

Running Head: PARENT PARTICIPATION

Parent Participation: Increasing Parent Involvement in the Individualized Education Program
Process in Grades 6-12

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Abstract

This study examined the methods schools in three Appalachian Ohio public school districts utilize to increase parental participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings. The methodology employed for the study was a 15-item survey that asked questions ranging from demographic information to techniques utilized to increase parental participation in the IEP process. The study also explored creative techniques currently being used to encourage active parental participation in the IEP process. The study participants were special educators, administrators, and paraprofessionals in special education classrooms. The results of the study indicate that school districts follow the protocol of the federal law mandates; however, some school districts aren't meeting the statutory regulations of communication with parents of children involved in the IEP process.

Table of Contents

Introduction	
Review of Literature	
Active Parent Involvement/Participation	8
Family Involvement/Participation	10
Barriers to Active Parent and Family Involvement/Participation	11
Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 1997 Requirements	14
Parent Partnerships	16
Parental Motivators and Perceptions	19
Methodology	
Research Design	21
Instrumentation	21
Participants	22
Data Collection	23
Data Analysis	23
Results	
Communication	24
Face-to-Face Meetings	25
Collaboration	26
Active Participation	26
Methods Used to Increase Active Parent Participation	27
Active Parent Participation	28
What Should Schools be doing to Increase Parent Participation in the IEP Process?	29

Parent Participation	5
Comparison of Grade Levels and Roles	31
Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions	
Limitations	32
References	
Appendix A	

List of Figures

Figure 1. Participants by Professional Role	22
Figure 2. Communication Techniques	25
Figure 3. Discussion of Collaboration	26
Figure 4. Active Parent Participation	27
Figure 5. Methods Utilized to Increase Active Parent Participation	28
Figure 6. Suggested Methods	30

Parent Participation: Increasing Parent Involvement in the
Individualized Education Program Process in Grades 6-12

Parent participation is a key factor influencing educational progress for students with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities have much more insight and knowledge about children than do their teachers and other service providers. Parents are able to explain their child's learning and behavioral styles and can also report previously attempted in-home strategies that have been successful or unsuccessful. Parents can provide information to school professionals that no one else can, because they spend more time with their children than school professionals. It is vital that parents are active participants in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Despite the importance of parental involvement in the IEP process, research suggests that parents are not actively involved in the IEP process in the United States (Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, & Howard, 1995). Studies indicate that teachers and school professional make important decisions for students with disabilities with little or no parental input (Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, & Howard).

Oftentimes, parents do not realize the importance of their contribution to the IEP process. Often, the IEP is completed when they come to a meeting and they are expected to sign it without question. Frequently, parents come to the IEP meeting, sit down and listen to a school professional read them a pre-written IEP, and sign it, and leave. Are school systems doing the minimum amount required by law to get parents involved in the IEP process? How extensive is active parental participation? How do we get parents to become more actively involved in their children's education? What methods do schools utilize to increase parental participation in the IEP process? This study attempts to answer these questions and provide educators and service

providers with recommendations for strategies to increase parental participation in the IEP process.

It is the purpose of this study was to find ways to increase active parental participation in the IEP process. It was the researcher's intention to discover the methods schools utilize to increase parental participation in the IEP process that can be broadly disseminated and contribute to the knowledge-base in the field of education. This study's hypothesis is that schools are doing the minimal amount required by law to get parents involved in the IEP process. If true, this is problematic considering parental participation can help school professionals educate students with disabilities more effectively and provide the most current research-based interventions based student's needs.

Review of Literature

Active Parent Involvement/Participation

Active parent involvement includes the following criteria: understanding the purpose of the IEP meeting, offering information about their child's strengths and needs, listening to the recommendations of school personnel, telling the teachers what they want their children to learn, and signing the IEP (Kober, 2002). The IEP process for students with disabilities is a complex process that brings together stakeholders including parents, schools, individuals, and related service providers to accurately draft a functional plan and outline specialized services in the school program for a student with disabilities. According to Drasgow, Yell, and Robinson (2001), an IEP is the written document that describes a student's educational needs and details the special education and related services the school district will provide to address those needs. An IEP process is a set of procedures outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that govern how school districts determine the special education services that an eligible

student with disabilities receives. Literature on active parent involvement and participation in the IEP process indicates that parent participation is crucial to the development and success of students with disabilities.

According to Fiedler, Simpson, and Clark (2007), active participation requires flexibility, trust, effective and open communication, and collaboration skills. Flexibility requires parents and school professionals to be willing to compromise. When parents and school professionals are willing to compromise, it reduces frustration and future conflicts within the IEP team. Fiedler, Simpson, and Clark (2007) state that interpersonal trust is necessary for a collaborative and problem-solving relationship between school professionals and parents. A trust relationship is based on three factors: an atmosphere where a shared feeling of safety exists, reassurance and modeling of risk-taking behaviors, and reinforcement of both parties for risk-taking initiatives. Effective and open communication involves an interaction process in which parents and school professionals are able and willing to listen and learn from each other, share ideas, and be understood. Collaboration requires both parties to be equal in the decision-making process.

Drasgow, Yell, and Robinson (2001) convey that an IEP team is a team that determines annual goals and benchmarks or short-term objectives for a student, based on his/her educational needs. According to Gordon and Miller (2003), parents are the key members of the IEP Team. They know their child very well and can talk about their child's strengths and needs as well as their ideas for enhancing their child's education. They can offer insight into how their child learns, what his or her interests are, and other aspects of the child that only a parent can know.

According to Lytle and Bordin (2001), a parent or caregiver has a formal role in the process. A parent or caregiver has intimate and important knowledge of the medical history of the child and his/her daily routines, habits, likes and dislikes, behaviors, and family needs, and

sees the child in his/her natural context. The parent not only serves as an integral member of an IEP team, but also as the expert.

