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Parent perceptions of parent-school partnership efforts for students with disabilities

Jessica Chadwick
chadwick10@marshall.edu

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PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP EFFORTS FOR
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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in

The School Psychology Program

by

Jessica Chadwick

Approved by
R. Lanai Jennings, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson
Sandra Stroebel, Ph.D
Teresa Clark, Ph.D

Marshall University
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ABSTRACT

The study examined parent-school partnership efforts, as reported and perceived by parents of students with disabilities in a Mid-Atlantic State. Due to the high correlation between parent involvement and academic success, these qualitative comments were deemed vital to ongoing special education improvement in the state. The study utilized the State Education Agency parent survey data which was collected in accordance with the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report requirements under Section 616 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. Survey responses from parents of students with disabilities were aggregated and analyzed for local education agencies. These comments were categorized by topic area, parents' viewpoints, and themes to reveal the successes, obstacles, and experiences as perceived by parents of children with disabilities. Results indicate that parents express frequent concern regarding eligibility and evaluation, IEP Services, and Compliance with IEP, while they had frequent positive comments regarding adequate and qualified staff.

CHAPTER 1

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Trained to address numerous school-based concerns, school psychologists are adept problem solvers. They intuitively, and by necessity, reach out to parents to isolate referral concerns, conduct assessments, and design and implement individual student and system-wide interventions. Recognizing the benefits of including parents in the problem solving process, school psychologists are ideally positioned to strengthen family-school partnerships and examine the efficacy of increased partnerships on academic and social-emotional growth for children. Therefore it is not surprising that the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) through the Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (NASP, 2010) recognizes Family-School Collaborative Services as one of the 10 practice domains. According to the NASP Practice Model, school psychologists are expected to be knowledgeable of the research surrounding 1) family systems; 2) evidence-based interventions which capitalize on the strength of families and engender positive outcomes for students; and 3) strategies to cultivate and strengthen parent-school partnerships (NASP, 2010, p. 7).

The present study will serve to extend the research base on family-school collaborations. Rather than assessing evidence-based practices, however, the investigator will work to advance the paucity of research in the measurement of parent involvement and partnerships (Elbaum, 2012). The investigator will evaluate parent-school partnership efforts, as reported and perceived by parents of students with disabilities in one Mid-Atlantic State in the United States. The qualitative study will utilize the State's parent survey data – specifically the numerous, open-ended parent comments – which were collected along with the quantitative data as required by the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report requirements under Section 616 of the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). These comments, which were provided by the parents under no obligation to their children's school or the state, were categorized by IDEA 2004 topic area; other thematic categories not specific to special education; and positive, neutral/ambivalent, and resistant/negative attributes to reveal the successes, obstacles, and experiences as described by parents of children with disabilities.

What is Parent Involvement?

Parents, educators, policy makers, and researchers maintain different notions as to what constitutes parent involvement, and may strictly view parent partnerships to include only those activities which occur within the context of the school environment, such as school-based volunteer opportunities, family nights, and/or parent-teacher conferences. As described by McIntyre and Garbacz (2014), parent involvement and partnerships entail “more than family nights and ‘Welcome Parents!’ banners” (p. 455). Sheridan, Clarke, and Christenson, (2014) highlight studies that define parent involvement through the lens of school-provided parent and family training programs, whereas other definitions focus on the bidirectional collaborations which occur between the home and school for the purpose of improving students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes.

Although an array of definitions and individual opinions exist, researchers frequently reference Epstein's model of parent involvement (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 1995). This model is comprised of six forms of parental involvement occurring across the home, school, and /or community settings. Two forms primarily occur within the home setting: The first basic parenting form includes the provision of fundamental needs such as water, food, shelter, and emotional support and the second form of parent involvement is the facilitation of a child or adolescent's learning at home, including skill reinforcement and monitoring. Two additional categories are characterized by parent entry and participation in the school setting. The third

basic parenting form includes volunteering and/or attendance at school-based functions and the fourth involves decision-making activities including local school improvement committees, parent-teacher associations, etc. The fifth domain of parent involvement is defined by the home-school communication, whereas parent and community/agencies linkages comprise the sixth and final category.

Another avenue for defining parent involvement is from the stance of federal education policy. Two major laws, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was originally authorized in 1965 to provide children and adolescents equal access to educational opportunities, particularly for those students living in poverty, and IDEA 2004, have substantial requirements specific to parent involvement. In its most recent reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB 2002), ESEA defines parent involvement as the reciprocal and meaningful interaction between parents, their children, and the school environment. Through its requirement of including parents as full partners in education, ESEA effectively mandates:

1. Parents be at the forefront of their child's education through active involvement;
2. Parent participate as decision-makers;
3. Parent membership is represented on advisory committees targeting school improvement and parent involvement policies;
4. Funds are set aside to implement parent involvement activities, such as parent trainings, family literacy events, and other events which increase parent and school partnerships;
5. Schools annually evaluate the efficacy of parent-school partnerships / parent involvement activities (NCLB, 2002, p. 1962).

Special Education and Parent Involvement

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and its subsequent reauthorizations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA: 1990, 1997, 2004) codified the role of parent involvement in the special education process. The parent involvement requirement and concomitant procedural safeguards were enacted to ensure students with disabilities have full educational opportunity services to meet the individualized student's needs (Fish, 2008; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000). By affording parents active participation and decision-making authority regarding a child's goals, services, and least restrictive environment, IDEA 2004 emphasizes the role of the parent-school partnership and in the educational process.

Researchers have therefore examined parent involvement in relation to different aspects of the special education process. Because the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is the centerpiece of the process and requires direct contact with the parent, the IEP meeting, membership, and individual team member dynamics have been routinely investigated. As required by IDEA, the IEP team minimally includes the parent or guardian of the child, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, and the student if they are sixteen years or older (Fish, 2008). The requirement of including parents in the special education decisions of their children has been shown to have positive effects across multiple studies (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Elbaum, 2014; Epstein, 1995; Fish, 2008). Not only will the IEP team gain important knowledge about the children, they will also potentially assist the family unit itself to use interventions across environments and to teach parents and caregivers how to assist their child outside of the school. Consistency in interventions across domains helps facilitate learning for a child and mitigate challenging behaviors. "Professionals who take a family-centered approach build family knowledge and skills in communication intervention and

empower the family with strategies for supporting their children over time and across contexts” (Christenson and Reschly, p. 295). By increasing parent knowledge, the school is also building up the families’ self-confidence and strengthening the relationship between school and the home (Christenson and Reschly, 2010).

While parents frequently attend IEP meetings, they seldom participate as active decision makers in contrast to their teacher, specialist, and administrator counterparts. As Rock (2000) maintains, parents generally feel as if they do not possess sufficient skills or training to propose, or evaluate educational strategies and recommendations, thereby internalizing the belief that the education decisions are better “left to the educator” (p. 31). Moreover, many parents who fail to contribute to IEP goals or to the educational needs of their children, contrary to popular belief, often have an extreme interest in their child’s education (Rock, 2000). Lower levels of involvement are most notable in families with low socioeconomic status and in families of minorities. For this reason, it is not surprising that many school systems invite parents to the IEP meeting in order to fulfill state and federal requirements, but expect and ask nothing more from them than signing papers to complete the process (Fish, 2008; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000).

In addition to the perceived lack of skills and educational expertise, IEP team group dynamics may serve as a barrier to parental participation. School employees attend multiple meetings together throughout the course of a year and typically present as a cohesive group to the parent. The parents who attend, on the other hand, are the only changeable aspect of the group. Being outnumbered by the school staff and/or being the only non-school participant, can sometimes lead to feelings of intimidation and isolation by the parent at a routine IEP meeting. The divide can be even greater at an adversarial IEP meeting wherein parents report feeling

attacked by the team. Both scenarios can result in parents conceding to suggestions by educators if they feel the decisions made at these meetings are not in the best interest of their child. (Stoner, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley, 2005).

