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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WITHIN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

LAUREN E. LEHMAN

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DECEMBER 2018

APPROVED

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Abstract

Parental involvement of children with special needs in schools and the IEP process have both been a topic of interest for decades. Research shows that parental involvement produces a number of benefits for children. However, studies have also found that even with the implementation of IDEA 2004, many parents continue to play passive roles in their child's special education. While considering the disconnect between known benefits and yet minimal parental involvement, the following guiding questions have been examined:

1. What is the current nature of parental involvement in the IEP plan and process?
2. What role does the school play in parental involvement of the IEP plan and process?
3. What steps can be taken by both schools and parents to increase parental involvement?

Results of the literature review found that the most parents are playing passive roles in their child's special education. It also indicated that further training is needed for both professionals and parents to better support mutual involvement.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Laws and communication about parental involvement and children with special needs in the school system has been a topic that can be challenging to understand. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) 2004 law is a federal law mandating education of all students with disabilities (Overton, 2016). This law also contains regulations concerning parental rights and their involvement within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and special education process. These requirements have been put into place to protect students, families, and school systems. However, many parents and staff are not aware of, or are not properly educated on, this law.

IDEA 2004: Procedural Safeguards

Federal regulations for IDEA 2004 include a section entitled, Procedural Safeguards. The Minnesota Department of Education defines procedural safeguards as an overview of parental rights for parents of children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These rights include, but are not limited to, the following: rights given to parents, timelines, prior written notice, parental consent, confidentiality and personally identifiable information, independent educational evaluations, and consent to release. Procedural safeguards are given to parents at least once per school year. These regulations have been put into place to assist parents in understanding their rights in order to support and advocate for their child with a disability.

IDEA 2004 not only provides regulations regarding parental rights, but it also requires parents to be given the opportunity to participate as a part of the IEP team. Parents can choose to be active or inactive participants in their child's special education. Parental involvement in the IEP process includes all of the rights stated in the procedural safeguards, as well as playing an active role in creating the Individualized Education Plan. Parents are able to advocate for their

child and provide input concerning what they feel is in the best interest of their child. Schools often state the “IEP team” within an Individualized Education Plan, however who is playing an active role on this team can be questionable depending on the situation. Some parents may want to be active participants in developing their child’s IEP, however, they may not understand how to ensure this partnership.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement can mean different things to various people. Involvement for parents with children with special needs may look different than it does for parents of children without special needs. Research has proven that parental engagement can positively affect students in a number of ways. Jarmuz-Smith (2011) found that “parent involvement ultimately benefits students academically, socially, and occupationally (p. 44).

IDEA helps support parents in becoming involved with their child’s education. However, parents of a child with a disability often have many stressors that can make their engagement more difficult. Daily life stressors for parents of a child with a disability can include but are not limited to personal issues, scheduling issues, financial issues, and relationship issues (Martin, Harkins, Miller, Torma, 2006). Despite these stressors, “Their [parents] involvement in the educational process increases the accountability of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. Finally, the appropriateness of the IEP is enhanced by parental input” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1998). Schools also play an active role in setting parents up for important involvement. Jarmuz-Smith (2011) offers the following comments on this topic:

“With all these stressors and potentially negative interactions occurring, some educators and school administrators come to the IEP table with a defensive posture, hoping to avoid litigation. This situation sets up a non-collaborative relationship between school

personnel and parents and is a significant barrier to cooperation. In these cases, it may be helpful to take a step back from the table and attempt to understand the differing perspectives in the room” (p.44).

The topic of parental involvement has received more attention during the last decade. While investigating the topic of parental involvement, researchers have uncovered a large array of issues. This research has examined the process of parental involvement, parental involvement impact on student education, and communication between teachers and parents. As a result of this research, school systems have been able to make positive changes to improve parental involvement.

Definitions

Terminology used throughout this document includes at least the following:

Individualized Education Plan: A written plan of educational interventions designed that makes decisions about special education (Overton, 2016).

Individualized Education Program Team: The team specified in IDEA amendments that makes decisions about special education eligibility and interventions (Overton, 2016).

Procedural safeguards: Provisions of IDEA designed to protect students and parents in the special education process (Overton, 2016).

Special Education Services: Services not provided by regular education but necessary to enable an individual with disabilities to achieve in school (Overton, 2016).

Due Process: The right to a hearing to settle disputes; a protection for children with disabilities and their families (Overton, 2016).

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, passed in 1990 (also known as PL-142); federal law mandating education of all students with disabilities (Overton, 2016).

IDEA 2004: Law that reauthorized and improved the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Overton, 2016).

Child with a disability: A child evaluated in accordance with IDEA 2004 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services (IDEA 2004 Regulations: Part 300/ A /300.8).

Summary

Both parental involvement and parent perspectives as they relate to their child with special needs in the school system have been a point of discussion for years. When parents are actively involved, research has shown positive results for their child’s academic, social and emotional well-being, and physical well-being. When parents are introduced to the special education world, many things change. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are developed after an initial comprehensive special education evaluation and for every year thereafter that the child continues to qualify for special education services. This process is new to many parents and can feel very stressful. Parents typically need guidance during this time. Knowing what type of guidance parents need can be difficult. Parents have varying ranges of knowledge and differing perspectives about the special education.

Relationships and communication play an important role in a child’s special education. When there is disconnect between what parents know and what school staff think they know, there can be a strain in the parent-teacher relationship. In addition to stronger communication

about the child's education, guidance for parents can increase accountability for the IEP and special education process.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the involvement of parents of a child with special needs with the special education process, the role of their child's school in respect to parental involvement, and the steps that can be taken to increase this involvement. After thoroughly exploring existing research literature, I have addressed the following questions:

1. What is the current nature of parent involvement in the IEP plan and process?
2. What role does the school play in parent involvement of the IEP plan and process?
3. What steps can be taken by both schools and parents to increase parent involvement?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental Involvement in the IEP Process

The process for finding literature for this thesis project was found through searches of EBSCO host, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, ProQuest Education Journals, and EBSCO MegaFILE. Publication dates were narrowed down from 1970 to 2018. The parameters for finding literature were limited to searching for peer reviewed, academic journals and publications that focused on parent and school involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. Keywords that were used in the search included “parent involvement”, “school involvement”, “IEP planning”, and “IEP process”. In this chapter, we will review the literature on parental involvement in the IEP planning and process.

