THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
CENTER ON EDUCATION AND
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

Partnering with Families Through Special Education

Research-based Strategies for Special and General Educators

Developed for the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

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Special Education requires schools, communities, and service providers to come together as partners with families to provide tailored services, supports, and instruction for their children. It is clear from years of research that this partnership creates relationships and supports that form the best environment for any child to learn and grow. In these partnerships, families are the most enduring, expert supporters of their children. How professionals support and empower them in this critical role is the focus of this brief.

The brief summarizes findings of 30 research studies that provide the foundation for the strategies and recommendations that are offered within this document. The brief also incorporates practices from three, widely accepted frameworks for family engagement. The legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is also central to all the recommendations in this brief. Links to more in-depth information are included throughout.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) upholds the rights of children with disabilities and their families. IDEA gives explicit attention to the requirement that educators are to engage families intentionally and meaningfully in all facets of a student's special education experiences. Educators and parents (guardians) are specifically addressed within the legislation with the hope that they will be provided with the necessary tools, technology, knowledge, and support they need to improve the educational outcomes of the children with disabilities.[18]

IDEA unequivocally states the necessary involvement of parents and guardians in the special education process, a responsibility placed on the local educational agency which serves their children. This legislation, along with family engagement theories and research are the foundations for this research brief. While the three common family engagement models are briefly described, they should be seen as foundational to the implementation of IDEA and how educators can partner with families to ensure they are meaningfully engaged in all special education experiences.

It is possible to follow the direction of legislation while missing the opportunity to engage families authentically and meaningfully in special education. Educators are busy attending to numerous, complicated, often high-stakes demands. Building partnerships with families can seem like one more thing on a long list of to-dos. However, years of experience, the same evidence that serves as the foundation for legislation and theories, informs the understanding that building partnerships with families is worth it. Family engagement that is built on trust results in teachers who have a greater sense of efficacy, who raise their expectations of their students, and who are more likely to ask for feedback and try new approaches. Families also gain greater trust in educators, have a stronger sense of belonging with the school, and raise their expectations for their own children. Best of all, students have more positive experiences that lead to increased confidence, higher achievement, and sense of belonging in school.

The Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships[22] establishes the necessity of building the capacity of both families and educators and their partnership to positively impact student achievement. While educators and families experience separate and unique challenges regarding engagement, they both share in the benefits of process and organizational conditions that support effective partnerships. Families and educators have shared goals, and, as a result, they should engage in a reciprocal exchange of power to support each other's growth. As such, the Dual-Capacity framework is unique in its focus on changing educational policy and programs to build capacity in four main areas: capabilities, connections, confidence, and cognition.

The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process addresses why families do (and do not) become involved, what families do when they are involved, and how families contribute to students' school success. Parental involvement can influence positive characteristics in students that contribute to their achievement, such as self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation skills. This framework is unique in its focus on helping educators understand more deeply the challenges families face, the variety of impactful actions they take, how children and youth actively respond, in addition to exploring how student motivation and skills can be enhanced.

The Sunshine Model of Trusting Family-Professional Partnerships[33] centers trusting family-professional relationships as the primary support for children with disabilities. This framework highlights how families and professionals in educational settings rely on one another to foster belonging and resilience for students. Like the other two models, it emphasizes family-school partnerships as an important factor in student outcomes.

The recommendations and practices of the three frameworks, studies and legislation are summarized into 7 key strategies and example practices in this brief. The hope is that professionals will gain practical, research-based strategies for family engagement from the brief and take action—action that will improve or add a meaningful family engagement practice that supports a child's special education. To that end, a template is included at the end of this brief for recording reflections and next steps. Note: throughout this brief, "parents" refers to all adults who parent children and youth. This is inclusive of kinship caregivers, guardians, foster parents, and others who stand in the role of parent in the special education process. It should be noted that Ohio's definition of parent does not include several of these titles.

Strategy #1

Treat parents as experts and value their input.

