress, service delivery, or staffing.

- “If I don’t reach out about why he is not getting a service listed in the IEP, the district completely ignores it, until I threaten legal action.”
- “Lack of urgency from those in charge... No communication.”
- “My top concern is the lack of transparency... I haven’t been given full access to my child’s records or data used.”
- Lack of communication between General Ed and Special Ed teachers is a major concern in IEP decisions.”
- “We don’t know who to contact... no information has been provided since the start of high school.”

BARRIERS TO A FAIR AND COLLABORATIVE IEP PROCESS

- **24.5%** of caregivers do not feel like equal partners, and 15.5% are unsure
- Reports of **predetermination, rushed or confusing meetings, and difficulty accessing records or data**.
- Caregivers described feeling **dismissed, interrupted, or discouraged** from advocating.
- Some families expressed **fear of retaliation** when raising concerns.
- “I left meetings in tears and felt dismissed.”
- “Some special education administrative staff were actively hostile/unprofessional toward our family.”
- “The administration... is not being transparent and trying to almost bully you to give up.”
- “The PM... was absolutely discouraging and unsupportive... neglected to include ANY teachers for ALL IEP meetings”

Other Emerging Challenges

PROGRAM LIMITATIONS & INSUFFICIENT SPECIALIZED SUPPORTS

- Families reported **gaps in behavioral supports, social-emotional programming, advanced learner supports, and inclusive options**, especially in preschool and upper grades.
- “General education teachers do not fully comprehend the deficits and challenges... Special education laws are not being followed.” (Parent, 9–12)
- “There are not enough programs for kids who need different levels of support.” (Several caregivers across K–8)

TRANSPORTATION & SAFETY CONCERNS

- Late buses, **lack of communication**, and malfunctioning surveillance cameras were widely reported.
- “Transportation with NRT is terrible.” (Parent, 9–12)
- “Cameras don’t work and families can’t get answers when safety incidents happen.”

REDUCED ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES

- Families noted cuts to inclusion supports and advanced programs (e.g., gifted/advanced math, co-taught models) and increased reliance on restrictive placements.
- “The district is making more restrictive programs while stripping away support from less restrictive options.” (Parent, K–2)

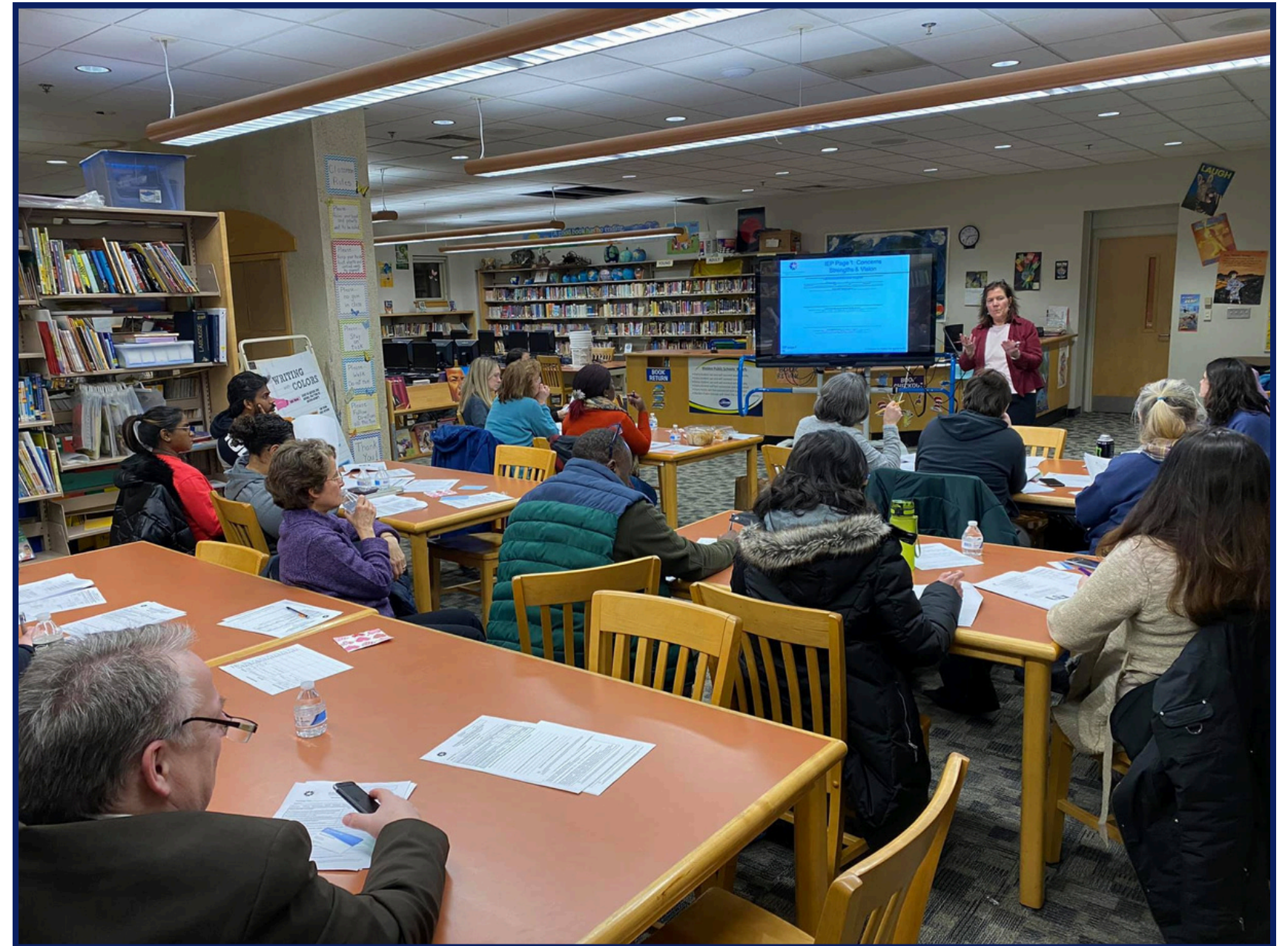
Family Feedback on SEPAC Outreach & Accessibility

