

Season 1, Episode 1: The Power of Parent Advisory Committee (PAC)

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SPEAKERS

Kara Clarke, Beth Santer

Beth Santer 00:00

Welcome to the Wayne resa Round Table podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and parents. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne resa facilitators who will be joining you throughout some of these conversations. I'm especially excited about today's episode because we have a wonderful guest joining us. Kara Clarke wears many hats in the world of family and community support. She's one of the dedicated mentors for the Michigan Alliance for Families, and she's also served as the past president of the Wayne County Parent Advisory Council, or PAC. We're going to be diving into her experiences and learning more about the important role the Parent Advisory Council plays in supporting families and schools. So Kara, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you here.

Kara Clarke 1 00:44

Thank you so much. Beth, I'm so excited to be here.

Beth Santer 00:46

So let's dig into this. So what exactly is the Parent Advisory Council, and how does it differ from other parent groups such as PTA or PTO?

Kara Clarke 00:56

That is a fantastic question. Beth, so to answer your question, first, I'd like to talk about the Parent Advisory Committee at the county level. And for this, I'm going to focus on the Wayne County Parent Advisory Committee, or the Wayne County PAC as we like to refer to it. There are the Michigan administrative rules for special education, otherwise often referred to as the Marse and those are Michigan's rules for special education. Those rules require that every intermediate school district or ISD or regional educational service agency such as Wayne resa establish a Parent Advisory Committee, which is the PAC. So the short answer it's the law. However, that law only applies to the county, not to the local districts. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that I'm sure the state would love to see each district have their own local PAC, but there are no laws or requirements for that. So one difference between a PAC and a PTO or the PTA is that the PAC at the county level is the law, and members are

appointed. The PTO and PTA members are voluntary. The PACs and the PTO and PTAs have a leadership team who are typically voted in and serve an appointed term. A PAC consists of parents who have students with disabilities receiving special education services. The PTO and PTA consists of parents, teachers and even students. I know my son was excited to join the PTA when he was in high school or even middle school I believe he joined too. Each local school district and public school academy, which are your charter schools within the ISD, are required to have at least one parent as a member of the PAC at the county level, for the charter schools, it's those who have served students with disabilities within the ISD, the PAC focuses on policy and programs, along with giving advice and feedback on how the ISD provides special education programs and services, and in Wayne County, that is the Wayne County uh, delivery of special education supports and services. The PTOs and PTAs tend to focus on community engagement and resources and do a lot of fundraising, and fundraising is something the Wayne County Parent Advisory Committee just does not do. Just as PTOs and PTAs can have a positive impact on their school, PACs are able to have a positive impact on the special education programs and policies, and that's some of our differences.

Beth Santer 03:13

Yeah, Thank you. Thank you for that answer. And one of the things I picked up on with what you've said is when you talk about that, it's part of Marse rules and IDEA, and so it's law. And you know all laws, there is the law and there's the spirit of the law. And I know the spirit of this is to increase that parent engagement and to give parents a voice and for them to understand their value absolutely in this big puzzle of special education. So what led you to become involved in the PAC.

Kara Clarke 03:41

Well, to be perfectly honest, I was invited by another parent. But I do remember the first time I heard about the Wayne County Parent Advisory Committee. It was when my oldest son was in preschool. So that was roughly 17, almost 18 years ago. And to be honest, it sounded like a really cool club for parents. I just could never find the details about it. It was like this really cool secret club. And I kind of always joke about that now that the PACs always seem like this best well kept secret. It was just something I kept hearing about. So when we moved to our current district and I was invited to this meeting by that parent, I finally saw this mysterious club that I had heard about all those years ago. What I liked about it, and what I still like, is the opportunity that is provided to network with other parents who just get it. They just understand what we go through. I also really like the learning opportunities that each meeting provides, because each meeting consists of a presentation about something related to special education or a topic related to or for people with disabilities. I also really appreciate being able to develop relationships with people at the county level. That has been pretty awesome in itself, as I've held different positions on the executive board. I've worked closely with several people at resa, and some have moved on, but it's been a wonderful experience. I have learned so. Much from being part of the PAC, and even more, I've made some wonderful lifelong friends. It has just been a wonderful experience all around

Beth Santer 05:09

so it sounds like it's it's a wonderful opportunity for learning relationships and kind of helping moving that needle along..

Kara Clarke 5:15

Absolutely.

Beth Santer 5:18

So why do you believe having a pack is so important for schools?

Kara Clarke 05:22

I really believe that it is incredibly important. And personally, I think it's a great way to build relationships and trust in the district between the administrators, the school staff, and parents. And when I say parents, I mean anyone in a parent role, not just a biological parent, but it could be a grandparent, a foster parent, an aunt or uncle, a surrogate parent, anyone in a parental role. It's an opportunity for parents and administrators to work together, address concerns, grow the programs, and it's a great opportunity to learn together. The meetings do not have to be long, and that's what's awesome about the local PACs. You have the opportunity to do what works best for your community. So if meeting at 8am for 45 minutes works best, then that's what you do. Or if you find that most of your families work during the day and an evening, evening meeting works best for the majority, then meeting for an hour in the evening, that's what you do. You have the flexibility to structure the meeting and topics around your community. But my honest opinion, and what makes it so important about having a PAC is that it provides an opportunity for communication and building relationships, and it's an opportunity that might not otherwise exist.

