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All About the Special Education Process: A Handbook for Parents

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All About the Special Education Process: A Handbook for Parents

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Abstract

Until 1976 and the passing of P.L. 94-482 parents or caregivers of children with disabilities were not significantly involved in the education of their children. Even after this, many parents have felt they were in unknown territory regarding the field of special education. With different types of meetings, definitions, and processes that are not explained in a form that those who have not studied special education would understand, how could there not be unknown territory? Parents are provided with the Parent's Guide to Special Education (2018) and the Parental Rights for Public School Students Receiving Special Education Services: Notice of Procedural Safeguards (2018) annually throughout their child's experience in special education. However, even as this document was created for parents, it can be difficult to navigate and comprehend. Parents and teachers should feel connected and understood throughout the special education process, regardless of the process or terms being used.

This project reviewed the literature regarding parent involvement in the special education process and found the themes of communication, collaboration and common understanding. In response and in order to support families and caregivers, a handbook with definitions of common terms, explanations of the purpose and possible outcomes of each meeting in the special education process, an overview of the disability categories of special education, and resources for parents was created. The intent was to help them understand the special education process more thoroughly, ultimately allowing them to be more comfortable with the process – including planning and understanding the progress of their child.

All About the Special Education Process: A Handbook for Parents Literature Review

Introduction

Until 1976 and the passing of P.L. 94-482 parents or caregivers were not significantly involved in the education of children with disabilities. Even after this, many parents have felt they were in unknown territory in regard to the field of special education. With different types of meetings, definitions, and processes that are not explained in a form that those who have not studied special education would understand, how could there not be unknown territory? Parents are provided with the Parental Rights for Public School Students Receiving Special Education Services: Notice of Procedural Safeguards (2018) annually throughout their child's experience in special education, however even though this document was created for parents it can be difficult to navigate and comprehend. Parents and teachers should feel connected and understood throughout the IEP process, regardless of the process or terms being used.

As a parent, I understand the importance of understanding the processes that a child is undergoing. It eases one's mind and allows for procedures to glide smoothly due to understanding and better team collaboration. It is important, as a special education teacher, to collaborate with a student's parents, as well as other teachers (Ryan, 2018). In order to have positive and successful communication and collaboration with them, we all must be on the same page of understanding. Now, I am not asking that the teachers and parents are aware of what I, as a master's level special education teacher, am but I would like to assist them with the general knowledge of their student's special education paperwork and the language used within. Keeping this in mind, I explored the areas in which I felt parents and teachers needed more awareness.

According to parent surveys (Kurth, 2020), parents often dread going to Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Could this be due to unfamiliarity of the terms and what they

mean? To support families and caregivers, I created a parent-friendly handbook with definitions of terms, a description of the purpose and possible outcomes of each meeting, an overview of the categories of special education, as well as some resources for parents to dive deeper into the topic. The creation of this handbook for parents was intended to help them understand the special education process more thoroughly, allowing them to be more comfortable with the plan, the teachers, as well as their child's progress. Overall, parent and teacher collaboration and communication are what makes the process run smoothly from start to finish (Spann, 2003).

Review of Literature

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes a free appropriate public education (FAPE) available to children with disabilities throughout the world (About Idea, 2020). The most recent amendment to IDEA in Public Law 114-95 stated,

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.

This law makes certain that special education and other related services are available for students who need them. IDEA focuses on how public agencies and states provide early intervention, related services, as well as special education services to toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities who are found eligible (About IDEA, 2020).

Parents are so important when it comes to the special education process. Their communication and collaboration are vital to the creation of their student's IEP plan. *Endrew F. v. Douglas Country School District RE-1* is a court case that demonstrates the importance of

parent involvement. The parents in this case argued that their child with autism did not make measurable progress on his IEP goals and that the school failed to address his behavior problems that were noticeably worsening (Wrightslaw, 2021). The parents advocated for their student! As a conclusion to this court case, Chief Justice Roberts wrote, “a student offered an educational program providing ‘merely more than the minimum progress from year to year can hardly be said to have been offered an education at all.’” (Wrightslaw, 2021). Overall, both IDEA and the court case of *Andrew F. v Douglas County School District RE-1* demonstrate the intense need of parent’s communication and collaboration with the school and IEP team.

Through my literature review I found many themes to follow this intense need. Articles reviewed the need for common understanding, collaboration, and communication from both school faculty and parents. This begins with communication and common understanding that stems from the school.

