

Successful Family-School Partnerships

University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in
Developmental Disabilities

Families as Partners Training

What is a Family-School Partnership?

- A relationship that can span 13 years or more
- The integration of two systems: school and family
- "Like a marriage with no possibility of divorce."

Why Form Partnerships?

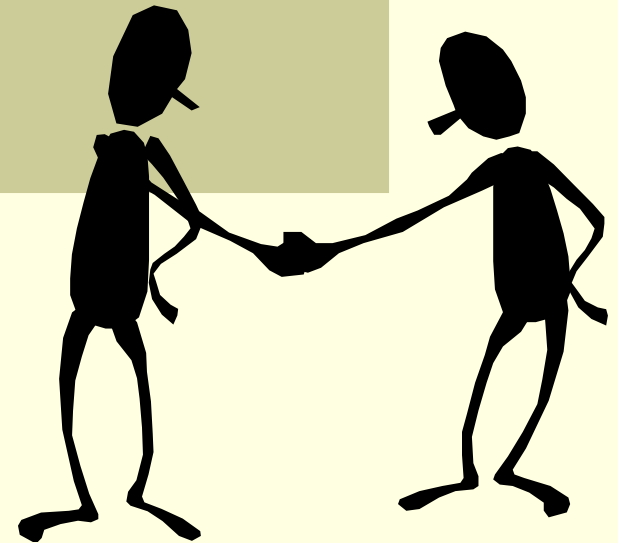
- Families and schools are the two systems most critical to a child's learning
- Successful, collaborative partnerships result in better outcomes for children

Outcomes of Family-School Partnerships

- Improved school attendance and graduation rates
- Higher achievement
- Enhanced social competence

Effective Family-School Partnerships

Strategies for Success



What are the barriers to
successful family-school
partnerships?

Barriers for School Staff:

- Mixed feelings about family involvement
- Stereotypic beliefs about families
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of time/funding for outreach efforts
- Lack of training in effective collaboration practices
- Overworked and underpaid

Barriers for Families:

- Feelings of intimidation and powerlessness
- Language and cultural differences
- Lack of trust
- Past negative experiences
- Economic, social and time constraints
- Lack of self confidence--convinced that "professionals know best"

Barriers to Partnership:

- Differences in family-educator perspectives regarding student performance and progress
- Communication only during crisis
- Families and general education staff may have a limited understanding of the IEP process
- Lack of trust within the family-school partnership
- Meetings that lack clear structure, are rushed, and scheduled at inconvenient times

Building Shared Responsibility

- Meaningful roles for families
- Regular communication between home and school
- Training for all members of the team
- Outreach to encourage participation of diverse range of parents
- Opportunity for parents to participate in school decision making

New and Improved IEP Meetings

- The meeting starts and ends on time
- There are introductions
- There is an agenda and ground rules
- No one dominates the meeting
- There are no interruptions
- Snacks are available, the room is comfortable
- People come prepared and stay for the entire meeting
- Team members are focused and on task
- People LISTEN to each other

Tips for Families:

- Bring someone with you to meetings
- Participate in developing meeting agendas
- Bring your child to all or part of each meeting
- Be prepared to share your child's strengths, interests, and areas of competence
- Know what the law says about your child's rights
- Respect feelings and positions even when you disagree

Tips for Educators

- Focus on strengths as well as needs
- Avoid acronyms and clinical terms
- Paraphrase reports rather than reading them
- Offer to meet with parents before the meeting to review any reports that will be discussed at the meeting
- Avoid patronizing language (e.g. addressing parents as “Mom” or “Dad” instead of their names)
- Respect feelings and positions even when you disagree

Reaching Consensus

What DOESN'T work:

- Being passive—agreeing while harboring resentment
- Being hostile—name calling, blaming, yelling
- Refusing to consider the other person's point of view

Reaching Consensus

What DOES work:

- Listen with respect
- Speak in plain English
- Speak from the heart
- Seek areas of mutual agreement
- Use neutral language
- Ask for clarification
- Maintain a spirit of collaboration

What if we Can't Reach Consensus?

- Try to resolve the disagreement at the IEP level
 - Consider common ground
 - Don't dredge up past hostilities
 - Identify an effective problem-solving structure (such as *Solution Circles*, Forest & Pearnpoint, Inclusion Press.)
 - Have ground rules (no name calling, speak only for oneself and not others, avoid "questions of attack," etc.)

What if we *Still* Can't Reach Consensus?

- Resolution Options:
 - Mediation
 - Due process hearing
 - Resolution session
 - Advisory opinion
 - Complaint to the State Department of Education

Mediation

- Available to resolve any special education dispute
- Mediation agreement must be in writing and signed by the parent and agency representative
- Agreement is legally binding and enforceable by any state court or federal district court
- Mediation communications are confidential and may not be used as evidence in subsequent legal action

Due Process Hearing

- Any party may file
- Request goes to district and State Department of Education
- District must provide written notice of hearing request or must provide a written response to issues
- Must hold a resolution session unless both parties agree to waive

Resolution Session

Resolution session participants include

- Parents;
- Relevant IEP team members; and
- District representative with decision-making authority.
- May not include an attorney for the district unless parent's attorney is present

Parties may agree, in writing, to waive such meeting or to use mediation in lieu of the resolution session

Resolution Agreement

- Signed by both the parents and a representative of the district; and enforceable in state or federal court
- If parties execute a written settlement agreement, a party may void the agreement within three business days of the agreement's execution

Advisory Opinion

- Available in Connecticut to parties of a due process hearing
- Optional process
- Documents can be submitted and up to 2 witnesses per party
- Each party has 45 minutes to present their case and 15 minutes to ask questions of any witness or elaborate on their case
- Within 30 minutes, hearing officer will render an oral opinion

Complaint

- Filed with the State Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services
- Reports alleged violation of federal or state law concerning special education
- Alleged violation reported may not be part of a pending due process action
- Alleged violation will not be examined if addressed in previous due process action

Right to Bring Civil Action

Districts may recover their attorneys' fees from parents' or their attorneys if the case was

- Frivolous;
- Unreasonable; or
- Without foundation

Right to Bring Civil Action

Public agencies may recover attorneys' fees against the parents' attorney or the parents if the case was presented for any improper purpose such as to

- Harass;
- Cause unnecessary delay; or
- To needlessly increase the cost of litigation.

Moving Forward

- Remember why you are here—keep the focus on the child
- Work on building and sustaining relationships
- Be flexible and open minded
- Walk a mile in the other person's shoes

“No matter how difficult the past, you can always begin again today.”

Buddha's Little Instruction Book