

Parents as Equal Partners: Balancing the Scales During IEP Development

By: [Marcia L. Rock](#)

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Article:

Fifteen years ago, as a beginning special education teacher, I was proud of the preparation I had received in developing individualized education programs (IEPs). I was confident in my knowledge and skills and spent long hours after school and on weekends creating detailed IEPs for my students. I conferenced extensively with parents regarding the wonderful educational programs I had created for their children. The parents nodded and smiled in agreement. In fact, they were quite appreciative. Yet they said little about their child. At the time, I was perplexed and often bewildered about their reluctance to contribute to the dialogue. In retrospect, how could they have responded any differently? I was the one monopolizing the discourse.

Unfortunately, what I failed to realize for a number of years was that the IEP was not about ME or the curriculum I had created for the classroom. This called for a radical paradigm shift. Transforming the IEP process to empower parents was a necessary, difficult, time-consuming, and rewarding journey. It was grounded in a review of the literature and complicated by the translation difficulties that often emerge between theory and practice--that is, the limitations imposed by the system's needs. The process described here is a story of discovery and a description of the activities that are essential in generating parental partnerships that are truly meaningful and equitable. For more than 25 years, the IEP has been paramount to the provision of a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities (Bateman & Linden, 1998). Parents and teachers are the key stakeholders in the development of the IEP. Yet some parents feel ill equipped to address the special learning needs of their own children (Yanok & Derubertis, 1989). Out of frustration, despair, or ignorance, parents may simply choose to relinquish their active decision-making responsibility for their child's education. Parents need to become more aware of procedures involved in obtaining necessary educational services and need to understand the nature of a collaborative relationship. Teachers can play a critical role in preparing parents for their role as active, educational participants and decision makers.

WHAT THE LAWS SAY ABOUT PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING

The historic enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Public Law 94-142, revolutionized special education. Many new aspects to service provision emerged. Perhaps, as Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wheat (1982) asserted, the most radical was the provision of parent participation as a right enforceable by law. The lawmakers based the parental participation provisions on at least two assumptions:

* Parental participation is beneficial to students, parents, and professionals alike and is best educational practice.

* Parental participation is a vehicle to enhance the accountability of schools to both parents and students, and thus, to assist in assuring students' rights (assigning to parents a role similar to the checks-and-balances system in government; Turnbull et al., 1982).

The U.S. Congress upheld these assumptions in two landmark reauthorizations of P.L. 94-142: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476) passed in the early 1990s, and more recently the 1997

Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA 1997, P.L. 105-17). Congress intended the latter of the two mandates to strengthen the role of parents and encourage parents and teachers to resolve their differences, using nonadversarial venues (Bateman & Linden, 1998). IDEA 1997 increases active parental representation by expanding the preexisting IEP participation mandate. The new law specifies that parents are also to be participants in the eligibility decision, the placement decision, and the membership decisions associated with the State Advisory Panel (National Information Center, 1998).

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING

Although the federal mandates have clearly presented the legal nature or status of parental participation and decision making, the translation from statutory and regulatory provisions to everyday practice has been plagued with difficulties. For more than 2 decades, educational researchers have investigated this topic. The results of many of these investigations have revealed that many parents view themselves as "uninvolved" in their child's education (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1982). Typically, teachers are the educational decision makers, and parents are the consent givers (Harry, 1992). Further, parents who are Hispanic or African American experience lower levels of participation and decision making than Anglo parents (Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Stein, 1983). Due to ignorance and preexisting educational rituals, many teachers and systems engage in culturally insensitive practices that serve to further alienate parents, rather than to empower their participation (Harry; Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech, 1999; Sileo, Sileo, & Prater, 1996; Voltz, 1994).

Without question, professionals and legislators have held high expectations for parental participation and decision making, but have had little regard for cultural differences and preferences. Consequently, prejudice toward parents and barriers to the promotion of active parental participation and decision making have emerged.

BARRIERS TO ACTIVE PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING

Investigations in the mid-1980s indicated that barriers to productive parent-teacher interactions could be grouped into four general categories (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986):

- * Psychological
- * Attitudinal
- * Cultural/ideological
- * Logistical

Other researchers organized barriers slightly differently into the following categories: work, time conflicts, transportation problems, and child care needs (Lynch & Stein, 1987). Around the same time frame, Leyser (1985) and Stein (1983) identified work and language/communication difficulties as barriers that prevented parents from participating in their children's special education programs.