Communication

Communication between the parents and the schools is identified as a significant source of stress for the parents (Ryan, 2018). Kemp (2014) highlighted that parents have a difficult time with knowing what is going on with their student within the IEP meetings. Keeping this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why parents leave meetings feeling left out or defeated with the process. It is our job, as educators, to avoid this scenario from taking place going forward because as parents are a key factor in every single decision that is made for the student and their specialized programming.

To relieve this unfamiliarity with parents, we need to define special-education specific terms, so they understand what is being discussed. Additionally, educators need to ensure that the discussion is being held with parents about what it might mean for their child. The family

should have immediate access to this information in a form that is simple to navigate (Goldberg, 1982). Furthering their understanding of these areas will ease their stress and likely open more doors for better communication and collaboration, allowing for a progressive and successful pathway for the student and their families.

Ongoing communication with parents in the form of communication logs (Ryan, 2018) or touching base with a call each month (Kurth, 2020) also support parents. By doing this, relationships will grow stronger. There will be an open line of communication, which is vital for teacher and parent collaboration.

Collaboration

Parents should understand they are vital to their child's success and, in fact, meetings regarding a child cannot be held without them (Bodin, 2011). By including the parents in every meeting and seeking their opinion, they will see that the process, overall, requires collaboration between the all parties. Many parents have a difficult time with knowing what is going on with their student within the IEP meetings (Kemp, 2014), yet collaboration will allow them to see the importance of their attendance at each meeting, as well as the importance of their input into their child's learning and environment. Overall, parent and teacher collaboration and communication are what makes the special education process run smoothly from start to finish (Spann, 2003).

Developing Common Understanding and Providing Support

Attending meetings and understanding their purposes can be very overwhelming to families of students with special needs, especially as the number of meetings varies from a minimum of once/year to three or more times/year – depending on where the student is in the special education process (Pierangelo, 1996). With each meeting comes a handful of paperwork; this paperwork may contain a Prior Written Notice (PWN), Assessment Plan (AP), Integrated

Written Assessment Report (IWAR), and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), just to name a few. Each official document serves a legal purpose, according to IDEA, thus is written in legalese. For parents, questions such as “What do these documents stand for? What do they mean?” may arise. Without a supportive relationship and quest for collaboration, families may be hesitant to ask questions. Kurth (2020) pointed out that these papers are important and play a huge role in special education, however, most end up in the trash due to the parent not being aware of what they are or what they represent.

The need is high for explanations of the different special education categories. Parents, many times, leave with their child’s IEP document not knowing what the category means, or even how it was decided to be the right fit for their student (Rohrer, 2014). It should be explained to the parents that assessing their children and creating a “picture” of the whole child is vital in deciding whether they qualify for special education, as well as the category under which they will receive services. If a student is assessed and the results show that they are well below average in reading and math, chances are they will qualify for the special education category called “specific learning disability” (Shin, 1989).

Easily found and readily available resources is another area of need for parents, whether they are new or a veteran to special education; these include disability specific resources as well as resources on the general topic of special education (Bodin, 2011). There are many laws and rights that come along with a special education document. As students may not be within the cognitive or age level to understand the laws and their rights within the special education process, but parents should be aware of their right for advocacy for their child (Goldberg, 1982). While a teacher will do their best to make the family aware of these rights, it is not always completed with fidelity (Bodin, 2011.) If a parent has questions or needs further guidance, it will

only help their student or themselves to have an advocate become a part of the student's IEP team (Goldberg, 1982). This advocate will ensure that the students' rights are being met and that the school is implementing the teams' decisions that were founded throughout the individualized education plan meetings.

Conclusion

Overall, it was found that by helping parents develop a better understanding of the special education process while focusing on collaboration and communication, outcomes for students would be bet better (Ryan, 2018). Too often parents are not provided with the support and resources that is needed to comprehend what is happening in the students' academic world and within the special education process. Both the literature cited and the high leverage practices in special education support the need of progress in both areas of collaboration and communication.

Reframing the way parents perceive special education meetings and procedures may create more of a success rate for students; this is because what students are being told at school will make more sense to parents, where it will then be withheld with accuracy. While it can be argued that the procedural safeguards handbook is "enough" for parents to locate what is needed, I argue that there has not been the success of understanding that is crucial for these parents and caregivers to have and use to their advantage throughout their student's IEP process. Therefore, the following appendices consist of a parent-friendly handbook highlighting the special education process.