Nature of Parental Involvement

Since the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) was created in 1997, schools have been mandated to include parents as a part of their child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. IDEA was created to protect the rights of parents so that schools must include them when making educational decisions for their child with special needs. IDEA states that schools must include parents as part of the IEP team, however, it does not clearly define their role as active team members. As part of IDEA, schools are required to receive parental consent for both initial comprehensive special education evaluations and in Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Schools are also required to adhere to timelines regarding when information should be given to parents to meet due process guidelines, and to invite and include parents in a meeting where their child’s IEP is discussed and created. IDEA does not clearly define the parents’ role, however, it is up to schools to help parents discover how to be an active participant on their child’s IEP team.

Parental involvement can be described as how parents participate in making decisions for their child's education at the individual level as well as at the policy level (Shepherd, Kervick, 2016). Policy makers created IDEA, in part, to support the requirement for schools to include parents to be a part of their children's education and to be equal partners on their child's IEP team. Parents are experts on their children and understand their children in a way that other team members may not. Without a clear definition of what parental involvement should look like, parents and schools struggle to maintain equal partnership. Earlier studies have found that parent participation involves attending meetings, developing objectives, interventions, or methods of evaluations (Spann, Kohler, Soenksen, 2003). Parental involvement also can include quality communication with school staff, attending school activities, and showing involvement at home through providing support and follow through on school tasks and behaviors. Literature has shown that both parental participation and parental involvement can produce a number of benefits for students. Literature has also shown a number of challenges and barriers to both parental participation and parental involvement, as well as how schools can better provide support for parents to increase their ability to be active participants in their child's education.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Literature has proven time and time again that parental involvement is beneficial for student success. A dominant theme throughout literature suggests that parental involvement increases academic achievement, behavioral achievement, (Ferguson, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Leithwood, 2010), increased test performance, higher attendance rates, and higher post-secondary education aspirations (Jeynes 2007) (Shepherd, Kervick, 2016). IDEA, which is also known as PL-142, mandated schools to invite parents to become a part of the IEP team because of both their comprehensive knowledge of their own child and the

understood increased benefits of parental involvement. Parents play a critical role on their child's IEP team as they have knowledge of their child that is different from that of an educational standpoint.

The U.S Department of Education (1994) states that family involvement is more important to student success than parent education and income (Staples, & Diliberto, 2010). When parents are actively engaged in their children's academic career, their child is more likely to perform well in school academically, socially, and behaviorally (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006; Jeynes, 2007) (Lo, 2014). After IDEA was mandated, parents were not simply caregivers anymore, they were now clearly entitled to be advocates and supporters for their child's education. With this law in place, schools were now given the opportunity to learn from parent's knowledge of their child. This collaboration between the school and parents as equal team members gives students the best opportunity to succeed.

Challenges of Parental Involvement

Literature discusses a great deal of benefits that come from parental involvement. However, it also discusses the challenges of parental involvement from both school and parent perspectives. One challenge that is common in much of the literature is about the readability of IEP's and the readability of the procedural safeguards. Lusa Lo wrote that research has suggested that numerous factors, such as a parent's lack of ability to read and comprehend school documents, may prevent some parents of children with disabilities from making use of their rights and from playing an active role on the IEP team (e.g., Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Pizur-Barnekow, Patrick, Ryner, Cashin, & Rentmeester, 2011; Singh, Matson, Cooper, & Adkins, 2009) (2014). Schools are required to disclose parental rights to parents, and yet this document's readability may be difficult for some parents to read. A parent's reading ability can be due to a

number of things, such as environment and education. Research has found that many adults may be up to six grades lower than their highest grade completed (Davis, Crouch, Willis, Miller & Abdehou, 1990; Miller & Bode, 1994) (Lo, 2014).

Along with low reading levels, the demographics continue to change in the United States, where more immigrants continue to increase in number (Lo, 2014). Although the Department of Education provides parental rights in different languages and schools are required to provide a translator if needed, there continues to be a language barriers.

In addition to a parent's reading ability, there is also special education jargon within special education documentation that parents are expected to read. This includes both the IEP itself, as well as the procedural safeguards. Research shows that parents who are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology are likely to perceive themselves as unprepared to address their child's educational needs (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001) (Fish, 2008).

Research has shown that schools struggle with time concerns and scheduling IEP meetings at times that work for families. Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull and Curry examined the dynamics of 14 IEP conferences. During that study, they found that none of the conferences were attended by both parents (1980). Many parents have to work during contracted school hours, which makes it difficult to schedule meetings during those times. Time concerns play a role in the challenges of parental involvement in their child's education and as equal partners on the IEP team.

Communication between school personnel and parents is essential for developing a successful IEP team. Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, and Haring (2014) found research done by Strogilos and Xanthacou (2006) who interviewed members of various IEP teams. They

found that members of the IEP teams they studied rarely talked about goals and objectives together, and that parents felt like their opinions and suggestions were not heard. Collaboration within an IEP team is critical in the development of a student's IEP, with parents playing a crucial role in the decision-making process. When parent suggestions are not heard, parents begin to take a passive role in IEP meetings.

Reality of Parental Involvement

Research has found that there is a difference between what is stated as the law and what is actually occurring within schools (e.g., Harry, 2008) (Cavendish, Connor, 2018). In a study done by Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry, where IEP meetings were examined, they discovered that only 5 of the 14 conferences were found to be legally constituted (1980); one or more participants that were required to be there by IDEA did not attend. A study done in 1981 by Scanlon, Arick, and Phelps, found that only 75% of mothers were in attendance at their child's IEP meeting.

Attending the IEP meeting alone does not constitute being an active IEP team member. However, studies have found that parents often lack the information and skills needed to actively participate in IEP meetings (Salembier, Furney, 1997). Because of this, many parents have taken passive roles in the IEP process. Through their research, Salembier and Furney also found that parents felt discouraged by school professionals, and that the IEP seemed to be predetermined before the IEP meeting (1997). This limits parents to simply becoming recipients of information rather than equal team members. Some studies also found that IEP meetings are characterized as being focused on compliance with legal procedures rather than on the collaboration between team members to develop the IEP (Harry, 1992; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986; Salembier & Furney, 1997).

When parents take on a passive role on the IEP team, the school educators become dominate decision makers for their child's IEP. Results of numerous studies on parent participation indicated low participation in the decision-making process during the IEP meetings. They also found that parents' roles perceived by school staff was primarily as recipients of information rather than as collaborative team members (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, Lasky, 1988). Literature on parent perspectives throughout the IEP process has found that parents often feel like outsiders when it comes to their child's special needs services and education. Despite the development of IDEA, schools continue to struggle and lack collaboration with parents. IDEA was set in place to help define parent's roles and to clarify their rights on the IEP team, however, it simply has become a compliance issue rather than a collaboration process.

The Role of Schools in Parental Involvement

Schools have more than one role within the IEP process. School professionals have legal roles as well as moral responsibilities. Special education teachers or case managers are required members of the IEP team. Other required IEP team members include parents/legal guardians, regular education teacher of the student, a district representative, the student's case manager, and an individual who specializes in and can represent the student's disability category.