Regrettably, some research suggests obstacles to parent participation through the IEP exist and/or are fortified during the very first IEP team meeting. Stoner et al. (2005) evaluated parents' perceptions of their child's initial IEP team meeting. They found participants all perceived the initial IEP meeting to be distressing, confusing, and exceedingly complicated. The initial perception was associated with overall dissatisfaction of the special education system (Fish, 2008). The wealth of negative feelings toward the initial process and overall level of hostility may be an indication of fundamental problems with school and family relationships. As the IEP meeting is ultimately meant to help a student, having the experience be anything but reassuring can certainly negatively impact a student's education and placement. At the worst, a parent may decide to refuse to provide consent for services, which can negatively impact a student's educational prospects. "Each local education agency or State educational agency shall ensure that the parents of each child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child" (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 2004, 2004, p. 37).

While educators and administrators certainly have a professional advantage in terms of familiarity with instruction, terminology and the special education process, the parent maintains the cumulative, unwritten record on the child. As parents see different dimensions of their children's behavior throughout the developmental stages, a parent's input can be invaluable at the meeting. Parent participation in the IEP meetings facilitates quality programming, strategies for resolving problems, parents' satisfaction, and positive outcomes (Fish, 2008). "Parental

involvement, which encompasses the patterns and nature of parent-professional interactions, has been identified as a key to building strong and effective educational experiences for children with disabilities” (Stoner et al., 2005, p 39). A parent is much more likely to work with educators to help their child if they feel they are part of the process. As recognized by Fish (2008), “The establishment of effective educational experiences for students who receive special education services depends on parent’s involvement in educational programing, which signifies the importance of equal partnerships between parents and educators” (Fish, 2008 p. 9). As the ultimate goal of education is to be sure that a student succeeds, it is vital to have parental involvement in all aspects of special education.

Without addressing the satisfaction and understanding of parents to this process, which is often confusing and frustrating, no lasting improvements will be made. Without support and contributions from the family, interventions are less likely to work and consistency will not be maintained in a child’s education. It is vital to embrace the parent as part of the IEP team, and as an active decision maker in their child’s education. Further, conflict between parents and the school could ultimately result in negative perceptions of education by students, who are likely to pass on these assumptions and aversions to their own children, thus perpetuating a cycle of dysregulation and poor educational outcomes.

Accountability for Parent Involvement of Children with Disabilities

As required under Section 616 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), State Educational Agencies (SEAs) are required to annually survey parents of students in special education to assess the extent to which schools facilitate parent involvement as a means of improving services and results of children with disabilities. SEAs report the results of these accountability data through their Annual Performance Report

(APR) under Indicator 8, the indicator designated by OSEP to address parent involvement. The APR is an annual report that each state must submit as evidence of their progress toward meeting IDEA Part B goals. While all states are required to have the same measurement, they are able to select the type of survey instrument they wish to use, or develop their own survey if they deem it to be more appropriate to their data collection process. Of all 60 states and territories reporting APR data for Indicator 8 for federal fiscal year 2012, the vast majority (43 states or 71.7%) reported data obtained through the use of the *Preschool Special Education Partnership Efforts and Quality of Services*, *Schools' Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale*, and/or another National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) adapted scale (OSEP, 2014). Of the remaining states, 11 developed their own parent involvement survey, three used a combination approach, and another three failed to specify what instrument was used. As noted in the OSEP's FFY 2012 Part B APR Analysis, the variability among states selection of instruments, sampling, and dissemination method is great (OSEP, 2014).

The NCSEAM instruments were constructed and validated through the use of a national sample between 2002 and 2006 by the OSEP sponsored national technical assistance center due to a general lack of valid and reliable survey tools targeting parent-school partnerships (Elbaum, 2012). The NCSEAM scales include close-ended, Likert item scales ranging from *Very Strongly Disagree* to *Very Strongly Agree* (See Appendix B and C for Preschool and School Age Surveys). Survey items include questions about parent involvement in IEP meetings, the ease of information exchange between parents and the school, perceived academic support at school, accessibility of educators to parents and children of special needs, and the school's provision of services to children of special needs. Therefore, the scales measure different dimensions of parent involvement as perceived by the parent including school program efforts, quality of

services, parent participation, and impact of services (Elbaum, 2005). The resulting data lend nicely to a single Rasch value when the scales are implemented and calculated as intended, which works well for the overall OSEP accountability measure.

However, beginning in school year 2011-2012, one Mid-Atlantic State, in partnership with a new contractor, added a qualitative component to the survey, which afforded parents an opportunity to submit supporting comments in addition to answering the close-ended items. Although this particular Mid-Atlantic State annually collected parent involvement data using the *Schools' Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale* (NCSEAM & Elbaum, 2002) since school year 2005-2006, SEA staff were looking to supplement the quantitative results with qualitative comments for enhanced program planning and APR reporting. A qualitative method was needed to examine these comments and summarize the data for programming purposes due to the numerous comments received. Similar to Elbaum (2012) who reported a paucity of quantitative accountability measures to evaluate parent-school partnerships efforts, the researcher found a dearth of qualitative measures, which target the evaluation of parent involvement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to systematically analyze the optional comments, which have tended to be numerous and informative in nature from 2011-2014. The findings were intended to aid professional development, future State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report activities and answer key research questions with relevance to school psychologists and educators, alike. The following research questions will be used to analyze and explore the parental comments of this Mid-Atlantic State from 2011-2014.

- 1) When considering the subset of comments directly related to the special education programming, which policy areas received the most positive parent comments?

- 2) When considering the subset of comments directly related to the special education programming, which policy areas received the most resistant/negative comments from parents?
- 3) Of the subset of comments related to Child Find, Evaluation/Reevaluation, and Eligibility, and Initiation and Access of Services, what general themes and trends exist?
- 4) Of the subset of comments related to Transition Services and accompanying graduation, dropout and post-school outcome topics, what general themes and trends exist?
- 5) When considering the subset of comments not directly linked to special education programming, what percent of the positive and resistant/negative were linked to the following school variables: emotional safety, physical safety, positive and negative relationships at school, ongoing communication, school disciplinary culture, etc.?
- 6) Based on the totality of parent survey results what recommendations for state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) planning can be provided for the next six-year State Performance Plan cycle, including the State Systemic Improvement Plan?

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the study were 7,090 parents or guardians of children and adolescents from age 3 to 21 with disabilities in one Mid-Atlantic State. The surveys were administered to all parents of children identified with active special education status in the school districts in accordance with the sampling plan without any restrictions based upon race/ethnicity, age, gender, or other demographic variables. The SEA did not collect demographics for participants, but rather survey numbers were linked back to unique student identifiers to ensure the respondents' families adequately represented the population of enrolled students with disabilities by race/ethnicity, gender, and disabilities classifications. The participant addresses were pulled from the state's longitudinal data system that houses the educational data for all children and adolescents with active special education status.

Instrument

The survey instrument administered to parents of preschool age children with disabilities was the *Preschool Special Education Partnership Efforts and Quality of Services Scale* developed by Elbaum and the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring in 2002. This 26-item scale has been widely used by other state educational agencies (SEAs) across the nation to determine parent partnership efforts. Additionally, the survey had a final space at the end for parents to include comments about their child's special education experience, although the qualitative comments had never been formally evaluated (See Appendix B for the Preschool Survey).