A critical component of successful school-based family engagement, particularly for families of students with disabilities, is intentionally valuing and including the expertise that parents and families possess regarding their child. In traditional roles of parent-professional relationships, professionals (e.g., teacher, educator, administrator) assume the role of expert during conferences and meetings.[6, 17]

This structure positions educators as the advice-givers and parents as the advice-seekers, emphasizing a school-centered, one-way communication approach rather than a family-centered, two-way communication partnership.[6] Parents report that their expertise goes unrecognized in favor of teachers' knowledge, opinions, and expertise.[6] Additionally, parents who offer advice to educators often receive what is described as "assertion of knowledge" – educators minimizing the advice shared by asserting that they were already aware of the information (p. 391).[17] This can result in parents feeling unheard and disparaged.

Parents' self-efficacy and empowerment increases when a family-centered approach is implemented.[8, 9] This is an important consideration for all families, but particularly for those of students with disabilities. The two-way exchange of advice and knowledge in meetings and interactions between parents and educators is a measure of whether the parent-professional partnership has developed effectively.[6] Both educators and parents hold expertise about a student, and it is imperative for the success of the student that this information be shared in a cooperative fashion that is mutually beneficial.[2] This perspective is supported by all three frameworks of family engagement outlined in the introduction. Additionally, this type of partnership requires that educators and professionals relinquish their own perceptions of themselves as the only experts and embrace families as necessary contributors with critical expertise on their child.[7]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS TO IMPROVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

- Talk with families (parents and their children) to develop a shared vision with clear goals for the student at the start of the relationship and recommit to that vision at each meeting. This sets a positive foundation upon which two-way communication and partnership can thrive.[7]
- Collaborative strategies often must be explicitly taught. This can be successfully accomplished by providing training for parents and teachers that addresses default communication patterns (e.g., teachers as advice givers; parents defaulting to the role of advice seekers; teachers not pursuing or valuing parent advice) and addresses tensions that could arise from default interactional structures.[6]

- Reassure parents and families that they are teammates-working together for a common goal. Highlight both the educators' and parent's strengths, while accommodating each other's limitations in a supportive manner.[7]
- Use joint problem-solving where all parties (educators and parents) are actively engaged in the process. Consider using reciprocal judgment-free dialogue to engage in creative problem-solving that permits the consideration of non-traditional solutions and the generation of innovative ideas.[7] This creates an atmosphere where the parent voice is heard and reinforces their expertise.

Strategy #2

Practice culturally responsive family engagement.

The implementation of culturally responsive practices is essential in meeting the needs of all students, in particular the needs of diverse students. Considering parental support and involvement are necessary for special education goals to be achieved, family engagement practices must also be culturally responsive.[25] Unfortunately, several cultural barriers exist that limit family engagement in special education. Differences in language heavily impact engagement for diverse families. Families suggest that translation services within special education are often inadequate, making it difficult for parents who speak languages other than English to actively participate in meetings and other school-related activities.[1] Thus, not meeting the standards as envisioned in IDEA. Another barrier to engagement within diverse families is educator perceptions imposed by stereotypes that assume families lack education and the ability to communicate effectively.[31] These attitudes often result in the erroneous perception that parents are uncommitted to their students' growth and success.[15]

Consequently, it is important to engage in open communication that fosters mutual respect between parents and educators. Borrowing from the Dual-Capacity[22] and Sunshine[33] models, parents of color have made note of the need for reciprocal information sharing and decision-making through open lines of communication to establish trust with their students' teachers.[3] Taking cultural perspectives into consideration can improve engagement outcomes such as active participation during IEP meetings. Since the differences in perspectives of education may be misinterpreted as disinterest or passivity, it is essential to highlight the value of the parent's role in a student's achievement.[20] Parental input from diverse families allows for a student's needs to be explained from a cultural lens that school personnel may not have. In many ways, parents are the experts regarding their children and of their culture and thus could share best practices with educators.[13] When educators value the assets of diverse families, they provide families of students with disabilities guidance, who in turn can incorporate school-based strategies to support their students at home where they can engage comfortably in cultural practices.[1]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- Establish a routine practice of reciprocal information sharing and decision-making.[3] Position parents as one of the experts on their child's team and communicate to them their perceived value as well as how they are essential to their student's achievement.[20]
- To increase cultural competence, provide teacher training focused on racial and linguistic diversity. Doing so can reduce some of the incorrect assumptions made about parents of color that often result in inaccurate conclusions.