Along with being active IEP team members, case managers have additional legal responsibilities they must follow. Some of these responsibilities include communicating with families to collaborate and set up meetings, completing due process paperwork within required timelines, completing the required due process paperwork, informing parents of their rights, educating families, and leading and guiding IEP meetings. Collaborating and building relationships with parents is both a moral and a legal responsibility. Special Education teachers should communicate about the student's education often.

An IEP meeting is required at least annually, however, an IEP meeting can be requested by a parent at any time. School staff, typically the case managers, are responsible for scheduling all IEP meetings and working with parent schedules to find a time that works well for all required attendees. Due process paperwork includes preparing and distributing meeting notices, sign in forms, excusal forms, prior written notices, and completing the IEP after the IEP meeting. Due process paperwork must be completed within a specific time frame. School personnel also have the responsibility to inform parents of their parental rights. “IDEA requires a school district’s personnel to ensure meaningful parental involvement or active participation in the IEP process (Dragow et. al., 2001; Salas, 2004) and confirm understanding of procedural rights and proceedings (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Yell, Katsiyannis, Dragow, & Herbst, 2003)” (Fish, 2008). School professionals have a duty to explain the parent’s roles when it comes to the IEP process. The IEP meeting is a great means of exchanging information and as a mutual session between school professionals and parents (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, Curry, 1980). “In this conference, the professional can define his or her role as one of consultant to the parent, helping to set realistic goals for the child” (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, Curry, 1980).

School professional’s facilitators of student IEP conferences. This is done in a number of ways including creating meeting notices and guiding meetings. Research found through surveying professional members of a school, that a majority felt that parent participation in the IEP development should consist mainly of presenting and gathering information about their child, rather than by contributing to the educational planning (Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman & Maxwell, 1978) (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, Curry, 1980). These findings may contribute to low involvement by parents in their child’s IEP process and plan.

Research has found that parental involvement manifests in a number of benefits for their child's education. However, studies have also found that "parents and service providers hold different perceptions about collaborative relationships and the effectiveness of early intervention services" (Dinnerbeil, Hale, & Rule, 1996) (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). IDEA included parents in their child's special education process and planning for a reason and school professionals must recognize the benefits to a collaborative team model.

Steps to Increase Parental Involvement

Research has found that parents of a child with disabilities who demonstrate more involvement in their child's education increase their child's educational outcomes. These include better school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence (Newman, 2005) (Wagner et al. 2012). Although the benefits of parental involvement are clear, research continues to show low involvement for parents who have a child with special needs. Parents are not always the primary cause for this low involvement. School systems and school professionals play a significant role in including parents in the education process, especially when it comes to students in special education. One goal of creating IDEA was to protect parent's rights and to increase parent involvement.

From a legal standpoint, IDEA increased the opportunity for parental involvement. IDEA requires school professionals to include parents in the IEP process through communication, collaboration, completion of required paperwork, and through child specific meetings. However, IDEA's legal requirements haven't completely changed the way parents participate in their child's education. Parents still continue to take passive roles on the IEP team and in their child's education. Parents also continue to lack knowledge of their child's special education and understanding of their rights within the IEP process. Research suggests that discussions and

educational decisions are strongly dominated by the special education teachers (Vacc, Parker, Bonner, Lester, Laster, Richardson, Yates, 1985). It is the responsibility of school professionals to inform parents of their child's educational rights. Parents often are not being treated as equal partners on the IEP team. "An effective IEP team is more than just a group of people who have the same purpose or goal in mind. A team is distinguished from a group by the interaction among its members" (Friend & Cook, 2000) (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Despite barriers of parental involvement, school personnel have a responsibility to create a team atmosphere and to work together to do what is best for the student.

Rebecca Lytle and Judith Bordin found that effective IEP teams exhibit characteristics such as identifiable roles, positive social support, proximity, distinctiveness, fairness, similarity, and effective communication (2001). Mandates have put requirements on schools to attempt to include parents in their children's education, however, research has been clear that mandates alone cannot ensure parental involvement. Findings have indicated a number of steps that schools can take to increase parental involvement. The common theme across research found that these steps include communication, knowledge of the special education process, parent's understanding of their child's IEP, and equal partnership.

Communication

Communication challenges between school personnel and parents is a common issue among research findings. "Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings with another person" (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). During the IEP process communication plays a significant role. Communication is needed to build a relationship between school and home. Staples and Diliberto (2010) wrote that "building rapport at the beginning of the school year sets the stage for open communication and continued involvement" (p. 60). Building a

positive relationship with parents will encourage open and collaborative communication.

Communication also promotes the development of parental input in the IEP process. Parents know their children and their input is vital to their education. Instead of playing a passive role in the IEP process, parents should be encouraged to participate and to openly share information with the school staff that may help the team better understand their child. In a study, Salembier and Furney (1997) discovered that parents found that their participation during IEP meetings was increased when they felt that they had established a relationship with school personnel (p. 36). Communication can be difficult for school professionals' because of time constraints, assorted forms of communication, and varied levels of parent response. Nevertheless, research has found that building positive communication between parents and school professionals can increase the success of collaborative outcomes with an IEP team's planning and implementation. Staples and Diliberto (2010) found that positive communication and collaboration can be developed by giving parents multiple opportunities to participate in school activities outside of meetings, by developing a communication system, by involving parents in classroom information, and by building rapport (p. 60). "The rapport building and development of a collaborative partnership allows the IEP team to operate as a cohesive unit" (Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Knowledge of Special Education

In addition to communication, research indicated that knowledge of the special education process, related terminology, and federal mandates are additional factors that can have a negative impact on parental involvement. When parents have a child with special needs, the amount of information they are given can be overwhelming. Schools provide parents with documents including a request for consent to evaluate their child, evaluation results, prior written notices,

staff excusals, IEP's, and procedural safeguards. When an IEP draft is sent home, for example, school staff expect parents to review the document and an assumption is made that parents are understand the information being presented and are able to determine on their own whether or not they agree with the special education services that are being proposed by the school (Lo, 2014).

In addition to parents having knowledge of the numerous special education documents, there are also a number of regulations that surround the IEP process. These mandates include timelines, parental notices, special education service minutes, and least restrictive environment documentation. Understanding parental rights is integral to parental involvement. Burke and Goldman (2015) found that poor parent-school partnerships relate to higher rates of due process and mediation to resolve conflicts, which lead to financial and emotional tolls on schools and families (Goldman & Burke, 2017). The list for mandates within special education can be daunting for parents and, although they are listed within documents and can be found online, it is the school professionals' duty to help parents understand their rights, their child's disability, and the impact that disability might have on their education. Increasing understanding can be done through open communication with parents, giving parents the opportunity to collaborate, and encouraging parents to ask questions. When parents understand the entire special education process they are then not only bystanders on the IEP team, but they become actively involved members of the team.

