

Exceptional Individuals

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Feature Article

Fostering a Positive Relationship between Parents and Educational Staff Throughout the IEP Process

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Abstract

The importance and value of creating positive, inclusive and collaborative relationships in urban schools between educational staff and parents/guardians, during the process of developing individualized education programs (IEP), is addressed. Understanding the perspectives of parents/guardians, who are impacted in a variety of ways when having a child referred for special education services, is critical to building productive relationships. Strategies for cultivating mutual understanding, trust, open communication and respect between educational staff and parents/guardians are discussed.

After waiting in the hallway for 20 minutes, Mrs. Jones finally was invited to enter the faculty lounge, where her first IEP meeting for her 8-year-old son, William, was being held. She carried with her an envelope containing a series of assessment reports. The reports, which included many unfamiliar terms such as "mean score," "standard deviation" and "average range," were confusing to Mrs. Jones. For example, she remembered when she was in school, a score of 74 was average. However, according to the report, William's "Broad Reading Cluster" score of 74 fell within a very low range in comparison to his grade-level peers. "This doesn't make sense," she thought. As she entered the room, she was told to take a seat at a long conference table, directly across from the other six IEP team members, most of whom she was meeting for the first time. As the meeting commenced, she felt her heart begin to race as she thought, "What if they ask me what I thought of the reports? Do I tell them I don't understand them? Will they think that William is stupid like his mother?" One by one, each team member introduced him/herself and stated his/her job position. "What does an occupational therapist do, and why does William need one?" Mrs. Jones thought. During the meeting,

each member gave his/her view on why William was having problems in school. One teacher said that William had been bothering the other students during reading and thought that something must be happening in the home to cause his behavior. The team members continued pointing out everything William was doing wrong. Mrs. Jones began to feel embarrassed and ashamed; particularly each time the door opened and someone came in the room to use the kitchen facilities. Mrs. Jones began to think of ways she could get the facilitator to end this meeting quickly. She thought, "This is the last time I will come to one of these meetings."

The number of students with disabilities has grown tremendously over the past decade. According to the most recent reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2007), the number of students identified with a disability has almost doubled since the mid 1970s. As the special education population increases, it becomes even more essential for educators to facilitate a more equitable learning environment for students with disabilities and to ensure that their schools remain in compliance with provisions that were previously mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One of the major provisions of IDEA involves the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is a legal document that serves as an educational blueprint for teachers, school personnel, parents/guardians and other professionals, on how to build an educational program that meets the specific needs of

a student with disabilities. All school stakeholders (including parents/guardians) are expected to be involved in the process of developing a student's IEP. Although this process can be arduous for school stakeholders, the overarching benefits of a well-written IEP are compelling in that it can improve teaching and learning. It can also provide assurance for families and educators that a student's unique needs are being addressed through a mutually agreed upon education program, designed to improve learning as evidenced by measureable outcomes (IDEA, 2004).

All school stakeholders (including parents/guardians) are expected to be involved in the process of developing a student's IEP.

The first step in developing a well-written education program is establishing an IEP team. IDEA mandates that parents/guardians of children with disabilities must be considered IEP team members and share equal responsibility with school staff in determining the most effective educational arrangements, such as classroom setting, modifications and other related services, that meet the needs of their child. However, unfortunately, many parents/guardians have had similar experiences to that of Mrs. Jones, in the opening

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vignette. The initial IEP meeting can be confusing and intimidating for parents/guardians, and schools must strive to cultivate collaborative relationships with parents/guardians and help put them at ease during the IEP process.

Importance of Collaboration throughout IEP Process

IDEA (2004) encourages collaboration between school professionals and parents/guardians and promotes cooperative discussions and decision making of all team members during the IEP process in order to ensure the development of a successful educational program. Students have a greater opportunity for success in school when their parents and school personnel maintain a harmonious relationship and share similar beliefs about the potential of the student (Milson, 2007). Adams and Christenson (2000) found that positive relationships between teachers and parents were predictors of trust, which in turn was found to be significantly correlated with indicators of performance in school.

During the IEP process, IDEA (2004) recommends that parents/guardians establish an alliance with the school and are encouraged to serve as valuable resources to the IEP team. Parents possess important data about their child, including previous records and evaluations. They are also able to offer extensive information about the child's background, including remarkable events and medical history (Goodall & Bruder, 1986). This information is useful to educators and service providers because it helps create a more vivid picture of the child's strengths and abilities, areas needing development and behavioral characteristics that may either facilitate or hinder learning in certain contexts. When combined with school observations, evaluations and feedback from teachers and service providers, supplemental information from parents can contribute greatly to the design of an effective IEP.