The involvement of parents in the IEP process has many benefits. According to Smith (2001), those benefits are: to increase the teacher's understanding of the child's environment, add to parents' knowledge of the child's educational setting, improve communication between parents and the school, increase the school's understanding of the child, and increase the likelihood that, with improved understanding between home and school, mutually agreed upon educational goals will be attained.

Family Involvement/Participation

The importance of family involvement in the IEP planning process would do well to be defined so as to not omit potential stakeholders in the planning process. Family involvement conveys to some degree, the general philosophy of family-centered services, which recognizes the family's constant, central role in the child's life and places family priorities and values over those of the professional or the school (Berman & Shaw, 1997).

The strategies related to family involvement are associated with parent and family participation in planning and delivering education and transition services, including strategies that facilitate family participation. These strategies focus on three aspects of family involvement: participation and roles, empowerment, and training. Participation strategies focus on a wide array of roles through which families might be involved in planning a delivery for individual and community-level transition education and services, such as assessment, decision-making, policy development, and as trainers (Kohler & Field, 2003).

Empowerment strategies include practices that facilitate meaningful family involvement in transition-focused activities such as specific methods to identify family needs. Family-focused

training increases family members' abilities to work effectively with educators and other service providers and vice-versa. Family involvement has been shown to improve school attendance, increase higher education attendance and assessment scores, improve students' self-esteem and confidence, and reduce drop-out rates (Kohler & Field, 2003).

The importance of parent participation in the IEP process is crucial as stated above. Studies have shown how parent involvement improves student achievement, as well as, self-esteem and confidence. The questions school professionals have to ask are why parents aren't involved in their child's IEP process and what are the barriers that prevent active parent participation and family involvement?

Barriers to Active Parent and Family Involvement/Participation

When parents are not actively involved in their child's IEP process, often educators may misinterpret their lack of involvement. Educators may presume parents are unhappy with their child's education or the parents simply do not want to be involved. Research shows there are many barriers to active parent participation. According to Smith (2001) some of the barriers to parental participations are communication, law-related elements, lack of understanding of the school system, logistical problems, and the professional staff's lack of understanding of the student's culture or language may lead parents to feel inferior or inhibited.

According to Dabkowski (2004), barriers to active parent participation can also be related to environment and climate. Morrissette and Morrissette (1999) state that parent participation directly impacts parental time, responsibilities, and energy. Also, teachers may avoid involving parents because educators may lack practical parental involvement programs lack skills of collaboration and consultation, and perhaps may have even encountered bad past experiences

that minimize or shadow the importance of diligently seeking parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002).

According to Lytle and Bordin (2001), communication is the process of shared information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings with another person. For an IEP team to meet its goal to provide the best possible programming for a student with a disability, the individuals within the team must communicate effectively. Communication problems and educational jargon cause parents to feel uncomfortable in IEP meetings. Parents often do not know the educational jargon that school professionals use and therefore they feel inferior. To avoid miscommunication, school professionals should use language that everyone in the IEP meeting knows and understands.

According to Friend and Cook (2007), communication with parents should be in a language in which they are fluent and preferably their primary language. Communication also should be welcoming and inviting. Parents should feel free to ask questions or present suggestions. School professionals need to use good communication to display interest in what the parent has to say. Dabkowski (2004), uses the example of bad communication, a professional who presents an indifferent attitude with a suggestion that a parent “speak up if they want” (p. 35) may send a message that the team is merely going through necessary motions rather than placing any value on what might be said. School professionals need to ask what the parents think and grant them time to present their thoughts about the information discussed during the IEP meeting.

Law-related issues can be a barrier to parental participation. Often parents do not know the law or their rights as parents. According to Smith (2001), parents may not understand the meaning of statistical analysis and terminology about placement and programming options and it may confuse or discourage them from fully participating in the IEP process.

Smith (2001) suggests, that a lack of understanding of the school system hinders parental involvement in the IEP process. Smith believes a lack of knowledge of how to help the child, and/or feelings of inferiority sometimes make parents feel ill-equipped to provide meaningful educational information about their child that can help professionals develop special education programming.

According to Smith (2001), the professional staff's lack of understanding of the student's culture or language may lead parents to feel inferior or inhibited. Some parents are from places in the world where they are not allowed to question or disagree with authority figures, and so they may be reluctant to assert their opinions with members of the IEP team.

Logistical problems may also hinder parent participation. According to Smith (2001), parents' participation might be hindered by lack of transportation or child-care or scheduling difficulties related to work or other responsibilities. According to Gordon and Miller (2003) logistical problems such as literacy, lack of childcare, and work schedules hinder parent participation.

According to Dabkowski (2004), environment and climate can also hinder parent participation. Often IEP meetings are held in small rooms. Many times school professionals and parents are crammed into a small area that is uncomfortable for everyone. The room may be too hot or too cold making an uncomfortable situation for all the parties involved in the IEP process.

According to Morrissette and Morrissette (1999), parents may find themselves in a precarious position when defining personal limitations that will affect their level of participation. Parents may seek direction and support from school personnel or they may fear jeopardizing their relationship with school personnel when exercising their right to disagree or limit their involvement, so they simply do not participate.

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, and Reed (2002) suggest teachers with limited experiences or skills may reach out to solicit participation only to give up prematurely if efforts are not immediately successful. Experienced teachers may be reluctant to invite parents if negative encounters have cast a pall over the perceived likelihood of successful involvement.