Parent's Understanding of their Child's IEP

A significant amount of research has found that parents have limited understanding of their child's Individual Education Plan. Valle and Aponte (2002) found that parents feel coerced into signing documents that they do not fully understand (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Research

has also found that parents have difficulty understanding their child's IEP for a number of reasons including special education legal jargon, their own reading ability, and language barriers. Families are given legal documents during the IEP process such as Parental Safeguards, Prior Written Notice, and the IEP itself. These documents contain a great deal of both legal and special education jargon. Luso Lo (2014) wrote that "in order to ensure that families can be involved in each stage of their children's life, readability of these written documents is important" (p. 97). Understanding special education documents is crucial for parents. It will help them discern the special education services their child receives at school as well as how they can better support their child at home. Studies have shown that school professionals need to focus on the readability of special education documents to ensure parent understanding. There is a need to ensure that written documents be written at or below fifth-grade reading level (Paasche-Orlow et al., 2003; Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2010) (Lo, 2014). Luso Lo (2014) recommended a number of ways school professionals can increase the readability of IEP's:

1. Use Software and Online Readability Check System
2. Decrease Text Difficulty (font, spacing)
3. Use of Glossary
4. Proofread Each IEP
5. Enhance Professional Development Activities
6. Educate Parents About the Process

By using these recommendations school professionals can help parents understand the IEP. The IEP is a crucial document that must be understood by all parties of the IEP Team in order to ensure quality collaboration.

Equal Partnership

Shaw (1976) defined teams as any collection of two or more people who are together for a common purpose (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). IDEA mandated that IEP teams must consist of specific team members, and that parents must be given the opportunity to be a part of this team. Research has shown that schools invite parents to IEP meetings for their child, however schools are not involving parents in the actual meeting. In a study done by Salembier and Furney (1997), they discovered that parents who found the meeting to be “predetermined” or “pre-planned” felt that their input had not been requested either before or during the meeting and as a result there was “not enough involvement as a team” (p.38). Parents are equal partners on the IEP team and must be included in the decision-making process for their children’s Individualized Education Plan. Schools professionals should be prepared to come to meetings and be ready to walk through each portion of the IEP with the team so they might gain knowledge, and insight about the child, and make decisions to address the child’s needs during the team meeting. Being equal partners on the IEP team does not simply mean just attending meetings. Parents also have the right to be involved in any decision-making process outside of those meetings, such as schedule changes, behavior plans, or updates to accommodations and modifications. School professionals should collaborate frequently with parents often about what is happening with their children’s education. Members of effective teams must depend on one another and support each other for the common goal, the child’s educational needs (Lytle and Bordin, 2001). School professionals can ensure that parents are equal partners by encouraging parental input, including parents in decision-making, having frequent and quality communication, and including them in their child’s education.

Interventions

Studies contain an exponential amount of research on parental involvement including forms of involvement, school-home relationships, positive effects of parental involvement, and the negative effects of low parental involvement. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the efficacy of interventions for increasing parental involvement at school, specifically for students with disabilities (Goldman and Burke, 2017). Findings have made it clear that additional training for both parents and school professionals is needed if parental involvement is likely to increase.

In a study done by Hirsch (2004), an attention group received an unrelated informational handout about developmental milestones that was reviewed prior to meeting. The control group, however, did not receive any information beforehand (Goldman and Burke, 2017). This study revealed that the attention group displayed significantly higher participation, higher satisfaction, and demonstrated significantly higher levels of post-training knowledge (Goldman and Burke, 2017).

Applying the findings from this study to parental involvement suggests that training combined with additional information would benefit both parents and school professionals. One study on parent involvement found that effective training for staff might include improving scheduling options, limiting the practice of writing IEP's prior to the IEP meeting, understanding all participants roles and responsibilities, and learning strategies for involving others in conference discussions (Vacc, Vallecorsa, Parker, Bonner, Laster, Richardson, Yates, 1985). Research provides significant evidence that parental involvement is beneficial in the education of a child with disabilities. School professionals must ensure that this is happening. School professionals must ensure that they are taking measures to encourage and support this practice. School professionals can create an equal partnership through teaching parents about the special education process, providing consistent communication, unbiased collaboration, and encouraging

parental input. This may seem to occur naturally for some educators; yet others may need interventions to assist in their ability to increase of parental involvement.

CHAPTER III: APPLICATION OF THE RESEARCH

Evidence Based Rationale

Parental involvement has been a challenging topic for decades. This has been seen over and over through discussions, studies, lawsuits, and laws. Schools are mandated to include parents in their child's education in a number of ways, including as equal members of the IEP team. This also includes adhering to meeting due process paperwork deadlines, providing appropriate communication, holding IEP meetings with all required team members present, and informing parents of their rights. Research has proven that even with mandates in place they do not guarantee parental involvement. This is a critical issue in special education and has brought a number of topics to question. The rationale for this project has derived from a literature review that looked to answer three guiding questions:

1. What is the current nature of parental involvement in the IEP plan and process?
2. What role does the school play in parental involvement of the IEP plan and process?
3. What steps can be taken by both schools and parents to increase parental involvement?

Research describes the nature of parental involvement in a variety of ways. IDEA mandates schools to include parents as equal members of their child's IEP team, yet the implementation of this law is inconsistent. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen found that parent participation involves attending meetings, developing objectives, interventions, or methods of evaluations (2003). Parental involvement can be described as how parents participate in making decisions for their child's education at both the individual level as well as at the policy level (Shepherd, Kervick, 2016). A large amount of research found that even with all of the opportunities that parents have a right to participate in, parental involvement is still limited.

Results of numerous studies on parent participation indicated low participation in the decision-making process during the IEP meetings. They also found that the perception of parents' roles by school staff was primarily as recipients of information rather than as collaborative team members (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, Lasky, 1988). Parents have been taking passive roles in their children's education, instead of participating as active team members.

Salembier and Furney found that parents feel discouraged by school professionals, and that the IEP seems to be predetermined before the IEP meeting even begins (1997). While school professionals may think that parents are simply playing apathetic roles, research has found that they may simply not have the knowledge or training to actively participate in the IEP process. As a result, some parents feel alienated and coerced into signing documents that they do not understand (Valle & Aponte, 2002) (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Lack of understanding by parents is not the only reason for their passive involvement. School professionals are the voices from the field of special education and they set the stage for parents. Schools have significant responsibilities as required IEP team members to include parents by completing due process paperwork, meeting deadlines, collaborating during the IEP meeting, informing parents of their rights, and communicating openly and clearly.

