

FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Parent Involvement in Instructional Planning

Dorothy Crawford

Since the legislative mandate of the widely exalted — as well as reviled — Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), this law has been subject to all manner of scrutiny and interpretation. The majority of parents still look upon this Act as an enigma. With regard to parent involvement in instructional planning, it seems appropriate first to examine the Act's reference to this process, specifically as mandated by the Individual Education Program (IEP). The IEP (as printed in the *Federal Register*, August 23, 1977) is stated to be:

... a written statement for each handicapped child developed in any meeting by a representative of the local educational agency or an intermediate educational unit who shall be qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of handicapped children, the teacher, the parents or guardian or such child, and whenever appropriate, such child, which statement shall include (a) a statement of the present levels of educational performance of such child, (b) a statement of annual goals, including short-term instructional objectives, (c) a statement of the specific educational services to be provided to such child, and the extent to which such child will be able to participate in regular educational programs, (d) the projected date for initiation and anticipated duration of such services, and appropriate objective criteria and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, on at least an annual basis, whether instructional objectives are being achieved. . .

THE IEP TEAM

The Act is specific about the persons to be involved in developing the IEP, to insure that all persons with information about the child have input in making decisions representing the child's best interests. Consequently, an administrator of the local education agency (LEA) or intermediate educational unit must be involved to assure the availability of resources (including staff, space, and money) needed to implement the IEP. Identifying these resources helps to insure the attainment of specified objectives and goals.

Dorothy Crawford is National Project Director of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities Research and Demonstration Project, Phoenix, Arizona (Federal Grant 76-JN-99-0021), investigating the relationship between juvenile delinquency and learning disabilities. She also serves on the ACLD Board of Directors.

The child's teacher is a second member of the IEP team. Teachers are the primary persons responsible for program delivery; therefore, they must be involved in program planning and placement decisions. The teacher is in a qualified position to assess the proper setting, skills, and supportive services necessary to achieve the child's instructional needs. The teacher also provides a means of communication between classroom and home — an essential component of successful programs. Including the teacher on the team reduces the possibility of breakdown in important communication and helps eliminate misunderstanding and confusion by parents about the child's program. Additionally, the teacher can more easily implement and conduct the remediation program through full involvement with the IEP team.

A third member of the team is the parent. Parents possess important information about the total child — his or her development, preschool history, and unique needs — which is deemed critical to the plan. Further, the law mandates parents' *rights* to be participants in all decisions about their children's educational program. They must have the opportunity to state what they believe is proper for their children's educational needs. If the parents do not agree with the plan, they also have a right to request a hearing in the course of *due process*. Congruently, *due process* can be initiated by the schools if they do not agree with demands of the parents. Procedural safeguards have been written into the statute for

the benefit of the child should due process considerations arise.

A fourth member of the team may be the child, if deemed appropriate. In the past, children seldom had an opportunity to give their views of their own proposed program and/or alternative programs. The child, as part of the team, now has the potential opportunity to relate his/her feelings, desires, and reactions to decisions as they are developed. This type of input can prove valuable in writing an ideal IEP.

The individualized education program is a documented agreement between all parties. It sets forth in clear terms the provision of certain services. The IEP is the conduit for the handicapped to receive a free, appropriate public education, a management design linking the child with an appropriate program. Prior to placement in any special education program, an IEP is required, and failure to observe this order of procedures violates the intent of the Act.

The law assumes that a child's unique needs can be stated if it is determined that he/she needs special education. It also assumes that objectives can be established, that a reasonable length of time can be projected, and that achievement of objectives is determinable. It must be demonstrated that the program can be expected to produce the objectives.

Many parents, as they become cognizant of PL 94-142, are of the mind that it is a panacea; that through this statute all handicapped children shall be provided the *best* education. This is a fallacy. The law requires that handicapped children be provided a special education *appropriate* to their needs. Most school agency staffs interpret an appropriate education as that which could be expected to achieve agreed upon objectives of the individualized education program. One of the major reasons for the team meeting is to reach agreement, by all parties, that the proposed program is indeed *reasonable*.