Lack of Collaboration during IEP Meetings

Although a shared approach for an IEP meeting seems to be in the best interest of everyone involved, it is not necessarily a common practice in schools during the IEP process (Mueller, 2009), especially for parents/guardians of minority status living in conditions of lower socioeconomic status (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). Parents have indicated that a lack of cooperation between IEP team members is one their main concerns during the special education process (Fish, 2006). During IEP meetings, there appears to be an over-involvement of special education teachers (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner, & Lovett, 2006) and an under-involvement of parents as well as administrators (Chambers & Childre, 2005). The results from a study implemented to

examine the level of participation of team members in IEP team meetings revealed that special education teachers spoke more than 50% of the time when compared to parents and family members who talked for approximately 15% and administrators who spoke less than 10% (Martin et al., 2006). The researchers also found that the individuals who participated in the meeting the least, scored the lowest on survey questions pertaining to IEP knowledge. Often parents/guardians are lacking in knowledge about IEPs. This

is particularly true for Latino families, with low incomes, who have reported feeling uninformed and even estranged from the IEP process because schools used too much formal language and written material (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1992). Such findings may suggest that IDEA's provisions, mandating that schools ensure that parents/guardians understand the special education system and IEP process, so they can participate more fully (IDEA, 2004), are not being met by educational staff.

Lastly, increasing reports of due process hearings in special education, across the United States, support the notion that IEP teams are lacking in collaboration between school personnel and parents (Mueller, 2009). Although due process requirements were established in IDEA to help ensure that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate education and to assist in making the most suitable decisions in the best interest of the student (IDEA, 2004), such legal sessions are reactive (Mueller, 2009) and are not a solution for building harmonious relationships.

Perspectives of Parents/Guardians

Considering the rise in due process hearings, it should come as no surprise that many parents/guardians feel dissatisfied with the IEP process and have difficulty always trusting educational staff. Since IEP meetings are typically controlled by a school professional, parents often feel like spectators rather than active participants, which impacts their level of involvement in the decision-making process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

In a study by Lake and Billingsley (2000) exploring factors that led to legal issues in special education, parents reported the following perceptions: not being heard by teachers; not having adequate knowledge; feelings of being dominated by the school system; and distrust in members of the IEP team. Further, parents reported knowledge (or a lack thereof) as a factor that impacted their ability to make accurate judgments about appropriate services for their

“Parents have indicated that a lack of cooperation between IEP team members is one their main concerns during the special education process.”

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children and impeded their ability to serve as advocates for their children. In addition, trust in educational staff, which appears to be a major obstacle for low income African American parents (Marion, 1979), is adversely impacted when parents/guardians feel they are forced to fight for equitable services for their child during the IEP process (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005).

Another important need for parents/guardians is regular, open and honest communication with school staff (Stoner et al., 2005). Issues of communication have been ongoing for parents in urban settings, particularly for parents of minority students. School professionals in urban settings have a history of making significantly fewer attempts to correspond with parents of minority students (Tomlinson, Acker, Canter & Lindborg, 1977).

Lastly, when trying to understand parents'/guardians' perspectives during the IEP process, educators need to recognize that cultural values and expectations may influence the ways parents/guardians view their child or his/her disability (Diken, 2006). For example, in some cultures, people may view disabilities as temporary, and there may be expectations that the child's challenges are simply a normal part of development, and as the child matures, his/her struggles will disappear (Diken, 2006). People from other cultures may believe that having a child with a disability is a punishment for a sin committed by one of the parents (Diken, 2006). Cultural influences will likely impact the types of special education services and/or interventions the parents/guardians choose for their child. Further, often there are an array of emotions associated with various cultural beliefs, including disappointment (e.g., expecting the child to recover from the disability) and guilt or shame (e.g., assuming that they did something that caused the child's disability).

Suggestions for Creating a Positive and Collaborative IEP Process

Since both the number of students with disabilities and due process hearings are growing steadily, schools need to implement more effective strategies for fostering collaboration during the IEP process. Once principals and their staff become more aware of the perspectives of parents/guardians, they will be more sensitive towards their needs during the IEP process and more successful in making the process more inclusive and collaborative. The following are some suggestions (see Table 1) for fostering a more positive and collaborative IEP process between educational staff and parents/guardians.

