

# The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Parent Participation

## INTRODUCTION

Parent involvement and participation are a recurring focus of education policy and practice. In current federal and state education initiatives, both the United States Department of Education (ED) and the California Department of Education (CDE) have created “blueprints” for education integrating engagement of and collaboration with parents to ensure the success of education programs. (ED, 2010; CDE, 2011) In special education, parent participation has been a core, foundational concept since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997. (Trainor, 2010b; Turnbull, 2001) Key components of the original law and its reauthorization in 2004 include parents’ rights under due process procedures; parent participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning; home-school collaboration; and decision making opportunities for parents in all aspects of their child’s education, including evaluation, placement, and service implementation.

## WHAT IS PARENT PARTICIPATION?

The terms “parent involvement” and “parent participation” generally refer to a range of activities and are

often used interchangeably within professional and popular literature as well as policy and guidance. Other terms, such as “parent engagement” and “family engagement”, are increasingly and similarly used, referring to an integrated strategy across multiple programs. (McGuire, 2011) Individual parent participation ranges from passive to assertive and varies in intensity, focus, and arena. (Turnbull, 2001; Trainor, 2010) Historically, parents of children with disabilities have advocated at both local and systems levels to provide children with appropriate and inclusive educational opportunities. However, some parents exercise their involvement solely as representatives for their own child at required meetings. For this issue brief, “parent participation” will be used to reference the specific activities required or described under IDEA (see Table 1).

## POLICY AND PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Parent participation requirements under IDEA mandate communications, processes and procedures that afford a continuum of parental involvement impacting plans for individual children as well as service implementation at the local and state systems levels. Requirements may be organized into broad categories:

Table 1. Parent Participation Requirements Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

<i>Requirement</i>	<i>34 CFR Citation</i>	<i>General Description (Paraphrased from the federal regulations.)</i>
<b>One-Way Communication</b>		
Prior notice	§ 300.503	The local educational agency (LEA) must provide written notice, in language that may be understood by the parent, proposing or refusing to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child or the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to the child.
Procedural safeguards notice	§ 300.504	The LEA must give parents a copy of Parents' Rights (a full explanation of all procedural safeguards under IDEA) at least one time each school year and at initial referral or parent request for evaluation; at receipt of the first due process complaint (filed by the parent) in a school year; and at the request of a parent.
Public information	§ 300.212	The LEA must make available to parents of children with disabilities and to the general public all documents relating to the eligibility of the State education agency under Part B of the IDEA.
<b>Student-Level Decision Making and Planning</b>		
Consent	§ 300.9	The parent has been fully informed about, understands and agrees, in writing, to a specific activity related to the provision of special education services for their child. The granting of consent is voluntary and may be revoked at anytime.
Parental	§ 300.300(a-c)	The LEA must obtain informed, written consent before the initial evaluation, the initial provision of special education and related services, or a reevaluation of a child for special education services.
	§ 300.300(d)(3)	The LEA may not use a parent's refusal to consent to one service or activity to deny any other service, benefit, or activity.
Eligibility determination	§ 300.306	Based on evaluation and assessment results, qualified professionals <i>and the parent</i> of the child determine whether the child is eligible for services.
Parent as IEP team member	§ 300.321	The LEA must ensure that the IEP team for each eligible child includes a parent of the child.
Parent participation in IEP team meetings	§ 300.322 § 300.501(a)	The LEA must ensure that a parent of the child with a disability is at each IEP team meeting or are provided the opportunity to participate. The LEA must notify parents of IEP meetings early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend and must schedule IEP meetings at mutually agreed on times and places.
Educational placements	§ 300.327 § 300.501(c)	The LEA must ensure that a parent of each eligible child is a member of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child.
Alternative means of meeting participation	§ 300.328 § 300.501(c)(3)	The parent of a child with a disability and an LEA may agree to use alternative means of meeting participation, such as video conferences and conference calls.
<b>Information Access</b>		
Opportunity to examine records	§ 300.501(a)	The parent of a child with a disability must be allowed an opportunity to inspect and review all education records with respect to identification, evaluation, and educational placement of the child; and the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to the child.
<b>Systems-Level Decision Making and Planning</b>		
State advisory panel	§ 300.168	The State advisory panel that provides policy guidance with respect to special education and related services must include parents of children with disabilities.

## DATA AND RESEARCH

### Data

**Parent participation data.** In the Annual Performance Report (APR) to the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the California Department of Education (CDE) is required to report the percentage “of parents of children ages birth - twenty-two receiving special education [services] reporting that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means improving services and results for children with disabilities.” (CDE, 2011a) For the APR for federal fiscal year 2009, California reported that 97.5% of parents surveyed indicated that schools did facilitate parent involvement as described. What does the high percentage of “yes” responses about parent participation in special education in California mean?

