

RESEARCH BRIEF

**PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT:  
A COMPARISON OF  
SCHOOL DISTRICT AND  
PARENT CENTER PERCEPTIONS**

Prepared for

Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative

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On behalf of our more than 100 member school districts, I want to acknowledge the contributions of many individuals to the completion of this *Research Brief*. First and foremost, we thank those Collaborative Members and Associates who took the time to complete the survey and provide examples of the successes they've had and the challenges they've faced in engaging parents and families of students with disabilities in their school districts. A core value of the Collaborative is district-to-district sharing, and the participation of more than 75% of our member districts in this survey reflects a commitment on the part of our Members to assisting one another in improving their practice on such a critically important area as parent engagement.

Diana MTK Autin, Executive Co-Director of the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network in New Jersey, played a critical role in helping to craft the language of the survey so that it would resonate with both school district and parent leaders. Her leadership and support for the initiative resulted in the participation of Parent Training Information Centers from across the country, which allowed us to present contrasting views of parent and family engagement in urban schools.

Rebeca Delgado, a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, helped organize the survey responses and produced a preliminary analysis. Her efforts facilitated the work of my EDC colleague Amanda Dorris, who authored this final report. Amanda deserves a special “thank you” for her perseverance in completing the report while meeting many other competing demands for her time and talent.

Our collective hope is that this *Research Brief* will prompt conversations among urban school districts, schools, parent advocacy organizations, and parents as to how they might more purposefully partner in the interest of improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

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## Introduction

Parent engagement has become more and more important with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the updated Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). Like many other school districts, members of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative (the Collaborative) have been working to increase the participation of families of students with disabilities.

In order to better understand perceptions regarding current practices, barriers to involvement, and strategies for improving outreach to and engagement of families of students with disabilities, the Collaborative partnered with the Region I Parent Technical Assistance Center (R1PTAC) at the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network of New Jersey to conduct a survey. Through this survey, the Collaborative and R1PTAC hoped to provide information to member school districts and parent centers that could be used to improve parent outreach and engagement. The overarching goals of the survey were to compare the perceptions of current practices held by school districts with those held by the Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers (parent centers) in their communities, to examine barriers to parent involvement, and to share successful strategies used to engage families of students with disabilities.

## Methodology

In the fall of 2005, the Collaborative developed the *Parent Engagement Survey*, in consultation with Diana MTK Autin, Esq., executive co-director of R1PTAC. The survey items were designed to learn more about school district and parent center leaders' perceptions of the issues surrounding the involvement of parents of students with disabilities, including current outreach by school districts, pertinent barriers to parent participation, and effective strategies for building partnerships with parents around their child's education. The 31 survey items included both Likert scale statements and open-ended questions. The first 16 items addressed the current level of parent involvement and the school district's efforts to reach out to parents. Items 17–34 dealt with barriers to involvement, and the final item addressed exemplary practices to involve parents.

In November 2005 and again in January 2006, the *Parent Engagement Survey* was distributed to special education leaders from the Collaborative's 105 member school districts. Respondents used Survey Monkey to complete the survey online, anonymously. With the help of R1PTAC, the survey was also distributed to 59 parent centers located in the same school districts that comprised the Collaborative at that time. Parent center staff received the survey as an electronic Microsoft Word document.

## Findings

Response rates were very high. Seventy-nine, or 75%, of the Collaborative member school districts completed the survey, representing urban districts from across the country. Thirty, or 51%, of the 59 parent centers responded, representing an equally diverse set of urban locations. In 2006, the data was collected and analyzed by Collaborative and parent center staff. The data collected from parent centers was analyzed using the EZ Analyze program, while the data collected from school districts was initially analyzed using Survey Monkey; however, to ensure that both sets of data could be treated in the same manner, the school district data was also analyzed using EZ Analyze. Survey results are discussed below in three sections that correspond to the three sections of the survey: Current Practices, Barriers to Parent Involvement, and Exemplary Practices.

### Current Practices

The first section of the survey included 16 statements regarding current levels of parent involvement and the ways in which school districts facilitate this involvement. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they “agreed,” “strongly agreed,” “disagreed,” or “strongly disagreed” with each statement; if they weren’t sure, they could answer “don’t know.” The first 6 items dealt mainly with assessing current parent involvement, and the last 10 items focused on school district efforts to reach out to parents.

To analyze this section, staff looked at the percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed with each statement for both school districts and parent centers. Next, they compared the data from the two groups of respondents to look for commonalities and differences in opinion. To facilitate this comparison, staff calculated and compared mean scores for each item in order to determine which items had agreement between school districts and parent centers. Mean scores were calculated by assigning a numerical value to responses. *Strongly Agree* was given a “1,” *Agree* a “2,” *Disagree* a “3,” *Strongly Disagree* a “4,” and *Don’t Know* a “5.” School districts and parent centers were considered in agreement if their mean scores for a item were within .5 points of one another. They were considered in disagreement if the difference between their mean scores was greater than .5. (See Table 1 in the Appendix for a side-by-side comparison of mean scores for school district and parent centers, as well as the percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed with each statement.)

Analysis of the data revealed some differences between school district and parent center respondents’ perceptions of parent involvement in district schools. Strikingly, 87% of school districts reported that parents participate in their child’s IEP process. In contrast, only 47% of parent centers found that this was true (survey item #1). From the mean scores, staff determined that school districts and parent centers were mostly in agreement regarding the remaining five items assessing levels of parent involvement in other school and district activities. Both

school districts and parent centers reported low levels of parent involvement. Both reported that parents of students with disabilities are not represented on every school-level parent advisory committee (#3). They also agreed that parents of students with disabilities are not involved in monitoring and developing school improvement plans (#6). Both were ambivalent about whether parents of students with disabilities are represented on district-level parent advisory committees (#2) and whether they are active in their schools' PTA organizations (#5). However, 64% of school districts indicated that parents are active in special education PTAs and support groups specifically for parents of students with disabilities (#4). While only 43% of parent centers reported that this was true, this percentage was the highest of the five items measuring parent involvement beyond IEP participation.

The greatest discrepancies between school district and parent center responses appeared in the items that addressed district outreach efforts to parents of students with disabilities. Overall, the survey indicated that Collaborative member school districts believe they are reaching out to parents in many ways and are providing needed training and information. However, according to the survey results, parent centers do not agree. In all 10 items in this section, school districts reported that they provide a higher level of services than was perceived by the parent centers—and in some cases, this difference was extreme. When mean scores were compared, the greatest disagreement was found in items #7, #9, #10, and #12. While 68% of school districts agreed or strongly agreed that they invite parents to relevant Board of Education meetings (#7), only 20% of parent centers agreed with that statement. Seventy-two percent of school districts reported that they provide workshops for parents on their rights under NCLB and IDEA (#9), yet only 13% of parent centers indicated that their school districts provide this service. Sixty-nine percent of school districts asserted that they provide training to help parents effectively partner with the school (#10); in contrast, only 23% of the responding parent centers agreed with this statement. School districts overwhelmingly (90%) reported that they reach out to parents in multiple ways to involve them in their child's IEP meeting (#12), while only 43% of parent centers agreed with this assertion.

School districts rated themselves highest on involving parents in the IEP process (#12) and communicating with parents in their primary language (#16). While parent centers did not agree that school districts reach out to involve parents in IEP meetings, they did agree that school districts regularly communicate with parents in their primary language (#16). In fact, 53% of parent centers indicated that this service is provided, the most positive parent center response to any of the items relating to school district outreach. School districts ranked themselves the lowest on providing services that make it easier for parents to participate, such as childcare and transportation (#15), and scheduling meetings at times that are convenient for working parents (#14).

## **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

The second section of the survey addressed perceived barriers to parent involvement. Fourteen common barriers were listed:

- B17 Parents are unaware of their rights.
- B18 Parents are unaware of best practices in education.
- B19 Parents are not interested in participating in their child's education.
- B20 Parents do not have the time to participate in their child's education.
- B21 Parents do not have the knowledge and/or skills to participate in their child's education.
- B22 General education parents are not interested in special education issues.
- B23 Professionals are unaware of the rights of parents in the process.
- B24 Professionals are unaware of best practices in education.
- B25 Professionals are not interested in partnering with parents.
- B26 Professionals do not have the knowledge and/or skills to partner effectively with parents.
- B27 Professionals do not have the time to partner effectively with parents.
- B28 General education administrators and educators are not interested in special education
- B29 The collective bargaining agreement limits our flexibility to meet with parents.
- B30 Insufficient resources to provide information to parents in their own language(s).

Respondents were asked to rank the 14 barriers in order of importance and relevance to their school district. In addition to the barriers listed, respondents could add other factors that they see as barriers in their school district. Item #35, the open-ended question, gave respondents an opportunity to elaborate on the reasons that they chose the barriers they ranked as the top three most important.

A total of 53 school district and 26 parent center leaders completed this second part of the survey. Table 2 in the Appendix shows the number of respondents who ranked each barrier as first, second, third, etc. Some respondents only indicated their top 3 most important barriers, others chose more than 3, and some ranked all 14 barriers in order of importance. Table 2 shows the rate of occurrence—the number of times that respondents checked off a barrier, regardless of whether they ranked it first or fourteenth. Table 2 also indicates the number of times a barrier was chosen as one of the top three barriers by any respondent. Tables 3 and 4—the results from school district and parent center respondents, respectively—list the results of the open-ended question, #31, which provide a fuller explanation of respondents' rankings. Results from the survey show that school district and parent center respondents consider different barriers to be the biggest impediments to active parent involvement.

## **School Districts**

School districts noted a wide array of barriers to parent involvement, including those that focus on parents themselves and those that focus on professionals. Three barriers stood out as the greatest concerns for member school districts. “General education parents are not interested in special education issues” (B22) was the largest concern, chosen by 64% of the respondents who completed this portion; a full 50% chose it as one of the top three barriers in their school district. “Parents do not have the time to participate in their child’s education” (B20) and “Parents are unaware of best practices in education” (B18) were chosen by more than 55% of the respondents, with approximately 37% ranking them among their top three concerns. In addition, more than 45% of school district respondents considered “Parents do not have the capacity to participate in their child’s education” (B21), “Professionals do not have the capacity to partner effectively with parents” (B26), “Professionals do not have the time to partner effectively with parents” (B27), and “General ed. administrators and educators are not interested in special ed.” (B28) to be important barriers. The barriers least often chosen were “Professionals are unaware of best practices in education” (B24) and “Professionals are not interested in partnering with parents” (B25).

School districts were concerned about the lack of interest in special education from parents of students in general education (B22). Responses to the open-ended question showed that school district respondents believe that other parents do not understand what parents of students with disabilities experience, citing two key reasons for this lack of interest: (1) fear that special education will take money out of the pocket of education in general, and (2) fear that inclusion has a negative effect on instruction in the classroom. However, their answers did not reveal much information as to *why* these parents’ lack of interest was the biggest barrier to the participation of parents of students with disabilities. One respondent did assert that if general education parents showed greater concern for the needs of students with disabilities, perhaps all parents could come together to better advocate for special education services.

School district respondents also reported that general education administrators’ and educators’ lack of interest in special education is a barrier to parent involvement (B28). Again, responses regarding this barrier revealed much frustration. Respondents noted, “General education individuals could not care less about special education” and “General educators still thwart inclusion efforts.” However, only one respondent mentioned the effect on parents, saying that parents at the respondent’s school are not included in school district planning committees.

Parents’ time restraints (B20) was considered one of the most important barriers to their full participation as partners. School district staff clearly understand the difficulties that working parents face, noting in their responses to the final question that “parents are working long hours just to get by” and working parents “often lack the resources to be available during the day or the evening.” It is

important to note that in addition to rating this as one of the most important barriers to parent participation, in the “Current Practices” section of the survey, school districts also gave themselves low ratings on providing meetings at flexible times for working parents.

Parents’ limited knowledge base was also a major concern for school district respondents. “Parents are unaware of best practices in education” (B18) was one of the most frequent statements rated as one of respondents’ top three barriers. One school district respondent summed up this problem in the final question: “Very often, our parents do not know about the different ways that services can be delivered, nor do they know about the state’s mandate to try to keep students in the mainstream as much as possible.” School district respondents were also frustrated that because of a lack of information about best practices in service delivery, parents sometimes do not back up decisions made by schools, even if the decisions are supported by research or mandated by the law. Respondents also pointed out that when parents do not have enough information, they can jump to solutions they have read about or seen on television without a clear understanding of whether this strategy would be appropriate for their child. “Parents lack the capacity to partner with the school” was also considered a barrier. Responses to the final question revealed that, for most respondents, this statement was another way to sum up the concern about parents’ lack of knowledge of best practices in education.