LOW PARTICIPATION & AWARENESS

- **59.3%** of families did not attend a SEPAC meeting in the past year.
- Many were unsure what SEPAC does or how it could help them.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

- Families shared that district administrators attending meetings can feel intimidating or limit open dialogue.
- Some families were unaware of when meetings were held or how to access them.



Connecting Family Feedback to District & DESE Data

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE & PROFICIENCY

Students with disabilities in Malden score far below the overall student population on literacy measures:

- DIBELS K–3: **Students with IEPs average ~28th percentile**, compared to ~49.5th percentile for all students.
- i-Ready Reading K–8: A large percentage of students with disabilities score **below or well-below grade level**, with only a small percentage meeting expectations

Projected Proficiency (DESE/District data):

- 4th grade students with disabilities: **57%** not meeting expectations; **only 10%** projected to meet expectations.
- 8th grade students with disabilities: **46%** not meeting expectations; **only 13%** projected to meet expectations.

Connecting Family Feedback to District & DESE Data



GRADUATION & DROPOUT (DESE DATA 2024)

- Only **62.4%** of students with IEPs who exited Malden in 2024 graduated with a diploma
- **15.3%** dropped out

ACCOUNTABILITY CLASSIFICATION

- Most Malden schools: “Not requiring assistance or intervention”, with school percentiles in the mid-20s to mid-50s.
- Malden High School: Classified as “requiring assistance or intervention,” school percentile = **14** (very low)

What Families Need

CLEAR PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION

Families want **timely** updates about progress, missed services, changes in staffing, and decisions that affect their child's day-to-day learning.

ACCESS TO SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTION

Caregivers emphasize the **need** for high-quality specialized instruction, curriculum modifications, and trained staff who understand their child's disability-specific needs.

RESPECTFUL & COLLABORATIVE MEETINGS

Caregivers ask for Team meetings where they are treated as **equal partners**, without interruptions, dismissiveness, or predetermined decisions.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Families want **meaningful** inclusion, strong co-teaching models, and appropriate supports so students aren't unilaterally pushed into more restrictive settings.

CONSISTENT SERVICE DELIVERY & IMPLEMENTATION

Parents want IEP and 504 services delivered **as written**, on time, without unexplained reductions, and with clear documentation of progress.



Key Recommendations

CLEAR & CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS

Establish districtwide expectations for timely updates, missed-service notifications, progress data access, and points of contact for families.

RESPECTFUL, COLLABORATIVE, & LEGALLY ALIGNED IEP/504 MEETINGS

Develop meeting norms, provide staff training in family engagement, restore the end-of-meeting feedback survey, and ensure no predetermination of services.

STRENGTHEN QUALIFIED STAFFING & TARGETED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Create a comprehensive staffing and recruitment plan, expand training for new special educators, and ensure providers have capacity to deliver required services.

REGULAR IEP/504 IMPLEMENTATION CHECKS

Monitor service delivery, documentation, accommodations, and evaluation timelines across schools, and provide quarterly summaries to families.

STRONGER INCLUSIVE PRACTICES & ACCESS TO SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTION

Improve co-teaching models, protect less-restrictive options, ensure curriculum modifications and specialized instruction are provided consistently.

REENGAGE IN THE APPLE PROGRAM (FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS)

Bring caregivers, educators, and district leaders together for joint planning to rebuild trust, improve team collaboration, and strengthen IEP processes.

SEPAC Goals for the Future

EXPAND ACCESSIBLE FAMILY WORKSHOPS

SEPAC will offer **more training aligned with what families requested**, including:

- Rights and navigating the IEP/504 process
- Understanding measurable goals
- Advocacy strategies and accessing data
- Communication strategies for difficult meetings
- Behavioral and social-emotional supports
- Disability-specific workshops (ADHD, autism, dyslexia, executive function, communication needs)
- Transition planning (college, employment, independent living)

CREATE MORE WELCOMING & INCLUSIVE MEETING SPACES

- Offer caregiver-only discussion spaces without administrators present
- Provide hybrid meetings to reduce scheduling barriers
- Increase multilingual materials and interpretation options

WE NEED YOU!

SEPAC will be holding elections **soon**, and we welcome caregivers who want to help shape this work. Families asked for a stronger, more active SEPAC, this is **your opportunity** to join, lead, and make a meaningful **impact**.

Thank You!

Questions?

Contact info: sepacmalden@gmail.com

Scan QR code for Facebook page:



**Malden Special Education
Parent Advisory Council**