The survey instrument administered to parents of school age children with disabilities

was the *School's Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale* (Elbaum, 2002). It contains 24 items targeting parent involvement in IEP meetings, the ease of information exchange between parents and the school, perceived academic support at school, accessibility of educators to parents and children of special needs, and the school's provision of services to children of special needs (See Appendix C for the School Age Survey). Similar to the preschool survey, the school age survey also included a comment section for parents.

Procedure

The survey responses that were returned from parents of preschool and school age students with disabilities for 2012, 2013, and 2014 were aggregated and analyzed. More specifically, investigators systematically examined the numerous, open-ended survey comments submitted by parents. These optional comments were categorized by topic area, parents' viewpoints (i.e., positive, neutral/ambivalent, and resistant/negative), and themes to reveal the successes, obstacles, and experiences as perceived by parents of children with disabilities in this Mid-Atlantic State.

The current study utilized extant parent survey data obtained annually by the educational department of the Mid-Atlantic State to fulfill State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report requirements. The survey was administered to one third of the local education agencies (LEAs) in the state, over a three-year period in order to get a representative sample of disabilities, race/ethnicity, district size, and state regions. The Office of Special Education Programs at the United States Department of Education approved the sampling method that was utilized in 2012. All parents or guardians with a child in special educational programming in the selected counties were administered surveys in accordance with the sampling plan.

In the 2012-2013 survey cycle, individual telephone calls were made to each district that was selected to participate in order to discuss with them how best to assist parents with the completion of this survey. In addition to verbal instructions, Parent Educator Resource Centers (PERC) and special education directors in these districts received e-mails with detailed instructions on how to advise parents on the completion of the survey, as well as an outline of the process of this research. Special educators and directors were reminded a second time about this survey and to give parents the state's toll-free number when they had problems with the survey at the State Director's meeting. The completed surveys were then mailed by Measurement, Inc. and afterwards additional e-mails were sent out to ensure school and PERC staff was available to assist parents as needed. If parents were unable to reach the local PERC, they were to contact the coordinator through the toll-free number for assistance. A follow-up survey was then mailed by Measurement Inc. to parents who had not completed and returned a survey from the original mailing. These measures were implemented in a continued effort to improve survey returns.

Sampling Plan

A sampling plan was developed by the state's educational department, Part B Data Manager, providing a representative sample based on the state's demographics, with all parents in a selected group of districts being surveyed each year. The plan was approved by OSEP in 2012. Due to confidentiality measures, this information is being kept confidential by the primary investigators in a separate document. However, the sampling plan outlines the distribution of all 57 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) over a three-year period. The plan ensured all parents of students with disabilities (SWDs) in these LEAs received a survey during the assigned year. Projections of the percent of Pre-School and School Age parents to be surveyed were based upon the state's December 1, 2011 special education child count.

Within the sample, no less than three large districts (1000 or more SWDs), six medium-sized districts (500-999) and seven small districts (under 500 SWDs) participated in the survey each year. Participation of districts in the state's eight Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs) or geographical areas was balanced to the maximum extent possible, while also ensuring that the yearly sample adequately reflected the state's overall racial and ethnic composition.

Further, this sampling plan outlined the projected racial/ethnic composition of the sample over three years. The sample composition within the state provided a difference percentage for each race/ethnicity category, based upon the December 1, 2011 child count data. The sample provided by the state similarly illustrated a breakdown of the distribution by student's disability for the three-year sample period.

Analyses of the Open-Ended Parent Comments

Step 1: Development of the Code Book

While the investigators intended to use the chapters, sections, and subsections of the current state educational policy as the general structure for the code book for comments specific to special education, the development and refinement process for the code book was also influenced by the initial reading of the parent comments. The initial reading and pilot coding provided the investigators experience with the comments to understand which subsections in the state policy could be excluded from the code book, and which sections required further expansion or specification. Furthermore, the initial reading was essential in identifying the content domains beyond special education, such as school safety, positive relationships, ongoing communication, professional and ethical behavior, and discipline issues within the schools, which were also incorporated into the code book.

Step 2: Codes Defined

All content codes were defined to ensure each investigator could accurately and consistently code parent comments at the statement level. Examples and non-examples were outlined, particularly for the unclear content. Positive, neutral/ambivalent, and resistant/negative examples were similarly provided.

Step 3: Coding and Analyses

The primary investigator coded the parent comments for 2012, 2013, and 2014. These comments were then further divided at the utterance level by the type/category of comments to capture a range of ideas expressed by each parent or guardian. Within this study up to four separate category codes or different utterances were permitted per individual parent survey. Parents who exceeded the four-category criterion were assigned the first four category codes observed. Their remaining comments were excluded from the data set in order to avoid a small percentage of parents with very lengthy responses unduly influencing the results. Upon completion of the initial coding by this investigator, the comments, with the corresponding codes, were then rechecked by one additional investigator in order to ensure coding accuracy. Any comments that were found to be miscoded were then corrected or recoded by comment category by the second investigator. The frequency of comment type (positive, neutral/ambivalent, and resistant/negative) and topic area was generated via Excel and SPSS. The LEA identification number, region number, survey type (i.e., Pre-School versus School Age), and year of survey administration were other variables which were maintained in the data file and used in the investigation, although these were kept confidential, and identified only by a code book in the possession of the primary investigators. Researchers then revealed thematic

trends in parent partnership efforts, as perceived by parents, in this Mid-Atlantic State, and will be included in the discussion.

Institutional Review Board

The current study was examined by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted approval under the exempt status of human subject research due to the fact that the examiner was provided with the data with all identifying information removed. The approval letter from the IRB is provided in Appendix A.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

During this three-year data collection period a survey was sent out to every parent with a child in special education programming. A total of 34,728 surveys were sent out to parents of children in special education in the state. Of this number, 7,090 (20.4%) Pre-School and School aged surveys were returned to the SEA. Of the subset of returned surveys, a total of 2,104 (29.7%) included at least one parental comment. When coded at the utterance level, 2,816 discrete data entries were identified from the 2,104 comments submitted.

Table 1
Survey Return Rates

Year	Total Surveys Sent	Total Surveys Returned	Percent of Total Surveys Returned	Pre-School Surveys with Parental Comments	Percent of Total Pre-School Surveys Returned	School Age Surveys with Parental Comments	Percent of Total School Age Surveys Returned	Total Number of Unique Utterances
2012	12,649	2,688	21%	51	0.01%	882	7%	1,267
2013	11,683	2,598	22%	75	0.01%	750	6%	1,089
2014	10,396	1,804	17%	40	0.01%	306	3%	460
Total	34,728	7,090	20%	166	0.01%	1,938	6%	2,816

Question 1: When considering the subset of comments directly related to the special education programming, which policy areas received the most positive parent comments?

Table 2
Positive Parental Comments for 2012-2014

Year	Comment Category	Total Number of Comments	Positive Percentages
2012	Adequate and Qualified Staff	42	57%
2013	Adequate and Qualified Staff	45	63%
2014	Adequate and Qualified Staff	20	54%
2012-2014	Adequate and Qualified Staff	107	58%
2012-2014	Progress Under IEP	263	62%
2012-2014	Determination of Services	482	37%
2012-2014	Transition Services	83	31%
2012-2014	Professional and Ethical Behaviors	95	26%
2012-2014	School Discipline	15	20%
2012-2014	Parental Participation	73	16%
2012-2014	Ongoing Communication	247	12%
2012-2014	Compliance with IEP	96	8%
2012-2014	Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services	107	8%
2012-2014	Positive and Negative Relationships	18	5%
2012-2014	Least Restrictive Environment	68	5%
2012-2014	Emotional/Physical Safety	32	4%
2012-2014	Parent Training	79	4%
2012-2014	Survey Comments	223	3%
2012-2014	Transportation	31	3%
2012-2014	Initiation and Access to Services	20	0%
2012-2014	Due Process	26	0%
2012-2014	SAT	0	0%
2012-2014	Child Find	0	0%

When examining the subset of comments directly related to special education programming for 2012, 2013, and 2014, the policy area yielding the most positive parent comments was within the overall umbrella of administration of services, but specifically the provision of adequate and qualified staffing. Overall 63 comments, or 58%, of the total utterances targeting adequate and qualified staff were positive.