Although IDEA requires schools to inform parents of their rights and to include them as equal IEP team members, IDEA does not require schools to train parents on how to become actively involved. It also does not require school professionals to provide parents with the knowledge to understand their child's IEP and the special education terminology it contains. Schools also have the responsibility to inform parents of their rights which are documented in the procedural safeguards and provided to parents annually. While IDEA does ensure that schools provide "meaningful" parental involvement opportunities including "active" participation within

the IEP process (Drasgrow et. al., 2001; Salas, 2044), the definition of “meaningful” and “active” are interpreted in multiple ways. Research has found that many schools are not doing much, if anything, to support an increase in parental involvement.

The topic of involvement for parents with a child in special education continues to be an interest to researchers, and with this brings a number of questions to the table. These include asking what steps can be taken to increase parental involvement.

Many studies have clarified successful ways to increase parental involvement. These studies have also clarified that lack of parental involvement does not lie solely with either the parents or the school system, but rather it is a shared responsibility. In fact, schools have the opportunity to make a difference one family at a time. Despite the known barriers to parental involvement, schools have a responsibility to create a team atmosphere and to work together to do what is best for the student. The common theme across research found that these steps might include increasing communication, supporting parent’s understanding of their children’s IEP and the special education terminology used within it, increased knowledge of special education mandates and parental rights, building relationships, and an expanded understanding of parent perspectives by school personnel.

The areas in which schools could improve to help increase parental involvement are clear, and yet the exact way for schools to gain this information is not explicit. School staff should have the knowledge and skills to include parents in the IEP process, planning, and education of their child. One project that has been designed to meet the training needs for school professionals so they might gain the knowledge and skills needed to increase parent involvement is the Special Education Teacher (SET) Training Program.

Special Education Teacher (SET) Training Program

Purpose

The Special Education Teacher (SET) training program was designed to help support teachers with the skills and knowledge they might need to increase parental involvement in their child's education and throughout the IEP process. This program trains school professionals in a variety of areas including how to build relationships with parents, communication, special education terminology, readability of IEP's and procedural safeguards. With this information teachers will have the skills and knowledge to better support parents with their understanding of special education and to become active participants on their child's IEP team.

Audience

The target audience for this training program includes both special education teachers and case managers. These are the school professionals that typically set the stage for parental involvement and are the primary communicators with the parents of students in special education. Special education teachers and case managers have the ability to change the way parents participate in their child's education and training, and knowledge of the challenges that parents face is necessary to make this change. Principals, psychologists, social workers, related service providers, and other school professionals may also benefit from this training program as they are also typically part of the IEP team. The goal for the SET program is that at least one representative from each school within a given district (special education teacher, case manager, principal) complete the provided training. The representative would then bring the SET training to their own school and share the information provided with the school professionals during a planned professional development time.

Resources

Initial resources for SET training are intentionally limited to those that are most easily accessed and achievable for schools that choose to participate. Funding for SET training must be provided by the school district and/or individual schools. After attending an initial training for SET, school professionals will be provided with the SET materials that they can in turn use for training additional school personnel during a required staff professional development workshop.

SET training is provided in both presentation and trainer directed forms. The PowerPoint presentation used in an initial SET training session is available to each SET trainer after their completion of the introduction to the program.

Sustainability

The sustainability for SET training depends on each individual schools' dedication to the program. To be most effective, school districts will need to annually train representatives from each school. Individual schools will then need to carry out this training during staff development.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary

The IDEA 2004 mandate is defined as a law that reauthorized and improved the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), a federal law mandating education of all students with disabilities (Overton, 2016). This law also contains regulations for parent rights and involvement within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) planning and process for their child. One key component of IDEA 2004 is to protect the rights of parents and to increase their opportunities for parental involvement. The topic of parental involvement in the educational process and planning for children with disabilities has been studied for decades and continues to be of great interest to the field of special education. Research has shown that parental involvement produces multiple benefits for children. Studies have also shown that even with IDEA 2004 in place, some parents continue to play passive roles in their child's education. With parental involvement benefits known, the following questions have been explored:

1. What is the current nature of parental involvement in the IEP plan and process?
2. What role does the school play in parental involvement of the IEP plan and process?
3. What steps can be taken by both schools and parents to increase parental involvement?

IDEA 2004 requires schools to include parents in decision-making about their child's education. For many schools, this is implemented by inviting parents to IEP meetings, having frequent communication with parents, and sending home due process paperwork. Parental involvement can be described as how parents participate in making decisions for their child's education at both the individual level and the policy level (Shepherd, Kervick, 2016). Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen found that parent participation involves attending meetings, developing

objectives, interventions, or methods of evaluations (2003). The current nature of parental involvement in their child's education is often limited. Results of numerous studies on parent participation indicated low participation in the decision-making process during the IEP meetings and that the role of parents is often perceived by school staff as simply being the primary recipients of information rather than as collaborative team members (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, Lasky, 1988).

Schools and parents each play a critical role in parental involvement. IDEA requires school professionals to provide opportunities for "meaningful" parental involvement and "active" participation in the IEP process (Drasgrow et. al., 2001; Salas, 2044). Schools set the tone for how parents are involved in their children's education and studies have shown that schools have the ability to make a difference. Research has found that school professionals are generally not doing much, if anything, to support an increase in parental involvement.

Both schools and parents need to make changes to increase parental involvement. Research shows that steps to boost parental involvement include increasing communication, parent understanding of the special education process and their child's IEP and clearly defining special education terminology and jargon, recognition and implementation of mandates and parental rights, expanded parent-teacher relationships, and staff consideration of parent perspectives.

Based on results from the literature review, the SET project has been developed to meet the needs of the school professionals who play an important role in increasing parental involvement. The SET project is designed to train school professionals so that they might be better equipped as they encourage parents to participate in both active and meaningful roles as part of their child's IEP team.

Professional Application

The literature review above introduces the Special Education Teacher (SET) training program as a professional application to address the information learned about the lack of parental involvement. The SET training program is designed to train school personnel on ways by which they can encourage parents to become meaningful and active IEP team members for their child. Research found substantial evidence demonstrating the benefits of parental involvement. Schools and parents both need to learn about these benefits and then work together to advocate for and make decisions in the best interest of students. Lawmakers have also recognized the benefits of parental involvement, and addresses it with IDEA 2004. This law requires schools to include parents as team members, however it does not clearly define how parents are to participate as a part of this team. The SET training program is in accordance with IDEA 2004 and uses evidence based research to assist in the training of school professionals.