Professionals’ lack of training (B26) and time to devote to partnerships (B27) was also considered a barrier to parent involvement. Several respondents mentioned that professionals are not taught to partner with parents in their teacher training programs and that current professional development efforts are not sufficient. They indicated that staff need more training around such complex issues as handling conflict and interacting with parents beyond basic meetings. For the final question, one respondent noted that the current professional development opportunities at the respondent’s school are often “introductory or awareness level, with insufficient opportunities for more hands-on and ongoing professional development, including opportunities to see effective practices modeled.”

Respondents were also concerned that teachers and other staff are not given dedicated time during the day to focus on building partnerships with parents. For the final question, one respondent summed up this concern, asserting that teachers must “teach, plan, prepare, and collaborate with general education teachers” in addition to working with parents. A few reported that union contracts and leadership in their school districts discouraged meeting with parents outside the contractual work day, even though this type of flexible scheduling is needed to accommodate parent schedules. Overall, they noted that teachers try very hard but are stretched thin and do not always have the resources to reach out to parents, even if they are committed to doing so.

Several school districts also offered their insights by listing other barriers that they see as major concerns. One respondent indicated that many parents do not have the communication skills needed to share their own perspectives and to advocate for their child. Another noted that the professionals are often from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds than the parents and, consequently, do not feel comfortable interacting with parents on the parents' "home turf," for example, by conducting home visits or having meetings at community centers or houses of worship. Another respondent was concerned that parents are not viewed by staff as equal partners when it comes to decision making.

### ***Parent Centers***

As with the school district respondents, parent center respondents pointed to barriers that concern both parents and professionals. The survey results showed that parent centers viewed parents' lack of information regarding their rights and best practices in education as the biggest barriers to involvement. "Parents are unaware of their rights" (B17) was chosen as a barrier by all but one respondent, with 84% ranking it as one of their top three concerns. "Parents are unaware of best practices in education" (B18) was chosen by 89% of parent center respondents, and rated as one of the top three concerns by 54%. Also frequently chosen (by approximately 70–75% of parent center respondents) were "Professionals are unaware of the rights of parents in the process" (B23), "Professionals are unaware of best practices in education" (B24), and "General ed. administrators and educators are not interested in special ed." (B28). The survey indicated that the issues of least concern for parent centers were parents being uninterested in participating in their child's education (B19), and general education parents' lack of interest in special education (B22).

The parent centers overwhelmingly indicated that parents' lack of understanding of their own rights (B17) is an impediment to developing successful family-school partnerships, with all but one citing it as a relevant barrier in the school district. In contrast, school districts did not rate this barrier as a major concern. Their final question responses revealed some of the reasons that parent centers rated this barrier so highly. Many mentioned that parents simply trust that the school is doing what is best for their child and do not find out about their rights until a problem or crisis arises. One respondent noted that parents do not know what supports exist or how to find out about their rights, adding, "Teachers are the ones who control the meetings and do not help [families] unless they ask or have an advocate there." The centers reported that very few parents understand the IEP process—and if they do not understand the process, they cannot understand what their rights are within it. In addition, many families who do not speak English as their first language struggle even more to understand the IEP process in particular and the U.S. school system in general. Parent centers also reported that professionals are unaware of parents' rights in the process (B23). One respondent wrote, "It seems as though many professionals are unaware of IDEA

in general. They know the law exists, but many of them seem not to realize that parents' rights are written in the statute.”

More than half the parent center respondents considered parents' lack of information about best practices (B18) to be one of the top three barriers to parent involvement in their school districts. It is important to note that school districts also found this to be a key barrier. Parent centers explained that it is not enough to train parents on the laws; families should also be trained on what works best in education to help them contribute to the educational progress of their child. One respondent summed up the problem in this way: “It is about knowing how to ask the right questions, and if you don't know what a good answer looks like, how can you make an informed decision about what is right for your child and family?” The final question responses from parent centers show that they understand the many stresses on families, such as long work hours, that leave them little energy to participate in school events.

Respondents also indicated that professionals' lack of awareness of best practices in education (B24) is an impediment to building effective partnerships with families. While only 27% of the respondents ranked this as one of their top three concerns, 70% believed that it was a relevant barrier in their districts. In contrast, very few school districts thought that this was a barrier. Their responses to the final question revealed that parent centers worry that professionals are not given enough training or time to keep up with best practices. One respondent noted, “Educators want to improve and are not being afforded the opportunity, information, or resources [to do so].” Another added, “There is so much they [teachers] are expected to learn, and so little time, that they often resort to what can be done in crisis mode, which does not support learning [or] keeping pace with best practices.”

The feeling that general education administrators and educators are not interested in special education (B28) was also ranked as a relevant barrier by many parent centers. For the final question, one respondent asserted, “General education administrators do not understand the value of good special education and how SPED teachers have the capacity to lift achievement for all students in a school.” Another gave specific examples of how special education is overlooked in the respondent's school district, noting that many of the classes with students with special needs are in portable classrooms and receive the newest, least experienced teachers. However, as with the responses from school districts, parent centers did not give clear reasons as to why this lack of concern by educators and administrators directly affects the level of involvement of parents of students with disabilities.

Parent centers also described several barriers not included in the list. One respondent noted that language, socioeconomic, and cultural differences sometimes intimidate professionals from backgrounds that are different from those of the families they are serving. Interestingly, similar barriers were noted by

several school district respondents. In addition, one respondent indicated that professionals' lack of a clear definition of parent involvement stood in the way of effective partnerships. Another noted that transportation and childcare are major issues for many families of students with disabilities because it is especially difficult for these parents to find a qualified person to care for their child.

## **Exemplary Practices**

The final survey item was an open-ended question that allowed respondents to share best practices that they believe are promoting parent involvement in their school districts. This part of the survey was completed by 40 school district and 19 parent center leaders, whose responses can be seen in Table 6. While school districts and parent centers highlighted different types of practices, there were several overlapping strategies, such as the importance of providing workshops—ideally, ones that are planned and taught with the help of parents.

### ***School Districts***

Many of the effective practices described by school districts addressed the barriers to involvement that districts highlighted in the second section. However, surprisingly, despite being named as the largest barrier to the involvement of parents with disabilities, the lack of awareness and support from general education parents was not addressed directly in any of the school district suggestions for successful outreach strategies.

The concern that parents lack information about best practices and the capacity to be involved was addressed by many of the best practices that school districts described in this section. School districts indicated that they consider the delivery of information as one of the keys to improving participation. As one school district staff person wrote, "Knowledge is the most important tool you can give a parent." Workshops and special events, including resource fairs, were the most commonly cited strategies for delivering information. Many school districts provide workshops on topics related to communication styles, rights, and information, as well as instructional practices in special education. School districts often asserted that these workshops are successful because of joint planning and implementation with parent organizations and advisory councils.

Two programs offer workshops that address a specific school district concern:

- One school district hopes to improve parents' understanding of best practices by providing intensive training in four half-day workshops that focus on instructional and behavior-intervention practices used in special education. Through evaluations, parents have indicated that they appreciate the information, hope for more training sessions, and believe that what they have learned will greatly improve their ability to be involved in their child's IEP development and implementation.
- For more than 10 years, another district has focused on providing training to families of students in its Exceptional Student Education program

whose first language is not English. Over a five-month period, monthly workshops are offered in Spanish and Creole on selected topics, such as parents' and students' rights and home activities to promote learning. The school district noted that not only do parents receive information, but they are also given an opportunity to network with other parents who speak the same language and who struggle with similar issues.

Parents' lack of time is major concern for school districts. In the "Current Practices" section, school districts gave themselves low ratings on providing flexible meeting times for working parents. In the "Barriers to Parent Involvement" section, results showed that parents' lack of time was considered one of the largest barriers to family involvement. Unfortunately, responses to the final survey item did not reveal many solutions to address this barrier. One school district did indicate that it has found giving three to four weeks notice of an IEP meeting to be effective at improving attendance. Another constantly reschedules meetings to meet parents' needs, but still notes the problems the district encounters when families request to meet outside school hours, which is difficult to accommodate.

In the "Current Practices" section, schools gave themselves low ratings on delivery of services, such as childcare and transportation, that might make it easier for parents with limited time to attend events. However, in the "Exemplary Practices" section, several districts described the creative solutions they are implementing. One school district holds workshops on Saturdays and provides a bus that travels to neighborhoods where families live to take them to the events. Another school district provides home visits and holds workshops in convenient locations in the community, such as neighborhood churches. Another school district's Exceptional Student Education Advisory Committee offers a "fun camp" for children while parents are attending workshops.

In addition, responses to the "Exemplary Practices" section indicate that Collaborative member school districts value input from parents and working with parent organizations. Many cited the involvement of parents in the selection of topics and delivery of workshops for other parents. Another school district includes parents as trainers for both parent and staff in-service events. Many school districts noted their collaboration with local PRCs, Parent Training and Information Centers, Parent Advisory Committees, Special Education Parent Advisory Committees, and other parent organizations at the state, county, and school district level. School districts have found that working with parent groups provides an avenue for distribution of information and recruitment for events. School districts reported that involving parent groups in the creation and delivery of events for parents and staff also creates buy-in, helps parents feel comfortable at an event, and ensures that the needs of parents are represented.

Many school districts indicated that they gather data on parents' needs and the effectiveness of their offerings. One school district reported making major strides

to include parents by building its school improvement plan based on results of a self-assessment conducted several years ago. Another school district reported that it has just administered its first-ever district-wide family survey and is currently awaiting the results. Several respondents noted that they provide parents with an evaluation form at each session or workshop so that they can improve their offerings.

Throughout the responses, school districts frequently mentioned the importance of people who can bridge the worlds between parents and the school, make parents feel comfortable, increase communication, and advocate for families when needed. In some cases these people were staff members, and in other cases they were other parents. Several school districts asserted that their outreach efforts had been bolstered by the addition of a family-school liaison. In some cases this staff person was available for all families in the school, and in other cases he or she was specifically hired to support parents of students with disabilities. One respondent described a successful parent mentor program funded by the state, where two mentors in each school district provide support for other parents in group and individual settings, and represent and advocate for parents on several committees.

### ***Parent Centers***

As with the school district respondents, parent centers overwhelmingly described trainings for parents as an effective practice for improving partnerships between families and schools. Parent center respondents provided much more detail about the topics of these workshops and other trainings. Many of their trainings address best practices in special education and the IEP process. One parent center has even created a “walk through” IEP training, which includes filling out all the forms step by step in preparation for the real experience. As expected from the centers’ focus on parents’ lack of understanding of their rights in the “Barriers to Parent Involvement” section, many of the workshops teach parents about their rights under IDEA. Their training descriptions also showed that parent center respondents feel the need to provide parents with more than information. Many parent center respondents noted that parents need to be “empowered” and that they needed help learning to “advocate” for their children. This type of language was almost completely absent from the school districts’ descriptions of best practices. Many parent centers described workshops that teach skills to help parents become better advocates. Topics of these workshops include learning to communicate and develop relationships with school staff, and how to gain information about their own rights and the school district’s rules and procedures. One parent center respondent described the benefits the respondent has seen from teaching parents advocacy skills: “Parents attending the advocacy seminars become more outspoken about their needs and the needs of their child. Frustrated parents learn to become more courteous [when] listening to educators. They begin to have meetings that are less stressful and more productive. Attitudes in meetings are more positive.”

In addition to trainings for parents, parent centers highlighted trainings for school staff as a key to improving parent involvement. In many cases, parent centers explained that they work with school districts to choose the topics that are most needed by school staff. Many workshops focus on teaching staff strategies for partnership with families or conducting effective IEP meetings. One parent center also invites school staff to serve on its task forces and committees as a form of professional development, with good results. For example, the parent center found that because staff are more aware of parents' points of view, the center does not have to spend as much time representing and advocating for parents at meetings, allowing center staff to focus energy on other areas. Another strategy cited frequently was the use of parents as trainers for school staff. In some cases, parents and parent center staff present trainings together.

Responses also revealed parent centers' expertise in reaching out to parents throughout the community. As part of best practices, many parent center respondents noted their work to disseminate information about trainings and other services they offer, using existing channels in the community. One respondent uses local children's hospitals and doctors' offices to publicize events. Others mentioned hospitals, churches, laundromats, and other community vendors. One parent center participates in community meetings organized by schools in the district, in which parents are invited to a neutral setting in the community and asked to share their concerns. To increase attendance among parents who might find transportation to the school or parent center difficult, some parent centers team with community centers to host events.

Partnerships with school districts was featured as a key strategy for improving collaboration between parents and schools. According to one respondent, "Partnering with the schools for results makes parents the happiest, and the student is the winner." Many of the parent centers credited strong partnerships with schools and school districts for their success. Two-thirds of the parent center respondents mentioned their work with schools, including training for school personnel on best practices for partnering with parents, presenting at parent nights, participating in community meetings organized by the school, and providing needs assessment for a school district. A few respondents mentioned that they've even given presentations on the partnerships they've developed with school districts at state and national events. Only one respondent noted resistance to the parent center's initiatives from the school staff.