There are many barriers to why parents are not involved in their child's IEP process as stated above. Some of those barriers can be controlled and others can not. School professionals have to go above and beyond to encourage parent involvement regardless of the barriers. Oftentimes, barriers become excuses and excuses lead to unproductively. School professionals do not have time to be unproductive; it brings harm to the school professionals and the students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 1997 (IDEA) addresses some of the previously mentioned concerns, however; it may still be lacking in some areas.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 1997 (IDEA) Requirements

The enactment of Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 did not prescribe parent participation by law. It provided the opportunity for parents and children with disabilities to play a more active role in their child's education programming depending on the professionals involved. Parents' roles were refined to include serving as active and equal team members during the special education placement conference and the IEP meeting (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Laskey, 1988). In 1997, P.L. 94-142 - Education of All Handicapped Children Act was replaced with IDEA.

Largely founded on the family-centered philosophy (Berman & Shaw, 1997), IDEA worked under the assumption that parental participation needed strengthening. IDEA mandated that schools provide an opportunity for active parental participation in decisions about the education of their children (Smith, 2001).

According to Knoblauch and McLane (1999), under IDEA, parents have the right to be notified in writing whenever the school proposes any of the following: an evaluation to determine whether their child has a disability, a reevaluation, or a change in their child's educational placement. Parents are also entitled to be notified in writing if the school refuses their request for an evaluation or change in educational placement for their child. Parents have the right to access their child's educational records. A school must comply with a parent's request to inspect and review his/her child's education records within 45 days of the receipt of the request. Parents also have the right to be fully informed by the school of all rights that are provided to them under the law and all procedural safeguards the school must follow to ensure the rights of all are protected.

Importantly, parents have the right to participate in the development of their child's IEP. The school must make every possible effort to notify the parent of the IEP meeting and then arrange the meeting at a time and place that is convenient for the parents. Under IDEA, parents have the right to be kept informed about their child's progress, by means such as periodic report cards at least as often as parents of children who do not have disabilities. Parents have the right to have their child in the least restrictive environment, which is determined by the IEP team. Finally, parents also have the right to due process and voluntary mediation to resolve difference with the school that can not be resolved informally.

Taylor (2002) agrees with Knoblauch and McLane (1999) in that IDEA gives the parents the right to be involved with all decisions made on the behalf of their children. Parents are members of the IEP team. Parents participate in the review of all existing data and parents must be notified with any changes to the IEP or special education services. Parents can however, choose not to participate in their children's IEP meeting and any decision-making processes by

signing a wavier form. According to Huefner (2000), IDEA requires parents to be informed of their child's progress. Parents must be informed of their child's progress when the typical child's parent is informed, which is generally once or twice in a nine week grading period.

Parent Partnerships

Partnerships between parents and educators enable both parties to make more effective decisions about the child's education (Kolberg, 1999). Parents may bring different strengths and needs to their interactions with teachers. Traditional strategies that attempt to involve families of students with disabilities may not be effective strategies to involve them in their children's education. Educators must consider that the skills of reasoning, language, and social interaction for families and that their stereotyped perceptions about parents may hinder their understanding of parent professional relationship (Sileo & Sileo, 1996).

Models of parental participation

According to Appleton and Minchom, (1990), there are four models of parent partnerships. The models are the expert model, the transplant model, the consumer rights model, and the social network/systems model. The expert model refers to the traditional medical model of work in which professionals assess and treat a particular problem without necessarily making careful reference to parental wishes, views, and feeling. Parents may be reluctant to question the professionals' apparent objectives.

The transplant model refers to the arrangement under which parents carry through a particular assessment or treatment program according to directions given by a professional. In this model, parents do what the professionals suggest. The consumer rights model assumes that parents would have the right to select appropriate services and appropriate interventions for their children. In the social networks/systems model, parents, children, and therapist are regarded as

part of a network of informal and formal development and social supports for the family and child. The consumer rights model and the social networks/systems model are two models that would be effective for the IEP process in which full parental involvement is desired without the implications of the school professional as a dominating stakeholder on the IEP team (Appleton & Minchom, 1990).

Principles of partnerships

Pinkus (2005) suggests there are four other principles of partnership. The four principles are: consensus about the purpose of the partnership, clarity as to who is in the partnership and why, enabling equal power distribution between the partners, and implementing transparency and accountability mechanism for monitoring partnership.

According to Pinkus (2005), a lack of agreement about the purpose of the partnership, together with a sense of confusion about the roles of the numerous partners, were identified as principle inhibitors to working together. Where there was confusion as to who was responsible for taking action, responsibility continued to be passed back and forth. The parents' expectations showed that multiple professionals were seemingly working together at any one time to support the child who had special needs, however there was not an agreement made on goals for the child. This caused conflict within the partnership.

Pinkus' (2005) study stated there was unequal power in the relationships, with parents being the least empowered, which was a concern among the parents. Unequal power relations were often reflected in the setting up of the physical environment in which the meeting took place and expressed in the ways that professionals communicated verbally and in writing with parents. The IEP had been written before the meeting, which did not empower the parent because they were not given an opportunity to actively participate in the IEP process.

According to Friend and Cook (2007), students' IEPs are written prior to conferring with parents, with a rationale that it takes too much time to discuss everything and write goals and objectives at a meeting. Parental frustrations related to the lack of transparency in special education procedures were further heightened by the positioning of professionals in conflicting roles as partner and gatekeeper to resources. There was not enough information given to the parents to become equal partners.

These principles affected the partnership because the parents were not being empowered by the school professionals. They were not given enough information to become active participants. Parents were not given the opportunity to become active participants because the IEP was completed before the meeting. If schools are going to be partners with parents they have to treat them as full partners.