Limitation of the Research

The research reviewed for this literature review has been related to the topic of parent involvement on the IEP team and in their children's education. There are several limitations to the research from this literature review. The research that focused on parent participation in the development of the IEP highlighted that limitations included sample sizes, disability categories, and perceptions of involvement. Some of the literature also focused on parent interventions to increase parental involvement, however, the research of these resources was limited by both time and small sample sizes. There is also only limited research on training for school professionals and parents to increase parent involvement.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed to examine interventions and training programs for school professionals and how they might impact parental involvement. There is currently limited research on training programs focused on parents and their roles in involvement. This research is critical in helping to develop more evidence based research training programs.

Another implication for future research is to look more specifically at cultural differences and their effects on parental involvement. Cultural differences and language barriers have each been found to be obstacles to parental involvement for some families. It will be important to look further into the correlation between cultural differences and parental involvement before developing additional training for school professionals.

Lastly, further research is warranted to explore the perceptions of parents in relation to their involvement in the IEP process. There is currently some research on parent and school perspectives of parental involvement, however, if more research is to be analyzed on training programs for schools and parents, it will be important to look at the parents and schools' perspective of their involvement after the training has occurred.

Conclusion

Parents are important members on their child's IEP team. Benefits of parental involvement are exceptional. Parental involvement can be defined in a number of ways, however, studies agree that children with special needs benefit when their parents play "meaningful" and "active" roles in their child's education. School professionals and parents are both responsible for creating a team atmosphere, nevertheless schools set the stage for parental involvement. Research indicates that parental involvement remains low regardless of the current mandates that are in place. Based on the results of this literature review, a Special Education

Teacher (SET) training program was designed to train school professionals on how to encourage parents to become meaningful and active team members on their child's IEP team.

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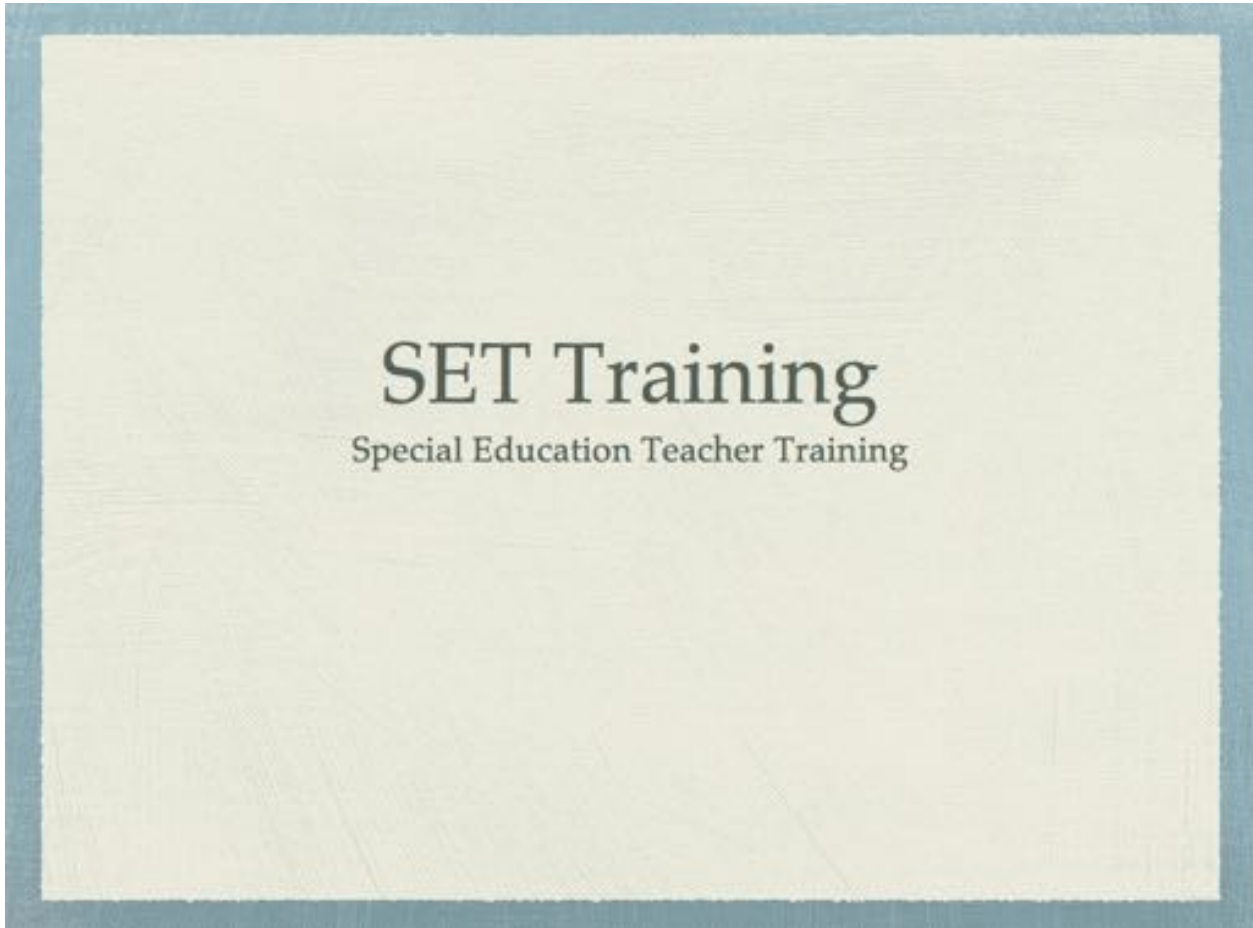
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APPENDIX A



The research found that parental involvement remains low regardless of the current mandates that are in place. It also found that school professionals and parents are both responsible for creating a team atmosphere, nevertheless schools set the stage for parental involvement. Based on these results, the Special Education Teacher (SET) training program was designed to train school professionals on how to encourage parents to become meaningful and active team members on their child's IEP team.

After conducting a literature review on parental involvement of children with special needs in school and the IEP process, research found that most parents are playing a passive role in their child's special education instead of playing an active role.

Even after IDEA 2004, which requires parents to be given the opportunity to participate as a part of the IEP team was developed, parents have continued to play this passive role.

The research examined the current nature of parental involvement in the IEP plan and process, what role the schools play in parental involvement, and what steps can be taken by both schools and parents to increase parental involvement.

This training will go more in depth about each area that was examined during the research process and how professional can help make a change. If this training program can help families and schools become more involved, they will have the opportunity to make a major difference in a student's life.