## **Conclusion**

Partnership between parent centers and school districts was mentioned as a key strategy by both parties. One parent center explained that when partners value each other, it inspires both parties to work hard for parents: “When you are partners, you work hard at it every day, just like in a successful marriage.”

Our hope is that this survey can function as a way to promote learning among school districts and parent centers and to encourage both to continue their joint efforts to increase the participation of families in the education of students with disabilities.

# Appendix

**Table 1: Side-by-Side Comparison of School District and Parent Center Responses to “Current Practices” Section, Including Mean Scores**

1. Most parents of children with disabilities in our district participate actively in their child’s IEP process.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 32.1%  
 Agree: 55.1%  
 Disagree: 11.5%  
 Strongly Disagree: 1.3%  
 Don’t Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 1.821<sup>1</sup>*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
 Agree: 43.3%  
 Disagree: 30.0%  
 Strongly Disagree: 23.3%  
 Don’t Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.733*

2. Parents of students with disabilities are represented on every district-level parent advisory committee.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 7.8%  
 Agree: 33.8%  
 Disagree: 39%  
 Strongly Disagree: 0%  
 Don’t Know: 19.5%

*Mean Score: 2.896*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 6.6%  
 Agree: 16.6%  
 Disagree: 43.3%  
 Strongly Disagree: 20.00%  
 Don’t Know: 13.33%

*Mean Score: 3.167*

3. Parents of students with disabilities are represented on every school-level parent advisory committee.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 7.7%  
 Agree: 23.1%  
 Disagree: 35.9%  
 Strongly Disagree: 7.7%  
 Don’t Know: 25.6%

*Mean Score: 3.234*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
 Agree: 10.0%  
 Disagree: 50.0%  
 Strongly Disagree: 20.0%  
 Don’t Know: 16.6%

*Mean Score: 3.367*

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<sup>1</sup> Mean scores were calculated by assigning a numerical value to responses: *Strongly Agree* = 1, *Agree* = 2, *Disagree* = 3, *Strongly Disagree* = 4, and *Don’t Know* = 5. Scores are rounded to nearest 10<sup>th</sup> of a percentage and, therefore, may not total exactly 100.0%

4. Parents of students with disabilities are active in our school district's special education parent support group/special education parent advisory council/special education PTA.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 32.1%  
 Agree: 32.1%  
 Disagree: 24.4%  
 Strongly Disagree: 5.1%  
 Don't Know: 6.4%

*Mean Score: 2.218*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 13.33%  
 Agree: 30.00%  
 Disagree: 33.33%  
 Strongly Disagree: 10.00%  
 Don't Know: 13.33%

*Mean Score: 2.800*

5. Parents of students with disabilities are active in the PTA/parent organizations for all parents in our schools.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 11.5%  
 Agree: 37.2%  
 Disagree: 26.9%  
 Strongly Disagree: 0%  
 Don't Know: 24.4%

*Mean Score: 2.909*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
 Agree: 33.3%  
 Disagree: 46.6%  
 Strongly Disagree: 13.3%  
 Don't Know: 3.3%

*Mean Score: 2.800*

6. Parents of students with disabilities are active in self-assessment, monitoring, and development and implementation of school and school district improvement plans.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 2.7%  
 Agree: 36%  
 Disagree: 37.3%  
 Strongly Disagree: 5.3%  
 Don't Know: 18.7%

*Mean Score: 3.000*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
 Agree: 13.3%  
 Disagree: 50.0%  
 Strongly Disagree: 26.6%  
 Don't Know: 6.6%

*Mean Score: 3.200*

7. Parents of students with disabilities are invited to Board of Education meetings at which important special education issues will be discussed.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 23.4%  
 Agree: 44.2%  
 Disagree: 19.5%  
 Strongly Disagree: 5.2%  
 Don't Know: 7.8%

*Mean Score: 2.299*

**Parent Center Response:**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
 Agree: 16.6%  
 Disagree: 46.6%  
 Strongly Disagree: 20.0%  
 Don't Know: 13.3%

*Mean Score: 3.233*

8. Our school district provides workshops for parents on their rights in the special education process.

**School District Responses**

Strongly Agree: 39%  
Agree: 41.6%  
Disagree: 14.3%  
Strongly Disagree: 2.6%  
Don't Know: 2.6%

*Mean Score: 1.896*

**Parent Center Responses**

Strongly Agree: 16.6%  
Agree: 30.0%  
Disagree: 26.6%  
Strongly Disagree: 26.6%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.633*

9. Our school district provides workshops for parents on their rights to be involved in educational improvement under No Child Left Behind and IDEA.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 23.7%  
Agree: 48.7%  
Disagree: 15.8%  
Strongly Disagree: 2.6%  
Don't Know: 9.2%

*Mean Score: 2.250*

**Parent Center Responses**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
Agree: 10.0%  
Disagree: 40.0%  
Strongly Disagree: 30.0%  
Don't Know: 16.6%

*Mean Score: 3.467*

10. Our school district provides workshops for parents on effective partnership with professionals in their child's education.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 24%  
Agree: 45.3%  
Disagree: 17.3%  
Strongly Disagree: 5.3%  
Don't Know: 8%

*Mean Score: 2.280*

**Parent Center Responses**

Strongly Agree: 10.0%  
Agree: 13.3%  
Disagree: 46.6%  
Strongly Disagree: 23.3%  
Don't Know: 6.6%

*Mean Score: 3.033*

11. Our school district provides professional development for staff on partnering with parents.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 19.5%  
Agree: 46.8%  
Disagree: 24.7%  
Strongly Disagree: 2.6%  
Don't Know: 6.5%

*Mean Score: 2.325*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 6.6%  
Agree: 30.00%  
Disagree: 36.6%  
Strongly Disagree: 10.0%  
Don't Know: 16.6%

*Mean Score: 3.000*

12. Our school district reaches out to parents in multiple ways to encourage them to participate in their child's IEP meeting.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 36.4%  
Agree: 53.2%  
Disagree: 7.8%  
Strongly Disagree: 2.6%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 1.766*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 6.6%  
Agree: 36.6%  
Disagree: 40.0%  
Strongly Disagree: 16.6%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.667*

13. Our school district reaches out to parents in multiple ways to encourage them to participate in workshops and other activities.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 19.7%  
Agree: 57.9%  
Disagree: 14.5%  
Strongly Disagree: 1.3%  
Don't Know: 6.6%

*Mean Score: 2.171*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 13.3%  
Agree: 33.3%  
Disagree: 36.6%  
Strongly Disagree: 16.6%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.567*

14. Our school district makes it easy for parents to participate by scheduling IEP meetings after school and at other times that are convenient to working parents.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 15.6%  
Agree: 45.5%  
Disagree: 27.3%  
Strongly Disagree: 11.7%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.351*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 3.3%  
Agree: 26.6%  
Disagree: 40.0%  
Strongly Disagree: 26.6%  
Don't Know: 3.3%

*Mean Score: 3.000*

15. Our school district makes it easy for parents to participate by providing childcare, transportation, refreshments, and other supports to encourage parents to participate in activities concerning their child's education.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 13%  
Agree: 35.1%  
Disagree: 42.9%  
Strongly Disagree: 7.8%  
Don't Know: 1.3%

*Mean Score: 2.494*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 6.6%  
Agree: 20.0%  
Disagree: 53.3%  
Strongly Disagree: 20.0%  
Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.867*

16. Our school district routinely communicates with parents in their primary language or mode of communication.

**School District Response**

Strongly Agree: 32.9%

Agree: 61.8%

Disagree: 5.3%

Strongly Disagree: 0%

Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 1.724*

**Parent Center Response**

Strongly Agree: 6.6%

Agree: 46.6%

Disagree: 36.6%

Strongly Disagree: 10.0%

Don't Know: 0%

*Mean Score: 2.500*

**Table 2: Number of Times Respondents Ranked Each Barrier as First, Second, Third, etc.; Rate of Occurrence in the Top Three; and Overall Occurrence**

<b>Responses from School Districts</b>														
<b>Rank</b>	<b>B17</b>	<b>B18</b>	<b>B19</b>	<b>B20</b>	<b>B21</b>	<b>B22</b>	<b>B23</b>	<b>B24</b>	<b>B25</b>	<b>B26</b>	<b>B27</b>	<b>B28</b>	<b>B29</b>	<b>B30</b>
1st	7	10	3	8	8	13	7	1		7	6	6	7	2
2nd	2	7	5	5	6	9	3	2	5	7	8	7	3	4
3rd	4	2	2	7	2	4	1	2	1	3	1	3	3	2
4th		3		2	4	2	2	2			3	2	4	4
5th	2	3	4	5	1	1		2	2	2	2	5	2	2
6th		4				2	2				1		3	
7th		1			1	1	3	2	1	1				
8th							1	2	1		2	1		
9th				2	1	1			2	1				
10th										1	1		1	1
11th	1										1	1		1
12th	1		1							1		1	1	
13th			1			1		1					1	
14th									1				1	2
<b>Rate of Occurrence in the Top 3</b>	11	19	10	20	16	26	11	5	6	17	15	16	13	8
<b>Overall Rate of Occurrence</b>	17	30	16	29	23	34	19	14	13	23	25	26	26	18

<b>Responses from Parent Centers</b>														
<b>Rank</b>	<b>B17</b>	<b>B18</b>	<b>B19</b>	<b>B20</b>	<b>B21</b>	<b>B22</b>	<b>B23</b>	<b>B24</b>	<b>B25</b>	<b>B26</b>	<b>B27</b>	<b>B28</b>	<b>B29</b>	<b>B30</b>
1st	17	2			1			1	1	2	1	2		
2nd	1	10	1				3	3	2	1	3			1
3rd	4	2	1	3	2	1	2	3	1			3		2
4th		6		2	2	1	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
5th	1	2	1		1	1	5	4	1	1	1	2		1
6th	2	1		1	1	2		3	2			2	1	3
7th				4			3		2	2	2	3		
8th			1			1	3		3	1	3	1	1	
9th						3			3	1	2		1	1
10th				2		3		2		1		1		
11th			1	1		1	1		1	3				
12th			2			1		1		1	1	2	1	
13th					2							2	1	1
14th			2							3				
<b>Rate of Occurrence in the Top 3</b>	22	14	2	3	3	1	5	7	4	3	4	5	0	3
<b>Overall Rate of Occurrence</b>	25	23	9	13	9	14	20	18	18	17	14	19	6	10

### **Table 3: Descriptions of Barriers to Parent Participation Identified by School Districts**

#### **B17 Parents are unaware of their rights.**

Parents have difficulty enforcing their rights.

The school district does not go out of its way to educate parents in their rights or what are best practices in education. The district gives [parents] a copy of the parents' procedural safeguards, usually after the meeting, and tells them to go home and read it. Because it is overwhelming to parents, they usually put it away and never look at it, or they lose it—no one goes through it with them. When a parent questions or disagrees, the district does not inform the parents of their next step. The district usually responds, "This is how we do it here." Parents are not treated at the very start like they are part of the process; therefore, parents do not think they are equal partners in the decision-making process.

If parents are unaware of their children's rights, they are unable to participate to the fullest extent possible.

The parent barriers include lack of knowledge of not only rights (especially the lower-income parents of color or those who speak languages other than English), but also of effective strategies to get their perspectives across and to advocate in partnership for their child, including prioritizing issues.

Parents are often overwhelmed by the IEP process, and until they have spent time in the system, they are not aware of their rights.

Parents are not always aware of their rights. Some believe they have little to do with educational decisions made about their child. Others believe, If this is what the school feels is best, then it must be true. Parents need to be familiar with their rights, the importance of their participation in educational decisions for their children, and the impact they have and can make on educational planning for their children.

In many cases, parents are not aware of their rights or best practices, and as a result they are not able to properly advocate for their child.

There needs to be more trainings geared toward assisting parent with what's current in the law. For the most part, opportunities are made available to allow parents to become partners; however, when parents are present, they appear to lack knowledge.

#### **B18 Parents are unaware of best practices in education.**

Very often, our parents do not know about the different ways that services can be delivered, nor do they know about the state's mandate to try to keep students in the mainstream as much as possible. They are often looking for "one to one" tutoring as opposed to services delivered in the general education classroom.

Most parents have no idea what the most effective means of teaching are. Too often, I have parents telling me that they expect us to hold their student back if the student is not up to the parents' academic expectations. When we tell them that studies don't support this, they tell us we don't know what we're talking about.

The school district does not go out of its way to educate parents in their rights or what are best practices in education. The district gives [parents] a copy of the parents' procedural safeguards, usually after the meeting, and tells them to go home and read it. Because it is overwhelming to parents, they usually put it away and never look at it, or they lose it—no one goes through it with them. When a parent questions or disagrees, the district does not inform the parents of their next

step. The district usually responds, "This is how we do it here." Parents are not treated at the very start like they are part of the process; therefore, parents do not think they are equal partners in the decision-making process.