Cultivate a Culture of Respect, Trust and Open Communication

In recent years, numerous professional leadership organizations (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, National Association of

Elementary School Principals, Educational Leadership Constituent Council) have come to realize that principals play a critical role in effective special education programs and have published guides to assist principals or have created competency standards that involve special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Further, since principals are the most influential people in the process of developing open and positive school cultures (Peterson & Deal, 1998), they play a significant role in setting the groundwork for the way the staff view special education, as well as setting the tone for appropriate staff behavior throughout the process of developing the IEP.

Table 1:

Suggestions for Creating a Positive and Collaborative IEP Process

1. School leader must establish a school-wide culture that is inclusive and based on trust, mutual respect and open communication
2. Provide parent/guardian with relevant data and paperwork, in sufficient time, prior to IEP meeting
3. Pay close attention to seating arrangements during IEP meetings
4. Set ground rules and clear expectations for IEP meetings
5. Discuss student in positive and clear, yet realistic terms
6. Use inclusive language - no educational jargon and acronyms
7. Encourage questions and leave adequate response time for parents to process information
8. Use school counselor in a more active and facilitative role throughout the process
9. Provide parents with a list of outside resources
10. Create a Special Education Parent Association and plan specific activities dedicated to parents/guardians of students with special needs

When principals demonstrate that the IEP process is critical and that parents/guardians deserve to be treated fairly, respectfully and equally, then the school's teachers, counselors and other involved staff will follow the principal's lead. Studies have shown that parents desire regular, open and honest communication from school staff (Stoner et al., 2005). Principals need to lead by example, by building a school culture where staff is respected, trusted and encouraged to communicate honestly and transparently. When staff members are immersed in this type of a positive and open environment, such traits become deeply-rooted norms, affecting the behaviors and attitudes of staff members. In turn, educational staff will treat their students and the parents/guardians of their students the same way the principal has treated them.

Of course, cultivating a positive culture is not enough. Principals also must support their staff and ensure that they are skilled and

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knowledgeable on special education issues and instructional strategies that meet diverse learning needs. This can be accomplished by scheduling sufficient joint planning and conferencing time for general and special education teachers and offering appropriate and frequent in-service programming on a variety of disabilities and effective instructional modifications. By focusing on special education services and devoting substantial resources, principals are sending the message that they value special education programs and that these programs are an important part of schools and deserve as much (or even more, in some cases) attention as the general education programs. The IEP process is only a part of a school's special education program, and if the entire program is not supported and highlighted throughout a school, then it is impossible to cultivate a positive and shared approach during IEP meetings. However, one important contribution a principal can make during the IEP meeting is to attend more frequently. Often the principal's participation in IEP meetings is limited (Armenta & Becker, 2006), and he/she only attends when staff anticipate difficulty or resistance with the family involved. The principal is at the meeting to diffuse any potential problems that may arise. Although principals' daily schedules are quite demanding and hectic, and often it is challenging to find time to attend lengthy IEP meetings, by doing so principals are demonstrating, once again, to their staff and to parents/guardians that special education and children's educational success are both extremely important.

Provide Parents with All the Relevant Data and Paperwork in Sufficient Time

The packet of information sent to parents/guardians, which comes along with special education referrals, can contain all types of standardized testing results, reports and information about their legal rights as parents/guardians, and all of the procedural safeguards that the school must follow in order to protect their rights. For someone whose primary language may not be English and/or who is not familiar working with data (e.g., raw scores, percentiles) in his/her jobs, laboring through this thick pile of papers can be an overwhelming and bewildering task. In addition, even if parents/guardians had someone to help explain the IEP-related paperwork, often they are given insufficient time to bring this information to an outside source to review. An educational staff member should be assigned the role of working with parents/guardians and should be responsible for the following: 1) ensuring the IEP-related pa-

perwork is received with sufficient time to review the documentation; 2) ensuring the information is presented in a consistent format; and 3) meeting with the parents/guardians prior to the IEP meeting to explain the relevant data and reports. When parents/guardians do not comprehend their child's academic, social and emotional standings, they cannot participate equally in the IEP meeting and truly share in the decision-making process that impacts their child and their child's future, as IDEA encourages.

“Studies have shown that parents desire regular, open and honest communication from school staff.”

Seating Arrangements

The way people are seated during an IEP meeting can have psychological implications and can impact the level of comfort experienced by parents/guardians. If an IEP meeting is held in a classroom, the desks should be arranged in a circle shape, if possible. When IEP meetings are held in a conference room, with a large table, staff never should sit together, all on one side of the table.