The IEP must include a statement concerning the time in which the child will be able to participate in the regular classroom setting/program. This portion of the Act reads:

FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN is published monthly except June, July, and August as a service to teachers, special educators, curriculum specialists, administrators, and those concerned with the special education of exceptional children. This journal is abstracted and indexed in *Exceptional Child Education Abstracts*, and is also available in microfilm from Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Subscription rates, \$10.00 per year. Copyright 1978, Love Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without written permission is prohibited. Printed in the United States of America. Second class postage is paid at Denver, Colorado.

Executive and Editorial Office
6635 East Villanova Place
Denver, Colorado 80222
Telephone (303) 757-2579

EDITORIAL BOARD

Edward L. Meyen
University of Kansas

Glenn A. Vergason
Georgia State University

Richard J. Whelan
University of Kansas Medical Center

Carolyn Acheson
Senior Editor

Stanley F. Love
Publisher

... that to the extent appropriate handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily . . .

This part of the Act means that the program must take place in the least restrictive environment. And decisions must be made on the basis of the individual's *educational needs* rather than on the traditional assumption that a child must be placed based on the handicapping condition. In regard to the least restrictive environment — if the IEP indicates a need for provision of a particular service that is not available in the regular school setting, that environment must be located or established.

The IEP is the signed contract mandating the designed program. It insures all parties involved of adherence to the agreed upon appropriate program, as to placement, goals, and objectives.

THE PARENT ROLE

Countless reams of paper have been utilized in printing the various rules, regulations, and recommendations for parent involvement in educational planning, including the many suggestions by various disciplines within the field of Special Education. A synthesis of these recommendations follows.

Diagnostic Evaluation

Practically speaking, parents, prior to their involvement in the IEP, should:

- Get in touch with a school administrator if they have a handicapped child who is not in school. Parents have the right to refer their child for a diagnostic evaluation. According to the law, no child can be excluded from school because of a handicap. The school must provide a comprehensive evaluation. If the child is found eligible for special services, a meeting to prepare an IEP must follow within 30 days.
- Investigate availability of services for the preschool child. Many states now have special programs for children as young as three years of age. PL 94-142 provides incentives for programs for the three- to five-year-old handicapped child.
- Communicate with the classroom teacher if their child is having problems. In communicating with classroom teachers, parents likely will find they have many things in common. Sometimes the problems the child is having at school are carried

into the home. These problems should be thoroughly discussed between the classroom teacher and parents.

- Get an outside evaluation if, as a parent, you do not agree with the evaluation of the local school agency. Or, if the child is already in a Special Education program and the parent believes it is based on inaccurate testing, a reevaluation may be requested.
- Document any requests for evaluations, in writing, to a school administrator. All critical information should be in writing and maintained in a file for future reference.
- Develop an understanding of the tests used in the diagnostic evaluation.
- Take the child to a medical professional for a complete physical examination to clarify the problem. Many times, mental handicapping conditions are ruled out because, through examination, the problem is revealed to be of a physical nature, or vice versa.
- Discuss, with the evaluator, knowledge of the child's strengths, weaknesses, developmental processes, etc. The parent has had the opportunity to observe the child on a day-by-day basis, whereas the diagnostician sees him/her only briefly. Pertinent information provided by the parent can be crucial to the final analysis.
- Become knowledgeable on the type of tests administered and learn what the tests are expected to do. Parents must give permission for the child to be tested; their signature is the doorway to testing, and to understanding its function.
- Inform the diagnostician if the child's primary language is other than English.
- Inform the evaluator of any visual or hearing impairments in the child, so special arrangements can be made for testing. All testing must consider the various types of handicaps so the child's abilities can be assessed fairly.
- Receive results of the tests through communication in the language or mode the parent comprehends. Also, parents may request and must receive copies of the evaluation.
- Request due process if the parent believes the school's decision is incorrect or inaccurate.