As Leiter and Krauss (2004) observes, parent satisfaction with education services is generally high; however, responses to satisfaction surveys such as the ones usually used to collect parent feedback are highly subjective and are “a complex function of expectations that may vary greatly” according to individual parent understanding, past experience, social and cultural values, and general personality. The data used for the 2009 APR was gathered from responses to one “yes or no” question on a survey (CDE, 2011b); in addition to being highly subjective, the responses provide no information concerning the quality, outcomes or practices of parent involvement.

**Parent participation research.** In reviews of recent literature, authors repeatedly cited low levels of parent participation or participation that is passive. Klingner and Harry (2006) found that “Most parents do not actively participate in meetings, instead spending most of their time listening to professionals.” Leitner (2004) proposes that low levels of parent participation may be due to parents being intimidated by professionals or hesitant to exercise their rights out of concern that it would negatively impact relationships with school personnel. This theory is in alignment with Klingner and Harry’s additional observation that many education professionals viewed IEP meetings as “a place to inform parents of their decisions rather than actively involve them in the decision making process.” (2006)

In reference to outcomes, positive effects of parent involvement have not been empirically proven and little research links parent involvement with student outcomes. (Jones and Gansle, 2010; Poponi, 2009; McGuire, 2011)

The potential for the positive impact of parent participation is acknowledged: Poponi (2009) found that students of parents who attend IEP meetings have higher report card grades and a higher rate of attendance, both characteristics associated with individual student achievement. As Leiter and Krauss (2004) observed, with the procedural safeguards afforded parents under IDEA, parents have “potentially vast power” in the development of IEPs. They must provide consent for assessment, may dispute findings and request independent evaluation, can participate in the determination of the programs and services that their child will receive, must provide consent before services may be implemented, may appeal provision of a disputed IEP, and may request periodic reviews of the IEP and its implementation. Jones (2010) argues that involving parents in planning processes as soon as possible could improve perceptions of parent participation, reduce unnecessary referrals and save time on assessments.

### EVIDENCE-BASE AND PROMISING PRACTICES

There is a growing body of literature on individual and agency practices and qualities that may support parent participation. Trainor (2010b) and Leiter and Krauss (2004) contend that the effectiveness of parent participation in special education is reliant on some specific and variable dynamics, including

- Parents’ cultural and social capital, which are not equitable or common across demographic groups;
- Parents’ and educators’ various beliefs and values around disability;
- Parents’ willingness and/or capacity to participate;
- Perceived differences in power between education agencies and parents; and
- Confrontational perspectives of participation that transform collaboration into conflict.

The literature on parent participation in special education often focuses on the experiences of specific demographic groups: parents who are culturally or linguistically diverse, immigrants, parents of students with specific disabilities, or parents with low education levels or low socio-economic status. (Al-Hassan and Gardner, 2002; Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006; Jones and Gansle, 2010; Jung; Klingner and Harry, 2006; Lai and Ishiyama (2004); Llan and Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Lo, 2008; Pang, 2011; Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen, 2003; and Trainor, 2010b) Both barriers to and supportive strategies for parent participation identified by these

and other authors, however, cut across demographic boundaries. This brief presents barriers and strategies in five broad categories: Logistics, Communication, Information for Families, Educator Characteristics and Behaviors, and Parent Characteristics and Behaviors.

## Logistics

Logistics include practical aspects of parent participation such as scheduling and location of meetings, formal structure of meetings, and real supports needed by family members to attend meetings.

**Barriers.** For some families, logistics limit their capacity to participate in education activities and processes. The need for transportation, child care, or release time may prohibit participation during regular school hours. (Pang, 2011; Klingner and Harry, 2006; Jones and Gansle, 2010; Trainor 2010b) For culturally or linguistically diverse families or families with a low education level who hold hourly wage jobs, taking time off to attend meetings may pose a financial hardship.

**Supportive strategies.** Flexibility in scheduling and conducting meetings so that parents may participate outside of regular school hours or through alternate means (phone and teleconference) are both options clearly supported by IDEA (34 CFR §300.322, §300.328, §300.501). Trainor (2010b) also suggests “strategic participation” on the part of parents: participating in school events and activities that are not related to special education. Strategic participation offers the parent the opportunity to observe and assure IEP implementation and to build relationships with school personnel that may result in collaboration to address other challenges related to parent participation.