To foster collaboration and to emphasize a shared sense of power and decision making, staff and parents/guardians should be integrated within the room environment. Staff should purposely arrange themselves so that some are sitting next to parents/guardians. This is a small, but often powerful, way to send the message that everyone in the room is on the same side - the side of the child.

Set Ground Rules and Clear Expectations

At the beginning of an IEP meeting, it is crucial to clearly establish some basic rules that all attendees must abide by, since personalities can vary greatly and appropriate behavior to one person is not always considered appropriate to another. The facilitator of the meeting should solicit basic meeting rules and expectations from all attendees, list them all and then decide as a group, which ideas to adopt. It is imperative that school personnel encourage parents/guardians to share their thoughts and then, make sure to incorporate some of these ideas in the adopted rules and expectations. This way, the parents/guardians will feel as if their ideas count and are adequately represented. Some examples of rules and expectations are as follows: "Everyone will express him/herself using a polite tone and will not raise his/her voice;" "When someone is speaking, no one else will speak until that person has finished her/his thought;" or "Part of collaboration involves having differences in opinions, so everyone will carefully consider and respect any ideas that are introduced."

Use Clear and Inclusive Language

The language educational staff use at IEP meetings should be clear and specific. Although not intentionally, educational staff can often be vague, impersonal, too negative and extremely conde-

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School Counselors' Roles

scending in the language they use when speaking with parents/guardians. This can create an unfriendly, exclusive climate, one of distrust. For example, on too many occasions, educational staff focus all the attention on a student's academic, social and/or emotional "deficiencies" (the term often used) rather than spending some time celebrating a student's strengths. Further, educational staff use pronouns to refer to the student, instead of using his/her name at all times. Lastly, in general, the education profession is overflowing with jargon and acronyms, and even those in the profession have trouble keeping current with the latest program and/or curriculum acronyms. Federal mandates require that an interpreter must be present during IEP meetings if a parent/guardian does not speak English, but no mandates exist to protect parents/guardians from educationese. There is nothing more intimidating or excluding to parents/guardians than when educational staff toss around acronyms and terminology that parents/guardians do not understand. Terms that are common to educational staff are not always familiar to parents/guardians. To truly foster open communication and a shared dialogue, everyone in the room has to speak the same language.

Encourage Questioning and Leave Adequate Response Time

Educational staff must recognize that many parents/guardians come to IEP meetings feeling uninformed, intimidated due to a variety of reasons (e.g., language and/or cultural barriers, lack of special education knowledge) and even embarrassed, in their view, that their child cannot perform according to the academic standards society has deemed to be typical. As educators, we know that each child learns best in diverse ways and at different paces, and we must emphasize this point, frequently, to parents/guardians.

Even if an educational staff member meets with parents/guardians prior to the meeting to explain a child's data and reports, there still may be issues that arise during IEP meetings where parents/guardians need further clarification. Parents/guardians may be hesitant to ask questions during the meeting for multiple reasons. For example, they might not want to appear as if they are being difficult and questioning the authority of the professional staff or wasting the staff members' time; they might be afraid of coming across as ignorant or uneducated; or they might not be able to focus fully on the issues being addressed because they are so overwhelmed with trying to process the emotional aspect of their child being referred, so they are not even sure which questions to ask. This is where it is imperative for educational staff to encourage questioning from parents/guardians by stopping the discussion, after each section of the IEP, and specifically asking parents/guardians if they have any questions and/or concerns about that specific section. Further, educational staff must leave enough response time after asking questions, to ensure that parents/guardians are given adequate time to reflect on and process the information that was discussed.

Earlier research has shown that the involvement of school counselors has been limited, with approximately 35% of school counselors actually participating in IEP meetings (Helms & Katsiyannis, 1992). Although it seems that school counselors are becoming increasingly more involved in working with students with special needs (Milsom, 2002), still it is unclear exactly how the school counselor's role in special education is defined (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). Over the years, the function of the professional school counselor has changed dramatically. Once referred to as guidance counselor, the professional school counselor now is expected to develop and facilitate a set of activities that promotes leadership, advocacy and collaboration among all school members (American School Counseling Association, ASCA, 2005). As part of their graduate program training, professional school counselors are taught to serve as consultants to parents, teachers and other educational staff, as well as make referrals to services within the school and within the community. In addition to working with students individually, professional school counselors deliver developmental lessons to groups of students or professional development to school staff that address issues on the ways to resolve conflicts. They are also provided with training on how to effectively address organizational issues within the school through advocacy and intervention. As part of their professional code of ethics, school counselors are expected to include students with disabilities in all of the activities that are part of the comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005).