IEP Development

Following the diagnostic evaluation and decision as to special needs, the process of IEP development commences. The parents' role here is best filled if they:

- Attend meetings held to plan the child's IEP. Again, the parent is very much a member of the team. In order to give thorough input, they should be present not at just one, but all meetings.
- Gather all documented information, including school records, pertinent to the child.
- Bring an advocate to the conferences. An advocate can be more objective than either parent or the other professionals and often is helpful in keeping the meeting "on track." Many handicapping conditions are represented by parent oriented organizations with advocates prepared to give assistance.
- Prepare a list of items the parent believes should be a part of the planned curriculum.
- Ask professionals (outside the school agency) to be present at the meetings if they have information pertinent to the child or to assist in verifying parent requests for special types of services.
- Feel free to discuss relevant information about the child. The child usually is dependent on the parent to be his/her greatest advocate. Test scores and assumptions of others regarding the child are not sufficient. That's a major reason parents are part of the team.
- Be sure the program the child is to receive is built on services that relate directly to the need, *not* the handicapping condition. The intent of the law is to get away from the practice of developing programs and then finding children to fit the programs.
- Be sure the child is placed in an environment that is the *least restrictive*. Some handicapped children cannot be mainstreamed, at least initially, but an essential issue to becoming mature, productive adults is good peer group relations, which can best be developed through some association with "typical" children.
- Avoid hostile, aggressive attitudes. Differences with other members of the team should be presented in a rational, reasonable manner. The advocate can be of help in this regard.

Prior to the parent's consent to the IEP, the parent should thoroughly understand the program as written. The parent should be certain that specific, rather than general or abstract, goals are presented. All goals and objectives must be clear-cut, with nothing left to speculation. Parents must be sure that the goals set are theirs as well as the professionals'. Also, parents should be able to understand and track their child's progress and to evaluate and monitor the program; otherwise, its effectiveness cannot be ascertained.

In IEP development, parents should consider program elements in addition to academic components. If parents think their child can benefit from an appropriate vocational education program, it should by all means be considered in IEP development. Enrichment programs should be discussed thoroughly. Parents know their children's special talents, and should make recommendations for fine arts programs. Appropriate goals and objectives *for the total child* is the ultimate aim of the IEP.

A parent's signature on the written IEP does not signal the end of parental involvement. Continued participation is in the form of regularly scheduled conferences with the child's teachers; at least one formal evaluation each year, with the IEP updated accordingly; and continued communication with other team members.

The IEP provides accountability for achieving specific goals within specific timelines. It provides closer communication and generates trust between school and home. It designs curricula with specific goals and objectives. Because the IEP must be a written document, it eliminates misunderstanding and confusion concerning program plans. It provides the needed interdisciplinary team approach, rather than haphazard individual efforts. Essentially, the IEP formalizes good standard teaching practices for the handicapped which, in years past, have been sadly missing.

The best way for the IEP to meet the expectations of Congress and provide the optimum content and effectiveness is for every member of the team, as outlined in the Act, to be *actively involved*. If the parents should refuse or decline to participate, a primary element of the team approach is lacking.

In the Annual Report of the National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped (1977), a mother of a handicapped child outlined her proposal of the IEP's contents, as follows:

The IEP should include (1) a statement of my child's present development level in all areas relating to physical, emotional,

and intellectual development; (2) a statement of my child's learning strengths; (3) a statement of any medical, environmental, or cultural consideration particular to my child; (4) a statement of my child's education needs and their relationship to the total sequence of developmental skills; (5) a statement of specific goals and timetables; (6) a statement of instructional alternatives; (7) a listing of appropriate educational materials relevant to my child's learning characteristics; (8) a clear delineation of the responsibilities of the entire planning team; (9) established time frames for daily programming, periodic review and evaluation; and (10) a description of program procedures.

Obviously, this proposed IEP plan was written by a parent who thoroughly studied the Act, the intent of Congress, and who expended energy in researching other plans. This plan would be an ideal model for parents, as well as other members of the IEP team.

Congress clearly intended that IEPs should decidedly reflect the observations, opinions, and desires of the parent. In fact, at one time the Senate version of the bill included a requirement that IEP planning conferences be held three times a year. Later, this requirement was altered to "at least annually," with the thinking that the frequency of conferences should be based on the individual IEP planning group in accordance with each child's individual needs. This revision in the bill, of course, does not preclude more frequent meetings. Regular, frequent conferences and communication are particularly valuable in enabling parents to plan and provide supplementary educational and developmental assistance in the home. Hopefully, the minimum requirement of annual meetings will be the exception rather than the rule.