All parents want their children to be successful. They depend on schools providing their children with the best possible education. They desire educational strategies, ideas, and concepts that will work for their children. However, parents are not always aware of best practices and changes in education. If they hear or read about a program that has been successful, they immediately think that it will work for their child, not knowing the mechanics or circumstances as to why it met a particular child's needs.

In many cases, parents are not aware of their rights or best practices, and as a result they are not able to properly advocate for their child.

**B19 Parents are not interested in participating in their child's education.**

Our city is, in actuality, a blue-collar town with little or no true buy-in on education.

**B20 Parents do not have the time to participate in their child's education.**

Parents' work schedules interfere with meeting attendance.

Many parents are working long hours to simply get by in our community. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to get them involved.

Schools provide informational services to parents around the parents' schedules.

Parents are required to work outside the home, and their time is limited. They often require childcare to come out for evening functions. Our resources are somewhat limited, although we attempt to provide families with the supports needed to participate.

Our parents (90% of whom are Spanish speaking [half Spanish dominant]) are very much interested in and concerned about the life of their children in school. Yet, we are aware that financial reasons often make their frequent involvement during the day not always possible. (We are almost 100% free lunch.) Nonetheless, despite our inability due to cost to meet after school or in the evenings (no more than four times a year), parents do find the time to make their interests and feelings known to the professionals, though not as often as in some very different districts (suburban and middle to upper-middle socioeconomic class).

Parents are often not available during the day.

Many of our families are struggling to make ends meet and come to meetings when they are able. They often lack resources to be available in the day or the evening. We do home visits, but that really doesn't enable parents to participate fully.

**B21 Parents do not have the capacity to participate in their child's education.**

Parents do not know how to most effectively support their students and the teachers. Simply listening to progress reports or participating on committees is not enough. Parents do not know how to effectively engage in the partnership.

Schools and local districts assume the responsibility for providing parent training around special education topics.

With a large percentage of English as a Second Language Learners (18%), communication becomes more of an issue. For some parents, their own personal challenges hamper their involvement in and understanding of their child's needs.

If parents do not have special education knowledge and do not understand how their child's disability affects their child's education, they cannot truly be active participants at an IEP meeting.

Parents oftentimes have had a hard time knowing how to participate in their child's education, especially in math classes. This is true for students with and without disabilities.

**B22 General education parents are not interested in special education issues.**

Oftentimes, people in general education could not care less about special education, and few even want to work collaboratively with special ed.

The main concern general ed. parents have is that SPED takes money from general ed. programs.

Many parents of students without disabilities are not aware of the struggles and concerns those parents have experienced. Special education services are often overlooked in the discussion when talking about services that students require for success. If the issues were presented "up front" and as a united effort, parents would find strength in numbers.

General education parents may be interested in special education issues only to the extent that provision of special education services impacts the budget and/or to the extent that inclusion of special education students affects the environment and instruction in the classroom.

Parents in our district are interested in our efforts to create a unified system of delivery. Though general education and SPED have not worked particularly well together in the past, there is a spoken commitment to change. There is also administrative backing to support this change. I strongly believe that creating this reality will bring more support from parents. Then on to the next issue.

**B23 Professionals are unaware of the rights of parents in the process.**

As often as we try to educate our professional staff (general ed., mostly) on parents' rights, they still do not seem to get it that those rights are legally guaranteed!

Ours is a district that responds to parental demands and parents' need to meet and talk about their child at all levels. The Superintendent and his Assistant are met often at parental request. All of the administrators, including me (Supervisor of Special Education Services), have an open door. And while I prefer appointments, any parent in distress or in need of support for any part of a child's life, though especially their education, is seen immediately. However, the idea that there should be a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals, **where both parties meet as equals**, is not universally held. We distribute a *State Parental Rights in SPED* manual to every SPED parent every time a meeting is held (parents usually refuse after they have collected one or two), but we do not distribute the manual to all teachers (and maybe we should).

**B24 Professionals are unaware of best practices in education.**

Most professionals do not learn effective practices in parent engagement and partnership or in educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings as part of their college experience, and the types of professional development opportunities that are usually offered are introductory or awareness level, with insufficient opportunities for more hands-on and ongoing professional development, including opportunities to see effective practices modeled.

**B25 Professionals are not interested in partnering with parents.**

No comments received.

**B26 Professionals do not have the capacity to partner effectively with parents.**

As with parents, professionals do not give explicit information to parents that allows meaningful involvement.

Some case managers have had a great deal of support in years past. Therefore, they have not seen a need to invest in partnering closely with parents.

Most professionals do not learn effective practices in parent engagement and partnership or in educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings as part of their college experience, and the types of professional development opportunities that are usually offered are introductory or awareness level, with insufficient opportunities for more hands-on and ongoing professional development, including opportunities to see effective practices modeled.

In fairness, it has only been after 40 years as an educator that I have come to appreciate the roles of non-educators in the education process of a child. Professionals have not been prepared in college, and home relationships are not routinely a part of their schooling. Our staff development activities do not include lessons on the value of parental involvement. I can only recommend to our Staff Development Supervisor that we at least use a couple of hours on the next Development Day agenda.

Our parents are very involved in the IEP process, and the school teams do an excellent job of working with parents regarding more simple issues. More training is needed with staff on addressing conflict and getting accurate information to parents of general education students re: process and services. As a district, I need to include more parent training—that is a focus for me this year.

The other major barrier is lack of teacher skill in truly engaging parents beyond basic meetings.

**B27 Professionals do not have the time to partner effectively with parents.**

Time constraints are always a concern. Training for new hires does not adequately prepare them with knowledge of procedures.

Systemically, there is not enough time or resources to allow for parent-professional dialogue.

We are a very large urban district. Child Study Team members are often unable to participate in developing activities to engage parents, due to their large caseloads.

Teachers are stretched, due to limited resources, and even though they may want to do a good job, they do not have the time to do the job adequately.

School district personnel, in some cases, are so overwhelmed that they are not able to devote the time and effort it takes to promote parental involvement.

Our teachers and staff are not given time to collaborate with one another or parents . . . it all has to be done after hours.

Time is a major issue in collaboration between professionals and with parents. It is difficult to teach, plan, prepare, and collaborate with general education teachers and find sufficient time to meet or communicate with parents.

The greatest barrier to working effectively with parents is lack of time.

**B28 General ed. administrators and educators are not interested in special ed.**

Oftentimes, people in general education could not care less about special education, and few even want to work collaboratively with special ed.

General educators still thwart inclusion efforts, as do budgetary decisions.

Principals have uneven interest in these priorities, especially since they are unaware of how these issues intersect with the priority that they seem to be most concerned with: test scores under NCLB.

I do not think that special education parents are included in campus-level or district planning committees.

**B29 The collective bargaining agreement limits our flexibility to meet with parents.**

Certificated staff will get up from the table when the clock strikes 3:35, unless we pay for the “overtime.”

The collective bargaining contract is very specific about working hours, and this limits after-school meetings. The greatest barrier to working effectively with parents is lack of time.

Clearly, flexible scheduling is critical when engaging families. Contracts and union leadership discourage meeting outside the contractual day.

**B30 We have insufficient resources to provide information to parents in their own language(s).**

I work in an at-risk school with a huge second language issue. The parents shy away because of their inability to communicate, and resources are stretched so thin that we cannot always get translators. The parents love their children and try their best, but often both parents are working minimum-wage jobs just to survive. Even though as special ed. teachers we try to work around parent schedules, we are not allowed to require teachers to stay past the work day.

**Other Barriers**

Another barrier would be the increased complexity of our classrooms, since we do not have the same situation of regular ed. and special ed. here.

The parent barriers include lack of knowledge of not only their rights (especially the lower-income parents of color or those who speak languages other than English), but also of effective strategies to get their perspectives across and to advocate in partnership for their child, including prioritizing issues.

In urban districts that are experiencing a rapid change in demographics, the cost of providing special education in multiple languages is unrealistic and prohibitive.

The services that we provide to the families do not always meet their needs. Our families need more individual assistance for several reasons: language, culture, and convenience. Many of our parents are not able to attend parent meetings because of other family demands/priorities, and it is easier for them to seek assistance through the phone or meeting with one person individually—someone who speaks their language and understands their experiences. I believe that our district office (ESE) is very supportive of family supports and resources; however, services and supports are not equally provided at the individual schools. Schools are not willing to accommodate the needs of the parents, such as flexibility around meeting times, or returning calls at times when parents are not working. I think that school staff, especially ESE (administrators, teachers, etc.), need to better communicate with families, starting with returning phone calls. Parents get discouraged when the school does not respond to their concerns, questions, etc.

Barriers to positive working relationships between parents and school staff tend to occur when requests by parents are viewed by staff as excessive and unrealistic and when parents view school staff as inflexible.

The barriers you have listed are really not issues currently experienced in our district. Professionals and parents do want to work together; however, the relationships have not yet been adequately developed. Transportation, cultural, class, and language barriers add to the difficulty.

Traditional opportunities are in conflict with cultural and economic barriers. Traditional PTA is not a route for parents who work two or three jobs. Coming to school to volunteer or attend meetings is not a viable route for parents who feel intimidated by the school process and environment. The professionals are from different cultures, economic statuses, educational levels, or languages of comfort. Not enough of the professionals know how to develop meaningful relationships with parents on their own “turf” or comfort zone, such as home visits, or meetings hosted at community centers or churches.

## **Table 4: Descriptions of Barriers to Parent Participation Identified by Parent Centers**

### **B17 Parents are unaware of their rights.**

Parents often want to participate actively in their children's education, but they do not have a clear understanding of what they are allowed to do. They do not know their rights, and they do not know how to find out about their rights. Many parents function strictly on what they are told by school educators and administrators. When they do find out about their rights, they then stumble through the process of getting the right contacts and following the procedures to implement their rights. Parents are not given explanations of procedures, although they may be given mandated literature. Parents are also intimidated by the educational system, and as a result they refrain from pursuing what is right. Parents sometimes have to decide what "effective involvement" is by definition. Often, the parent and the school have two very different definitions of parent involvement. This barrier is a constant struggle for parents who attempt to pursue their rights, and it places a strain on any effort in partnering with the schools.

Initially parents think that since the administrators are professionals, then they know best and will be benevolent in planning for their child. Then when parents learn that they really do have rights and what they say is important, they become interested. Knowing and understanding that parents of children with disabilities also have the right to have high expectations is the high moment in the life of a parent raising a child with a disability.

Despite the best efforts of parent centers, most parents do not call or attend training until there is a "problem" of some sort. If true training took place at the beginning of the evaluation process, parents would be effective team members from the start, and "problems" would be less frequent.

Parents do not seek information about their rights until they are in crisis. This is not because they don't care; it is because they are stretched to the limit from taking care of their family, working, and all their other commitments. When a crisis occurs, they decide that they must find the time to become educated about their rights.

Although the Procedural Safeguards has our contact info on the back, I don't think parents differentiate us from the school and from DESE when they look at that, if they see it. I think they leave a meeting feeling like the school is the authority and they don't have other options, or they're asking for too much. Therefore, they are reluctant to dig deeper, and they don't find us until it's really bad or someone else refers them. DESE will often refer them to us. In this district, we not only don't get ushered in, they also get very uptight when they hear we're coming. I'll hear comments like, "We've never had this many people in one meeting," or they will use the excuse to excuse about half the team. Parents often don't see a light at the end of the tunnel because it seems insurmountable. Once they do start to figure out what is wrong and needs to be fixed, they also realize that it is going to take a while to get straightened out. Some hold out, and some don't believe their problem will be resolved in a way that is appropriate to the student.

Again, many parents receive their information from the schools (at least in our state), and the information about their rights is handed to them in a tri-fold, small-print copied brochure. The names and addresses of the Parent Center and the Protection and Advocacy agencies are included on the back, but again this is distributed to parents along with all of the other paperwork needed at the time of the meeting.

Most parents don't know their rights because they trust the professionals and don't seek to find out about their rights until they are in crisis, and when the crisis is over they stop looking for answers until another crisis comes along. PTI centers need more funding and people to reach deep into the communities and provide extensive training on special needs subject matter, training of more community volunteers, and attorneys in the trenches to help parents who struggle to get the basic needs for their children.

To me, this is the most significant barrier to effective parent participation. Parents are unaware of the laws that ensure that *all* children receive a Free Appropriate Public Education. Most districts do very little to ensure that parents are educated in this area. To be effective, parents need to know how these mandates apply to all children and how to apply them to their children. Parents aren't aware and, most of the time, are reluctant to ask. The effectiveness of parent participation would tremendously increase if parents clearly understood these laws and how they apply to all children.

Families are often not given the full range of supports available to them through their local schools. PTICs and various family support programs continue to strive to find families through outreach efforts. Limited funds for education and advocacy groups slow down statewide outreach efforts. Finding and informing parents is our first priority.

Every week we receive calls from parents who had no idea about their rights in the IEP process. They may have received their parents' rights statement and not taken time to read it, or they may have not taken time to think about it until they had a concern. There is a wide range of situations at schools. In some schools, every parent receives some one-on-one verbal information and encouragement to be involved. In other schools, no information is very evident to parents. Many Spanish-speaking families have no idea what their rights are until they find us in some way.