According to Mannan, Poston, and Wang (2004), families reported they found it especially helpful to have partnerships characterized by open communication, equality, trust, and respect. Partnerships help parents become more empowered, knowledgeable, and motivated, leading to more active participation. Knoblauch and McLane (1999) relate that parents can list things they want their child to learn and note their child's behavior before attending an IEP meeting, so they are able to make suggestions and referrals. Parents can ask what they can do at home to support the program, which will help reinforce what is being taught at school. Parents and teachers can accomplish goals when they are working together as partners, with the same goals and objectives.

The academic literature regarding principles of partnerships suggests schools systems should view parental participation as one such partnership that can benefit a child's education and aid in the IEP process. To effectively draw upon such revelations, educators and school

systems must first be able to identify what motivates parents to participate in children's IEP processes, and evaluate the perceptions parents hold to gain higher rates of parent participation and increase the quality of such participation in children's IEP processes.

Parental Motivators and Perceptions

The foci of several articles were to identify methods of increasing parental motivators into the IEP planning process. According to Green, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007), there are three major sources of motivation for involvement. The first is that parents' motivational belief is relevant to involvement, including parental role construction and parental efficacies for helping the child succeed in school. The second is parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement, including general invitations from the school and specific invitations from teachers and children. The third source is the personal life context that influences parents' perceptions of the forms and timing of involvement that seem feasible, including parents' skills and knowledge for involvement and time and energy for involvement.

According to Green, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007), parents' beliefs about child rearing and child development and about appropriate home support roles in children's education influence their role in the IEP process. Parents' roles grow from parents' experiences with individuals and groups related to schooling and are subject to social influence over time. Parents who hold an active role construction are more involved in their children's education than parents who hold less active role beliefs.

Self-efficacy is defined as a person's beliefs that he or she can act in ways that will produce desired outcomes (Green, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007). It is influenced by personal experiences of success in parental involvement experiences and verbal persuasion by

others. Positive personal beliefs about efficacy for helping one's children succeed in school are associated with increased parental involvement (Green, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007).

Specific invitations to involvement from teachers have been identified as motivators of parental involvement in elementary through high school student populations. Teacher invitations are influential in part because they underscore the teacher's valuing of parent contributions to students' educational success. Responding to many parents' expressed wishes to know more about how they can be helpful in their children's learning, development of varied intervention programs, Green, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007) reported notable success increasing the incidence and effectiveness of parents' involvement activities through teachers' invitations to participate in specific involvement activities.

According to Green, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007), parents' perceptions of personal skills shape their ideas about the kinds of involvement activities they might undertake. Skills and knowledge are related to self-efficacy and involvement. Parents that are motivated to engage in involvement activities if they believe they have skills and knowledge that will be helpful in specific domains of involvement activity in the IEP team atmosphere.

Parents who have a child with a disability have voiced their perceptions about the IEP process in recent literature. Rock (2000) states that many parents view themselves as uninvolved in their child's education. Typically teachers are the educational decision makers, and parents are the consent givers. There has to be a balance. The IEP meeting has become a ritual in which teachers dictate the prescribed educational program and then pass the pen to the parent to secure their signatures, which defeats the purpose of the IEP. However, according to Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003), a stark counter-claim was reported in that the majority of parents believe they

were moderately to highly knowledgeable and involved in their child's IEP process but reported that schools were not doing enough to address their child's most pressing needs.

Methodology

Parental participation is important in the IEP process, but research shows only 46 percent of parents are involved in their child's IEP process (Fuller & Olsen, 1998). This indicates that 54 percent of parents are not involved. The purpose of this study was to determine the creative methods schools utilize to increase parental involvement in the IEP process. The subsequent sections will explain the procedures used for data collection.

Research Design

This study was designed to gather information from school professionals such as administrators, teachers, intervention specialists, and paraprofessionals to obtain their opinions, in an effort to find out what strategies they use to get parents involved in the IEP process. A survey was the instrument chosen for data collection. Fink (1995) stated, "A survey is a system for collecting information to describe, compare, or explain knowledge, attitudes, and behavior" (p. 22). Surveys allow a researcher to collect information on personal data as well as personal opinions from a large number of people. The survey is efficient in that those receiving the survey can complete it and return it at their own convenience.

Instrumentation

This study used a research-developed (see Appendix A) that focused on two sets of questions. The first set dealt with the demographics of the person completing the survey. The survey asked the participant to identify his/her role as a school professional. Next, the survey asked the participants to identify how many students they were associated with that required an IEP. The second set of questions related to the involvement of parents in the IEP process. The

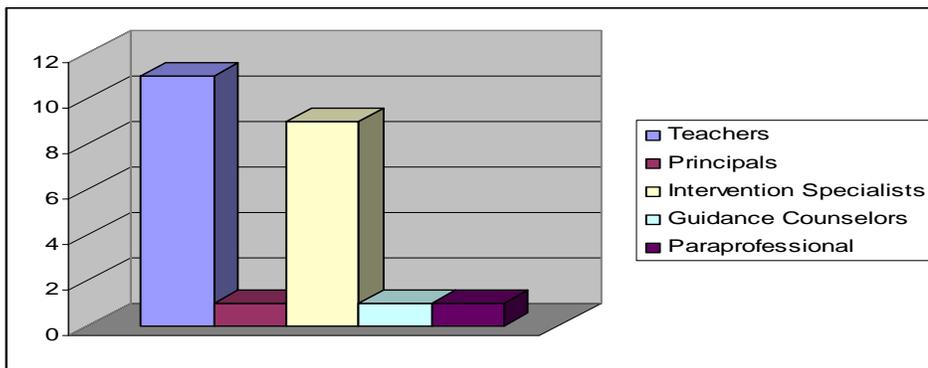
survey asked participants how many times they contacted parents or guardians prior to an IEP meeting, and what strategies they use to contact the parents or guardians. Next, the survey asked participants if they discuss collaboration with parents or guardians, and if the parents or guardians are actively involved. Finally, the survey asked what methods school professionals use to get parents or guardians actively involved.