Parent Involvement

- Literature has shown that parental involvement has a number of benefits for our students
- A number of challenges may have an effect on parent involvement
- The reality of parent involvement is that parents play passive roles on the IEP team
- Schools play a critical role in increasing parent involvement

Literature has shown time and time again that parent involvement is beneficial for student success. It is beneficial in a number of ways including increasing academic achievement, behavioral achievement, (Ferguson, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Leithwood, 2010), increased test performance, higher attendance rates, and higher post-secondary education aspirations (Jeynes 2007) (Shepherd, Kervick, 2016).

There are some challenges that may have an effect on parental involvement such as readability of IEP's, language barriers, SPED jargon, time concerns, scheduling, and communication.

What are some challenges that you have faced with parent involvement?

The reality of parent involvement is that parents are playing non-meaningful, passive roles on the IEP team. Research has shown that there is a difference between what is stated as the law and what is actually occurring. Simply attending IEP meetings, does not constitute as being an active team member. School professionals have legal roles as well as moral responsibilities.

Schools Role in Parent Involvement

- Schools responsibility
- School have the ability to increase parental involvement
- School Professional Training

School personnel also has the responsibility to inform parents of their parental rights. “IDEA requires a school district’s personnel to ensure meaningful parental involvement or active participation in the IEP process (Dragow et. al., 2001; Salas, 2004) and confirm understanding of procedural rights and proceedings (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Yell, Katsiyannis, Dragow, & Herbst, 2003)” (Fish, 2008). Schools set the stage for parental involvement and they have the opportunity to make a change. Schools can take steps to attempt to increase parental involvement, however there is no training for teachers on how to do this.

Purpose

- Special Education Training (SET) Program
- Increase Parental Involvement
- Training Areas:
 - Building Relationships
 - Communication
 - SPED Terminology
 - Parental Rights
 - IEP Readability
 - Current State Mandates

This program is designed to help train teachers how to increase parental involvement. The SET training program standing for Special Education Teacher training program. The (SET) training program was designed to help support teachers with the skills and knowledge to increase parent involvement in their child's education and through the IEP process. This program will train professionals in a variety of areas including building relationships, communication, teaching special education terminology and parental rights, readability of IEP's, and knowledge of their current state mandates. With this information teachers will have the skills and knowledge to train and support parents to be active team members.

Audience

- Target audience: SPED teachers / case managers
- Professional development

The target audience for this training program includes special education teachers and case managers. These are the school professionals that typically set the stage for parental involvement and are the primary communicators with the parents or guardians of students in special education.

The goal for this training program would be that a representative from each school in the district (special education teacher, case manager, principal) be trained in SET training. The representative would then bring SET training to their school and train school professionals during a professional development time.

What steps can we take?

- Voices of the field
- Gain the knowledge and skills needed to increase parent involvement
- Apply the skills learned within your classroom
- Share the skills with others

School professionals are the voices from the field of special education and they set the stage for parents. IDEA requires schools to inform parents of their rights in their children's education and to include them as IEP team members. However, IDEA does not require schools to train parents on how to be active team members or require school professionals to give parents the knowledge to understand their child's IEP or special education terminology. We have the ability to make a change, with the skills learned in the next slides to help increase parental involvement.

Activity

- What are strategies that you use to get parents involved in the IEP planning and process?

On your post-it, please write 1-2 strategies that you use to get parents involved in the IEP planning and process? We are now going to look at some strategies we can use to increase parent involvement.

Steps

- Build a **Relationship**
- Meaningful **Communication**
- Take Time to Explain **SPED Terminology**
- Understand and Explain **Parental Rights**
- Ensure the **Readability** of the IEP
- Understand and Follow Current **State Mandates**

Building Relationships

- “Building rapport at the beginning of the school year sets the stage for open communication and continued involvement” (p. 60).
- Building a positive relationship with parents will encourage open and collaborative communication.
- How can we build positive relationships?
 - Open communication
 - Getting to know your students and their families
 - Involve parents in classroom news and event

Staples and Diliberto (2010) wrote that “building rapport at the beginning of the school year sets the stage for open communication and continued involvement” (p. 60).

Building a positive relationship with parents will encourage open and collaborative communication.

How can we build positive relationships?

Open communication

Getting to know your students and their families

Involve parents in classroom news and events’

Communication

- “Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings with another person” (Lytle & Bordin, 2001).
- Benefits of positive communication
- How can we increase communication?
 - Multiple opportunities to participate
 - Develop communication system (notebook, emails, phone calls)
 - Involve parents in classroom information (newsletter, emails)
 - Build rapport (get to know families, show interest, build trust)
 - Don't pre-determine the IEP!

Definition of communication: Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, thoughts or feelings with another person.

Communication is needed in order to promote building a relationship, to build trust, and promotes the development of parental input in the IEP process. Literature has found that positive communication can increase parent's participation in the IEP planning and process. We can increase our communication by giving parents multiple opportunities to participate in school activities outside of meetings, develop a communication system, involve parents in classroom information, and by building rapport (Staples and Diliberto (2010). Don't pre-determine the IEP! All team members including the parents should have a part in developing the IEP