Parents continue to be unaware of their rights. Ninety percent of the referrals that come into my office are for parents getting a complete description of their rights for the first time, and finding out how to use them to help their child attain educational standards. It isn't until we review their rights and the information provided to them by the school region (if it was provided) that parents and students feel like they have a viable plan for their education and their futures. Adolescents and teenagers are often excluded from discussions and decision-making processes that are about them and their education. So, most students have no idea what an IEP is until they have met with us and reviewed their IEP with us. One of the things that we are beginning to grasp, and to work on finding ways to help understand, is that youth with disabilities need to understand their right to an education so that they can take ownership of the process and, through self-advocacy, become productive members of our communities.

This is also sometimes related to teachers who don't know their rights. While all three systems have translation/interpreter services, there is not sufficient information/hand-holding that is culturally competent and in the family's native language. Some perceived barriers (parents' lack of interest, or the capacity to participate), along with fears about what parents will ask for if they know that it really is supposed to be a partnership and collaboration, means that while all three systems are making outreach efforts, these efforts are not reaching many families.

### **B18 Parents are unaware of best practices in education.**

I believe we must educate parents as to best practice. I am sure some of my colleagues would disagree with me, but just knowing rights and procedural safeguards is not enough. It is about knowing how to ask the right questions, and if you don't know what good answers look like, how can a parent make an informed decision about what is right for their child and family? Along with this valuable knowledge will come the procedural safeguards, and parents will know how to use them wisely.

Districts do not make any effort to help parents understand best practice. I think that they are afraid that if parents knew more about best practice, they would become more of a problem to the educational system.

Parents are just beginning to understand what best practices are. This is a barrier for our families, due to the fact that our county is home to the poorest children in the nation. Having said that, families are more focused on how to make ends meet. All programs funded by the group that provides our funding require that best practices are incorporated across the board. Minimally, if

the families were not aware before, that is the “buzz word” in the community. Our workshops for IDEA require pre- and post-evaluations, and we provide information on where to access information regarding best practices at all levels.

A note: We just received the results of the pre- and post-, and it is amazing to see the percentage of families that had a better understanding after the workshops (which are provided in Spanish and English).

Many parents are unaware of the best practices in education because, as has been relayed to me, they do not even realize that this concept exists. This is not to say that parents are incapable of understanding this concept, but rather that they trust that their child is *already* receiving the best possible programs, using best practice strategies. As one parent said, “I thought that all of the teachers and administrators kept current in their professional fields—I have to in *my* job!”

Parents often believe that that “professionals know best.” This mindset leads to parents not effectively participating. Parents need to know what is available and how to implement these practices for their “individual” child’s needs. This is a joint responsibility. Parents and school districts need to collaboratively learn about best practices in education. Parents are often very trusting. This leads to parents not taking the initiative to learn about best practices. Educators need to be willing to help the parents learn. Once the parents become more knowledgeable, this helps them become more active in their child’s education. This component is one of the major factors in a child’s success.

Educating families on their rights is not sufficient alone. Families and professionals need to be educated on best practices, so that they can use research-based practices for students that will be beneficial and provide measurable progress.

As an advocate for student with disabilities, I often come across situations where parents have no insight as to what best practices are available within the department of education, or how they can go about accessing these resources. Other times, programs that work can only be found in certain school regions and not in others (e.g., literacy programs). In these instances, not only are parents in the dark about the resource, so are many of the professionals. Notices that entitled parents to services under NCLB are often not meant to include students with disabilities—because, I often hear school administrators say, these students are already getting services under the umbrella of special education. In addition, transition services for students aging out of the school system primarily work best for the students with the most significant disabilities. Students that are classified as having learning disabilities, having other health impairments, or being emotionally disturbed often fall through the cracks and get minimal transitional services.

### **B19 Parents are not interested in participating in their child’s education.**

To accept that some parents are not interested in participating in their child’s education is difficult. However, I find that some parents are not interested because they have too many other critical survival factors that they are confronted with daily. Many parents also become uninterested because they have historically and consistently been unable to make a difference, and they, therefore, become discouraged over the years with the “system.” These parents are no longer interested because the emotional price they have to pay is too high; coupled with all of the other family needs, it makes daily survival unbearable. These parents accept that they cannot win. They believe that the professionals are just going to do what they want to do, the way they want to do it, and that their decision is final. These parents feel dejected and disrespected, and they feel like they have failed their children. Over time, the mental and emotional pain experienced through attempts to exercise parental involvement outweighs the will to participate in their child’s education. They give up. They require advocates.

Too often, parents aren’t interested in participating in their child’s education. There are many reasons for this. Many parents believe, and some are led to believe, that their child with special needs will never be “normal.” This way of thinking causes some parents to not be interested because they have the mindset that their child will not be successful. Some are so mired down in

the disability that they don't see the importance of being an active part of their child's education. Of course, there are parents who don't care and are truly not interested in their child's education. They think that the education of their child is the district's responsibility and do not see the importance of being actively involved.

**B20 Parents do not have the time to participate in their child's education.**

**B21 Parents do not have the capacity to participate in their child's education.**

Changes in education are happening so quickly that most parents are not able to keep up or catch up, and no one is taking the time or has the time to assist parents in understanding education to the degree that they can effectively make sound decisions. Parents do not have the capacity to participate in education because they do not understand education. The barrier is that they lack knowledge. Today's children come from various backgrounds and cultures, and some of them are homeless. Parents also have various backgrounds; they can be biological parents, other relatives, foster parents, surrogate parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Many of these parental figures do not have any understanding of the educational system, and some become parental figures without any parenting skills. In the urban area, their barriers can range from being economically disadvantaged to living with instability at home, lacking transportation, and experiencing daily abnormal stress and constant emotional upset from situations in their homes and other environments. Often, support outside the home is needed to assist parents with parenting and with their involvement in education.

Parents feel helpless within the large district—especially if they lack English language skills. Many simply do not know that they can advocate—they are used to accepting what is given. Even if they feel like they should advocate, they may not know what to advocate for or how they can persuade others of and justify their requests.

**B22 General education parents are not interested in special education issues.**

General education parents do not like special education students in their school since they believe it brings down their scores on tests and these students take too much of the school budget. The parents of children with disabilities become ostracized and feel unwelcome at meetings.

**B23 Professionals are unaware of the rights of parents in the process.**

My co-worker, who worked for this district in special ed., actually said that she and the parents and a paraprofessional were the only ones who ever attended any of the IEP meetings they ever had. She got *no* coaching or instruction of any kind before being told to run the meetings and write the IEPs, which were not based on the child's evaluations or progress but just pulled out of thin air. The parents didn't know any better, and worse yet, she did not either, aside from her gut instinct. As far as how the district acts in meetings—I have seen one extreme to the other. In the majority of meetings I have witnessed, the district did not give much regard to the family. They usually have all the decisions made before the meeting, including Notices of Action already typed up. When challenged to defend their recommendations, they are usually caught off guard and don't have a good foundation for their answers. Building staff often do not agree with the administration. Staff often ignore the need for parent involvement—e.g., by not including them in the Review of Existing Data meeting, change of placement, and change of ed. category. They send the notice, but they don't invite parents to the meeting where these changes were discussed, and often there was no meeting. We've actually had several schools and a whole district decide that parents visiting their children at school would no longer be accepted at all.

It seems as though many professionals are unaware of IDEA in general. They know that the law exists, but again, many of them seem not to realize that parents' rights truly *are* written into the statute.

General education administrators and educators, as well as all special education staff, need to be informed on the rights of parents and the importance of meaningful parental involvement.

**B24 Professionals are unaware of best practices in education.**

I believe it is unfortunate that more professionals do not know best practice or the value of sharing procedural safeguards with families. Our state legislatures and SEAs must step up to the plate and require continuing education for educators to continue to be licensed. At the same time, both entities must value highly qualified educators with good compensation. Currently our organization works with more than 30,000 educators each year—that is a staggering number for a parent center. It seems to me that there is a message there, and that message is twofold: (1) Educators want to improve and are not being afforded the opportunity, accurate information, or resources, and (2) We must be providing good information, or they would not call.

They have little time outside the classroom to keep up to date on best practices in general or practices that may be tailored to specific needs. Additionally, our district is just starting to really develop an inclusion model, and the district has not yet “persuaded” general education teachers that they will have the support they need to include all children.

Professionals lack knowledge about how to deliver special education in the least restrictive environment. Kids end up in restrictive, self-contained environments unnecessarily, relegated to low expectations and segregated from typical peers, due to a lack of in-classroom supports and professional development regarding differentiated instruction. Most professionals do not seem to understand the importance of such practices as universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and inclusive learning, and if they do, they do not know how to implement them and/or are hindered by administrative practices that do not adequately support them. Resource issues prevent the provision of the kind of individualized supports that help children with special needs make it in the general ed. setting (including 1:1 support or intensive tutoring to remain at grade level). Kids fall further and further behind, making inclusion harder and harder. As kids spend more and more time in separate settings, expectations of grade-level achievement are lost.

Professionals are unknowledgeable about students' behavioral or educational needs and are unwilling to invest the time or resources needed to educate most students. Nor do the schools have the funds to implement the IEP needed to address these students. Professionals have limited funding for the resources, but they don't “train down,” so most teachers are unknowledgeable of resources or how to access them. Children with behavior needs are not being served appropriately. If a child has a behavior problem, the school would rather place the child in DEAP instead of providing social skills training and counseling along with the child's BIP. Educators stop teaching when it comes to social skills, when that should be a part of teaching, too. The professionals actually have no knowledge of most disabilities. Training is desperately needed for all. Everything is based on funds, when we should be basing our services on educational need (which isn't defined in IDEA).

Teachers—especially special education teachers—are currently under so much pressure to have students pass statewide assessment, and they do not have the time, tools, education, or support to keep up with what works. As a result, students, families, teachers, etc. are blamed when they don't achieve, and negative (vs. positive) sanctions and support ensue. Efforts to make teachers “highly qualified” under IDEA 2004 are sending teachers to “institutes,” but a 3–5-day course that isn't necessarily tied to the challenges they have in the classroom won't do it. Also, they see that there is so much they are expected to learn, and so little time, that they often resort to what can be done in a crisis mode. This does not support learning and keeping pace with best practices.

**B25 Professionals are not interested in partnering with parents.**

Professionals complain that parents are a pain and often do not know what they are talking about or are always in error. Professionals often admit to doing less for students who have parents who want or demand more, making the student the loser and the parent afraid of just such an event.

There is a lack of recognition that parents need to be equal partners in the IEP process. Parent participation is largely pro forma. Parents tend not to be adequately informed of the child's

progress, and quarterly progress reports tend to include very little information: “P” for progress usually doesn’t tell parents how *much* progress and rarely has concrete objective evidence behind it. There are significant problems with engaging or even informing parents who are not English-speaking about IEP meetings. Translation quality is poor and frequently unavailable by phone. We have seen instances of parents who did not know of changes in placement for their child—they knew that the child was no longer at the previous school, but they did not know where their child had been moved to, or why, and certainly had not had an opportunity to weigh in on the decision. The school bus would simply pick up the child in the morning, and the parent didn’t even know where the child was being taken!!

**B26 Professionals do not have the capacity to partner effectively with parents.**

Too many professionals are academically informed, or “book” trained, in meeting the diverse needs of different cultures. They are not trained in really understanding diverse cultures, or in building “intimate relationships” with diverse cultures—meaning, they never get up close and personal. You cannot teach people you do not understand—not only culturally, but also in the area of disabilities. Most educators have no knowledge of the traits and characteristics of specific disabilities, yet they have a mandate to “appropriately” provide services. The perceived expectation of culturally diverse parents and economically disadvantaged parents is that the majority population wants us to be like them, and we are not. They cannot become like the majority population—they are different. Professionals must appreciate difference, learn the culture, and establish a relationship with other cultures so that effective partnerships can develop between schools and parents.

Pre-service programs do not spend much (if any) time showing students ways to partner with parents. New teachers are overwhelmed with their classroom responsibilities and do not have the mentors to help them develop the skills to work in partnership with parents or to respect the expertise the parents bring.

**B27 Professionals do not have the time to partner effectively with parents.**

School district personnel do not have time or resources to work effectively with families.

Professionals, particularly teachers, are required to do much and to do it quickly and accurately with little to no training on what they are to do. They have numerous state and federal mandates. Many times, they do not even understand what they are supposed to do. They are required to teach each child to the unique needs of that child. They must stay abreast of their content-specific area of expertise. They must be expert disciplinarians and educators. They must enforce rules for safety and create a warm classroom environment. They must partake in other extracurricular activities, such as conferences, trainings, and other academic enhancements. They try to respond to every parent phone call. They have to grade papers at home and prepare for the week. They must fill out forms for behavior and attendance on a daily basis, and they must do all these things well. Then they go home to be parents and spouses, or they just go home to an empty home and assume another set of duties. Teachers are overwhelmed. As such, they often prioritize based on school mandates as opposed to developing partnerships with parents. Teacher overload makes parental involvement non-existent, too short, too one-sided, or too frustrating.