Technology provides potential support in addressing logistical concerns of parents. In addition to the phone and teleconferencing, Web-based meetings and communications may be used to provide access to parents who lack transportation, child care or time to participate in traditional meetings. Also, Computer Assisted IEP Development Systems (CAIDS) can provide the opportunity for parents to conveniently participate in the IEP process, virtually. (Wilson, Michaels and Margolis, 2005) Web meetings and CAIDS are being implemented, developed or adopted by education

agencies across the country. As critical stakeholders in the IEP process, Wilson recommends that parents are involved in the process of designing and choosing CAIDS.

## Communication

Communication includes both language and content of one- and two-way tools and activities intended to convey specific information between parents and education personnel.

**Barriers.** Parents feel intimidated and are not confident about communicating with education professionals. They may not understand the technical terminology, acronyms, and jargon related to their child’s diagnosis or condition, their child’s educational needs, or education processes. (Al-Hassan and Gardner, 2002; Pang, 2011; Lo, 2008; Klingner and Harry, 2006) For parents who do not speak the dominant language, some of the lack of understanding is caused by a lack of consistent translation services for forms, reports and meetings. (Lo, 2008; Klingner and Harry, 2006) In general, though, professionals may assume that parents understand written information provided to them and terms commonly used in education and fail to check for understanding or explain information and processes clearly. (Lo, 2008; Jones and Gansle, 2010)

**Supportive strategies.** Parents need access to understandable information about disability conditions, assessments, educational approaches, and special education documents. (Lian and Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Lo, 2008; Jones and Gansle, 2010) For all parents, both oral and written communications should avoid specialized terminology, jargon, and overly technical language. (Lo, 2008; Klingner and Harry, 2006; Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006) Parent-teacher conferences, school-site workshops, and collaborative community events provide opportunities for parent education on a broad scale, but education professionals should check for understanding and take advantage of teachable moments to build parent capacity. (Lo, 2008; Jones and Gansle, 2010) For culturally or linguistically diverse parents, the availability of trained interpreters, who are knowledgeable about special education policies and processes, is critical. (Lo, 2008; Klingner and Harry, 2006; Pang, 2011)

## Information for Parents

Information for parents includes both general information (disability-specific information, available services, evaluation and assessment processes) and child specific information (assessment reports, progress reports, and IEPs).

**Barriers.** Information is often not provided to parents or it is not provided in a timely manner to support meaningful participation. (Al-Hassan and Gardner, 2002; Jones and Gansle, 2010; Lo, 2008; Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006) Some information barriers are related to language: information is provided in forms that are not understandable for the average parent or in a language that the family cannot effectively understand. Some barriers are related to common practices: assessment reports are typically provided at instead of prior to IEP meetings; progress reports and standardized assessment results for students in special education are provided in alternate formats or on schedules that deviate from mainstream formats and schedules; IEPs and other information requiring translation may take two- to five- months to reach parents. (Lo, 2008)

**Supportive strategies.** Professional and peer relationships provide promising opportunities for information exchange. Jones and Gansle (2010) suggest that one way to involve parents is through pre-meeting organization and planning in which education professionals share information with the parents and reinforce their understanding prior to IEP meetings. Leiter and Krauss (2004) cite the importance of access to knowledgeable social networks, including other parents of students with disabilities. Family empowerment, resource and information centers are critical partners in linking parents with peers for information, education and support.

Technology also provides potential support in providing information to parents. Parents access the Internet for information on diagnoses, teaching strategies, and program requirements. It is essential that the information provided is current and reliable and that parents have the capacity to assess the validity of available information. CAIDS as described above might provide parents with ready information about their child's plan as well as progress updates specific to their child's IEP goals. (Wilson)

## Educator Characteristics and Behaviors

Educator characteristics and behaviors included personal perceptions, values and beliefs, and strategies for interacting with parents.

**Barriers.** Education professionals may lack understanding of the family's perspective and individual experience with special education and with disability for families of both majority and minority cultures. (Al-Hassan and Gardner, 2002; Trainor, 2010b) Klingner and Harry (2006) observed education team members behaving unprofessionally and insensitively to parent IEP team members by openly ignoring parents' questions and comments in meetings and referring to them as "crazy," "unreliable," and "challenging" outside of meetings. Additionally, educators may lack skills necessary for involving parents through collaboration, problem-solving and interaction. For example, Jones and Gansle (2010) found a low number of requests for input from parents by educators during IEP meetings. Skills for supporting parent participation are not explicitly addressed in pre-service training. (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, and Park, 2007; Klingner and Harry, 2006; Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008)

**Supportive strategies.** Jones and Gansle (2010) recommend that educators explicitly check for parent understanding and actively solicit input from parents during meetings. They propose that parent input and participation directly contribute to better educational outcomes for students since parents' input may provide insight about specific students and parent support and involvement may support student practice and achievement of goals. Conducting outreach to parents, allowing parents to use an advocate at meetings, providing information to parents, and explaining terminology and processes to parents are all educator behaviors that Jones and Gansle (2010) say might predict parent participation.