Participants

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual. This research project utilized a sample of convenience as participants were chosen by the geographic region in three Ohio counties closest to the researcher. The possible population for this study consisted of special educators, teachers, principals, counselors, and paraprofessionals from three school districts. The school districts were small school districts in southeastern Ohio. Not all invited to participate actually completed the surveys. The survey was distributed to a total of 130 school professionals. Twenty-three school professionals completed and returned the surveys resulting in a response rate of 17.7 percent. Of the twenty-three participants in this study, there were eleven teachers, one paraprofessional, one guidance counselor, nine intervention specialists, and one principal.

Figure 1.

Participants by Professional Role



Data Collection

The researcher contacted all the school principals by telephone to obtain permission to complete this study in their school. After approval, the researcher went to each school to distribute the surveys. Paper surveys were distributed to participating school districts in February 2008. The researcher placed all surveys and consent forms in each school professional's mailbox. Schools that agreed to participate in the study were given the surveys and blank envelopes. The surveys were to be sealed in the blank envelopes upon completion and then placed in a large manila envelope kept in the main office of each school. Each participant was given three weeks to complete the survey. The researcher picked up the manila envelope of completed surveys and completed consent forms from each school.

Data Analysis

After the surveys were collected, the researcher analyzed the data by reading through all of the responses identifying and making note of common themes. Differences and similarities in school professionals' responses and their perceptions of parental participation in the IEP process were determined. Data was divided by grade level (middle school and high school), to determine whether there were differences in school professionals' responses at the two levels.

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the creative methods schools utilize to increase parental participation in the IEP process. The following section presents the findings gathered through a survey completed by 23 education professionals.

Communication

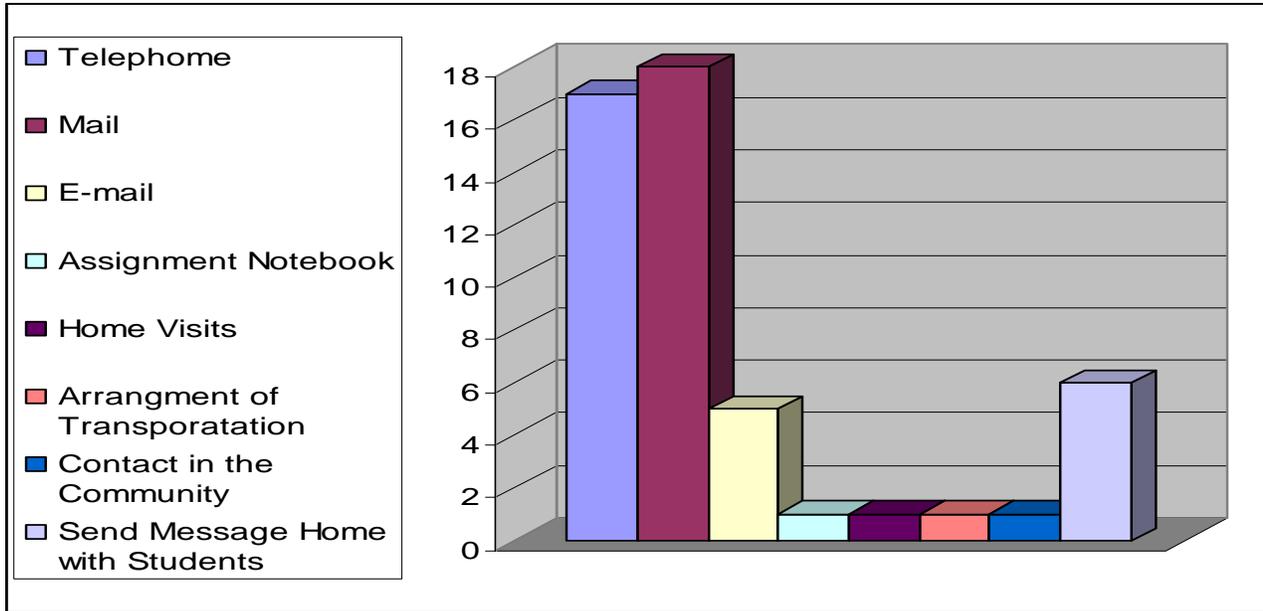
IEP attendance rates. Twenty-two participants stated that in their estimates half of the parents with students on an IEP attend the IEP meeting. One participant stated all of the parents with students in her class on an IEP attend the meetings.

Parental contact. Seven participants stated they did not contact the parent before the IEP meeting; that it was the job of the intervention specialists to do all the contacting and coordinating. Eight participants stated they contacted the parents three times before the meeting, which is required by law. Four participants stated they contact the parents two times before the IEP meeting.

Form of parental contact. Seventeen participants stated they used the telephone to contact parents. Eighteen participants stated they mailed letters and handouts home to the parents. Five participants stated they used e-mail to contact parents depending on accessibility. One participant stated he/she used an assignment notebook to contact parents daily. One participant stated he/she used home visits. One participant arranged for transportation to transport the parent to the meeting to keep them involved in the IEP process. One participant stated he/she used informal personal contacts with the parents when he/she was out in the community to involve parents. Six participants stated he/she sent messages and letters home with the students to give to their parents.

Figure 2.