I think most special educators want to partner with families, and many of them really go the extra mile. I do think that often there is so much to do, or they do not have the strategies and support to help them follow through on everything. I have seen some situations where there is excellent follow-through, but again, there are many families who come to us because for some reason it hasn’t happened.

**B28 General ed. administrators and educators are not interested in special ed.**

I think the key to improving education is leadership at every level. When I say every level, I think it starts at the State Education Agency [SEA]. The SEAs must step up to the plate and begin to look at licensure for school administrators. Our universities must step up to the plate at the pre-service

level. Administrator classes need to focus on what matters to improve student achievement, leadership, how to work with families, and teacher support, and to develop a vision for all children.

It feels like general ed. teachers and administrators still like to fall back on special education—it's a convenient place for them to retreat to when they don't have time, expertise, or resources to serve kids. In some ways, having separate divisions—general ed. and special ed.—has ruptured the educational system.

Professionals are not interested in special education. A lot of classes that have special needs students in them are out in portables, and the teachers with the least experience are placed in these classes, sometimes in their first year of teaching. Most schools provide the bare minimum to students in order to stay within the guidelines of the law, and every so often, when they step outside those lines, a parent who is knowledgeable reminds them, and the school then corrects the problem at a snail's pace or just acknowledges that they didn't know and then still doesn't make changes to the services until an attorney is involved.

General education administrators do not understand the value of good special education and how SPED teachers have the capacity to lift achievement for all students in a school. Without support or resources, teachers/staff/students are left on their own to sink or swim. It is really unfortunate that they haven't figured out how to use the knowledge/skills/capacity of special education to help the whole school, and instead focus on how not to count students in special education and English language learners.

#### **B29 The collective bargaining agreement limits our flexibility to meet with parents.**

#### **B30 We have insufficient resources to provide information to parents in their own language(s).**

We have some schools that have around 65 languages spoken in the homes of the students. Our city has become a destination for refugees from some countries and also for Spanish-speaking immigrants—many who are illegal and afraid to ask for anything or make waves. I keep hearing about IEP meetings that do not include interpreters and where parents just sign because the paper is put in front of them. I think the schools are doing some really good things in areas where there are the most families with these needs, but it is a huge project to do everything the way it should be done. The schools need more money and time. There is one district in the state that has hired Spanish-speaking liaisons to work with all the families who speak Spanish, and we have been able to train the liaisons about the IEP process. This has been great, but it is not being done in most areas.

#### **Other Barriers**

Professionals are not willing to view parents as authoritative equals: Educators and professionals consistently want to make decisions for children without really listening to the parents' views. Parents often stress that meetings are always pre-set. All paperwork is done and pre-viewed by the school team. The parent is invited primarily to sign the papers in an often chilly and hurried setting. Parents who are effective in being involved in their children's education want to be seen as effective equals and/or partners who are warmly welcomed into the setting. Many teachers/administrators insist on maintaining the authoritative role and a "we are the experts and we have the last say" attitude. While they are the authority on education, they are not the authority on parenting. They have a partial vested interest in the child, whereas the parent has a lifetime vested interest. These factors require equal grounding at the meeting table. There is division at the table, and this is a strong barrier. As a result, parents cannot be effective advocates for their children.

Professionals do not always have a good or clear definition of parent involvement: Is it to get them to sign forms? Is it to get them to come to the parent-teacher conference? Is it to listen to what they have to say? Does it mean we have to report to them all the time? Does it mean they

come get their child if he or she is acting out in school? Is parent involvement a law? Where is the law written? How do we do it? Some teachers do not want partnerships with parents; they want responses when they need responses. They do not have time to develop partnering skills, and some teachers are intimidated by parents of a diverse or economically disadvantaged background. This hinders effective parent involvement.

There are district efforts to prevent parents from obtaining new knowledge: The districts are very intent on not letting families learn this information. We are never invited to events at the schools during the early years—occasionally we're there for transition only. They invite us to speak at their parent nights, which virtually no one shows up to. And we're only allowed to talk on a benign subject—no actual rights issues. I have had several mentors make a major effort to notify other kids in their child's class on things like getting a play group together, only to find out that the only kid who got the flyer was theirs. When we mention that we'd like the opportunity to train their families so the process could be smoother, they always find a reason not to. When teachers call me, they are reluctant to tell me their name or where they teach. They are truly afraid of losing their jobs. They would almost never give our info directly to a family unless they were tenured. The closest a teacher comes is to remind parents to look at the back of the Procedural Safeguards. Very infrequently does the district invite parents to an event where they are likely to meet one another and share info. I actually had a teacher be threatened with losing his job because the school thought he referred a parent to us. He did not even know who we were. They are that paranoid that we will expose the truth.

Transportation and childcare continue to be the major factors affecting parent involvement for all families. This is exacerbated by the fact that some children with special needs cannot be cared for by just anyone, and appropriate care is very expensive. I reiterate, our community has addressed these issues through the funding available through the Children's Trust. Stipends to cover childcare and transportation needs may be included in all RFPs submitted.

When parents receive training and support about advocacy and rights, they are often able to begin participating more on an individual basis. However, there is a real need for a more whole-scale parent-centered approach (with emphasis on language and cultural competence) that involves and purposefully draws in families not currently able to participate.

## **Table 5: Strategies for Parental Outreach Described by School Districts**

1. We have a very high rate of participation by parents in the IEP process. We are diligent at scheduling and rescheduling TEAM meetings to meet their needs. The one place we have difficulty is when parents request meetings off school time. We have no power to make teachers attend.
2. Math “Family Nights.” Parents come to school in the evening to see what students are doing in math and to learn some of the basic concepts. The math department in each school conducts the activity.
3. We have a Parent Advocacy Group that involves community vendors that meet monthly to discuss issues regarding students with disabilities.
4. Parents are encouraged by phone calls, letters, and e-mails to participate and communicate with the school. This applies to all students.
5. Inclusive schools processes: Pre-referral Student Intervention Programs taught by psychologists and run by a team of general educators at the school. Differentiated instruction taught by national speakers and supported by regional special ed. staff. Co-teaching models taught by national speakers and monitored by regional special ed. staff. We are looking at levels of placement data and standardized testing scores for students with special needs to determine effectiveness.
6. The best effective practice to involve parent engagement is to inform the parents of the IEP meetings at least three weeks to a month in an advance.
7. Parent Education Program for parents of LEP/ESE [limited English proficient/Exceptional Student Education] students: This program offers annual parent workshops in two languages (Spanish and Creole) to schools with a population of students with LEP parents. This program offers to parents a variety of topics dealing with their rights in ESE, home activities to promote learning, family issues, etc. Topics have been developed by parents of ESE students. Teachers conducting the workshops are also trained on outreach strategies, suggestions for involving parents, etc. Every year, each school is offered a list of 12 topics to be presented, one per month from January through May. Ongoing support is provided to the teachers by staff from the Bilingual/ESE Dept. and FDLRS Parent Services. This program is offered by the Bilingual/ESOL/ESE Office in collaboration with other programs in the community. This program is offered to selected schools, and funding is provided by the Bilingual/ESE program. For this school year (2005–2006), it will be offered at 36 schools, with a total of 103 workshops. This program has been offered for more than 10 years, and every year both the parent participation and the number of schools participating in the program increases. Parents complete an evaluation after each session. Parents obtain knowledge that enables them to be more effective in understanding their child’s disability, how to help their child, and how to better communicate with the school. The program also gives parents an opportunity to network with other parents within the school, all in their own language.
8. Our district has a Special Education Advisory Committee that includes parents, school personnel, and community members. We are partnering with a local parent support group to provide a training and resource fair.
9. Parent trainings: Parents are involved from the start and throughout. Feedback evaluations are gathered at every event. Likert scores and comments are aggregated and shared. We provide school buses to pick parents up in neighborhoods for Saturday workshops, etc.

10. The district has specifically focused on improving the working relationship with the local special education parents' organization. With that improved relationship has come the ability to co-plan and co-conduct parent workshops. This strategy has been evolving for the past two and a half years. As a result of these efforts, we are seeing improved parent awareness and involvement in the creation of and/or the modification of the IEP.
11. We have a very active and strong Parent Resource Center and Special Education Advisory Committee and a parent liaison in each school. This enables us to reach a wide range of parents. We typically have 25–30 parents attend evening topical events.
12. The Inclusive Schools Project allowed individuals to become familiar with CC Models that work for regular ed. and special ed. students and staff. Selected schools in various regions were selected.
13. A countywide special education parent survey was recently conducted, and the results are in the process of being analyzed. This was the first time that a survey had been conducted where every family had an opportunity to participate. Although the response rate was lower than expected, the results are still expected to be helpful. Decisions re: future surveys will be made once the complete analysis has been finalized.
14. We collaborate with a statewide parent group, as well as a parent advisory board, in addition to the teachers union, to develop educational resources and best practices for all teachers and parents. Much of the work is hyperlinked to additional resources.
15. We provide parent training and informational services at each of the local districts on instructional practices and behavior intervention practices in special education. This training is provided in four half-day sessions. The topics for the workshops were selected by the officers of the district special education parent groups. Local district parent ombudspersons and parent facilitators as well as special education support personnel were involved in implementing the strategy. The training sessions began in September. Evaluations are distributed after each workshop session. The majority of the evaluations testify that parents are grateful for the information, that it will assist them to be better participants in their child's IEP, and that they would like more training sessions.
16. Effective practices within my school district usually are determined by each individual school building and are usually done by the building principal, who embraces special education and parent involvement. In our school district, there is a parent mentor program, which is funded through the state department by a grant. There are two grants to pay for two parent mentors in the district. The mentors are parents of children with disabilities themselves who have been through or are still involved with the school system. The grants were developed by a parent group, and the program has been in the district for at least 10 years. The parent mentors provide education and support, either on an individual basis or in a group. They sit on a few different committees within the district to bring the parent perspective of special education to the mix. At times, the district just relies on the two mentors as their parent participants, which is a downside, because they do not recruit any other parents with special needs children within the district. The strategy is evaluated on a yearly basis, with a report given to the state department that includes statistics on the parents they worked with within the district. The evidence is determined by the number of complaints and due processes that were filed, compared with the number of parents who contacted the program.
17. We have developed a community engagement process that is used for all of our accommodation issues and challenges, including special education. It has three steps: data collection, scenario development, and administrative recommendations. In Step 2, the stakeholder—be that parent, school, or community—is an integral step with built-in feedback loops as the process unfolds. It is important that all of the stakeholders are involved in the process and that they understand from the outside the purpose of the engagement (is it to

provide information about an issue or decision, or is it to develop with the stakeholders potential scenarios to address an issue or to inform a decision?). The other piece is to be clear as to who makes the decision (is it in the hands of the Area Superintendent or a particular Service Unit, is it the Chief Superintendent, or is it the Board of Trustees?). This process is proving to be very effective, especially when coupled with a clear communication plan. We would be pleased to share at one of the next collaborative meetings.

- 18.** Our parent Exceptional Student Education Advisory developed and presented four parent workshops during the school year. Our advisory consists of parents, administrators (district and school), and community partners. A keynote speaker addresses a topic (based on parent surveys), and several small breakout sessions complete the morning. We offer “fun camp” for children during the session and provide parents with free resource materials. We have had excellent parent attendance at some sessions and poor attendance at others. Attendance factors include the topic presented and conflicting activities going on at the same time.
- 19.** Parents of children with disabilities have very little trust in their children’s school(s). Part of my role is to rebuild their confidence that the school system can provide an appropriate education for their children. Some of the strategies I use are meeting with parents that are new to the special education process, explaining policies and procedures, offering consultations to parents, attending IEP meetings, providing parent/educator workshops, and helping stakeholders move from an adversarial relationship to a collaborative partnership.
- 20.** We have found that disseminating the flyers to schools is insufficient. Although somewhat time-consuming, our most effective approach, resulting in large turnouts, requires follow-up calls to classroom teachers and CST members. Reminder notices and calls have been very effective. Calls are usually made by the supervisors and teachers. Attendance is taken at each meeting, as well as names of parents who are willing to serve as liaisons for their school. An additional strategy we are attempting is a newsletter, noting important dates and activities. Location is also key to parental involvement.
- 21.** There are several initiatives in our urban district that encourage and support effective parent engagement. These include the development of a district-wide special education Parent Advisory Council [PAC], which meets monthly and offers three trainings a year to parents and professionals (in collaboration with the state PTI, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, paid for by the district) and sponsors an annual meeting with the superintendent on the state of special education; the development and dissemination of tools for parents and educators, including a Parent Guide, brief brochures on each stage of the special education process, an IEP checklist that is used at IEP meetings, and a Positive Student Profile Goals at a Glance chart; a bimonthly newsletter written by the PAC and sent to each special education parent in the district by the district; passage by the district of a mandate to include a special education parent on every school-based school review and every district-wide advisory group (including the District Leadership Team); and passage by the district PTA Council that every PTA must have a Special Needs Liaison to represent the interests of parents of children with special needs (the PTA Council has a Special Needs Liaison as well, and is hosting a Special Needs portion of the website that is just about to go live!). These strategies came about as a result of a self-assessment that the district conducted five years ago (the district conducts an annual parent survey as well to measure progress). Parents, advocates, general and special educators, and the Director of Pupil Services were involved in the self-assessment and in the development of the Improvement Plan, and the committee continues to meet several times a year to review implementation progress. Parent forums have been held to discuss the self-assessment findings as well as reports on implementation and impact. The strategies are evaluated through review of annual surveys that measure progress in resolving the issues identified by previous surveys.
- 22.** To be very honest, I cannot identify a single parental involvement approach or activity that has been implemented in the eight years I have been here.