Question 2: When considering the subset of comments directly related to the special education programming, which policy areas of the state policy and procedures received the most resistant/negative comments from parents?

Table 3
Negative Parental Comments for 2012-2014

Year	Comment Category	Total Number of Comments	Negative Percentage
2012	Determination of Services	85	74%
	Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services	42	95%
	Compliance with IEP	44	100%
2013	Transition	41	60%
	Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services	45	86%
	Compliance with IEP	31	80%
2014	Parental Participation	25	84%
	Compliance with IEP	21	95%
	Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services	20	100%
2012-2014	Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services	107	92%
	Parental Participation	73	84%
	Compliance with IEP	96	92%

In contrast to the high amount of positive feedback in Administration of Services the policy areas that received the most negative parent comments was Compliance with IEP's. In the three-year data set there were only four positive comments about compliance with an IEP out of 96 total utterances.

A second category viewed as highly negative or resistant was Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services. This category included a broad range of topics related to Child Find, Screening, Referrals, Student Assistant Teams (SAT), Initial Evaluation, Reevaluation, Initiation of Services, and Parental Request for Evaluations. Of the 107 total utterances, 98 were negative/resistant.

A third negative or resistant theme emerging in the data set was an inability for parents to participate in their children's schools. A total of 73 comments were made about this category with 84% of them being negative/resistant.

A fourth category that was problematic for parents was Progress under IEP, although this did not consistently rank in the top negative comments. Approximately six in every ten comments submitted were positive and the remaining were negative.

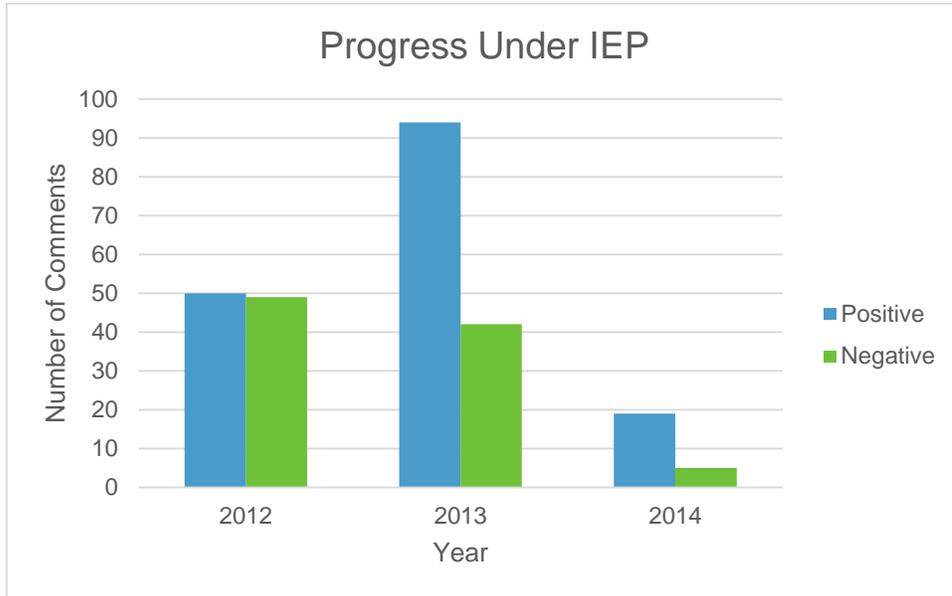


Figure 1. Progress Under IEP. This figure illustrates positive and negative comments by parents for 2012, 2013, and 2014 about their child’s progress under an IEP.

Question 3: Of the subset of comments related to Child Find, Evaluation/Reevaluation, and Eligibility, and Initiation and Access of Services what general themes and trends exist?

Year	Comment Category	Total Number of Comments	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
2012	Child Find	0	0%	0%
	Evaluations/Re-Evaluations	25	4%	96%
	Eligibility	5	0%	100%
	Initiation and Access to Services	7	0%	100%
2013	Child Find	0	0%	0%
	Evaluations/Re-Evaluations	24	4%	83%
	Eligibility	6	0%	100%
	Initiation and Access to Services	7	0%	85%
2014	Child Find	0	0%	0%
	Evaluations/Re-Evaluations	8	0%	100%
	Eligibility	3	0%	100%
	Initiation and Access to Services	6	0%	100%
2012-2104	Child Find	0	0%	0%
	Evaluations/Re-Evaluations	57	7%	93%
	Eligibility	14	0%	100%
	Initiation and Access to Services	20	0%	95%

Based upon the aggregate data set, parent concerns regarding Child Find, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Eligibility, and Initiation and Access of Services were almost exclusively negative or resistant. There were no parent comments about Child Find within this three-year data set. In terms of Evaluation/Reevaluation parents statewide reported a 97% negative view. Eligibility was associated with 100% negative views by parents, and Initiation of services was associated with 95% negative views by parents.

Question 4: Of the subset of comments related to Transition Services and accompanying graduation, dropout and post-school outcome topics, what general themes and trends exist?

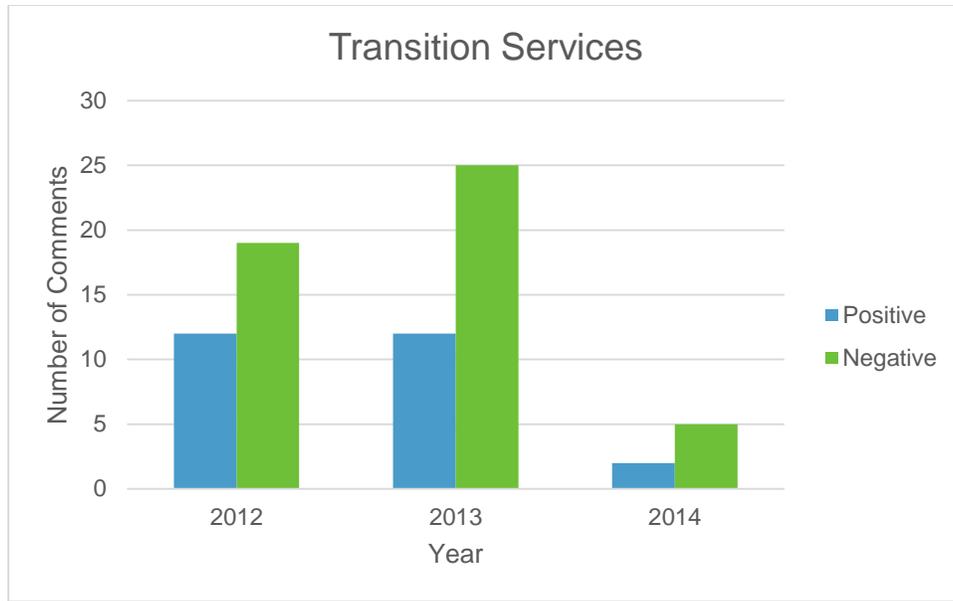


Figure 2. Transition Services. This figure illustrates positive and negative comments by parents for 2012, 2013, and 2014 about transition services.