Teaching SPED Terminology

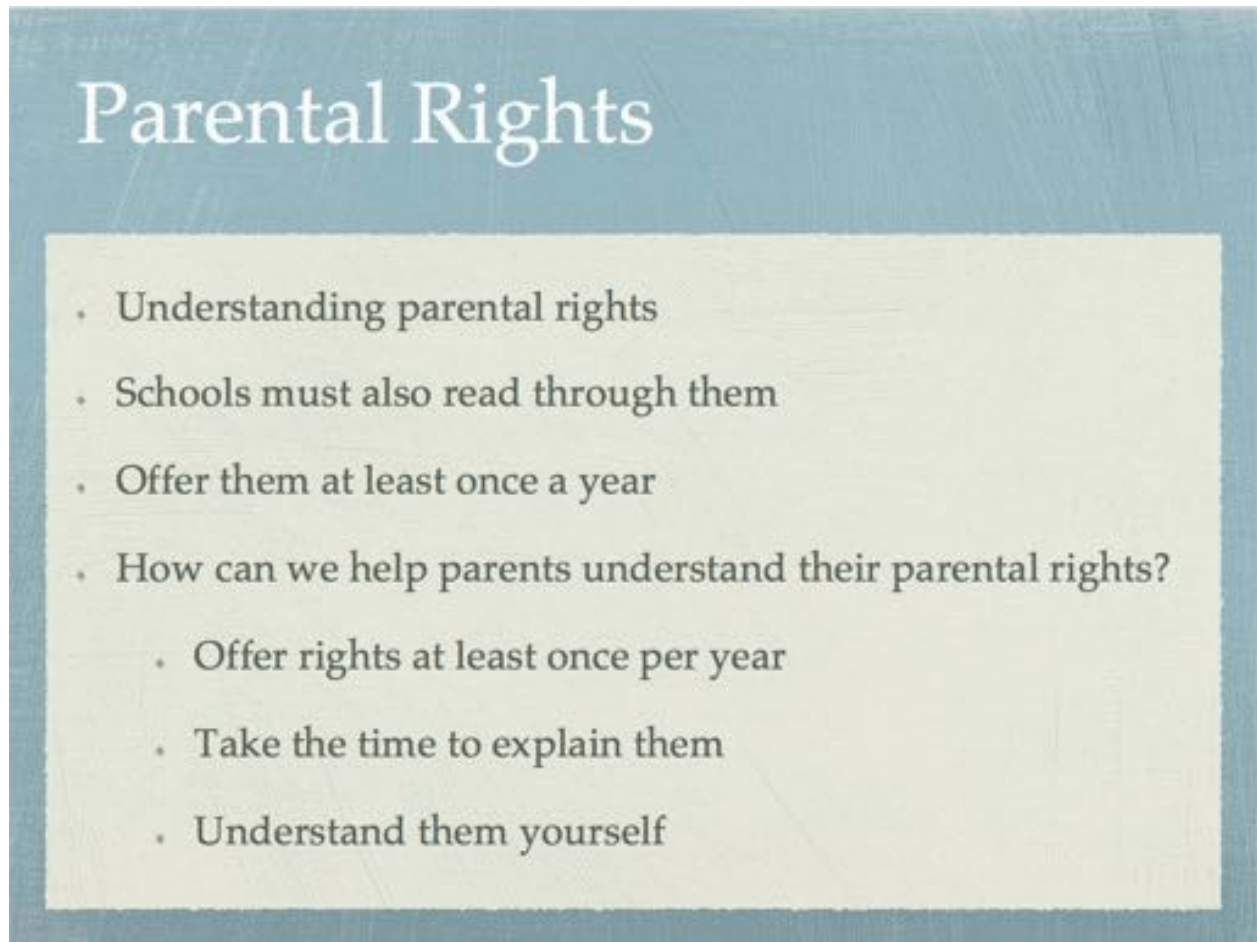
- Special Education documents contain a great deal of jargon.
- Jargon: words used by a particular profession and are difficult for others to understand
- Assume understanding
- How can we help teach SPED jargon?
 - Help parents understand this terminology
 - Give handout with definitions
 - Limit jargon in written documents

SPED documents contain a great deal of legal and special education jargon. Jargon is defined as words used by a particular profession and are difficult for others to understand. When documents are sent home, such as the drafted IEP, school staff expect parents to review the document and assume that parents are capable of understanding the information and determining whether they agree with the special education services that are proposed by the school (Lo, 2014).

On one of your post-its, please write down some words that you think are jargon that you have used in your documents. What are some words you came up with? These are all examples of jargon and are words that parents may not understand: EBD, ASD, accommodations.

How can we help teach and support understanding of SPED jargon?

- Help parents understand this terminology
- Give handout with definitions
- Limit jargon in written documents



It is part of the schools responsibility to help parents understand their parental rights. However, many of us haven't even read through them ourselves. How many of you have read the parental rights? Let's take a minute to read through them right now. Is there anything that surprises you?

In order to help parents understand their parental rights we can:

- offer rights at least once per year (this is also a requirement of the state)
- take the time to explain them

-understand them ourselves

Readability of IEP's

- Valle and Aponte (2002) found that parents feel coerced into signing documents that they do not fully understand (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).
- Reading level
- Dependent on the case manager
- Language barriers
- Luso Lo (2014) recommended a number of ways school professionals can increase the readability of IEP's:
 1. Use Software and Online Readability Check System
 2. Decrease Text Difficulty (font, spacing)
 3. Use of Glossary
 4. Proofread Each IEP
 5. Enhance Professional Development Activities
 6. Educate Parents About the Process

Valle and Aponte (2002) found that parents feel coerced into signing documents that they do not fully understand (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). (This is a sad fact, and one that happens often.) Studies have shown that school professionals need to focus on the readability of special education documents to ensure parent understanding. There is a need to ensure that written documents be written at or below fifth-grade reading level (Paasche-Orlow et al., 2003; Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2010) (Lo, 2014). Another issue is that each case manager has different writing abilities. Along with low reading levels, there could also be issues with language barriers. Parental rights can be offered in other languages, and a translator should attend meetings if necessary to help understanding.

Luso Lo (2014) recommended a number of ways school professionals can increase the readability of IEP's:

1. Use Software and Online Readability Check System
2. Decrease Text Difficulty (font, spacing)
3. Use of Glossary
4. Proofread Each IEP
5. Enhance Professional Development Activities
6. Educate Parents About the Process

Knowledge of Current Mandates

- . Overwhelming amount of information
- . Parental rights
- . Timeline mandates
- . Required team members
- . How can we help ourselves and parents have knowledge of current mandates?
 - . Read current mandates on MDE website
 - . Read through parental rights
 - . Explain mandates to parents and the process you are going through
 - . Open Communication

When parents have a child who has special needs, it can be overwhelming with the amount of information they are given. The list for mandates within special education can be daunting for parents and although they are listed within documents and can be found online, it is the school professional's duty to help parents understand their rights, their children's disability, and their children's education.

On one of your post-its I would like you to write a current mandate that you know and come post it on the front board. An example of this would be if I wrote "Annual IEP meetings must happen at least once per year". Where there any that surprised you?

How can we help ourselves and parents have knowledge of current mandates?

- Read current mandates on MDE website
- Read through parental rights
- Explain mandates to parents and the process you are going through
- Open Communication

Parent Support

- **Burke and Goldman (2015) found that poor parent-school partnerships relate to higher rates of due process and mediation to resolve conflicts, which lead to financial and emotional tolls on schools and families (Goldman & Burke, 2017).**
- **Equal Partners**
- **Meaningful Involvement**
- **We are the Support System/Advocates**

Burke and Goldman (2015) found that poor parent-school partnerships relate to higher rates of due process and mediation to resolve conflicts, which lead to financial and emotional tolls on schools and families (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Since IDEA, schools have been mandated to include parents as equal partners on the IEP team. Schools are also responsible to ensure meaningful parent involvement. We are the front line for parents to communicate needs, ask questions and to be advocates for.

Be the Change

- We can make a difference.
- Increase Parental Involvement
- Benefit Students
- Build Relationships
- Communication

We have the ability to make a difference in a student's life. This can simply be done by building strong relationships and communication systems with families. The benefits of parental involvement are undeniable and we have a chance to make this difference. Take these steps to increase parent involvement in your case load and take the time to share them with your team.