From the other team members' standpoint, parent involvement should consist of much more than eliciting parents' observations and suggestions. The process should guarantee the parents an opportunity to evaluate and monitor their child's progress, and should provide assurance that the child's problem has been properly classified according to handicapping condition *and* need. Utilizing maximum parent participation enables the team to gain the best possible understanding of the child's needs and how best to meet them.

The National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped (1977) supports the following propositions:

1. That the Individualized Education Program is an invaluable education tool which should be fully and unreservedly used by every school in the nation with every handicapped child;
2. That the IEP should be seen as concerning the whole child, in all aspects of his or her life —

outside of school as well as in it, and bearing on physical and emotional as well as intellectual needs;

3. That the preparation of each IEP should be an interdisciplinary effort with appropriate participation by every member of the staff who can make a substantial contribution.
4. That every *effort* should be made to *involve* parents both in the development of IEPs and in their implementation; and
5. That school officials should demonstrate their understanding of the importance of IEPs by establishing priorities, special in-service training programs, teacher schedules, and resource allocation procedures that recognize the needs involved and assure optimum results.

In a U.S. Senate debate, Senator Williams (New Jersey) made some particularly apt comments regarding the IEP and parent involvement. These remarks were, in part:

... I think that one of the greatest benefits that can come to the handicapped child is to have the parents brought into this conference, because the education of the child continues after the school doors close and that child is at home. This is part of the educational process. That is one of the reasons why we have developed the idea of the mandatory conference, to make sure that the parent is part of the education of the child . . . (Williams, 1975).

If we believe that our children are the future, we must do all we can to further their well being and development. For parents, that includes active representation and involvement, following any avenues that will lead to betterment of their children's lives.

REFERENCES

- Amicus*, a special report. Washington, DC: National Center for Law and the Handicapped, July 1977.
- Closer Look*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, Fall 1977.
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). *Federal Register*. Washington, DC: August 23, 1977.
- Hobbs, N. The parent and the professional. *The futures of children* (Appendix A). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1974.
- National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped. *Annual report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1977.
- Schimmel, D., & Fischer, L. *The rights of parents in the education of their children*. Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education, November 1977.
- South Dakota Association for Children With Learning Disabilities. *Newsletter*, April 1978, 5(4).
- Warner, C. *Rights and responsibilities of parents and school in . . . the education of handicapped children* (rev.). Phoenix: Arizona Department of Education, January 1978.
- Williams, Sen. (NJ). Senate report No. 94-168. Washington, DC: *Congressional Record*, June 2, 1975.

CLASSROOM FORUM

*Beverly Dexter
Assistant Professor of Education
Lynchburg College
Lynchburg, Virginia*

This is my first year of teaching and, therefore, my first direct experience with IEP conferences. The other special education teachers say they have trouble getting parents involved. Is this unique to my school system, or are the parents generally indifferent? Whose fault is it when the parents refuse to take an active part on the IEP team? How can I help change attitudes in my own situation?

American education is presented as a free and equal educational opportunity for all children. Passage of PL 94-142 is helping this concept become a reality for handicapped children and their parents. With parental involvement in the IEP planning conference, a more thorough program can be planned for each exceptional child. In some instances, the student is involved actively in his or her own program planning.

In preparing for planning conferences, the special education teacher soon becomes aware that some parents hesitate to participate in such meetings. Without thinking, educators frequently brand these parents as uninterested, lazy, or similar terminology. In any case, these parents appear to be unconcerned about their child's educational welfare.

Unfortunately, educators tend to put the blame on the parents rather than on the "system" or other factors that may influence parents' reactions to requests for attendance at special meetings concerning their children. It will help the teacher if he or she tries to understand the parents' side of the situation.