Communication Techniques



Face-to Face Meetings

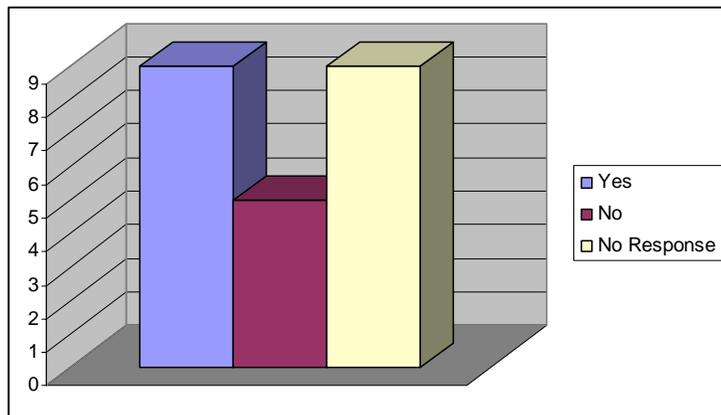
Four participants said they met with parents face-to-face two times per year and stated only one or two parents come back after the first meeting. Two participants stated he/she met with parents face-to-face one time a year for the IEP meeting. One participant stated he/she met parents face-to-face up to five times per year depending on the students' behavior, reporting that the poorer the behavior, the more face-to-face meetings were held. Two participants stated they met with parents face-to-face three times per year. One participant stated he/she met with parents face-to-face one to three times per year depending on student performance. One participant stated he/she met with parents face-to-face three to five times per year depending on student performance and behavior.

Collaboration

Five participants stated they did not discuss collaboration with the parents of children on an IEP. Nine participants stated they do discuss collaboration with the parents with children on an IEP. Nine participants did not respond to the question. One participant stated that input is needed by all members of the team. One participant stated parents give input on individual students' needs and behaviors. One participant stated he/she discuss accommodations with parents and general education staff. One participant stated he/she lets parents know classroom procedures and requirements. One participant stated that only a few parents try to collaborate.

Figure 3.

Discussion of Collaboration



Active Parent Participation

Thirteen participants stated parents were actively involved in their child's IEP process. Two participants stated parents were not actively involved in their child's IEP process. Two participants stated some parents were actively involved in their child's IEP process. Six participants did not respond to this question.

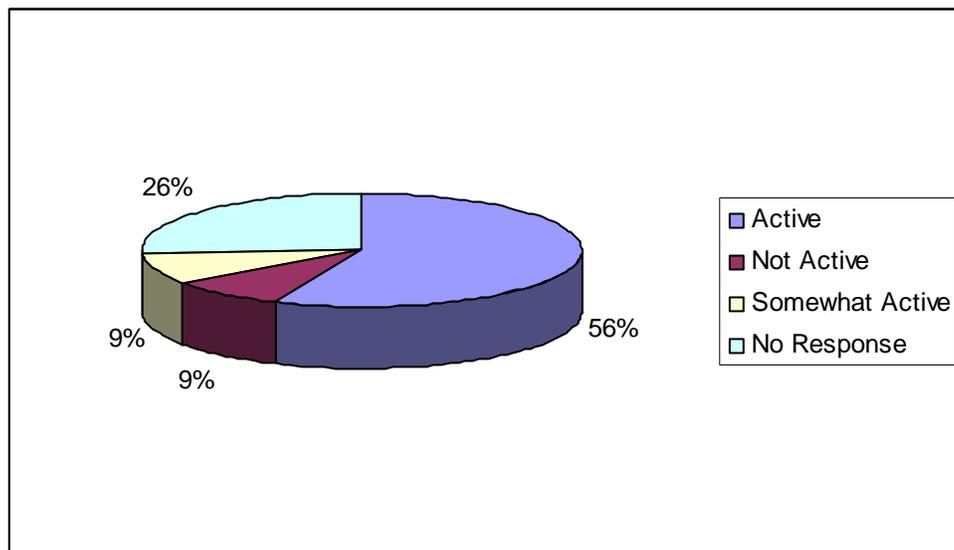
Areas of parental input identified by the participants included: input on future plans, transition goals, and strengths and weaknesses, the child's interests and modifications, their

dreams and fears for their children, medical and social issues, and effective strategies. One participant stated not many parents are involved, while another stated that some parents give suggestions after observing the class.

One participant stated he/she encouraged parents to actively participate, and another suggested that most parents come to the meeting, agree with what is said and sign the IEP. Another participant gives parents a handout titled “Whose Idea Is It?” for parents to read their rights.

Figure 4.

Active Parent Participation



Methods Used to Increase Active Parent Participation

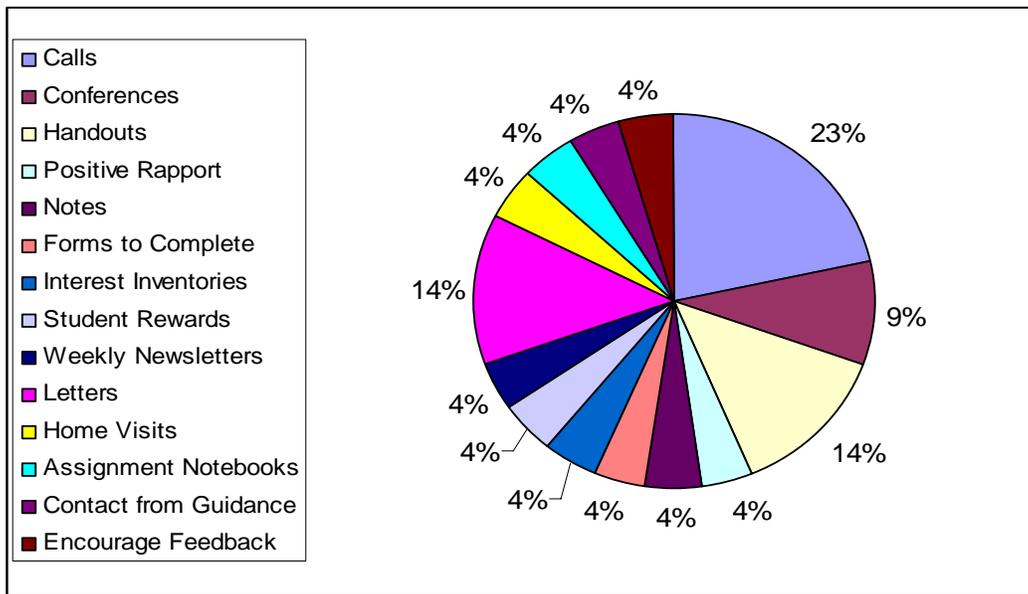
Five participants stated they used telephone calls to get parents actively involved in the IEP process. Two participants stated they set up conference times to get parents actively involved in the IEP process. Three participants stated they gave parents handouts to get them actively involved in the IEP process. One participant stated he/she established positive rapport to get parents actively involved in the IEP process, while another sent notes home to increase active parent participation.

