

Recruitment, Training, and Support Center (RTSC) for Special Education Surrogate Parents (SESPs) - Program and Conference Overview

In accordance with the direction of the Mass Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Special Education Surrogate Parent Program responds to the mandates of federal special education laws which require that procedures be in place to protect the special educational rights of ALL children who may require special education services, including those who are in the care or custody of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or whose parents are unknown or unavailable, and ensure that the rights of these children to benefit from a free and appropriate public education are protected.

Overview:

The Recruitment, Training and Support Center (RTSC) for Special Education Surrogate Parents (SESPs) is a project of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education under contract with the Federation for Children with Special Needs (Federation), a nonprofit organization. The Federation advocates for quality education, parent participation and access to quality health care services for all children, especially those with disabilities.

The mission of RTSC is to ensure that every child in state custody receives the educational supports they need to succeed. We strive to meet this goal by recruiting volunteers from across the state and providing them with the training and ongoing support they need to be effective SESP. There are approximately 900 students statewide currently supported by this project.

About SESP, the students, and others we serve:

Federal education law requires a student's parents or guardians be included in the special education decision-making process. However, children in state custody may not have anyone to fill that role. In Massachusetts, those children depend on SESP to protect their legal right to a free and appropriate education. Students who qualify for SESP face many challenges. They must cope with both special education needs and the lack of a parent or legal guardian to advocate for them. In addition, many move frequently between homes, between schools, and between education programs. Most have had traumatic experiences including abuse and/or neglect, the death of parents and loved ones, and separation from siblings, friends, and community. Parents or guardians for eligible students are either: (1) unknown, (2) cannot be located, (3) do not retain special education decision-making right, or (4) student is classified as an "Unaccompanied Homeless Youth". Although these students can live in a variety of living situations, the majority reside in residential schools or group homes. For these children, an appropriate education can be a lifeline in a challenging world by helping them to develop the tools and strategies they need to grow into successful adults.

SESPs are community volunteers who make education decisions for individual students. Our volunteers include parents, educators, retirees, and others looking to make a difference for these vulnerable students. Once appointed these volunteers have the full legal rights and authority of a parent or legal guardian in matters of special education. SESP attend Team meetings, approve or reject Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and if necessary, can access a variety of problem resolution options. Volunteers must be over 18, have no conflict of interest, submit a CORI application, and attend an initial orientation to participate in the program. All volunteers agree to work for the best interest of the student. On average an SESP spends approximately 20-30 hours a year volunteering their time. These few hours can make a significant impact for a student.

RTSC provides ongoing support to SESP's in a variety of ways including: monthly webinars, Developmental Childhood Trauma and Learning workshops, on-going phone support, our monthly *Consider This* newsletter, networking meetings, an annual conference, and more. RTSC extends these supports and resources to Foster, Adoptive and Kinship caregivers and the many other professional partners including educators, clinicians, and child welfare workers.

About the Conference:

Making a Difference is RTSC's annual statewide conference that presents a range of topics related to the education and support of these students. This conference provides a unique opportunity for volunteers to learn and network with each other, child welfare professionals, and RTSC staff. It also provides an opportunity for us to acknowledge and show appreciation for the support they provide. For the safety and protection of attendees and staff, the 2021 conference will be hosted on a virtual platform on **Tuesday, November 16th**. There are many features incorporated into the platform to ensure that the conference continues to provide an interactive and engaging experience.

The 2021 conference will include a wide range of topics areas including the Resilience, Cultural Responsiveness, Trauma, Assessments, Social/Emotional IEP goals, and much more. In recognition of the challenges of this past year, the 2021 Making a Difference conference is being offered free of charge for all attendees.

For more information about the Special Education Surrogate Parent program visit our website at www.fcsn.org/rtsc.