- Create a strategy to understand culturally based approaches a student's family uses at home and incorporate these into the child's special education supports.
- To support families of children who are learning English, create a process to ensure that a system is in place to translate all special education documents.

Strategy #3

Practice effective, reciprocal communication.

Reciprocal (two-way) forms of communication between schools and the families of students with disabilities are critically important for school-based family engagement.[33] In fact, when effective two-way communication occurs in special education contexts, families are empowered, they feel supported, and their engagement increases.[4] Many parents of children with disabilities bring their experience with general education to special education interactions. As a result, they are often learning a new system and trying to understand their role in it. When educators intentionally extend explicit invitations to families of children with disabilities, family engagement increases.[14]

Clear communication with families of children with disabilities creates an environment of partnership and collaboration. Thus, whenever possible, special education conversations and communications should not include jargon or lingo.[30] This often keeps special education discussions out of reach for families, since it signals to them that they are not welcome to add their voice or perspectives. Families of children with disabilities desire to engage in communication on their own terms and they prefer to receive communication in multiple ways. They see themselves as an advocate on their child's special education team and they deem their inputs critical to the development of best practices that can be used to support their student.[2] Centering families as essential to school-family communication offers educators an opportunity to leverage families' funds of knowledge by positioning them to contribute to discussions based on their personal expertise with their child.[6]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- Ensure school-based communication with families is frequent and proactive.
- In addition to the reason for communication, when interacting with families, be sure to communicate care and concern.
- For special education discussions and deliberations, create a culture that is inviting to families and caregivers, such that their perspectives are welcomed and included.
- When designing and holding special education meetings, ensure the family and the child are at the center of all activities.[4]

Strategy #4

Commit to inclusive, empowering, consensus-building Individualized Education Program processes.

An individualized education program, or IEP, is a necessary component in special education services that addresses the specific educational needs of a student with disabilities. Parents are interested in playing an active role in developing IEPs but face barriers to engagement that lead them to believe their input is not valued. While parental participation is integral to the IEP process, families have often described the team decision as "educator-driven" with little room for their input.[35] Families report receiving testing results and other data from educators, administrators, and professionals and often not being granted substantial time to respond to what has been shared or to offer their own input.[24]

Some families may have a lack of understanding of the crucial components of the IEP process, including the role of providers and their process of service delivery, how accommodations are provided in the general education classroom, and how a student's educational placement is determined.[21] As a result, minimal involvement occurs and parents express that when there is disagreement between family and professionals (educators), the team often defaults to the educators' opinions on placement and services.[7, 11] This limits the opportunity for positive conflict (differences of opinion) to lead to creative solutions and instead decreases parents' active participation—often a precursor to legal action.[7, 24] Families who consider themselves to be highly involved in the IEP process report a need for their involvement due to services not being adequately implemented in the classroom.[4, 35] Most importantly, their perception of positive IEP meetings occurs when educators provide alternatives to meeting in-person during the workday (e.g., phone conferences), when there is less of an emphasis on state testing, and special education jargon is omitted during the conversation.[5]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- IEP documents should be written with language that makes knowing how, when, and where services will be provided easily accessible.
- Provide a checklist for each IEP team member, with details and expectations of their role in implementing services and support for the student.[34]
- Parent education programs can assist family members in understanding the sections of the IEP document before being formally presented with information during the IEP meeting.[21]
- Offer families multiple options when scheduling IEP meetings. Attending meetings in person during the school day may not be practical for those with inflexible schedules, so virtual meetings and phone conferences can increase access for them.[5]

Strategy #5

Start transition planning early and connect families to services for all aspects of a full life.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that the goal of transition planning is, "to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation."[19] The required elements of transition planning according to IDEA includes, "(i) Instruction; (ii) Related services; (iii) Community experiences; (iv) The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and (v) If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation."[19] Families want to be provided with post-secondary goals and services that will lead to their child's future independence and overall success. However, most parents are unfamiliar with local community-based resources or know how to access transition-related services. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for families and educators to not be aware that students with disabilities may continue to receive special education services until they reach age 22 or have met their graduation requirements, whichever occurs first.[18]