More recently, researchers have focused on the cultural insensitivity, ignorance, and miscommunication that exacerbate traditional barriers that impede parental participation. Investigators have identified the following as barriers that sabotage parental participation (Harry, 1992; Quiroz et al., 1999; Sileo et al., 1996; Voltz, 1994):

- * Menu-driven district approaches.
- * Parental "tracking" practices.
- * Reluctance to explore culturally diverse values.
- * "Teachers know best" mindsets.
- * Lack of sociocultural diversity in the teacher work force.
- * Parental mistrust due to minority overrepresentation rates in special education programs.

These researchers have focused on the need for teachers to recognize and adapt to cultural diversity and develop effective strategies for promoting collaborative parental partnerships in an effort to erode the existing barriers (Harry, 1992; Quiroz et al., 1999; Sileo et al., 1996; Voltz, 1994). Indeed, the barriers to parental involvement are complex, numerous, and varied. Clearly, the barriers include ethnic and cultural differences (Harry; Lynch

& Stein; 1987; Stein, 1983). Teachers, however, can adopt meaningful and ongoing practices that surmount the barriers.

BALANCING THE SCALES: WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO TO CREATE MEANINGFUL PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING

One of the major effects of the lack of active parental participation and decision making has been in the development of legally inappropriate and educationally unsound IEPs for students receiving special education services. Many students' IEPs lack procedural compliance and educational usefulness (Bateman & Linden, 1998). By facilitating meaningful parental participation and decision making, teachers can improve their IEP process and product practices. Teachers can use the tools and strategies presented in this article before, during, and after the development of the IEP to promote active parental participation and decision making.

Creating opportunities for increases in parental participation and decision making begins long before the actual IEP conference is held. It begins by laying a foundation built on teachers' engaging in activities that communicate sensitivity, trust, respect, and acceptance to parents. Teachers can initiate many actions to build collaborative parental partnerships before the IEP conference (see box, "Pre-IEP Conference"). Figure 1, page 34, presents suggested parent survey questions, and Figure 2, page 34, shows a sample IEP conference agenda.

More than 5 million IEP conferences are held annually (Bateman & Linden, 1998). The actual IEP conference provides a variety of opportunities for teachers to facilitate active parental participation and decision making. Again, we need to radically change our IEP procedures if we are to encourage truly meaningful parent participation. Traditionally, the IEP meeting has become a meaningless ritual in which teachers dictate the prescribed educational program and then pass the ceremonial pen to parents to secure their signatures.

In contrast, the purpose of the IEP is to brainstorm (Bateman & Linden, 1998). All participants should collaborate to determine the student's strengths, needs, present levels of performance, special education and related services, and goals/benchmarks for the upcoming year. Participants should recommend placement after they have collaboratively determined the contents of the IEP (Bateman & Linden). Educators can find many ways to transform the IEP conference from ceremonial symbolism to educational substance (see box page 35, "IEP Conference").

After the IEP meeting has occurred, opportunities for active parental participation and decision making remain. Teachers need to complete paperwork for the district--and parents need to review them for accuracy and agreement. Teachers can also use feedback collected from parents during the meeting to establish continued goals in this area. Following the IEP conference, educators and other professionals can find many ways to embrace the development of ongoing parental partnerships (see box page 36, "Post-IEP Conference").

Many teachers feel overburdened, devalued, and undercompensated. To effectively employ the tools and strategies discussed here, school district administrators must rally to the assistance of their teachers. Here are effective administrative supports:

- * release time
- * special recognition
- * compensatory funding
- * scheduling accommodations
- * moral support (Gable, Korinek, & Laycock, 1993).

Without these supports, the parental participation and decision-making provisions of special education law may never be realized.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Parental participation was assumed by Congress to result in benefits for the child by "creating a climate of cooperation between the child's parents and the school" (Morgan, 1982, p. 37). Consequently, many schools and districts have developed and disseminated how-to manuals, workshops, and other training programs.

Unfortunately, these traditional attempts to increase parental participation and decision making have often resulted in a "professionalization" process. Frequently, this has been an ineffective and inefficient strategy to address parent needs. Some professionals argue that the effect of the federal mandates has been limited to increasing communication between home and school, rather than enhancing active parent participation and decision making (Yanok & Derubertis, 1989).

Regardless of which role or to what extent parents choose to participate and make decisions, they often lack the terminology, expertise, and finances that their professional counterparts possess. Parents enter the decision-making partnership with a distinct disadvantage. One solution may be to balance the scales by providing teachers with the tools and supports to create opportunities for active parental participation and decision making during the development of the IEP. This, in turn, may strengthen the bond between parents and educators, and aid in the establishment of equal partnerships, meaningful IEPs, and better services to students.