Other strategies included: providing parents with a form to complete before the meeting, and interest inventories to complete. One participant even gave the students rewards if their parent attended.

Some participants used regular communication as a tool. One sent home a weekly newsletter to keep parents informed and give them an opportunity to become active, while three others sent letters home. One made home visits and another had the guidance counselor contact the parents directly. Finally, one encouraged feedback from the parents to increase active involvement in their child’s IEP process.

Figure 5.

Methods Utilized to Increase Active Parent Participation



Active Parent Participation

Twenty-one participants stated they would like to see parents more actively involved in the IEP process. Two stated they would not like to see parents more actively involved in the IEP process. Reasons given for the importance of parental participation included: the need for parents

to be an advocate for their children, the more parents are involved the better the chance for their child to have success, and nobody knows their children better than the parents do, so it is essential they are involved.

One participant stated when the parents are involved it keeps everyone on the same page and it benefits the child, and another indicated that children need to know their parents are involved. Finally, one stated that parent involvement increases communication between the home and school.

On the negative side, one participant stated parents should not be involved because they propose unrealistic goals and objectives, while another suggested that parent's input tends to be sugar-coated and not open-minded.

What Should Schools be doing to Increase Parent Participation in the IEP Process?

When asked what schools could be doing to increase parent participation in the IEP process, the participants had differing perspectives. Two participants stated that school professionals should give more positive feedback instead of negative. Another stated that school professionals need to believe their students can succeed. A third suggested asking parents questions and listening to their responses.

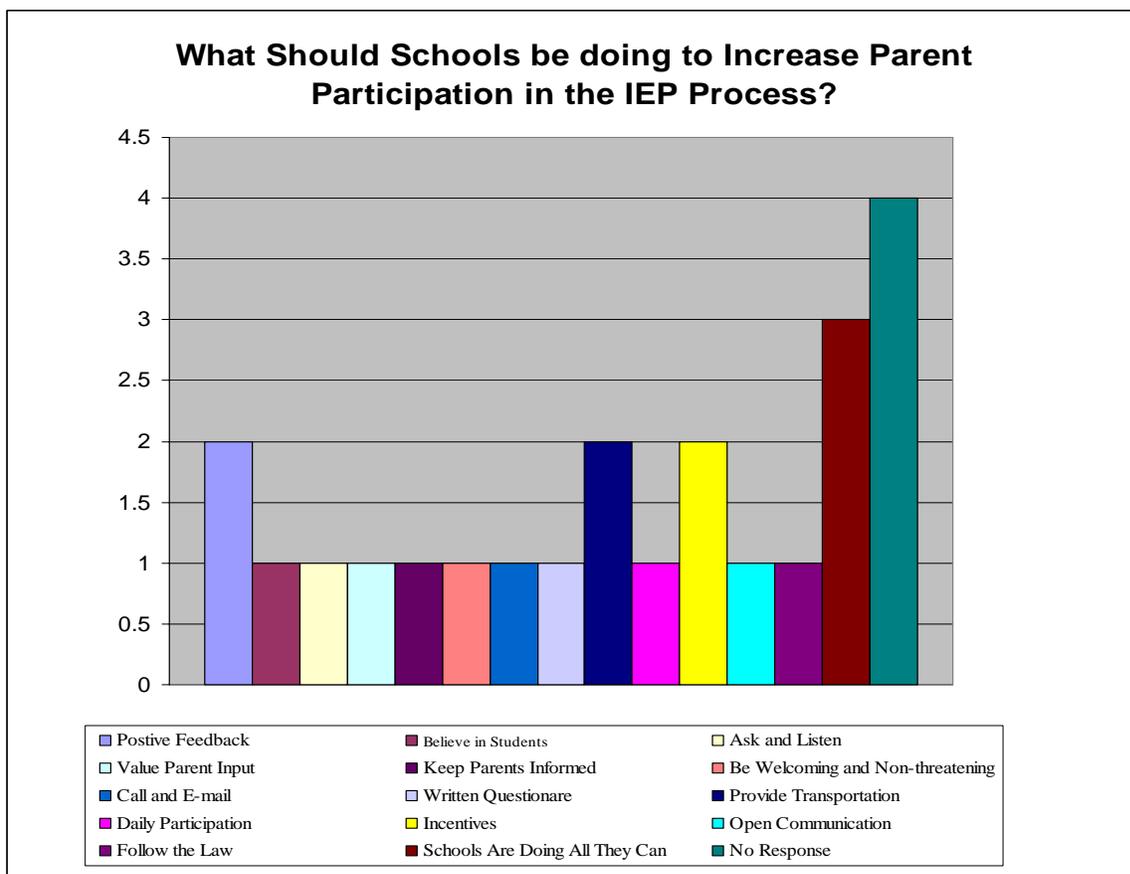
One participant believed that making visits, calls, and meetings, will increase their participation and show that school professionals value the input from the parents. Another participant believed that by keeping parents informed, it would encourage them to be more active. One participant suggested that making the IEP process welcoming, painless, and as non-threatening as possible would enhance participation. Another suggested calling and e-mailing to get parents to attend meetings.