Transition planning and services are essential to supporting concerns that families express related to their child's ability to form relationships outside of school as well as enhancing knowledge and gaining access to post-graduation resources.[28] Parents have communicated feeling underprepared to assist in their child's transition into postsecondary activities.[29] Others may not be aware that when their student transitions to college, communication, decision making, and the provision of specialized supports now belongs to the student. Parent-identified barriers for receiving adequate transition services include limited career preparation for students as well as unclear and unrealistic career goals.[5] There is a need for parental education and training on post-secondar transitions, including the legal aspects of transition plans as well as strategies to help youth and young adults integrate into the workforce and communities outside of special education.[28]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- Transition planning should begin as early as possible (Ohio requires the transition sections of the IEP at age 14), and parents and educators should be well-informed and well-equipped for the conversation, utilizing resources such as the United States Department of Education Transition Guide.
- Effective transition planning should include a team that shares ownership and responsibility in the success of the student. Decision making should be accomplished by way of effective partnership, where all team members' voices and opinions are equally heard and considered.[7]
- Identify and hold high yet appropriate expectations for students to create long-term goals that focus on improvement and independence, to the extent possible.

- Create an environment of active participation by family members and the students themselves so that they can advocate for their own goals and expectations. This helps the team to have a shared vision of the student's future which is necessary in creating clear and realistic transition goals.

Strategy #6

Support children and youth in their family engagement.

Family engagement models are designed to assist educators and families in considering the most collaborative and effective ways to support school-aged children and youth. The student and their unique needs are centered in these models and are critical to the application of the models in practice. As such, they should be considered active participants in school-family engagement. Since IDEA was signed into law in 1990, students with disabilities can be (and, at times, are required to be) invited to participate as a member of their special education team. Additionally, their preferences and interests are to be considered within the IEP process even if the student is not in attendance.[18] Despite this language being included in special education legislation, students with disabilities have been limited in their participation in decision-making meetings. Families and students convey a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the purpose of special education meetings (e.g., IEP meetings, IEP transition meetings) which often results in hesitation and limited engagement that can be harmful to a student's future outcomes.[7, 23, 27] When students are invited to special education meetings, they describe their role as passive rather than integral to the decision-making process.[7, 23, 32, 36] They also have communicated that these meetings are frequently conducted from a deficit perspective, focusing primarily on their weaknesses.[7] This approach further discourages the student from participating.

In Ohio, when a student turns 14 years of age, their transition meetings offer an opportunity for them to provide their own perspective and share self-directed goals. However, this should not be the first and only time a student is invited to join their special education team in decision-making. This is particularly true for a student identified in early childhood as needing specially designed instruction. Student presence and participation at team meetings is not only of benefit to the student. When the student is present within meetings, team members increase their engagement and are more intentional about discussing student data using an asset-based approach.[23] Additionally, when students are present, educators' perceptions can shift during IEP meetings and parents can experience increased knowledge and understanding following meetings.[5] When students are prepared and treated as active participants, such as educators asking students (and their parents) to share their own perspectives and experiences regarding successes and challenges, they are empowered to assume their rightful role among the special education team.[7]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- Proactively and intentionally plan and prepare students and families for special education meetings.[16] Students who plan to attend their IEP meeting must be prepared with knowledge about their disability category, components of the IEP process, as well as terminology and language that they will hear the team use during the meeting.

- Consider hosting a mock-meeting to allow the student to practice the skills they will use in special education meetings that will assist them in advocating for themselves and to participate as a member of the team.[7]
- If they are attending, provide students with an age-appropriate checklist of the necessary components needed to develop an effective IEP, particularly resources and requirements related to transition planning.
- Special education team members should look for opportunities to include students with disabilities and/or their perspectives in the evaluation, IEP, and transition processes. Even if it is determined that a student will not be present at a decision-making meeting, the team must prioritize gathering the student's preferences, interests, and other relevant self-reports.

