

Vermont Special Education Legislative Advisory Committee

Biographies

Co-Chairs:

Katie Ballard, Parent, Advocate, SEAP Chair, EWSD SEPAC Co-Chair

Katie Ballard is a person with a disability, a parent of two boys with disabilities, and an instructor for COPAA's national Beginner Special Education Advocacy Training class. Katie currently serves as a member representing disability rights for the Child Poverty and Strengthening Families council, and is the current chair of the Vermont State Special Education Advisory Panel.

Over the last several years, Katie has spent many hours testifying and advocating for different special education topics, such as literacy, specifically around dyslexia and discipline. In 2020, Katie and a fellow parent founded the EWSD Special Education Parent Advisory Council and continues to serve as the chair.

Erin Maguire, Director of Equity & Inclusion and Special Education Director

Erin Maguire is the Director of Equity & Inclusion and Co-Director of Student Support Services and Instruction for the Essex Westford School District. She also serves as the Past President of the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators and the Past President of the Council of Administrators of Special Education for the nation. She began as a paraeducator in 1999 and has since served as a middle school science teacher, a special educator, a 504 Coordinator, a building-based special education director, and a district-level special education director. She has served on several legislative committees and testified several times on issues ranging from equity to mental health to special education practices in Vermont. She has keynoted presentations on disability and safety in schools, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and other education topics, and holds a broad set of leadership skills and facilitation skills. Erin received her bachelor's degree from UVM, her Masters Degree from Castleton University, and her Certificate in Advanced Education Leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is a passionate advocate for social justice and the rights of all people, and she strongly believes that public education is the cornerstone of our democracy.

Members:

Kris Benway, Director of Special Education

Kris Benway serves as the Director of Special Services for the Slate Valley Unified School District, a role she has held since 1998. She is dedicated to supporting equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all students. Prior to her service to Slate Valley she worked for several years in community mental health supporting adults with disabilities and also in higher education as the Director of Student Supports. She has served as an adjunct instructor at Castleton University and the Community College of Vermont where she has taught undergraduate and graduate classes in early childhood education, special education and school law. Her additional public school

experience includes service as an early childhood special educator, home to school liaison, and classroom teacher. Kris has been a member of VCSEA since 1998 and has served as a Regional Representative for the SW Region, as well as a member of the professional development, legislative, and rules and regulations committees. She currently serves as President of VCSEA, chairs the VCSEA Legislative Committee and serves as the voting member for the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) representing Vermont. In 2010, she was honored with the prestigious Gail Lynk Award for her outstanding contributions to the field. With a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) from Castleton University, Kris brings extensive expertise in special education, student advocacy, and program development. She makes her home in Bomoseen, Vermont which she shares with her two children Connor (20) and Hope (17). Kris enjoys all water activities and nature photography; she is especially grateful for any opportunity to escape to her favorite spot in Maine and to Cuttyhunk Island in MA. Kris is passionate in her service to her schools and community and is thankful for the opportunity to serve on this advisory committee.

Jon Berliner, Director of Special Education

Jon Berliner is the Director of Student Support Services and Special Education for the Harwood Unified Union School District in Washington County. Prior to his current role, Jon worked as a secondary social studies teacher, paraeducator, and behavior interventionist before becoming a middle school special educator at Browns River Middle School. In addition to his work at HUUSD, Jon is an active participant in the Vermont Council for Special Education Administrators (VCSEA). He co-facilitates the organization's New Leader Academy that supports new and aspiring special education administrators and co-facilitates his VCSEA regional group meetings. Jon represents his region on the VCSEA Legislative Committee where he works to advocate for and support the organization in working towards legislation that provides schools with the tools and resources they need to educate all students in their school. He is a member of the Vermont Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind (D/HH/DB) Advisory Council which works at improving the lives of individuals by shaping quality improvement initiatives and policy implementation to address the needs of individuals who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or DeafBlind in Vermont. During the winter months, Jon has volunteered as an instructor for Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports helping make sure everyone in Vermont has an opportunity to enjoy snow sports. He lives in Charlotte with his wife and two elementary aged children.

Kelly Cray, Teacher, Person with a Disability, Organizer

Kelly Cray is an educator, disability advocate, and systems-level leader working in neurodiversity education and multilingual education. Kelly has been teaching since 2007 and has worked in several countries and states. In 2019, she found herself at Burr and Burton Academy, where she founded one of the first Neurodiversity Studies courses at the high school level in the United States and currently serves as President of NNETESOL. Kelly is an advisor with VT-HEC's Neurodiversity and Inclusion certification program, helping shape professional preparation at the state level, and teaches higher-education courses focused on Universal Design for Learning, collaboration, and disability advocacy.