The first step in preparing for an IEP conference involves an evaluation of the child from an educational standpoint. This evaluation procedure frequently is referred to as "psychological testing" — a term that is often misinterpreted by the general public. "Psychological" is confused with "psychiatric," which in turn implies "crazy" to many parents. Also, parents fear that such testing may point a finger at them for having made the child the way he is, especially if the exceptionality has to do with retardation. Society still insists on "putting a pox" or stigma on families with children who are not "normal," and too many families consider this situation as their "cross to bear" alone through life.

Thus, educators inadvertently may have increased the distance between parents and schools by using inappropriate terminology during their initial contacts with parents. Instead of thoroughly explaining *why* and *how* the child is to be evaluated, many school systems indicate only *what* is being tested — and this often implies IQ to the parents.

The procedure described above puts many parents on the defensive at the onset. To be told that your child has a learning problem (that he or she is somehow different from other children) can be traumatic. Even if the parents already suspected that their child had such a problem, confirmation of these suspicions may be more than they are ready to deal with at that particular time.

One doesn't know what has been going on in the parents' minds prior to notification from the school that their child is to be evaluated. Perhaps Aunt Sophie has been pointing an accusing finger ever since the mother insisted on seeing "Planet of the Apes" during her third month of pregnancy. Or Uncle Herman has insisted that the father came from a "no good" family for sure. Or maybe the pediatrician has patted them gently on the shoulders and assured them that their child soon would outgrow his or her problem.

Another reason for parents to be defensive or even fearful may be that this child is following a pattern established by one or both parents. A parent who had difficulty in school may convey this attitude in how he or she treats educational experiences of the offspring. If this parent was ridiculed throughout the school years, he or she may wish that the child remain in school only long enough to acquire the basics necessary for securing a job.

Further, parents may not want their child to be singled out for evaluation and possible special placement in the educational program. It emphasizes to them that their child is different and, again, this is interpreted as a

direct reflection upon themselves as parents and as adult human beings. Rather than seeing the educational planning process as a potentially positive aspect of their role as parents, they may view it as a negative implication of their own capabilities.

If a parent refuses to become involved in a conference such as mandated by PL 94-142, the child should not be dropped from the program. Rather, the school should work toward helping the parents *want* to become more involved in the total educational experiences of their child. Working hours, misinformation, unconfirmed prejudices, fear of the unknown, and biased negative feelings toward the school system in general may prevent the parent from “cooperating.”

An informal pre-conference with the parents could pave the way toward a working relationship between parents and teachers. The conference should be structured from the viewpoint that the teacher knows exactly what is proposed to be accomplished within the time period allowed for the pre-conference, but does not give the impression that these concerns are systematic to the point of being rigidly adhered to no matter what happens during the conference.

Making a list of special information to be exchanged between the two parties will help the teacher formulate appropriate questions to be asked. These should be ranked in order of priority, then re-ranked according to the feasibility of obtaining adequate answers during the preliminary conference. Of vital importance is to convey to the parents the child’s learning needs from the teacher’s standpoint, the program’s overall objectives, and how the role of special education ties all of these concerns together to help the individual child.

More than one meeting may be needed to develop meaningful contact with parents, but once parents experience a positive relationship with the school, they most likely will want to become more actively involved in the total educational experience of their child.

After parents have participated in the initial IEP conference, how can the teacher help maintain their interest and support in their child’s educational program?

Although the team approach to providing services for handicapped children is not new to most special education teachers, active involvement of the parent — and in some cases the child — around the IEP conference table is a unique experience for parents and educators

alike. In the past, major educational decisions were made by designated personnel within the school system while parents remained on the perimeter. Now, parents are required to take an active part both in planning and implementing the IEPs they helped develop.

This involvement on the parents’ part might be difficult for some of them to cope with initially, since it may be a drastic change from their previous role as observers of their child’s learning activities. After experiencing negative or even apathetic aspects of educational systems that have been unable or unwilling to provide appropriate services, many parents may hold back their involvement, in disbelief that they now have such rights protected by law.

To help parents over the hump of this new role in the educational lives of their children, special education teachers should be aware of some of the ways in which they can aid parents in their continuing interest and support. The following are some suggestions for teachers to help maintain parental involvement.