Transition services within the state had extreme responses from parents, many of which were negative. In total 83 comments were made about transition services. Of these utterances 59% were negative/resistant while 31% were positive.

Question 5: When considering the subset of comments not directly linked to special education programming, what percent of the positive and resistant/negative were linked to the following school variables: emotional safety, physical safety, positive and negative relationships at school, ongoing communication, school disciplinary culture, etc?

Table 5
School Variable Comments for 2012-2014

	Comment Category	Total Number of Comments	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
2012-2014	Emotional/Physical Safety	32	4%	96%
	Positive and Negative Relationships	18	5%	88%
	Ongoing Communication	247	12%	85%
	School Discipline	15	20%	80%
	Professional and Ethical Behaviors	95	26%	74%

The parental comments explored in this question were skewed heavily toward the negative. Problems that parents identified in this subset of comments included bullying concerns, negative relationships in the school between parents and staff as well as children and staff, difficulty with communication with teachers and specialized personnel, and a lack of professional and ethical behaviors by the staff in the school. Other issues that consistently came up in this category was a lack of time or professionalism during special education meetings.

Question 6: Based on the totality of parent survey results what recommendations for state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) planning can be provided for the next six-year State Performance Plan cycle, including the State Systemic Improvement Plan?

Based upon the responses in this survey, the following recommendations can be made to the Mid-Atlantic State's Educational Department:

1. Additional directions for parents of students with children that have been placed in special education for speech and language disorders should be included on the survey. Parents of children and adolescents with speech and language impairments often perceive their children as nonparticipants in special education. However, speech and language services only are considered to fall under the umbrella of special education per the state's policies. Therefore, a comment noting this perceived inaccuracy is needed so that parents of children and adolescents with communication disorders will participate more fully in the survey.
2. Additional directions for parents of students with children that have been placed in special education for gifted only programming should be included on the survey. This survey is not intended for these students and additional directions to return or disregard it would be helpful for future analysis.

3. The state should consider including a small number of open-ended questions regarding a specific area of targeted changes. For example, if the state is targeting dropout prevention for students with disabilities, specific transition questions should be asked to better gauge the current status, barriers, and future needs of students as related to program improvement in the state. The questions will encourage more detailed responses from parents, which can then directly inform statewide strategic planning around a specific topic area.
4. Many of the parents surveyed specifically request more parent training or parent support groups. Therefore, continued collaboration between education agencies at all levels (i.e., state, regional, district, and school) and parent training, resource, and advocacy centers/groups is warranted to increase both the quantity of available supports to parents and the quality of parent-school partnerships. Linkages between local parent-teacher associations and organizations servicing children and adolescents with disabilities will be critical to engendering positive outcomes toward this end.
5. The findings support specific training modules for statewide use in the area of parental interactions during initial SAT/IEP meetings for teachers, transition services at all levels of education from early childhood to post graduation, communication with parents, and professional and ethical behaviors.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to organize and summarize the optional parental comments gathered as a result of the three-year study performed by the Mid-Atlantic State's department of education as part of the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report requirements under Section 616 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). The comments, which were submitted as part of the special education survey for both pre-school and school aged children from 2011 to 2014, were analyzed in order to help the state's educational department develop this Mid-Atlantic State's next six-year SPP/APR cycle and answer several key research questions. The parental comments that were analyzed are a vital part of continued improvement of special education programming.

For the purposes of improvement planning, there is a distinct difference between a parent rating an item as 'very strongly disagree' and outlining a specific area of concern such as, "Our experience with getting my child tested for special needs and getting information about where to get help with the school system is a fight/struggle every step (School Age survey, 2012)," and, "My child hasn't been tested since 3rd grade-now a senior (School Age Survey, 2013)." The survey's comment section for parents is an excellent way to allow parents to tell the state's educational department exactly what issues they are experiencing. These parent comments provide vivid descriptions of parent concerns and afford districts a better opportunity to conduct root cause analyses and thereby conduct improvement activity planning.

Question 1

As noted above, the most positive commented on area within state policy was Adequate Staff/ Qualified Personnel. Comments reflecting this positive viewpoint ranged from a high

level of regard for teacher quality to a generally stated appreciation for educators and education specialists. Parent comments on the highest end of the continuum expressed sincere gratitude for the services provided to their children and adolescents with disabilities. For example, one parent wrote, “My daughter has serious learning disabilities. Because of her LD [learning disability] teachers she is making the honor roll. They nurtured her, loved her, encouraged her. They were a 'Gift from God'! Oh yes, she wants to be a LD [learning disability] teacher (School Age Survey, 2013).”

Other such parents used descriptors like *priceless*, *instrumental*, and *phenomenal*. “Ms. XX is the best advocate for my son. She is the reason he is on grade level and doing well in the classroom. She is priceless to our family (School Age Survey, 2013),” and “We [his parents] feel truly blessed that we have a school in our community where our child can have his academic needs met by a caring staff” (School Age Survey, 2012). Parents who perceived their child’s teachers as advocates, caretakers, important companions, and professionals who work *tirelessly* were similarly positioned as higher end, positive regard comments.

Significantly more respondents were within the middle of the range of the continuum with regard to positive comments. They were satisfied or enthusiastic, about the specialized staff, general education teachers, special education teachers, and their training. Many parents commented that their student’s academic outlook in school had changed because of these professionals: “My son has made huge improvements with the Birth to Three, speech, and pre-school programs. His sounds and words are so much clearer now (Pre-school Survey, 2013),” or that their child was now happier and more engaged in school, “Early intervention is vital and has improved my child's life, educationally and socially! Thank you! (School Aged Survey, 2013).” Moreover, they labeled staff with descriptors such as *supportive*, *helpful*, *caring*, *amazing*, and

exceptional, and often wished to commend specific educators, schools, and administrators through their comments. Finally, a small number of parents submitted comments falling on the lower end of the positive continuum. While some of these comments were less descriptive (e.g., “I like all my son’s teachers,”), others described their children’s teachers as *pretty good* or that others described their children’s teachers as *pretty good* or teachers parents have “never had any problems with.”

Despite the overall positive perceptions for adequate and qualified staff, 42% of the remaining comments were characterized as primarily negative or resistant. Parents had particular concerns with the training of special education teachers in specific disability categories or areas as related to their child. “Not enough educated teachers on autism (School Aged Survey, 2012),” “Most people are not educated about deafness (School Aged Survey, 2012),” “More training for teachers to better learn how to deal effectively with behavior disorders (School Aged Survey, 2012).” While autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were most frequently referenced by parents, a range of specific disability categories under IDEA 2004 were noted when voicing the need for qualified staff including deafness and emotional behavioral disorders, as well as other mental health diagnoses including bipolar, depression, attachment, and obsessive compulsive disorders.

Because many counties in this Mid-Atlantic State are rural, it is likely that the child with an exceptionality, such as autism or cerebral palsy, may be the only child or one of few in the school area with such an exceptionality. It is difficult for the smaller, rural schools to recruit and retain a specialist trained in such a disability, and very few special educators specialize in any one given disability. Many receive a multiple category certification, which covers a broad scope of categories. With such a small percentage of students presenting in those same school, the

administration are unlikely to be able to provide special programming for those students, and the special educators may have never worked with a student with a specific disability even if certified. Many parents asked that both general and special education teachers receive more training in exceptionalities as noted above. Some participants also specifically voiced a concern with the lack of certified or highly qualified teachers in the schools. “Most of our teachers are not certified (School Aged Survey, 2012).”