Beth Santer 06:29

So it sounds like there's a lot of latitude

Kara Clarke 6:32

There is

Beth Santer 6:33

in terms of how each specific school district wants to handle their pack.

Kara Clarke 6:37

There is absolutely

Beth Santer 6:39

which is great, because we know that parents, all parents are busy. And then when you are a parent of a child with special needs, it can get even a little busier than that. So let's say a school district or a parent wanted to know about PAC, be part of Pac. What's the first step that a school district should take or a parent should take, in terms of being part or starting to form a PAC?

Kara Clarke 07:05

Well, if a parent is interested in having a logo pack at their district, then the first thing they should do is reach out to their special ed director. The first the thing to keep in mind is that parents can work with the district. It's not a parent run thing, but parents, it's a school run thing, so, or the district run thing, I'm sorry. So parents, they but they can help, and they can work with their district. It's about that

partnership, and that's I just keep saying, like there's a whole theme to everything you keep talking about. I feel like it's relationships and building those, you know, the conversations and stuff, and that's a big part of the pack. If the district is looking for a PAC rep, then they should talk to the parents of students with disabilities, see if anyone has the availability to attend the meetings, and if they're willing to share the information they learn, the administrator or the director, whoever's working on that, can invite the parent to a Wayne County Parent Advisory Committee meeting. They can share a brochure with them, and if they need any help whatsoever, they can always reach out to RESA or anyone on the executive board. I know that any of the executive board will be more than happy to speak with any prospective PAC representatives. They can even reach out to a neighboring district and connect with their neighbors, with the neighboring districts PAC rep, and I'm sure that that PAC rep would be willing to talk to the neighboring district's potential PAC rep. They can talk, have that conversation. It's always nice to have those parents connect, and that's where you have those fluid conversations. But above all, keep it simple, and when in doubt, reach out the Wayne PAC is always more than happy to help.

Beth Santer 08:35

So when, when thinking about how to form that pack and making sure that all parents are involved. We know that when you have a child with a disability, you have that story of that one child with a disability, but there's so many stories, and all stories are different, and all should be represented. So how does a PAC ensure it represents all parent voices?

Kara Clarke 08:58

So I think one of the strategies for the person recruiting, and in my experience, that is typically a special ed director at the local district, is to team up with the parent and keep that communication open and honest. Invite them to a meeting, and if it's at all possible, attend the meeting with them. Experience it with them. We do have several directors that regularly attend, the wing pack, the Wayne PAC meetings keep those conversations going and let them know your expectations from the start. Ideally, pack representatives will take the information they learn at the meetings and share it with their communities and within their districts. And I'm talking about the PAC reps at the community at the county level. This is why I feel communication is so very important. If there is that open and ongoing communication right from the start, and these are the things that are not going to fall through the cracks. It's just going to be part of their normal, everyday conversation.

Beth Santer 09:48

So what common challenges do new PAC face, and how can they overcome them?

Kara Clarke 09:54

Well, I think there's a couple big challenges that new PAC can face. One is getting the word out. Two is keeping that steam going, keeping that motivation going. The last thing you want to do is start out the year strong and then fizzle at the end. So keeping that momentum going, keeping the topics relevant for the majority, making sure the time and the day of your meetings work for the majority, and making sure that advertising is done correctly, using multiple sources where your families are going to see it, sometimes sending home a piece of paper and a backpack isn't always the way to go. That works for some, but it doesn't always work for all. Sometimes the emails don't always work. Sometimes social media doesn't work. So figuring out what works for your families, that's the best, and sometimes you

need to do all of them. You just got to figure out what works best for your community. You need to be open minded and have to meet families where they are in order to exceed and that's something that can be challenging.

Beth Santer 10:46

Yeah, you're right. Um...How about success stories? Can you share a success story where a PAC made a real difference in a school or program? Or do you personally,

Kara Clarke 10:57

Absolutely so first, in my district, I've seen our local PAC at all stages and sizes. We've had over 20 people in attendance, and then we've had two people in attendance. But our PAC has never given up, our administration, our leadership. They have worked with us parents, and right now they worked with parents that are like the representatives for the Wayne County PAC. Right now, that is just me. We've worked on reinventing our pack and to attract new attendees. Some of those ideas have been absolutely brilliant, and some of them have made us laugh, because it was just really a solid effort. But my point is that the relationship and dedication is solid, and when our families hear this, it gives them faith and reassurance. The other there's another story. There was a district that was launching their new local PAC, and I was honored to attend their first meeting. They had a very strong attendance for their first meeting. The engagement was so impressive, and it literally, literally left parents wanting more. I was so proud of that district and our Wayne County PAC rep, who had a big hand in helping it can be a lot of work to getting that first initial PAC get going, you know, up and going, but I do promise, it's worth the effort. Just remember, meet the families where they are, keep that communication open, be honest, and even when you know they won't like it, keep that you know communication going build those relationships, I seriously feel that's what the recipe is for success.

Beth Santer 12:27

Yeah, all of it is such great information. Thank you so much. Kara. I and the RESA community want to thank Kara Clark for sharing all of her insight and for being with us today. Thanks to all of our listeners. We hope you join us again for the Wayne resa Round Table podcast.

Kara Clarke 12:41

Thank you so much Beth.