DO keep in regular contact with the parents following the initial IEP conference. Short notes or phone calls to parents let them know you are interested and concerned with providing continued educational services for their child. Grading periods need not be the only time when contact with parents is forthcoming. And information should not be confined to the negative. Progress and other positive changes deserve to be shared.

DO encourage parents to share their concerns with you. They may feel intimidated at first, but continued contact should improve their confidence level. If they are harboring negative feelings toward the IEP goals established for their child, little progress may be evidenced until the air is cleared of these feelings. This doesn’t mean you need to establish encounter group sessions — only that communication be kept open and honest on both sides.

DO listen to the parents. They should be able to provide information that is valuable to you as their child’s teacher. After all, parents have been with this child daily since birth and should know the child better than anyone else by the time he or she enters a public school program.

DO try to see the parents’ side of the situation. They didn’t ask to have a child with a handicap. At least you had the option to choose work with the handicapped as a profession. For parents, there is no 3:30 in the afternoon on school days. Nor is there a two-day weekend to anticipate when things get rough.

DO encourage the parents to share with each other. Organize small group discussions in which parents can

meet with (or maybe even without) you to share their mutual concerns. Arrange car pools for parents who may have problems in transporting their children.

DO encourage the parents to become more involved in classroom activities through home assignments related to what is happening in the classroom. Note that "home assignments" is used rather than "home work" — to encourage reinforcement activities with involvement by both parents and children. A simple review sheet may be provided as a basis for parent-child discussion. Better yet, a set of general questions may be given to parents each week to help them initiate conversations with their children regarding classroom activities. Try to keep these home assignments short and not just a rehash of worksheets done in the classroom.

DO encourage parents to make mental and/or written notes concerning their child's progress at home. Written notes may take more time, but they are more meaningful because of their documented form. Doing this also will help parents formulate questions and comments when conferences are scheduled, and a review of their written comments will help them tie together home and school activities.

DO encourage your students to talk with their parents about classroom activities. A simple language experience story at the end of the week may be written by the teacher while the child dictates, or the child may practice writing or typing skills by copying the "story." Postcards, short letters, or drawings describing classroom activities also may be used.

If possible, cassette tapes may be made periodically. The format should be varied to maintain interest on everyone's part, and the activity should be a "fun" one that deemphasizes academic pressures. The child could even use a form with incomplete sentences to help organize his or her thoughts. Starter sentences like, "This week I liked it when _____"; "I did my best work on _____"; or "I tried _____ for the first time this week" may be helpful in the beginning.

DO keep the parents informed about the program, current issues in education related to PL 94-142, and parents' rights in the education of handicapped children. Parents cannot be expected to become active participants in a program they do not understand fully. Educating parents concerning PL 94-142 may be the first step necessary for their commitment to educational goals for their child. Therefore, you must be familiar with the concepts and terminology utilized in the law. Familiarity with PL 94-142 is necessary for parents and educators alike, with emphasis on "down to earth" explanations and examples throughout each phase of the law.

But please. . .

DON'T use professional jargon with parents. This tends to widen the gap between parents and educators since so many of the terms are ambiguous-sounding at first. Of course, you needn't resort to a third grade speaking vocabulary either. Rather, treat the parents as adults, using terminology with which they can easily identify in their own experiences. Instead of discussing their child's "visual perceptual motor match" problems, why not substitute "eye-hand coordination," with an example of their child's particular problem in this area.

DON'T underestimate the parents. Many of the current laws regarding the handicapped have been the direct result of parent action groups throughout the country who have joined forces to demand equal rights for their children. Work toward having the parents communicate openly with you rather than silently against you.

DON'T let your own frustrations interfere with your conferences with parents. Everyone has days when everything seems to go wrong. At the end of each day, take a few minutes to note the positive things that happened during the day. This may not always be easy to do, but surely something good emerged from classroom activities during the course of a day.

You may wish to add to this list or make your own list of *DO* and *DON'T* ideas that individualize your own teaching situation regarding continued interest and support on the part of parents involved in the IEP conference.