All About the Special Education Process: A Handbook for Parents

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Appendix A: Glossary of Special Education Terms and Definitions

*The follow definitions were taken from: https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Special-Education-Toolkit_Definitions.pdf

ACCOMMODATIONS: Changes in the administration of an assessment, such as setting, scheduling, timing, presentation format, response mode, or others, including any combination of these, that do not change the construct intended to be measured by the assessment or the meaning of the resulting scores. Accommodations are used for equity, not advantage, and serve to level the playing field for a student with a disability. To be appropriate, assessment accommodations must be identified in the student's Individualized Education IEP or Section 504 plan and used regularly during instruction and classroom assessment.

ACHIEVEMENT TEST: An instrument designed to efficiently measure the amount of academic knowledge and/or skill a student has acquired from instruction. Such tests provide information that can be compared to either a norm group or a measure of performance.

Example: NDWEA testing

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT: Tests that gather information on the standards-based performance and progress of students whose disabilities preclude their valid and reliable participation in general assessments. Alternate assessments measure the performance of a relatively small population of students who are unable to participate in the general assessment system, with or without accommodations, as determined by the IEP Team. There are different types of alternate assessments a state may adopt under the federal requirements. First, states must make available an alternate assessment based on grade level achievement standards. Then, states may develop two other alternates: the "alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards" designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and the "alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards" for students who cannot be expected to achieve grade level standards within one school year and who need a less complex assessment to demonstrate their knowledge of those standards.

ASSESSMENT: The process of collecting information about individuals, groups, or systems that relies upon several instruments, one of which may be a test. Therefore, assessment is a more comprehensive term than *test*.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY DEVICE: Any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability. The term does not include a medical device that is surgically implanted, or the replacement of such device

EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES: Programs and services provided to infants and toddlers under Part C of IDEA who are experiencing developmental delays or have a diagnosed physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay.

FREE APPROPRIATE PUBLIC EDUCATION: Special education and related services that (a) Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) Meet the standards of the SEA; (c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state involved; and (d) Are provided in conformity with an individualized IEP that meets the requirements of IDEA

INCLUSION: Under special education, an approach that stresses educating students with disabilities, regardless of the type of severity of that disability, in the regular classrooms of their neighborhood schools and delivering special education and related services within the classroom to the extent possible.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP): A written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with IDEA regulations.

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE): The IDEA requires that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, i.e., in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports (referred to as “supplementary aids and services”) along with their non-disabled peers in the school they would attend if not disabled, unless a student’s IEP requires some other arrangement.

MODIFICATION: A change to the testing conditions, procedures, and/or formatting so that measurement of the intended construct is no longer valid, and the score cannot be aggregated with scores from tests administered under standard conditions.

NOTICE OF MEETING (NOM): A form that tells when the meeting will be held, where it will be held, and who it will be with.

PRIOR WRITTEN NOTICE (PWN): A form that tells what was completed at the meeting.

RELATED SERVICES: Transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education; includes speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, early identification and assessment of disabilities in children, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. Related services also include school health services and school nurse services, social work services in schools, and parent counseling and training

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI): A practice of providing high-quality instruction and intervention matched to student needs using data on the child's learning rate and level of performance to make important educational decisions about the necessity for more intense interventions or as part of evaluating eligibility for special education.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: Specially designed instruction, provided at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.

STANDARDIZED TEST: A test administered with the same directions and under the same conditions (time limits, etc.) and scored in the same manner for all students to ensure the comparability of scores.

Appendix B: Meetings and Their Purposes

Who attends the meetings for my child?

A typical special education team consists of a group of people from within the school, and the parents/guardians of the student. The group of people from the school include: the classroom teacher, the principal, the counselor, the special education teacher, and any other teachers that assist with the student throughout the day. Without these members, the meeting cannot go forth unless there has been an excusal of the team member. In this case, there is a specific form that must be created and signed. In some cases, a school psychologist is present. A school psychologist assists with placement of an IEP, as well as new assessments that need to be done every three years.

My child is new to special education. Where do we start?