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PRE-IEP CONFERENCE

Examine your "teacher expectations." Ask yourself what you expect from parents and determine whether your expectations are appropriate.

Respect differences (e.g., cultural, gender). Become knowledgeable about diversity and demonstrate behavior that communicates nonjudgmental attitude.

Become a "private investigator" (PI). Collect data from a variety of sources (e.g., parents, present and previous teachers, students, cumulative files) regarding students' academic and behavioral strengths and needs.

Create duplicate IEP files for each student. Create one for the teacher and one for parents. Use the files to organize the data collected from "PI" activities. The files should contain exactly the same information.

Create a "parent friendly" IEP manual. Survey parents regarding important topics to include. Engage students in creating the graphics and artwork to illustrate the manual. Collaborate with other special education teachers and district administrators to author various sections of the manual. Request that your school district's central printing office professionally bind the manual and reproduce color copies. Make the manuals available to parents for loan by housing copies in the school library.

Provide parents with sample IEPs. Be sure to maintain confidentiality.

Conduct monthly parent meetings. Collaborate with other special education teachers, administrators, community providers, and parents to share the responsibility for directing the meetings. Conduct a Needs Assessment to determine topics of interest and importance to parents. Create parent teams to serve as advocates and support systems for one another. Devote 20-30 minutes of each meeting to survey parents. Surveys should focus on identifying parental priorities for student learning (e.g., "What three things do you think are most important for your son/daughter to learn this year?"). Surveys should be completed during the time provided at the meeting; hence they should be brief with a mixture of forced choice and open-ended questions.

Use established district parent-teacher conference days to conduct Pre-IEP planning sessions. For example, request that parents bring photos or a photo album of their child to the conference. Simply ask parents to talk about their child. As they discuss the child, jot down a list of the student's strengths and needs, the parents' dreams for their child, and so forth. Use subsequent conferences to complete interviews or surveys. It is also helpful to ask parents to bring samples of the student's work that have been created at home. Further, the traditional 15-minute parent-teacher conference may need to be reconfigured to reflect a more "culturally compatible format" (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech, 1999). For Latino parents, consider using a group conference format, which is more amicable with their cultural value of collectivism. This format tends to be more relaxing for parents and provide them with increased levels of peer support. Opportunities for individual conferences can be made available following the group session (Quiroz et al.).

Use established district planning days to collaborate with parents/other professionals and engage in Pre-IEP planning (e.g., general education teachers, psychologists, speech and language clinicians). Invite parents to participate. Review all data concerning the student's progress. Collaborate to create charts and graphs to illustrate the student's performance.

Use an IEP Planning Checklist. Organize data collected from your investigations and to ensure thoroughness.

Communicate with parents regarding the establishment of a convenient meeting time for the IEP conference. Remember that work and child care are barriers to parental participation and decision making.

Request district support. For example, ask for compensation to hold IEP meetings in the evening or on weekends. Arrange for child care by using district resources (e.g., many Career & Technology Centers have an Early Childhood program). Alleviate transportation difficulties by requesting that the district make available free public transportation (such as bus passes) to parents or provide district transportation. Parents could also be provided taxicab fare by the district. If neither the district nor the parents' budget permit such support, the IEP team could travel to the parent's home to hold the IEP meeting. All of these issues should be addressed before the actual IEP meeting.

Send formal invitations to all IEP meeting participants. Invitations should be received by all participants at least 2 weeks in advance.

Ensure that parents have received and understand the Procedural Safeguards.

Create a list of decisions and survey parents (see Figure 1). Include all of the instructional and behavioral decisions that need to be made to develop a legally appropriate and educationally useful IEP. Use the list as a survey to determine what type and level of parental participation and decision making they prefer (e.g., "What do you feel most comfortable making decisions about regarding your son/daughter's education: Curriculum--what they learn; Instruction--how they learn it; or Assessment--how what they have learned is measured?").

Prepare an agenda for the IEP meeting (see Figure 2). Include the agenda with the invitation and request feedback. Be flexible and reorganize the agenda, if necessary.

Recruit parents. Those who are active participants and decision makers can assist you in involving parents who are not.

If language is a barrier, translators are required. If the district does not possess adequate resources in this area, request assistance in securing external resources. For example, many universities and colleges have foreign language departments where students and professors are fluent in languages other than English. Senior Citizen centers in the community may also house an untapped wealth of resources--seniors who are fluent in other languages and who also have the time. Within the district, parents, foreign language teachers, English-as-a-second-language teachers, and students may also be recruited to surmount the language barriers.