Staff ratios and turnover emerged as other negative or resistant themes. “You need to provide special education teachers... Qualified teachers that will stay in the position instead of moving to regular education (School Age Survey, 2014).” To lower ratios, some parents suggested increasing in the total number of aides. Two parents specifically suggested assigning one aide to each classroom or teacher. Numerous parents additionally addressed the retention of qualified personnel, a perennial issue in rural school districts and special education. High turnover can result in inconsistency in special education programming and may contribute to setbacks for students in the more rural areas of the state (Berry 2012). Table 6 represents a sample of parent comments regarding turnover.

Table 6

Additional Parent Comments

Comment Year	Parent Comments
2012	They continuously change his aides. Not acceptable! Should be what benefits child more than personnel and seniority laws. Do for one, you do for all!
2012	Too much variation year-to-year with teachers/aides.
2013	“I chose to keep him in speech therapy, but was very disappointed that he kept getting new teachers, both in speech therapy and in early head start and regular head start
2013	Aides are a huge issue! Substitutes for aides and teachers are different every time and [they] have to be trained every time. My daughter has missed often because of this.
2013	My major issue has been that he has had a different speech therapist every year for 10 years. It makes continuity difficult.
2014	This year he has a new teacher. Until last Friday (8/29) we weren’t even sure if our child had a teacher.

“I chose to keep him in speech therapy, but was very disappointed that he kept getting new teachers, both in speech therapy and in early head start and regular head start (School Aged Survey, 2013).” Recruitment and retention of qualified personnel is always an issue in schools, but can be particularly difficult in rural school districts. High turnover can result in inconstancy in special educational programming and may contribute to setbacks for students in the more rural areas of the state (Berry 2012).

Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chestnut, & Haring (2004) and Kosko and Wilkins (2009) identified educator satisfaction and commitment as a key variable in engendering student success through parent-school partnerships. Perceptions of job satisfaction have been found to differ across rural, urban, and suburban environments. As this Mid-Atlantic State is largely rural, along with approximately one-fourth of the country that is considered to be rural (Brandes et al., 2014), trends in this area will be examined. “Although a consistent definition of rural does not exist,

common themes rely on smaller population, limited territory size, and proximity to a larger urban area” (Brandes et al., 2014).

According to the literature teacher retention is by far the largest issue facing teachers in rural environment, particularly those in special education, “The shortage of qualified special educators in rural settings, which make up to 40% of the nation’s districts, is reported to be as high as 35%, notably higher than the 11.4% nation-wide quality shortage in special education” (Berry, 2012, p 31). Due to this nearly constant shortage of teachers, it is not uncommon for special educators to feel increased pressure from administration, parents, and colleagues without the benefit of qualified peer support to assist them. Higher demands on their time, and pressure to succeed with students that are often difficult and require increased attention, can add additional strain to an already stressful job. Westling and Whitten (1996) concluded that rural special education teachers are more likely to be susceptible to attrition due to a lack of recognition from colleagues, a lack of support from their administration, and a lack of help in their position.

These increased pressures lead to higher attrition rates. High turnover, particularly in rural settings, can lead to uneven educational practices. Despite having IEP goals, students can certainly lose ground if their special education teachers change often. Even if goals are met, teachers have different teaching styles and it can takes some students receiving special education services, and their parents, a longer time to adjust to new teachers and their instructional methods. Inconsistency in personnel for any reason can be unsettling, and constant change can be detrimental to child level outcomes. Further, long lasting relationships built between special educators and parents of special education students that often rely on trust and open

communication cannot be maintained if attrition rates are high, which can further frustrate and alienate parents from the special education process (Berry, 2012).

Another area with a higher positive-to-negative ratio of comments was Progress Under IEP. Sixty-two percent of utterances in this category were coded as positive when the data for all three years were analyzed collectively. Multiple parents reported that special education programming had improved their child's academic performance and/or social-emotional functioning. Example comments include "The administration and special education teachers have in-depth knowledge of special needs students. Our son is obtaining continued success academically which then improves his emotional and social confidence," and "My child has made tremendous progress." One respondent credited a school's special education program with helping her "daughter to understand her math and graduate with a passing grade." Another parent noted, "The programs offered to my child has helped him greatly! Not only have his skills improved, but he also enjoys learning now." A few parents specifically stated their child's progress was significantly improved resulting in discontinuation of special education services or high school graduation.

Question 2

In contrast to the high amount of positive feedback in Administration of Services the policy areas that received the most negative parent comments was Compliance with IEP. In the three-year data set there were only four positive comments about compliance with an IEP. Concerns ranged from mild worry, "One of his teachers refused to make accommodations (School Aged Survey, 2014)," to more severe issues, "My child's school wrote a service on the IEP which they refused to provide (direct instruction and pull-out setting). When I complained, they took the service off the IEP (School Aged Survey, 2013)." Some issues were so problematic

that parents were considering withdrawing a child from school, or had done so already, “We have had issues in the past with our school system. I homeschooled one year due to problems and they kicked my child out of speech therapy. We had to fight half the year to get her back in (School Aged Survey, 2012).” Some parents were considering hiring legal representation to be sure that the special educational programming was being followed. “Mr. XX at the high school did not follow my child’s IEP and failed my son. I'm considering getting a lawyer. The school knows this and done nothing to change it! He is not certified! (School Aged Survey, 2012).”

A second category viewed as highly negative or resistant was Eligibility/Evaluations/Initiation of Services. This category included a broad range of topics related to Child Find, Screening, Referrals, Student Assistant Teams (SAT), Initial Evaluation, Reevaluation, Initiation of Services, and Parental Request for Evaluations. The parents commented on the length of time and effort it took to get their children evaluated. “Since 1998 I've had three children referred to the special education program and for two of them it took an act of God to get them tested. They entered the program late. One was retained a year before I could get him tested. Only two teachers in a twelve-year span ever took the time to watch my kid’s progress and call home, before the child was failing! (School Aged Survey, 2013).” Many parents reported it required years of advocating for an initial evaluation to occur. They perceived the delay resulted in their child missing out on valuable resources and falling dramatically behind their peers in school. “It took several years of pushing for an IEP before my son received one. He had one in special needs pre-school but the elementary school would not accept it. It took until 8th grade. This should not have happened” (School Aged Survey, 2012).

A third negative or resistant theme emerging in the data set was an inability for parents to participate in their children’s schools. Of the 73 utterances about parental participation, 84%

were negative/resistant. Many of these comments were focused on mild frustration of parents who wanted to be more active in their child's school experience. "I believe parents should be allowed to be more involved with the school, not just a few select times of the year," and, "I do not like that parents are discouraged from participating in the classroom or even joining children for lunch." While these comments were not as problematic as those that indicated violations in special education policy, they were a notable concern of parents across the state.

A fourth category that was problematic for parents was Progress under IEP, although this did not consistently rank in the top negative comments. Approximately six in every ten comments submitted were positive, and the remaining were negative. Parents who perceived their children as failing to make sufficient progress were particularly disheartened. "He has had her for two years and there has been no progress made" (School Age, 2013). "He failed almost every year of high school" (School Age, 2013). "I am not satisfied with my son's progress due to his limited vocabulary and limited ability to speak" (School Age, 2013). "I do not want my child slipping through the cracks of this educational disaster. Every child deserves a chance to be someone, anyone that they want to be. Not slip through the cracks because they're a little hyper (School Age, 2012)." "My son will be in 9th grade this year and his education level is a 3rd grade level. Explain how this is right" (School Age, 2012).