Strategy #7

Support families by providing mentors.

There is very little research regarding how parents of children with disabilities formally and informally mentor other parents. Yet, the limited research regarding this practice suggests that it positively influences family engagement. Research has found that parents of children with disabilities organize networks with other parents of children with disabilities in their school or community.[2] These networks help to organize resources and build awareness regarding children with disabilities and their unique needs. Peer support interventions have promising potential for positively impacting perceptions of parent efficacy and reducing caregiver strain.[10] Formalized parent-to-parent support involves training parents of children with disabilities to mentor those who are new to special education. Support can consist of phone calls, providing families with emotional support, information, and promoting positive attitudes toward services.[10]

School-based parent to parent support networks are known to remove barriers that could stand in the way of positive parent engagement with the school and service providers.[10] Parents' efficacy and preparedness to have a tangible influence on their child's education is critical to academic success, particularly in special education. When a parent's efficacy and engagement increases, this leads to an increase in their child's engagement in mental health services, school attendance, and improved behavioral outcomes (e.g., fewer suspensions).[10] While parent-to-parent support programs have successfully used train the trainer models to ensure sustainability, schools can maintain this critical support by positioning a master's-level professional with expertise in the field of special education and supporting families throughout the process (e.g., psychologist, counselor, social worker) to prepare parents to serve in a recognized mentorship role.[10] Given the potential stress associated with providing support to other families, it is recommended that mentors also meet routinely to provide one another with support, share experiences, and solve problems.[10]

Practical Applications of Peer-to-Peer Supports

The Georgia Department of Education supports the Parent Mentor Partnership. This program began in 2002 and it employs almost 90 parents who engage families and provide them with learning opportunities. Focusing on family engagement and special education best practices, the Parent Mentor Partnership is based in part on the Dual Capacity framework. This program is built upon the premise that families are not the problem, but rather the solution to family engagement. The Parent Mentor Partnership benefits both families and educators by directly increasing contacts with families, increasing collaboration with community agencies and organizations, and centering family engagement as critical to school improvement and decision-making.

Ohio has a similar parent-to-parent program that has a longstanding history of offering support to parents of children with disabilities. The Ohio Parent Mentor project was created in 1991 as a part of the Ohio Department of Education's Special Education Action Plan Goal #7 (Parent Involvement in Education). The goals were developed by the State Superintendent's Special Education Advisory Council as required by P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). The Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities was already involved as a Parent Training and Information Center for Ohio and was asked by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to help shape activities for the implementation of Goal #7. This resulted in over 400 parents attending region-based focus group meetings in December of 1991, after which 10 Parent Mentor pilot projects were chosen.

Currently, Parent Mentors are located across the state and are employed by local school districts or Educational Service Centers. Blending their personal special education experiences with professional development and technical assistance provided by The Ohio State University, Parent Mentors provide mentorship to parents of children who are suspected of a disability as well as those already identified and receiving services. They can attend all special education meetings and provide training to families and educators. This successful model of parent-to-parent support is known to enhance school-based family engagement efforts, increase skills and knowledge, and empower families and Parent Mentors themselves.[26]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS:

- Create a support group for families of children with disabilities and make it a part of your school-based special education action plan.[12]
- Provide a list of organizations or groups that offer parent-to-parent support to the parents of children with disabilities.
- If a parent of a child with disabilities has experienced a long-standing, positive relationship with your school, consider asking the parent if they would be willing to meet with new parents to share their knowledge about special education procedures.
- If you have additional funds, consider creating and funding a part-time parent mentor position.

Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

Strategy	**Glows** What can we celebrate about our current work?	**Grows** What are our next steps?
1. Treat parents as experts and show them their input is valued.		
2. Practice culturally responsive family engagement.		
3. Practice effective and reciprocal communication with family members.		
4. Commit to developing inclusive, empowering, consensus-building individualized education plan (IEP) processes.		

5. Start transition planning for students early and connect families to services for all aspects of a full life.		
6. Support children and youth in their family engagement through inclusion and self-advocacy.		
7. Provide mentors as a support for families.		

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*denotes articles not derived from review of literature

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