1. **Profile meeting-** A profile meeting is where the IEP team initially meets to go over the student's present level of function. The special education teacher will ask questions about the student's home life and school life. After going through many questions, the school psychologist, special education teacher, and any additional team members such as a speech teacher or occupational therapists will state what assessment(s) they would like to do with the student in order to find out even more information.
2. **The Integrated Written Assessment Report (IWAR) meeting-** An IWAR meeting is where the assessors will highlight the results of the tests they completed with the student. The team, including the parents, will decide the eligibility for special education based on these results. If the student qualifies, the team will then begin to develop the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
3. **The IEP meeting-** Since the team would have already discussed the present level information for this student beginning in special education during the profile meeting, they will need to add in the assessment results as well as create goals for the student to work toward, determine the child's least restrictive environment, discuss assistive technology needs, as well as accommodations, and how many minutes the student will receive the services within their school day.

*After the student qualifies for special education and the IEP is given to the parent, expect to have annual IEP meetings going forth. Having this annual meeting allows for updates to your child's IEP. The student will be reassessed every three years to ensure they are in the correct category placement for special education. So, you will go through this same process three years from now!

What if my student is already qualified in special education services?

1. **The IEP meeting-** If your student is already on an IEP, you must attend the annual meeting! This meeting will update the student's present level functioning, where again

the teacher will ask many questions about the student's school life and home life. New goals will be made, and minutes as well as accommodation's may be adjusted as the team sees fit.

Reminder: You will have another annual meeting next year. The student will also be reassessed every three years, so you will be going through the process of 1. Profile meeting, 2. IWAR meeting, and 3. IEP meeting again when the time comes.

Anything else?

YES!

1. **Amendment meeting:** If, at any time, you have concerns or want to make changes to your child's IEP document, you may ask the special education teacher to have an amendment meeting. This is where the team will get together and make the small or big adjustments that you and they see fit for the student.

Appendix C: How are Special Education Categories Determined?

Categories are determined based on the assessment data that is completed throughout the profile meeting and IWAR meeting process. To determine if a child is a child with a disability and in need of special education resources, data is looked at for assessments. This includes aptitude and achievement tests (but not restricted to these results), parent input, teacher recommendations, physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior.

Once the data is reviewed, the team deciphers which category fits the students' criteria best by following a checklist for the different disability categories.

Appendix D: The 13 Disability Categories for Special Education

*The following definitions are from:

https://www.dodea.edu/dodeaCelebrates/upload/Disabilities_Defined_IDEA.pdf

1. **Autism** means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
2. **Deaf-Blindness** means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.
3. **Deafness** means a hearing impairment so severe that a child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
4. **Emotional Disturbance** means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
5. **Hearing Impairment** means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but is not included under the definition of "deafness."
6. **Intellectual Disability** means significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
7. **Multiple Disabilities** means concomitant impairments, the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments.
8. **Orthopedic Impairment** means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
9. **Other Health Impairment** means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and adversely affects a child's educational performance.
10. **Specific Learning Disability** means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken, or written, that may manifest

itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations.

11. **Speech or Language Impairment** means a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

12. **Traumatic Brain Injury** means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

13. **Visual Impairment Including Blindness** means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Appendix E: Parent Resources

<https://www.easterseals.com>

Easter Seals provides exceptional services, education, outreach, and advocacy so that people living with autism and other disabilities can live, learn, work and play in our communities.

<https://familyvoices.org>

Family Voices aims to achieve family-centered care for all children and youth with special health care needs and/or disabilities.

<https://www.pacer.org>

The mission of PACER Center (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) is to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and their families, based on the concept of parents helping parents.

<https://www.understood.org>

Understood has many definitions, process examples, and so on for parents to follow.

Appendix F: FAQ (Frequently asked questions)

Can you assess my student for dyslexia?

No, school districts do not assess students for dyslexia. Specific assessments to determine if a child has dyslexia can be completed by doctors or psychologists. However, know that dyslexia is part of the Specific Learning Disabilities category and we use the interventions that are recommended for students with dyslexia.

Will my child outgrow their disability?

While there is no way to know if your child will outgrow their disability, we will continue to teach strategies needed for them to be successful with their disability. We will teach skills such as the use of assistive technology, social abilities, and so on.

Who develops my child's IEP?

The parents, one education teacher, an admin member, and the special education teacher.

Will my student be left out of classroom activities?

The least restrictive environment for each child is determined at their IEP meeting – the LRE is a continuum of services. This means some children may be best served within the general education setting, while others may benefit the most from small group sessions in the special education setting. Please know we will do our best to plan services around activities that take place within the general education classroom.

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