One participant suggested having parents respond in writing to questions pertaining to short-term and long-term goals, child’s interests, and ideas that are unique to their child. Two suggested schools should provide transportation, so parents can attend the IEP meetings. One suggests getting parents involved on a daily basis, not just in the IEP process. Some felt the school should use incentives to get parents involved. Keeping the lines of communication open and following the laws in place governing parent participation.

Finally, three participants believed that schools are already doing all they can do with the resources they have available. Four participants did not respond to this question.

Figure 6.

Methods Suggested to Increase Parental Participation



Comparison of Grade Levels and Roles

When comparing both grade levels (high school and middle school) there were no significant differences to report. Education professionals at all grade levels believed that parents were involved in the IEP process and most school professionals expressed a desire for parents to become more actively involved.

One paraprofessional, principal, and school counselor all stated it was the intervention specialist's role to initiate, set up, and facilitate the IEP meeting. They viewed their roles as one of support for the intervention specialist in helping students succeed.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This study was designed to determine the degree of parental participation in the IEP process. The findings demonstrate that the majority of schools are doing the minimum amount required by law to get parents involved in the IEP process. The law requires the schools to contact the parents three times before an IEP meeting to invite their participation in the process.

The majority of participants indicated they contact parents three times before the IEP meeting. However, some indicated they only contacted the parents two times prior to an IEP meeting. The school systems involved in this study are doing the minimum amount required by law to get parents involved in the IEP process and some schools are not even abiding by the law in that they are only contacting the parents two times prior to the initial IEP meeting.

According to this study, parents are active in their children's IEP process. The majority of parents are active in the IEP process, however; some specified that parents were attending the meetings and simply signing the IEP, which is not active participation. Schools would like to see parents play a more active role in the IEP process. Suggestions for getting parents to play a more active role in the IEP process include speaking positively about their child, valuing their input,

keeping them informed, providing transportation, communicating in a welcoming and non-threatening manner, providing parents with the information they need to get actively involved, believing in their children, and by giving the parents incentives to participate.

There are many methods schools utilize to increase parental participation in the IEP process. The schools involved in this study are calling parents, sending letters home, and holding conferences to keep them informed in their children education. The schools are providing weekly newsletters, handouts, forms, and interest inventories to parents. Schools are giving student's rewards for their parents' active participation and are encouraging feedback and rapport with parents. Some school personnel are making home visits to encourage and support parents to get involved in the IEP process. Overall, schools are using creative methods to increase parental participation in the IEP process, and according to this study it is effective. Parents are involved in the IEP process. In conclusion, this study clearly indicates that although many educators are attempting to reach out to parents to get them actively involved in the IEP process, more can and needs to be done.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Though this study was well thought out and will prove to be beneficial to educators, it is not without its weaknesses or limitations. For example, one school decided not to participate in this study after giving initial consent. Also, there was a lack of general participation in that 130 surveys were distributed and only 23 surveys were completed and returned to the researcher. The researcher would recommend for future research, this study be conducted in a non-Appalachian region to compare the results found in this study and to open the study up to a more diverse group for participation. The researcher would also attempt to find funding for the research to more thoroughly examine the hypothesis. It is in the researcher's opinion that a differing

philosophical approach could motivate educators to do more. If the education community would adopt a philosophy that it is not the sole responsibility of the special educator to act as the expert in the IEP process, but rather a collaborative effort, the burden of service design and implementation would be less intrusive and demanding on already over-burdened educators. Parents, seen as the experts on their own children, would be sought out for their opinions and recommendations. This would contrast with the current philosophical climate in many school systems, that the underlying tone is one that the special educators are expected to be the sole expert and then play politician to rally parental support around their ideas regarding a child's IEP and the interventions to be implemented. A change in the philosophical approach could liberate special educators rather to seek and compile information, and rely on the true experts of the children they work with; the children's parents.

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Appendix A

Parental Involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Survey

1. What school district do you work for?
2. What is your role? (Teacher, paraprofessional, principal, etc.)
3. What grade level do you teach?
4. How long have you been teaching?
5. What is your highest level of education? (Bachelor's, Master's, Ph.D)
6. How many students do you teach or are associated with that require an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?
7. Of the number of students you teach or are associated with that require an IEP, On average, how many parents/guardians attend the IEP meeting?
8. How many times do you contact a parent/guardian before each IEP meeting?

9. In what ways do you use to contact parents/guardians to involve them in the IEP meeting (telephone, e-mail, mail, etc)? List/describe all that apply.

10. Including the IEP meeting, on average how many times a year do you meet face-to-face with parents/guardians to discuss student performance?

11. As a school professional, do you discuss collaboration with the parents/guardians? If so, please describe how collaboration is discussed/addressed in your discussion.

12. Are the parents actively involved, meaning do they give input to what goes into the student's IEP? Please describe the way parents you work with are involved.

13. What methods do you use to get parents/guardians to become actively involved in their child's IEP (encouraging them, giving them handouts, etc)?

14. Would you, as a school professional, like to see parents being more actively involved in the IEP process? Why or why not?

15. In your opinion, what can schools be doing to increase parental participation in the IEP process?