Review and graphically summarize student progress regarding the previous IEP. Disseminate this information to all IEP meeting participants before the meeting. To ensure efficiency, include it with the invitation and the agenda, using a packet format.

Complete ONLY the demographic information on all district-required IEP forms.

FIGURE 1. SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO INCLUDE IN A PARENTAL PREFERENCE SURVEY

- * What information do you need the most concerning your son/daughter's education?
- * What is the best way to provide you with the information you need?
- * What types of decisions do you feel most comfortable making regarding your son/daughter's education?
- * What barriers prevent you from actively participating and making decisions about your son/daughter's education?
- * What support services do you need to actively participate and make decisions about your son/daughter's education?
- * Do you feel comfortable making suggestions during your son/daughter's IEP conferences?
- * Have you made any suggestions during any of your son/daughter's past IEP conferences?
- * Were your ideas/suggestions incorporated into your son/daughter's IEP?

Note: The format of the survey can be forced choice or open ended. To increase the response rate, a combined format is preferred. This provides a structure to facilitate parental responses and also allows space for comments.

FIGURE 2. SAMPLE IEP AGENDA

- I. Introductions and distribution of IEP files.
 - II. Review of previous IEP and current assessment data--distribute summaries and graphs.
 - III. Identify areas of unique instructional and behavioral need. Delineate student's strengths, needs, and present levels of performance in unique areas.
 - IV. Determine special education and related services--including ESL and ESY (Extended School Year), participation in district testing, accommodations, modifications, and behavioral support. Write annual goals and create 2 or 3 instructional benchmarks for each goal.
 - V. Develop assessment procedures and schedules for each benchmark. Also determine method and schedule for progress reporting to parents.
 - VI. Determine placement (least restrictive environment) for student to receive services.
 - VII. Conduct a brief conference survey to poll participants' satisfaction with the IEP process.
- Source: Sequence of items based on Bateman & Linden (1998).

IEP CONFERENCE

Ensure enough time and flexibility. If the meeting needs to be changed, or an additional meeting is necessary, allow enough time to do so. This means holding the meeting 3 to 4 weeks before the annual review date. Sixty to 90 minutes is an appropriate duration for the meeting.

Provide resources previously agreed upon (e.g., child care, transportation, English translation).

Conduct the IEP meeting in a private and distraction-free environment. Ensure to the greatest extent possible that the environment is comfortable. Close the door to ensure confidentiality.

Consider the seating arrangements in advance. Use round-table seating if possible (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

Redistribute the agendas. Bring enough copies for all the participants. Although they have been previously distributed, many of the participants will forget to bring them along.

Ensure that there is access to technology (e.g., video, e-mail, teleconferencing, fax, Internet; Bateman & Linden, 1998).

If the student is not present, display a picture of the student. This will help to maintain the focus of the meeting on the student (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

Use butcher block paper, easel, dry erase board, or chalkboard to record ideas brainstormed at the meeting. All participants should share in the recording process (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

Provide markers or writing utensils to all participants.

Have copies of the student's IEP file that you created to distribute to each participant.

Provide beverages/snacks. This is optional; however, it often aids in the establishment of a comfortable environment.

Use a tape/video recorder. If the parent demonstrates a language difference or a disability, recording devices may be necessary to ensure procedural compliance. However, recording devices can also be a valuable tool later when the ideas are transferred to the IEP forms. The audio or video tape can also be transcribed and serve as the

official minutes of the IEP meeting. Be certain to review existing state and local school district policy regarding the use of tape or video recorders. The current Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) policy maintains that the public agency may limit or regulate the use of recording devices at IEP meetings. If a conference is audio or video taped, it does become part of the "education record" and is subjected to confidentiality requirements and regulations (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

Begin the meeting with the introduction of all participants. This should be the first item listed on the agenda.

Employ effective communication (verbal and nonverbal) and empathy skills during the meeting.

Use the data collected before the IEP meeting to increase parental participation and decision making during the meeting. For example, if parents indicated they preferred to make decisions regarding what their child learns (curriculum), ask them to facilitate the discussion on goals/benchmarks. This should be previously determined and agreed on before the meeting and should be reflected in the agenda.

Secure the signatures of all the participants who attended the meeting.

Conduct a brief conference survey to poll participants' satisfaction with the meeting. This should be completed at the end of the meeting and should not take more than 5-10 minutes.

POST-IEP CONFERENCE

Complete the required paperwork. Transfer the data recorded on the butcher block paper or charts to required district forms.

Disseminate IEP meeting minutes to all participants.

Disseminate the IEP in the official district format to all participants, including parents, for final review and approval.