23. We have involved parents in our planning process for parent professional development. We use the parents to help us provide in-services to our staff and other parents in the district. We started using this strategy in the 2004–2005 school year. We are still measuring the effectiveness of this practice.
24. Our best strategy is to develop the most positive relationship with our families.
25. A continued practice used by our school division is the use of interactive workshops and presentations with parents and educators. Parents have the opportunity to suggest topics and to plan and assist with the implementation of some workshops. Some workshops are planned exclusively by parents. Parents are also encouraged to attend local workshops in order to become more knowledgeable about educational practices. These activities are evaluated through program evaluations and verbal feedback. This practice must be working because there has been an increase in parent participation throughout this school division.
26. Knowledge is the most important tool you can give a parent. Knowledge about their rights and the rights of their children is the most effective tool in helping parents become more engaged in their child's school life. I do workshops around our district informing parents of the programs and services available to them and telling them how they can access the services.
27. We have not found a good strategy.
28. The PAC is an active one. There is a budget that is supported with school funds. The PAC chair has an office in the Family Center at a school site.
29. The one thing that I am most proud of about Northside ISD is the willingness of all groups to share and communicate the needs and concerns within the various departments—a willingness to work together for the success of all students.
30. Parents routinely/always come to initial meetings, though their attendance tends to fall off at annual meetings, which are commonly rescheduled. One strategy we use is really frequent communication to parents from the PPS central office. This strategy works based on DOE CPR.
31. Two strategies: (1) Develop a special education council that would include parents. We're looking at that for spring 2006. (2) Develop a training series for parents: January—IEP and compliance issues; February—autism; and April—reading support.
32. Developing meaningful relationships with parents through home visits, asking for their input to culturally responsive teaching, parent-to-parent communication, and community-hosted meetings at churches and community centers. The special education director and administrators are supported by the Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee in community-based meetings, invitations to cultural events, and home visits. Very effective relationships have been developed with parents, one at a time, in a large urban district. No evaluation other than fewer parent complaints (three in a school year) and fewer due process hearing requests (two in a school year, mediated to settlement).
33. We have a parent advisory group that comprises parents from the clusters that make up our district. The group was formed by the Dept. of Special Education, advocacy groups, and parents of students with disabilities. This group has met for approximately three years. The group meets monthly and identifies concerns that the group can address for parents. The group identifies potential in-service topics, conference ideas, and community resources to support parents. A survey is sent to parents to gather feedback on the effectiveness of activities and to gauge parent satisfaction regarding the responsiveness of the Dept. of Special Education to their concerns.

- 34.** We have employed Family Service Coordinators in all of our elementary schools. They offer assistance to parents of regular ed. students and special ed. students. They help them access schools and other agencies. They help them access insurance, mental health centers, medical centers, etc. They also provide transportation for IEP meetings, etc. They also work with our homeless population, connecting them to resources, etc.
- 35.** Our school district has formed a subgroup of our Parent Advisory Council, which focuses on the needs of students on the autism spectrum. This group (composed of parents and administrators) meets monthly and invites other professionals, as needed, to attend. This is the second year that this group has been in existence. Through the efforts of this group, we have been able to add an autism specialist to the district. Parents play a very key role in this group, and I certainly would be willing to share any information about it.
- 36.** As part of the Special Education Oversight Action Plan, the district committed time, resources, and training to the development of a Parent Dispute Resolution System. The system supports encouragement and training to enhance access to information and problem-solving support. The system encourages parents to address their concerns, starting with the classroom teacher and school-based staff. Many parents prefer to address their concerns or questions centrally. Therefore, the district has developed a Parent Information Center with nine Parent Information Specialists (housed at Central Services). Parents receive information from the specialists that assists them in finding their way through the system to resolve their issues. A database has been created for schools and the Parent Center to record and track issues and their resolution.
- 37.** We host an Annual Parent Conference, parent and family seminars, and other activities in conjunction with the area high school district, hospitals, churches, and city mental health offices.
- 38.** Our teachers are in-serviced on effective communication. This has been an ongoing strategy. The fact that we don't have a lot of legal disputes indicates that we are doing a good job of communication. There's a person in our state who does great training in this area, and her name is Lisa Webne-Berman.
- 39.** We have hired a part-time family advocate/parent liaison in the district. She is available to parents for problem solving, mediation, information, etc. She also meets regularly with me to identify any patterns that may be emerging at a particular school or district, which then allows me to intervene. We have found this to be an effective way to empower parents, particularly those who have lost faith in schools. Our Local Advisory Committee was instrumental in advocating for this position. The position has been in place for almost 10 years. We have not formally evaluated this strategy, but evidence, such as few complaints at the state level and few due process hearings, suggests that it has a positive impact.
- 40.** Since we are a one-school district in a very tight-knit community, we have a very strong network of parental support. This is my second year here, and at this time we do not have a formal strategy to involve parents. Our parents are just involved. The cooperative we belong to has parental and professional developmental meetings, seminars, workshops, and in-services that cover a myriad of topics for professionals and parents to become more involved in their child's/student's education and rights.

## Table 6: Strategies for Parental Outreach Described by Parent Centers

1. Our most effective efforts to support districts in engaging urban parents have been the result of our past 18-month SIG contract. We (the PTI) designed the conceptual framework of the project and got 15 local districts, 50% of which would be classified as urban, to agree to participate prior to the state submitting the proposal to OSEP. The initial contact was made by PTI staff, who approached special education directors or other key personnel. Key incentives were previous positive work with the PTI, the need for all districts to document efforts to involve parents as part of IDEA application for funds submitted to the SEA, and allocation of significant financial resources in the SIG contract to be used at the discretion of participating districts to support parent participation.

The initial activity was a facilitated needs assessment meeting for each district, which required participation by administrators, educators, and parents. If districts “had a hard time” identifying interested parents, the PTI offered suggestions. A plan for offering diverse joint training opportunities was developed at the meeting, a district point person was assigned responsibility to work with the project coordinator, and training modules were tailored and offered to families and staff in the district on multiple occasions.

Participating districts were given the opportunity to use allocated funds to extend initial training by choosing additional joint learning activities. Activities that have been implemented include sending teams of parents and professionals to state or regional conferences; developing, translating, printing, and mailing community resource brochures to all families in the district; developing family literacy kits to be sent home to parents of preschoolers; replicating the initial training by parent-professional teams from the district; and providing information, resources, and support to Title I Parent Liaisons located in all schools.

A train-the-trainer session was offered as a culminating activity, and 25 additional districts attended as parent-professional teams and have begun to initiate training and information dissemination in their districts.

Evaluation of the activities was conducted by an independent evaluator contracted by the state to assess all SIG projects. While the project evaluation results were extremely positive, the most significant success of these efforts from our perspective can be measured by the interest and willingness of the participating districts to sustain these activities beyond the project period, the attendance of new districts at the train-the-trainer session, the increased requests for joint training that have resulted from attendance at the train-the-trainer session, the establishment of district teams and use of the parent needs assessment tools prior to planning activities, and requests for an in-service for school staff on engaging parents.

I think the districts were surprised at the interest and involvement of parents who they believed would not attend these events or value this information. The PTI was often very instrumental in recruiting parents to attend who may or may not have received information that was sent home by the school. We encouraged parents, other parent organizations, and service providers we talked to to invite other parents.

We have just completed our final report for this project, which officially ended December 31. We have many collaborative follow-up activities already planned for the spring and will continue this work as a contractual partner with our state’s new SIG. We are hoping to include an ongoing assessment of families and staff to determine if these efforts have been sustained, if attitudes have been changed, if parental engagement has increased, and if district policies have been created that will impact practices in the future.

2. We have co-presented with people from our state office of education on the topic of parent professional partnerships to school district personnel. The personnel came after school and received credit for in-service hours. We were still preaching to the choir to some degree, because those who were already most interested were the ones who chose to attend. We also are often invited to do parent panels and presentations at our universities. We are often hard-pressed to keep up with the demand, and are told that our presentations receive the highest rating of the semester on the student evaluations. However, we struggle to have enough time to do this on our funding level. This was requested by districts. We have done it off and on over the years. We have satisfaction questionnaires that are filled out at the end of the training.

We have trained Community Parent Trainers to do small IEP workshops in the Spanish-speaking and some Native American communities. These are people who already had some skills to feel comfortable presenting and who are members of the community. Some are parents, but many are para-educators, Head Start personnel, and others who are already interacting with parents in their jobs. This worked out well, but our funding source ended, and we have not had time or resources to update the training and PowerPoint presentations for IDEA 2004. The people have had some longevity, and we still have a relationship with them. It took us about three years of working on this to refine our model, and I wish we had money to keep it going better, but at least the people are still there as a resource in their communities.

We received a small one-year grant to develop a training on Negotiation and Advocacy Training—Interest-Based Negotiation and also how to influence public policy. We hired one person to develop this, starting in August of 2005. We have been going around the state presenting a one-day workshop. We collect evaluations at the end of the day. The project ends in June. We will do a survey of participants to see if they have used these skills. The feedback has been very positive. Most participants have been parents, and we have also had staff of independent living centers and other professionals attend. We strongly encourage parents to have attended our IEP and communication workshops before they come, since this takes their skills to a higher level. The training is very hands-on and is similar to the training some teachers have received in our state's Mentor Teacher Academy. Some school districts have helped us by providing space and publicizing the workshop in the community. We think we have developed a good model, and after we have the final version of our presentation, we would be willing to share.

3. I believe we do **partnerships** well. Our parent center administration and school administration meet regularly. We develop workshops and problem-solving strategies together. Though this does not mean that things are not in need of improvement, it just means that we have partners at a high level in the district that really do care. Any time you know your partner cares, it makes you want to go the extra mile. Make no mistake about it, it is a lot easier to be adversaries than partners. When you are partners, you work hard at it every day, just like in a successful marriage. Though we have always been able to do some problem-solving, it has only been during the past four years that our partnership has really borne fruit. Some of our outcomes:

- No complaints recommended by the parent center in more than three years
- Schools are more welcoming to advocates
- Many in-services are combined
- We co-present workshops for families and educators
- We provide positive gate-keeping

We spend a lot of time working with staff on **best practice**. We have staff participate on a lot of task forces and committees. This does three things:

- Teaches staff what it is like to look from the other side of the table

- Gives our partners a look at our side of the table
- Builds relationships that are outside of an adversarial situation

The outcome is that we seldom have to represent the parent point of view at meetings—the educators do that well—while we on the other hand can look at support for other stakeholders.

We spend an extraordinary amount of time **building community**. We believe that bringing folks together and building community is the only thing that will create sustainability for the work we do. We have dedicated staff to just shepherding our leadership path. We recruit folks at all times from many walks of life—everyone can be involved at some level.

4. We developed a training called “Walk Through the IEP” that can be done one on one or in groups; it walks the parent or teacher step by step (line by line) through the IEP forms. It was developed by a parent center director who did so many one-on-ones with parents to get them ready for these meetings. It evolved as a good way to train parents in the process and help them appropriately advocate for their child’s needs. We are willing to share, though it is set to North Carolina forms—but the idea could be easily done for any state forms.

We have been using it for about six months in training form, but longer not as formal training. Parents’ feedback is that they now have more knowledge about what is going on, and they are more empowered with that understanding.

Parents attending the advocacy seminars become more outspoken about their needs and the needs of their child. Frustrated parents learn to become more courteous [when] listening to educators. They begin to have meetings that are less stressful and more productive. Attitudes in meetings are more positive.