Frequently, utterances regarding lack of progress were tied to utterances voicing dismay about communication and/or access to assignment grades and progress reports. "I had no communication with any teachers last year and his grades dropped horribly. I have an email this year so there will be no problem with reaching me" (School Age, 2013). "My son has ADHD and was failing science and math. I was on Edline almost every day during the last six weeks trying to get grades updated and missing assignments. It was tough at times to get these" (School

Age, 2012). “It would've been good to have had written progress reports more than one time per semester” (School Age, 2013). One parent specifically noted confusion regarding the progress report. “The form given at the end of each nine weeks to accompany the report card is very confusing and seems irrelevant. I am sure it contains important information, but I don't know what it is (School Age, 2012).”

The comments on this category were split at nearly sixty-forty, with more positive comments than negative. However, the negative comments that were included were extremely troublesome. Parents who were dissatisfied with their child’s progress reported little or no progress at all in special educational programming. “I see no improvement with my child's reading, spelling, and writing. His grade level with reading is about the same as it was in the beginning. Don't think they are helping him to improve for life as an adult (School Aged Survey, 2012).”

It is possible that some of these comments, particularly those that are vague, are a result of the parent grieving process. Many recent studies have indicated that parents with children with disabilities undergo a process similar to that of someone who has lost a loved one, which is better known as the ‘The Five Stages of Grief’ as theorized by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. These five stages are denial, bargaining, anger, despair, and reconciliation (Douglas, 2013). However, unlike someone who is transitioning through these stages in sequence, as most people do after they lose someone, many parents with children who have special needs continue to cycle through these feelings throughout the span of their lives. “The current literature seems to imply that when a child has a disability, grief stages and acceptance may coexist as part of the long-term parental adjustment pattern (Keller and Honig, 2004).” This research may indicate that while there are certainly problems associated with the special educational programming in the state, some of

these negative comments may be further fueled by emotional shifts, through which the parents are cycling.

Question 3

Based upon the aggregate data set, parent concerns regarding Child Find, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Eligibility, and Initiation and Access of Services were almost exclusively negative or resistant. There were no parent comments about Child Find within this three-year data set, indicating that there was either no problem with the service or that parents were unaware of the concept. The other categories included in this hypothesis were much more problematic.

In terms of Evaluation/Reevaluation parents statewide reported a 97% negative view. Eligibility was associated with 100% negative views by parents, and Initiation of services was associated with 95% negative views by parents. Many of the comments that were related to these categories indicated a serious problem with evaluation timelines, the time it took to get a child tested and determined eligible or ineligible, as was discussed above.

Question 4

Transition services within the state had extreme responses from parents, many of which were negative. Some parents were pleased with the early childhood transition services from Birth to Three to Elementary school while others reported more problematic moves. “Transition for my five year old to kindergarten did not go well. Services we were using did not carry over (Pre-School Survey, 2012).” All parents commenting on transitions from middle school to high school were negative. “Transition to high school has been totally overlooked. We don't even know who is his aide or teachers in regular education (School Aged Survey, 2012).” Additional targeted professional development for transitions at all levels would be greatly beneficial in this state.

School professionals could greatly improve ongoing relationships at all levels if transitions services could be improved upon.

Question 5

When considering the comments not directly linked to special education such as emotional safety, physical safety, positive and negative relationships at school, ongoing communication, school disciplinary culture, what were considered to be the most positive and negative/resistant areas? The parental comments explored in this question were skewed heavily toward the negative. Problems that parents identified in this subset of comments included bullying concerns, negative relationships in the school between parents and staff as well as children and staff, difficulty with communication with teachers and specialized personnel, and a lack of professional and ethical behaviors by the staff in the school.

Several parents noted concern over bullying and a lack of ethical and professional conduct by school staff. One mother reported, “Harassment and bullying are still a huge problem, even at the high school level. Most teachers still don't take it seriously (School Aged Survey, 2012).” Another parent reported, “I even had to explain to the principal that my child was not doing his work on purpose as he accused. He accused my child of wanting to take the easy way out. I was very upset because I know how hard it is for him (School Aged Survey, 2014).” These comments were not only directed at teachers, but also at other school specialists, including school psychologist, “Personal opinions on parents and attacks on parents’ education by the XX county psychologist are unneeded and common with many parents. She also writes them on the IEP (School Aged Survey, 2012).” The most alarming comments were those directed at teachers and staff that, according to parents, were part of the bullying process. “I have lost all faith in the school system since I clearly saw a person in authority abuse a child. Caught

on tape, and then suffer no consequences! This only opens doors for other abusers in our county to 'get away' with this kind of senseless act (School Aged Survey, 2013).”

Other issues that consistently came up in this category was a lack of time or professionalism during special education meetings. “Our first IEP meeting was in the dirty basement and was terrible. My husband and I were treated with disrespect. After that IEP meeting I told them I would record future meetings, and the past IEP meetings went well (School Aged Survey, 2013).” Inconsistent reevaluations of their child over time were also a major concern to parents. “Like not wanting to test him for I.Q. and neuropsychological testing due to him only wanting to test before graduating high school. What good would that do when he was tested and his I.Q. was only 54? If tested at the beginning of year adjustments to his IEP could have been made (School Aged Survey, 2013).”

Additionally, the communication category received the highest number of comments overall with a total utterance amount of 247. Of this number 211 comments or 85% were negative/resistant. Many parents commented that the lack of communication with the school was a source of stress. This was generally due to a child’s lack of progress and the parent’s interest in helping to improve that progress, or to understand why progress was not being made. “Last year my child was having a problem in a class and the teachers would not get back with me or come to the IEP meeting we had (School Age Survey, 2012).”

Question 6

Despite the above-mentioned problems that were reported numerous parents expressed a deep rooted appreciation for the services provided to their children and adolescents. For some families, this gratitude included spiritual references indicating these teachers were *blessings*, *Gifts from God*, etc. Other such parent used descriptors such as *priceless*, *instrumental*, and

phenomenal to describe their child's teacher. These educators were perceived as developing strong personal relationships with their students and were often key in engendering positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities. Others parents described these educators as *advocates* for their children who "go above and beyond" their professional duties as teachers. Select educators were specifically praised by families for serving in companion and caretaker roles, ensuring their children will not be "alone," and rather a teacher will be walking with the child and family through the educational process.

What nearly all of the neutral and negative/resistant comments in this data set have in common is the ability to effectively express the stress inherent in the school system for parents of children with exceptionalities. Stress is a serious issue that families with children of disabilities have, particularly those that are ill equipped to deal with the complicated and sometimes nuanced issues associated with educational laws and programs. Often the stress of having a child with a disability is further complicated when a family has a low socioeconomic status, poor family support, and increased emotional problems (Keller and Sterling-Honig, 2004).

Many of the parents in this survey, who likely have at least one of these difficulties, specifically requested parent training programs from this Mid-Atlantic State. A few of these comments included, "I would love to have parent support groups and/or training," "I think parents need to have IEP workshop trainings. If I didn't work in a special education setting I wouldn't know about any of the details," and "The fifteen minute training sessions before school parties are useless with no helpful information at all. The meetings don't ever give helpful parent information." These comments indicate a serious need for parent support and training in this state. According to Elbaum, 2012, this is not the only state struggling with this issue.