She identifies as neurodivergent, and her work is grounded in both lived experience and professional expertise. Across K-12 and higher education, Kelly focuses on building learning environments that prioritize access, dignity, and sustainability rather than compliance, translating

disability-affirming theory into practical, system-level change. She is currently pursuing advanced studies in education leadership at Harvard.

Alyssa Hutchins, Parent and Special Educator

Alyssa Hutchins is a Special Educator and Intensive Support Team Member at Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, where she focuses on capacity building and crisis response for high-needs populations. Having begun her career as a paraeducator before obtaining her license, Alyssa possesses a comprehensive background in the field that spans K-21 populations. She approaches her work with a focus on systems-level change, leveraging her background to support trauma-informed and strength-based learning environments.

Alyssa holds a Master of Arts in Special Education from Vermont State University and a Graduate Certificate in Behavior Analysis from the Florida Institute of Technology. She is currently a candidate for Special Education Director and Principal Endorsements at Vermont State University. Her academic foundation is rooted in history; her graduate thesis examined the evolution of disability services through the lens of the Brandon Training School, grounding her practice in Vermont's specific historical context.

A dedicated advocate for the profession, Alyssa serves as Co-Vice President of the Rutland Northeast Education Association and has extensive experience in contract negotiations and labor advocacy. She is also a member of the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

Deeply committed to her local community, she serves as Co-Local Director for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (Brandon/Sudbury Region). Alyssa navigates the education system personally as a parent of two children with hidden disabilities, fueling her dual commitment to professional excellence and family advocacy.

Daniel Tobin, Ph.D. Parent and SEPAC Chair

Daniel Tobin is the parent of a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the Champlain Valley School District (CVSD), where he co-founded and serves as the inaugural chair of the CVSD Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC). In this role, he works to elevate parent voice, strengthen collaboration between families and the district, and improve special education policy and practice. He also serves as a member of the Vermont Medicaid Beneficiary Advisory Committee. A rural sociologist, Dr. Tobin is an associate professor in the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics at the University of Vermont and serves as director of the Ph.D. program in Sustainable Development Policy, Economics, and Governance.

Crista Yagjian, Parent, Teacher, SEAP Member, Advocate, SEPAC Member

Crista is a Vermont special educator and reading and writing specialist based in Guilford, Vermont. She completed the University of Vermont's LEND (Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities) program as a Family Fellow in 2020, focusing on strengthening family-school partnerships. Crista has supported new special educators through VT-HEC's Special Education Academy and has served as a

co-teacher for *Meeting the Instructional Needs of All Students with Complex Profiles*. She has also served as an instructor in the University of Vermont's graduate special education program.

With more than 25 years of experience, Crista is also the parent of her son, Nate, who has Down syndrome. Her lived experience informs her systems-level advocacy, including service on the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council and the Vermont Special Education Advisory Panel. In WSESU, she helped develop a Special Education Advisory Panel (SEPAC) to elevate family voice and inform local special education policy and practice. She is also a parent educator with the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress Learning Program and serves on its Education Task Force.

Crista advocates for inclusive educational practices and improved literacy instruction for students with intellectual disabilities. She supports families in navigating special education and advocating for equitable access to instruction, services, and supports.

Pallas Snider Ziporyn, Parent & Advocate

Pallas Ziporyn is a public health professional, former school board member, and parent advocate engaged in special education policy and systems reform. She previously served on the Anne Arundel County Board of Education in Maryland and as a Planning Commissioner in Winooski, Vermont. She is a graduate of Emerge Vermont (2018).

Pallas works in public health at the University of Vermont's Larner College of Medicine and holds a Master of Public Health, with professional experience in research, teaching, and educational technology in higher education. She serves on the board of the Common Ground Center in Starksboro and leads the Camp Kaleidoscope Advisory Group, which supports autistic children and their families through inclusive programming.

As the parent of a child on an IEP enrolled in the South Burlington School District, Pallas brings lived experience navigating Vermont's special education system. In collaboration with other parents, she led the development and administration of a statewide survey capturing parent experiences and perspectives across 23 Vermont school districts, with more than 50 families contributing. She has shared these findings with legislators and brings a data-informed and family-centered perspective to this advisory group.