



Fairfield Special Education PTA

Fairfield SEPTA History

A parent support group began at the Early Childhood Center in the Fall of '99. The group provided a forum for parents, mostly mothers at that point, to find people who understood the challenges of raising a child with special needs, and also provided a wonderful, supportive environment where we could find and share resources that could meet our children's unique needs. We ran our first cookie walk that year. By the Fall of 2001, many parents began to discuss what might happen as we moved out of the small sheltered environment of the ECC into Elementary Schools. The parent group leaders invited the president of the Westport SEPTA to come speak to us about starting our own PTA that could address the unique needs of our community as our kids aged out of the ECC. It seemed clear that the group wanted to pursue forming our own SEPTA, and we began the process of starting our own SEPTA in Fairfield. Many of our first board members came from that parent support group at ECC.

As we gathered information about special education parent groups, we found that some groups were not well received in their communities due to an oppositional approach and the message that the communities were failing their children. We felt it was very important to take a positive approach with other parent groups and with our school system. We wanted people to know that we wanted to work with and not against others to help all children reach their full potential. Our philosophy was that we would accomplish much more by working together than fighting to be heard. Fairfield SEPTA was very successful those first years in getting out a positive message and being regarded as a positive force for children with special needs in our community.

With the help of Kevin Daly of CT PTA, Fairfield SEPTA was started on May 15, 2002. We were the fifth SEPTA in the state of Connecticut. That first evening, 44 people attended to help us form Fairfield SEPTA. By our first regular meeting on September 18, 2002, we had 20 paid members and \$433.25 in the Treasury, thanks to several generous donations. Despite the small treasury, we knew that we had a dedicated group who would work hard to accomplish our original mission to advocate in an informed and

positive manner on a broad-based community level for the welfare of families and children with special needs. Our mission was in line with Connecticut and National PTA missions: **"To support and speak on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community, and before governmental bodies and other organizations that make decisions affecting children; To assist parents in developing the skills they need to raise and protect their children; and To encourage parent and public involvement in the public schools in Fairfield."** We hoped to accomplish our mission by achieving four primary goals: **1. educate parents on topics pertinent to special needs children education, 2. provide appropriate social and recreational programming for special needs children within the district, 3. develop a Resource Book for parents in Fairfield and 4. recognize outstanding teaching in special education.** These are the exact mission and goals that were presented to our group on the night we formed. One important tenet that we all strongly believed was that we needed to develop a positive relationship with the district to effect positive change. We started every that first year and part of the second by reading a statement, **"Discussion of individual IEP's and comments on specific teachers is not permitted. The tone of the meetings should always be positive."**

In order to achieve these goals, we knew we would have to do things differently than building based PTAs. Much of our efforts were aimed at how best to reach our members without being able to backpack flyers home. Fairfield SEPTA was the first truly paperless PTA in Fairfield. We also needed to structure our board differently, and in the early days we created board positions as the need arose. Our board positions were not in line with other PTAs, but we felt the need to be creative to address our unique needs. Lastly, we felt that we needed to have the support of other PTAs in town, so on October 10th, 2002, Fairfield SEPTA asked to join Fairfield PTA Council and we were warmly welcomed.

As the years went on, new leaders began to focus on projects that were close to their own hearts, and the focus of the organization has changed along with the leadership. But our core mission has always remained the same.