5. Parent/professional workshops and training—the state PTIC has conducted workshops for more than 10 years. The PTIC outreach for these programs includes interagency programs, service providers, schools, and PTOs/PTAs, as well as local district Special Education Advisory Committees. Evaluations are used as a measurement tool for every workshop, and a follow-up random survey is conducted quarterly for reporting purposes. Many of the PTICs are currently using this strategy. Unique to our state, we have it mandated in our state regulations that every school district have a Special Education Advisory Committee comprising parents of children with special needs, professionals, and, in some cases, students. The PTIC, through a grant from the state Dept. of Education, has developed an LAC/RIPIN/SEAC network to help support all of the local advisory committees. A website and e-list have been developed for the dissemination of information, and biannual meetings are conducted to provide training and networking opportunities for the chairpersons of the advisory committee, as well as members of the Rhode Island Special Education Advisory Committee, the Dept. of Ed., and the state Parent Information Network. Each advisory committee in each district varies on activity level, due to the availability of volunteers and support from the local special education directors.
6. We work to empower parents to understand the IEP process and to participate in the crafting of the IEP as equal partners, and to empower them to participate in progress monitoring.

Strategies include one-to-one phone advice; more intensive mentoring and support, including meeting attendance; and larger group workshops for both parents and school staff regarding effective IEPs and IEP collaborative processes. The center has been using these strategies since the beginning of its existence. Effectiveness is evaluated through parent surveys and, more recently, database information collection.

Another promising practice is working closely with the state administration and with the local district administration to address broader systemic issues and concerns that come to light as

a result of our parent support work. These are frequently issues that come up again and again with the families we serve and therefore require a larger solution. This requires building and maintaining good relations with the state and local administration.

#### **7. Mediation over Impartial Hearing**

As a result of my using the mediation process to resolve conflicts between parents and schools, I have been able to find ways to improve communication between myself, as an advocate, and, most importantly, the parent and the school. Together we have found ourselves thinking outside the box and creating goals and ways of implementation and monitoring that have ensured a better understanding of the process and of our school system. Parents, teachers, and students find ways to utilize the process so that we can begin to see success for the student.

#### **SAS—Students Achieving Success**

SAS is a pilot program in one of our neighborhood middle schools. We offer training for students, parents, and providers on the IEP process and the role that the student should play in that process. UWS does the training over eight weeks. We are put into the students' weekly class schedule, and we meet with them one period per week. One Saturday we have an all-day retreat for the students and their parents. The goal is to better inform the parents of the process and to prepare and give ownership of their education to the students. We are very proud of this project, and we're now waiting on the final outcomes of the evaluation of the project, which was done by a professor at one of our universities.

8. In 2004–2005, our parent center launched a campaign to make parents aware of the fact that they have rights. The campaign included a wide distribution of flyers and brochures in churches, laundromats, stores, libraries, after-school programs, community centers, etc.
9. Several cities have had locally based parent resource centers staffed by an educator and parents for about 20 years. This model was originally developed by PEATC as a model demonstration project in three states. The local school system has hired staff to implement this strategy. Centers keep track of the number of parents served. Evidence of success includes the following:
  - Families feel more informed and able to participate in the IEP process
  - Centers are able to resolve some disputes between families and school personnel
  - More families who speak Spanish are involved in the process
10. **School District Open House**—The school district holds a “Parent Fair,” an evening where parents can visit the district’s administrative offices (it’s held at the main administrative building) and talk with the Special Education Administrative Team. The district hosts a series of breakout sessions with other community partners and asks the parent center to provide information at a breakout session as well as to help with the coordination of the event. This has been in place for approximately 8–10 years. There is no formal evaluation process in place at this time to measure its effectiveness.
11. We have a collaboration with other parent centers in our city called Center Without Walls, where we bring information to families and community-based organizations. We also have a collaboration with the local Immigration Coalition, where we provide training and advocacy support to immigrant parents. The Center Without Walls has been in existence for more than five years, and the immigrant parent collaboration has been in existence for more than a decade. The evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies is the significant increase in underserved families—immigrant families, low-income families, families of color—who have participated in workshops, received information, and become more active in their children’s education. We are willing to share information on these strategies with others.

12. Teaching parents effective communication around IDEA '04 and NCLB produces positive results, empowers the parents, and gives them the confidence to ask for what they know is needed. Partnering with the schools for results and following up makes parents the happiest and the student is the winner. At TEAM, a PTIC, all staff are involved in training and outreach. We partner with school personnel and other collaborative agencies to provide optimum results for parents. We have been in this city since June 2004.

This strategy is evaluated after any workshop or training and by survey annually. Our effectiveness rates in the 90th percentiles by parents who have received the services. Our most effective tools are training and technical assistance to parents, with a delivery system that is in three languages and a willingness to have trainings convenient to the parents at times when they can attend. Our trainers are predominately parents of children with disabilities and young professionals entering the field of assistance to persons with disabilities. Marketing is another tool, getting the word out that we are here and we are willing to help, at no cost, via e-mail, mail, word of mouth, website, e-lists, ISD/SEA/LEA announcements of services, presence at meetings, collaborative agency efforts, partnering with the city and faith-based institutions—all of this helps to notify parents who can benefit from the services of TEAM.

13. First, we employ collaborative rule-making, which includes parents and professionals and encourages parent involvement in the beginning. This practiced was started by the State DOE, the PTI, and the SPED Directors group. We all came to the table to iron out issues in the SPED regulations, and all came away with better knowledge of one another's viewpoint and a sense of ownership of the regulations.

Co-teaching is another great way to form collaborative relationships. Having a professional and a parent present information to each other's constituents shows partnership from the beginning.

14. First, working through service providers—therapists and regional service coordinators. I have good relationships with both of these communities, so often I will do little talks for them, at which point I also ask to add them to my mailing list so they will get notifications of trainings and can pass them on to their consumers. Otherwise, I may never meet them, due to HIPPA. I also offer to do a semi-customized closed training just for their consumers. We always collect contact info at these events, then add them to our master list. We've been doing it this way for about a year. The folks we reach really wanted the info. I can go back to each of these events and see who is still using our info, based on how each client finds us.

Second, tapping into natural networking systems, such as local hospitals, especially children's. I'll offer to do in-service trainings for the social workers. They refer to us often, as long as I stay in touch. Same thing works for doctors offices, etc. My son's doctor's office is huge, so I always take them a big stack of flyers. There is also a community networking group that is like a chamber of commerce but for NPs. They are great natural networkers. I go to everyone I can get to. Our regular trainings count as continuing ed. for many professions and for foster parents.

Third, the use of mentors in general. My mentors and I get involved with parent support groups as well as other disability-oriented activities in the region—sports, etc. We go to all the back-to-school fairs—10 this year—and every conference that is related, etc. They are volunteers, so that multiplies my efforts. I meet many people at these who need help. After they get help, if they would be good mentors I invite them to start coming to mentor trainings so I can see how interested and motivated they are. This is an ongoing program that has been in place with our organization for 10+ years. It works.

15. I wrote in general regarding the state as a whole from the perspective of the parent center. There are districts within the state doing very positive things for and with parents and their

involvement in the total school and district experience. This is certainly not the prevailing position of the majority of districts across the state. We recently talked to a parent in a small community who has a child in special education and had signed many IEPs but had never heard of an IEP meeting. It was difficult to respond to this without a specific district in mind.

16. First, we have a cooperative agreement with the school board that allows the parent center to effectively do outreach to families within the entire school system, provide training in schools and in the community, and provide in-services to the teachers, principals, district personnel, and anyone who comes in contact with families who have children with disabilities in the system. The local advisory panel provide has a 50% of parents of children with disabilities and reports directly to the superintendent of the district. The Assistant Superintendent of ESE and the executive director of the parent center were involved in implementation. This agreement has been in place for five years and was recently evaluated by the Doug Williams Group. As a result, there has been an increase in referrals from teachers and professionals working directly with families, and a decrease in due process hearing requests. Mediation and resolution meetings resolve 90% of the issues that cannot be resolved at our level.

Second, our Leadership Development Program: We have a strong Parent Leadership Program in collaboration with a local university and the Dept. of Ed. that has proven to be quite successful. This project is designed to teach families to become effective advocates for their children and then transition to a personal PATH that ultimately leads to advocacy efforts at the local, state, and national levels.

17. We have found in working with our families that most of these parents are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. Along with the identified parent leaders, teachers, and administrators of the schools we are working with, we have come up with a projected plan for more parent involvement in the schools. The strategy we use is the Joyce Epstein Plan, in which six key components are identified: volunteering, communicating, parenting, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Each person involved is responsible for fulfilling his or her assigned key. Some of our effective planning has been to implement educational and non-educational goals in which the parents have taken the lead in preparing, structuring, and overseeing the activities set forth for each goal. The results have been phenomenal, due to involvement from **all** parents. This strategy has been used for more than two years, and the outcomes have been an increase in student achievement, parents feeling like they have the capacity to advocate for their children, and an improved relationship between the schools, the community, and the parents.
18. We have implemented the SAS project for two consecutive years in a neighborhood middle school. This model offers opportunities for both the parent/guardian and school staff to work alongside the students in the area of IEP development and implementation. However, we have encountered much difficulty with getting the school staff to totally buy in to the project and, that lack of 100% collaboration has hindered our opportunity to obtain 100% cooperation of parents and staff. However, the students themselves and those parents that have participated have expressed that they now have a clearer understanding of their role as well as the role of others in their (or their children's) education. They have also commented that they now feel like they know what measures to take in the event that they need to have changes made to the IEP. The project runs for eight weeks, one period per week. The trainers are two staff people from our office. The training is provided during the regular school day, and it is worked into the curriculum for that part of the semester. The teachers are present and often assist the trainer during the sessions. The parents and students participate in a full-day Saturday workshop that not only focuses on the IEPs, but also helps participants learn better communication strategies to use with one another, their peers, and their educators. The center is currently waiting for the report on the evaluation of the project.
19. Through the state, PTI training is provided to parents to encourage active participation. Parents are trained in the laws and how these laws apply to their child. Through this, parents

are empowered to be advocates for their children. In addition, it provides the opportunity to network with other parents. We have three projects—PATH, TEAM, and PEN—that serve the entire state. Regional coordinators from each project are responsible for providing this service to parents and caregivers of children with special needs, in the form of trainings and workshops. We also host an annual Leadership Conference, in collaboration with the state Council for Exceptional Children. At this conference, parents are provided with skills and leadership techniques to further empower them as positive advocates for their children. This event offers parents an opportunity to participate in training sessions, network with their peers, and be part of a unique parent-professional partnership between these two groups. Many parents are provided with the opportunity to attend through stipends provided by the state PTI as well as from their Regional Education Service Centers. For the past 15 years, we have effectively served the families of children with special needs.

One specific strategy I personally promote for effective parent participation is for parents to get involved with their child's school. Parents who are actively involved build a rapport with the school personnel. It also shows the professionals and educators that this parent has a committed interest in their child's success. I recommend that parents not only help out with their child's teacher but in other ways as well, such as volunteering in the library, reading a story to students, being active on the PTA, helping out with school parties—whatever time allows. We all live busy lives, but there is always some "behind the scenes" work that can be done to help educators. Parents should also get to know other parents involved with the school. Parents need to make time to participate in one form or another. Be creative. This helps show that the parent is a positive advocate for all children. There is so much benefit to being involved with a child's education. One major attribute is that it helps foster self-esteem in a child. When children see their parent volunteering at school and being involved in their education, it shows them that they are valuable and that their education is very important to their parents.

The effectiveness of this practice is obvious. When a teacher feels comfortable with a parent, the teacher is more likely to come to that parent when there is a problem or challenge with that child. When an educator sees that the parent has a vested interest in this child's success, the educator is more likely to be more involved as well. Schools should be willing for and encourage parental involvement. All benefit when there is a collaborative team effort. When families are involved in their children's education, children earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to enroll in higher education than students with less involved families. For these reasons, increasing family involvement in the education of their children is an important goal for schools, particularly those serving low-income and other students at risk of failure. (See Funkhouser & Gonzales, U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 1.)

Another practice that I suggest to parents is constant communication with teachers. I recommend a daily communication notebook for the teacher and parent. This helps in so many ways. Open lines of communication are invaluable. Many times, a child's presentation at school is different from at home. Teachers need to know what happened at home the night before, just as parents need to know what happened at school. For the child to be successful, both parties need to be aware. This also helps when a parent goes to a doctor or counselor. The parent would have this to share to show how the child is doing—rather than just a parent's interpretation from report cards or progress reports. This also helps with preparation for ARD meetings for both parties, as well as helping to shorten ARD meetings. Time is spent on establishing appropriate goals rather than discussing and evaluating occurrences.

In addition, a communication notebook provides parents with an opportunity to communicate with their child. Parents who show a keen interest in their child's education open the door for communication. This notebook provides a base knowledge of the events of the day and can

serve as a facilitator for the parent to ask the child questions. Communication between all involved parties is imperative for a child's success.

This practice has proved time and time again to be successful. An open line of communication can help provide staff with insight into a child's strengths, interests, and needs, as well as help the parent be aware of programming services that match the child's strengths.

Collaboratively, these practices—increasing knowledge through trainings and workshops, school participation, and open lines of communication—play a vital role in a child's success. This responsibility falls on the parent and the district. The importance of all three practices needs to be realized by both.