Summarize and analyze IEP conference satisfaction survey data. Use this information to create an action plan for improving parental participation and decision making in the IEP process and product.

Send progress reports monthly (minimum is quarterly) and maintain student performance data in the IEP file.

HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS & IEP TEAMS

TEXTBOOKS

Better IEPs: How to Develop Legally Correct and Educationally Useful Programs, 3rd Edition (Bateman & Linden, 1998). ISBN: 1-57035-164-3. Cost: \$19.50. Publisher: Sopris West.*

Guia'ndose Por La Intrincada Senda De La Educacio'n Especial: Una Guia para Padres y Maestros (By: Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden, 1999) ISBN: 0-890627-07-0. Cost: \$16.95. Publisher: Woodbine House.*

* Spanish translation of Negotiating the Special Education Maze

Negotiating The Special Education Maze, 3rd Edition (Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden, 1997). ISBN: 0-933149-72-7. Cost: \$16.95. Publisher Woodbine House.*

Taming the IEP: A Handbook for Parents (By: Krantz, 1998). ISBN: 1-57035-066-3. Cost: \$25.00. Publisher: Sopris West.*

The IEP Team Guide (1999). ISBN: 0-86586-320-2. Cost: \$22.95. Publisher: The Council for Exceptional Children.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

IEP Connections: For a Dynamic, Living, and Practical Process (By: Kukic & Schrag, 1998, in collaboration with National Association of State Directors of Special Education-NASDSE) Cost: \$145.00. Three-component Kit.

VIDEOTAPES

A New I.D.E.A. for Special Education. (45 minutes). Cost: \$50.00. Produced by: Edvantage Media, Inc. For purchase information visit: <http://www.childdevmedia.com> or call 818-994-0933.

IEP Success. (30 minutes). Cost: \$79.00. Produced by Gardy-McGrath International. For purchase information visit: <http://www.iepresources.com> or call 1-800-651-0954.

The IEP Meeting: Roles and Responsibilities. (28 minutes). Cost: \$75.00. Produced by: Dr. Lawrence Ingalls. For purchase information visit: <http://www.childdevmedia.com> or call 818-994-0933.

Three R's for Special Education: Rights, Resources and Results. A Guide for Parents. A Tool for Educators. (48 minutes). Cost: \$50.00. Produced by: Edvantage Media, Inc. For purchase information visit: <http://www.childdevmedia.com> or call 818-994-0933.

AUDIOTAPES

Three R's for Special Education: Rights, Resources and Results. A Guide for Parents. Audio Tape (40 minutes). Cost: \$30.00. Produced by: Edvantage Media, Inc. For purchase information visit: <http://www.childdevmedia.com> or call 818-994-0933.

SOFTWARE

IEP Tracker: The Software Solution for Tracking Student Progress. (By: Cole, Bradshaw, & Cole, 1998). Cost: \$249.50, Building (unlimited use) license with User Manual; \$49.95, Single-user license with User Manual.

INFORMATION ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC): <http://www.cec.sped.org>
Professional Organization

Family Village: <http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.htmlx>

A Global Community of Disability Related Resources

Ideapartnerships: <http://www.ideapractices.org>

IDEA Technical Assistance Project

MUMS: <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/~rowley/mums/home/htmbc>

National Parent-to-Parent Network

National Information Center for Children & Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY):

<http://www.aed.org/nichcy/pagel.html>

Disability Policy Related Information Dissemination to Individuals or Organizations

Parents Helping Parents: <http://www.php.com/>

Family Resource Center

Schwab Foundation for Learning: <http://www.schwablearning.org/>

Resources for Parents (Formerly: Parents & Educators Resource Center-PERC)

SERI: <http://www.hood.edu/seri/serihome.htm>

Collection of Internet Accessible Information Resources in the Field of Special Education

* Legal and Law Resources

* Parents & Educator's Resources

* Special Education Discussion Groups

State Departments of Education: <http://206.43.192.244/roadmap/states.html>

Links to State Departments of Education in the United States

The Beach Center on Families and Disability: <http://www.lsi.ukans.edu/beach/beachhp.htm>

Parent Information Resource Center

The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates: <http://www.copaa.net>

Independent, nonprofit organization of attorneys, advocates, and parents established to provide legal assistance for parents of children with disabilities

The National Parent Network on Disabilities (NPND): <http://www.npnd.org/>

Provides presence and national voice for ALL families of children, youth, and adults with disabilities.

University of Virginia Special Education Information for Parents:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/cise/ose/parents>

Links to Parent Information Resources