With the most recent expectations presented by ASCA (2005), coupled with the extensive training counselors receive from graduate programs, the professional school counselor should be viewed as an asset to the IEP process and is aptly skilled to take on a more facilitative role during IEP meetings (Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007). In most schools, a district-wide special education supervisor facilitates IEP meetings. While the special education supervisor has the knowledge and experience with such services, in some cases he/she does not have the necessary facilitative skills. In addition, a special education supervisor may not know the student (or his/her family) being referred and may not be very familiar with the school's specific culture, systems and/or its collaborative structure. The school counselor is much more familiar with each student, as well as the school.

Provide Supplemental, Outside Resources

Although schools must be responsible for assisting parents/guardians with comprehending the IEP process, as well as special education services, there are many supplemental resources and numerous outside agencies, organizations and advocacy groups that can greatly aid parents/guardians and increase their understanding of this process (see Table 2 for a sample list of resources). The problem is that most parents/guardians are not aware of these ad-

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ditional resources, nor do they always have the time or skill set to devote to researching the resources that may exist. Therefore,

Table 2:

Special Education Resources for Parents with Children with Disabilities

Office of Special Education Programs Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network	http://www.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/resources.html
Identifying and Treating Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Resource for School and Home	http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/adhd/adhd-identifying.html
A Guide to Disability Rights Laws	http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm
Wrightslaw Online Assistance for Parents Needing Answers	http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.index.htm
Sample Individualized Education Program and Guidance Document	http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/policy/iep/
Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE)	http://www.fapeonline.org/parentalrights.htm
National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)	http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/nidrr/index.html
Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers	http://www.taalliance.org/index.asp

schools should provide parents/guardians with a list of outside resources (e.g., web sites, contacts for parent advocacy groups) to assist parents/guardians with seeking additional information that will help them become more knowledgeable and more able to provide input in their child's IEP planning.

Special Education Parent Associations and Other Parent-Related Activities

Although many schools and/or districts have a special education parent association, or something similar to this, many do not. Such associations are extremely valuable and supportive for parents/guardians of children with special needs by providing them the opportunity to interact with (and learn from) other parents/guardians who have had experience with the IEP process and who have struggled with similar issues. Further, schools should sponsor a variety of activities dedicated to uniting the parents/guardians of children with special needs in their schools. For example, schools could offer informational presentations on strategies for helping

children with homework or on specific disability categories; plan social events like potluck dinners; coordinate support groups that allow parents/guardians to dialogue and share the feelings they are experiencing about their children being referred; and foster interaction, outside of school, between educational staff and parents/guardians. Bringing together parents of children with special needs is critical to increasing understanding, advocacy and collaboration in relation to the IEP process and special education services, in general.

Final Thoughts

Although each staff member involved in the IEP process has a different role to fulfill, it is the responsibility of the entire educational staff to create a process that is collaborative, welcoming and transparent for the parents/guardians of the child with special needs. First and foremost, although not always directly involved in the actual IEP meetings, principals certainly are accountable for the ways their staff handle these meetings and the ways they treat parents/guardians throughout the entire process. As Barth (2001) emphasizes, school leaders have the choice of being builders or barriers to culture. Successful principals dedicate themselves to ensuring that all students achieve and foster collaboration to guarantee such results (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Remember, the IEP meeting is the child's and his/her parents'/guardians' entree into special education programming, and the initial tone that is set can impact--negatively or positively--the impressions parents/guardians have about their child being referred and the effectiveness of the services offered, as well as the level of trust they have in the school and its staff.



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Would you like to be More Involved in NYS CEC?

NYS CEC always welcomes nominations for the various board member positions. If you would like to increase your involvement in NYS CEC, please consider nominating yourself for next year's slate. You can keep apprised of vacancies for 2011 by reading *Exceptional Individuals*.

Not Receiving our E-mails?

NYS CEC receives an updated membership list from the Council for Exceptional Children headquarters each month. If you have opted out of providing your e-mail address, you may be missing out on chapter and division updates, announcements, conference invitations, and voting notifications that are sent electronically. If you would like to receive our e-mails, please update your membership information by contacting CEC's Constituent Services Center at (888) 232-7733, TTY (866) 915-5000, or e-mail service@cec.sped.org.