These figures suggest that on average, slightly more than two thirds of parents with a child receiving special education services in the United States and its territories affirm that school are facilitating parent involvement to a level that fulfils the intent of the indicator (as determined by states themselves). Conversely, approximately one third of parents report that schools are not facilitating parent involvement in such a way as to improve services and results for children with disabilities. (p. 207)

Parental training and involvement is a key component in enhancing school climate as well as improving student performance in the classroom (Fishman and Nickerson, 2014). As many of the negative comments in the survey were related to Positive/Negative Relationships in the School, Ongoing Communication, and Emotional/Physical Safety, increasing parental involvement and parent training is likely to improve a number of problematic issues within this state and should seriously be considered as part of the statewide improvement effort by this Mid-Atlantic State's educational department. These programs do not need to be a costly component in the state either. A body of research indicates that parent led support groups are often highly beneficial to other parents and can lower stress levels and increase understanding of special education programing without direct support from the school system (Solomon, Pistrang, and Barker, 2001). This could be a cost effective way to help facilitate positive outcomes in this state.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, a better understanding of trends between rural and urban school districts could help better shape special education programing. A second limitation of the study is that the data itself is of a qualitative nature. Parental comments reveal specific issues of concern, but may be polarized toward negative/resistant viewpoints. There is a

body of research that indicates that many open-ended comments tend to be negative in tone (Poncheri, Lindberg, Thompson, and Surface, 2007). A third limitation of this study is this examiner's inability to comment on other qualitative studies focusing on parent comments. After a thorough search of library databases, no other articles on parent comments in surveys could be located.

Future Research

Future research should include more qualitative research as a whole, including, but not limited to open ended questions for all parents that complete surveys. There was a notable lack of research in this area. Ongoing research should examine quantitative and qualitative items that are submitted by parents in all Title I schools that are required to obtain annual feedback from parents to help create locally designed evaluation plans. A comparison between annual performance reports would allow the state to analyze problems within counties across the state, determine what kind of training should be made available to teachers and administrators, and to compare problematic categories by region. It would also allow examiners to begin longitudinal data collection in order to track trends across time. Comments by parents could be compared to determine if parents have the same set of stressors or worries about special education programming. Additional comparisons of comments related to teacher retention could also help establish which regions are more heavily impacted by teacher turnover, which was an area of serious concern for many parents.

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APPENDIX A



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
401 11th St., Suite 1300
Huntington, WV 25701

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

January 28, 2015

Rebecca Jennings Knotts, PhD
School Psychology Department, MUGC

RE: IRBNet ID# 704425-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Jennings Knotts:

Protocol Title: [704425-1] Parent Perceptions of Parent-School Partnership Efforts for Students with Disabilities: A Three-Year Analysis of Survey Data in West Virginia

Expiration Date: January 28, 2016

Site Location: MUGC

Submission Type: New Project APPROVED

Review Type: Exempt Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.101(b)(4), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire January 28, 2016. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Jessica Chadwick.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

APPENDIX B

PARENT SURVEY - PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION



This survey is for parents of students receiving Preschool Special Education services through the Special Education Program. Your responses will help guide efforts to improve services and results for children and families. **You may skip any item that does not apply to you or your child.**

INSTRUCTIONS

- Fill in circle completely:
- Use pencil only. Incorrect:
- Please do not use pen.
- For each statement below, please select one of the response choices, i.e., Very strongly agree, Strongly agree, etc.

Very strongly agree
 Strongly agree
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree
 Very strongly disagree

PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP EFFORTS AND QUALITY OF SERVICES

1. I am part of the IEP/IFSP decision-making process
2. My recommendations are included in the IEP/IFSP
3. My child's IEP/IFSP goals are written in a way that I can work on them at home during daily routines
4. My child's evaluation report was written using words I understand
5. The preschool special education program involved parents in evaluations of whether preschool special education is effective
6. I have been asked for my opinion about how well preschool special education services are meeting my child's needs

People from preschool special education, including teachers and other service providers:

7. - Included me in the process of helping my child transition smoothly from early intervention to preschool special education
8. - Provide me with information on how to get other services (e.g., childcare, parent support, respite, regular preschool program, WIC, food stamps)
9. - Are available to speak with me
10. - Treat me as an equal team member
11. - Encourage me to participate in the decision-making process
12. - Respect my culture
13. - Value my ideas
14. - Ensure that I have fully understood my rights related to preschool special education
15. - Communicate regularly with me regarding my child's progress on IEP/IFSP goals
16. - Give me options concerning my child's services and supports
17. - Provide me with strategies to deal with my child's behavior

Please continue on the back page.

APPENDIX C

PARENT SURVEY - SCHOOL AGE SPECIAL EDUCATION



This survey is for parents of students receiving special education through the Special Education Program. Your responses will help guide efforts to improve services and results for children and families. **You may skip any item that does not apply to you or your child.**

INSTRUCTIONS

- Fill in circle completely:
- Use pencil only. Incorrect:
- Please do not use pen.
- For each statement below, please select one of the response choices, i.e., Very strongly agree, Strongly agree, etc.

SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO PARTNER WITH PARENTS

Very strongly agree
 Strongly agree
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree
 Very strongly disagree

Efforts to Improve the Special Education System

1. I have been asked for my opinion about how well special education services are meeting my child's needs

IEP Meetings

- 2. IEP meetings are scheduled at a time and place that are convenient for me
- 3. We discussed whether my child could be educated satisfactorily in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and support
- 4. At the IEP meeting, we discussed accommodations and modifications that my child would need ...
- 5. At the IEP meeting, we discussed how my child would participate in statewide assessments
- 6. The evaluation results were thoroughly explained to me
- 7. I was given enough time to fully understand my child's IEP

Information Exchange

- 8. Information was provided to me in a language I understand
- 9. I was given information about organizations that offer support for parents of students with disabilities

School Environment and Supports

My child's school:

- 10. - Provides funding, transportation, or other supports for parents to participate in training workshops
- 11. - Connects families to other families that can provide information and mutual support
- 12. - Offers parents training about special education issues
- 13. - Explains what options parents have if they disagree with a decision of the school
- 14. - Has a person on staff who is available to answer parents' questions
- 15. - Offers parents a variety of ways to communicate with teachers

Please continue on the back page.

SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO PARTNER WITH PARENTS *(continued)*

Very strongly disagree
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Agree
Strongly agree
Very strongly agree

School Personnel

16. My child's teachers give me enough time and opportunities to discuss my child's needs and progress

Teachers and administrators at my child's school:

- 17. - Answered any questions I had about Procedural Safeguards
- 18. - Show sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities and their families
- 19. - Encourage me to participate in the decision-making process
- 20. - Respect my family's values

The School's Provision of Services

- 21. The school gives me choices with regard to services that address my child's needs
- 22. I have a good working relationship with my child's teachers
- 23. The school communicates regularly with me regarding my child's progress on IEP goals

Transition from School

24. The school provides information on agencies that can assist my child in the transition from school

25. Child's Age when First Referred to Early Intervention or Special Education:

Under 1 year **OR**

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

Age in Years When First Referred

COMMENTS:

I do I do not agree to have my comments shared with the district.

Thank you for your participation!

Please return the survey in the enclosed postage-paid envelope to:

Parent Involvement Survey
c/o Measurement Incorporated
423 Morris Street
Durham, NC 27701



APPENDIX D

Data Code Categories

FAPE

Extended School Year/Summer Programs

Non-Academic Services

Child Find

SAT

Initial Evaluation

Re-Evaluation

Annual Review

Initiation of Services/ Out of State Transfer

Parental Requests for Evaluations

Prior Written Notice

Consent

Eligibility/State Eligibility Criteria

Adequate Staff/Qualified Personnel

School Specialist

Transition Services

Completion of Services

Procedural Safeguards

Compliance with IEP

Progress Under IEP

Least Restrictive Environment

Parental Participation

Due Process

Transportation

Thank You's

School Performance

Parent Training

Survey Comments

School Safety

Communication

Ethical and Professional Behavior

Tutoring

Meetings

Discipline

School Culture

School Safety