Lord Nelson, Summers and Turnbull (2004) describe specific professional behaviors that support parent participation: being flexible about time; defining the scope of the educator's role broadly; following through on tasks or promises; maintaining a "whole child" or "whole family" perspective; and establishing healthy, professional boundaries and relationships with families. Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Lord Nelson, and Beegle (2004) also identify professional

behaviors that facilitate professional support of parent participation. Among these behaviors, Blue-Banning et al (2004) specifically describe supportive characteristics of communication and relationships. Supportive communication is frequent, honest, accessible (understandable and translated) and two-way. Supportive relationships are characterized by equality, acknowledging the mutual validity and value of all points-of-view. Blue-Banning et al acknowledge that there is a lack of both research and personnel preparation activities addressing the operations of collaborative partnerships that support parent participation; in other words, education professionals *don't know how* to partner with parents. Increased opportunities for pre-service and ongoing interactions with families build understanding of the parent perspective and support relationships for effective parent participation. (Poponi, 2009; Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008)

## Parent Characteristics and Behaviors

Parent characteristics and behaviors included personal perceptions, values, and beliefs around education and disability as well as strategies for interacting with educators.

**Barriers.** Parents' previous experiences in education contribute to their family's individual culture around education and impact parent participation. A history of educational experience characterized by racism and discrimination may result in reluctance to pursue a disability designation or to view the system as marginalizing and segregating. (Trainor, 2010a) A history with mainstream general education may result in confusion about individualized services and accommodations that are not available to all and therefore are "not fair." (Trainor, 2010b) Familiarity with education systems in other countries may result in mistaken perceptions about American educational policies, procedures, and approaches, and expectations for educators to fulfill the roles of expert and advocate on behalf of a child. (Lai and Ishiyama, 2004; Pang, 2011; Lo, 2008) A history of negative, unprofessional or insensitive interactions with educators may result in resignation and acceptance of low achievement and unfulfilled expectations, or in an adversarial and defensive approach to parent participation. (Lai and Ishiyama, 2004; Trainor 2010b)

**Supportive strategies.** Sheehy, Ornelles and Noonan (2009) recommend merging mainstream planning and participation processes with practices and activities that are familiar to families through a "biculturalization process," resulting in approaches that are uniquely appropriate to support participation by the family. Through the process, educators 1) identify values and beliefs of the family, 2) choose a mainstream approach and tools that seems compatible with the values and beliefs of the family, 3) analyze family behaviors and practices, 4) develop a framework for participation that merge the mainstream approach with the family culture, and 5) apply the framework. Applied operationally, the biculturalization process may result in more family friendly tools and processes; applied conceptually, it may yield more collaborative and interactive communications and partnerships.

## IMPLICATIONS

As stated in the introduction of this issue brief, parent participation is a foundational element of IDEA. Additionally, recent Supreme Court decisions and proposed amendments to IDEA reinforce and expand parent participation and due process requirements under the law. (NPRM OSERS, 2012; Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, and Katsiyannis, 2009) Dedicated action and resources may support and inform parent participation rates and practices:

- Valid and reliable data: CDE has recently implemented a new, comprehensive parent survey, the *Partnering with Parents Survey*, to provide information about how well schools are supporting parents' involvement in special education. (CDE, 2010)
- Additional research: Empirical research is needed to draw firm conclusions about causal relationships between specific parent participation activities and improved student outcomes.
- Training: Both educators and parents require skills and knowledge in communication, cooperative planning, collaborative decision-making, cultural competence, and special education practices and processes. Training needs may be addressed through pre-service and in-service professional development, parent workshops and connections to parent resources.

- Systemic supports: Targeted policies, tools and systems at the school and district level support active, meaningful parent involvement and participation. Supports include trained and competent interpretation services, technology solutions, and relationship-based, culturally competent planning and implementation for meetings and other interactions.

## RESOURCES

*Questions and Answers About IDEA: Parent Participation.* (NICHCY, 2009) This resource provides an overview of parental involvement requirements under IDEA utilizing an easy to read Q&A format and includes a useful resource section. Available to download at [nichcy.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/QA2.pdf](http://nichcy.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/QA2.pdf).

Family Empowerment Centers (FECs). California FECs provide services to families with children with disabilities who are from the ages of 3 to 22. FECs provide training and support to parents and guardians; participate in decision-making processes and the development of individualized education programs; promote positive parent and professional collaboration with local education agencies, special education local plan areas, and other community agencies; and participate and support surrogate parent training. They serve as a resource for parent participation to both educators and families. To find FECs by county go to <http://www.calfedc.org/family-empowerment-centers.html>.



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