

building *Parent Trust* in the special education setting

Educators and parents of students with special needs must work together to change school culture and move from conflict to collaboration.

If trust is born in strong relationships, then first encounters are critical. Parents of students with disabilities undergo a great deal of stress and come to us – the educational professionals – for help with vital specialized tasks, including assessment, placement, progress monitoring, and maintenance of their child’s ongoing needs.

Often, parents arrive at our school doorsteps with apprehension. Some parents are seeking a cure. Some don’t believe their child has a disability. Some parents are angry with themselves or even the system itself and look to us for answers.

Special education is a framework where the very foundation is built on adversarial relations – where parents hire attorneys and advocates to fight against districts. We need to lead the way in changing this culture and move from conflict to collaboration.

Collaboration between schools and parents is the foremost approach to accurate educational planning and rests primarily

on two principles of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act: parent participation and procedural due process. IDEA requires parents to be included in the educational process.

Effective long-term partnerships

Often, parents of students with special needs will come to an Individualized Education Program team meeting and feel threatened by the very people who are responsible for providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for their child. Trust between parents and educational leaders is necessary for effective long-term partnerships and ultimately to support and improve the teaching and learning process for eligible children.

Because of differing perspectives and theories of educational intervention, there has been a remarkable escalation of IDEA-

By Laurie Wellner

related litigation between parents of students with disabilities—specifically autism—and public school districts. Katsiyannis and Herbst (2004) note that special education “has consistently been the most litigated area in education.” Parents often disagree with school districts regarding eligibility, recommended services, and placement of their special needs children. In special education, these disputes frequently lead to litigation by parents exercising their due process rights.

These discrepancies have long-lasting implications for educators. These disagreements also generate continued mistrust between schools, teachers, administrators and families, while creating a considerable strain on the district’s budget.

Win-lose mentality of litigation

A concise definition of trust has been developing in many disciplines of social and human sciences, as well as the medical and financial fields. More recently, a growing body of research yields essential findings for educational leaders as well.

Various studies describe lack of communication, collaboration, poor listening skills, and professionals’ unwillingness to consider new ideas and perspectives as main factors in unstable relationships. Feinberg and Vacca (2000) have clarified that, unfortunately, “Once conflicts begin, the win-lose mentality of litigation has replaced the complexity of cogent discussion.” It is apparent that these trust violations are at the heart of many interpersonal conflicts, including those between parents and school districts.

Because parents have experienced confusion and loss, they may distrust the education system. They often claim that services recommended by school districts are merely adequate as opposed to ideal. When parents advocate for services beyond what administrators view as affordable or necessary, frustration can become a source of conflict. Failed advocacy results in expensive litigation and significant burdens on both the financial and emotional realms of the parties.

Parents can feel inferior to the experts, the complicated language, and the procedures within special education. When con-

flicts arise, parents can withdraw or become adversarial, leading to more clashes and ongoing meetings. Conflict continues to escalate when communication fails. Parents do not feel heard and the overall manner of communication becomes exclusionary. The more the school districts try to meet the needs of parents and avoid the legal proceedings, the more they seem to occur. The more resistant staff is to parent requests, the



more difficult the IEP meetings seem to be.

Understanding the factors that escalate conflict is necessary in developing appropriate response strategies for staff. A comprehensive meta-analysis of the literature revealed three major categories of “trust actions,” as well as the behaviors needed to establish and sustain these relationships (Wellner, 2010). The categories are trust in relationship building, trust in interpersonal communication, and trust in problem solving. When these key variables are implemented consistently, reduced tension and improved relationships are evidenced.

Trust in building relationships

People’s capacity to trust in others is critical to their work relationships (Mayer *et. al.*, 1995). When people have a high capacity to trust others, they are more willing and able to work in a productive fashion. Improving relationships is key to an upward spiral of team performance.

Specific trust actions in this category

include but are not limited to establishing rapport, listening with empathy, inviting parents to partner on the team, and creating safety for open disclosure.

Being aware of the nuances of staff members’ behaviors that implicitly communicate frustration or satisfaction can lead to improved practices. Providing psychological safety and avenues for purposeful interactions will allow parents to feel less

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threatened and improve trustful relations. Additionally, demonstrating trustworthiness through consistency, competence, reliability and predictability eases conflict in difficult situations.

Trust in interpersonal communication

Effective communication is at the heart of building and growing trust. When conflict occurs in teams or organizations, discussion is often avoided. Facing the fear and stress of engaging in crucial conversations is complex. Staff members may fear retaliation if they address conflicts proactively; hence, differences of opinion are handled in a reactive manner. Failing to manage disagreements and engage in constructive problem-solving contributes to the problem and prevents resolution from occurring.

A select group of “trust actions” identified in the study include avoiding or limiting acronyms, explaining processes and procedures, and including the parents’ story. Storytelling is a key leadership essen-

tial for persuasive communication, creating change and organic growth. When parents are provided the opportunity to share their authentic experiences of loss and discovery, trustful relations can be advanced.

Districts can improve relations by using inventive and less threatening means of communication. This might include meeting with parents outside of formal meetings with fewer professional personnel present,

or even sharing information prior to scheduled appointments.

Used proactively, these tools can be a means of building expertise within the team. Positive trust within teams has been linked to constructive team performance, essential to productive IEP team meetings.

■ Trust in problem solving

Decision-making is the heart of great

leadership, and often in special education this process can be perplexing. It is ongoing and cyclical in nature and requires preparation and skill. Working harmoniously with teams to elicit efficient, student-centered agreements between parents of a student with a disability and the educational professionals results in overall success for the student.

Making constructive use of differing perspectives and cooperative planning of next steps can be useful in moving from distrust to industrious and meaningful partnerships. Exploring team members' differences of opinion can provide a sense of inclusiveness for the parents, making them feel less intimidated and more a part of the decision-making process.

The success of a team relies on the leader's ability to encourage and generate open sharing of sensitive information, establish a clear purpose, and facilitate equal roles during the problem-solving phases. The opportunities for improved team performance can prevent parents from feeling as though they require legal representation in order for their needs to be met.

Educate, not litigate

Special education has always been a law-driven field, often viewed as a world within its own. It is fraught with various timelines, forms, tests, expenditures, limitations, complicated procedures and various personnel that can be foreign to parents and educators alike.

We need to educate, not litigate. Purposeful trust actions with parents of students with disabilities can reduce the number of due process cases and complaints, and instead build bridges with our families. We can begin to overcome the negative climate currently at play in the field of special education. Effective and long-lasting partnerships necessitate a new approach, mindset, and level of consideration in order to foster trusting relationships. ■

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Using humor to help educators boost communication skills

By Kate Parnes

In a time when disagreements may occur over presidential politics, one area we all agree on is the importance of quality education to a child's success. Now, imagine finding out that your child has special needs that may impact his educational program. You are more vigilant than ever in understanding how to access the appropriate educational supports and programs for your child's unique needs.

This is the world for parents who are new to special education. They are instantly navigating a complex system of federal and state laws and regulations with unfamiliar terms, definitions and acronyms. Imagine what it must be like for these parents when educators do not clearly explain the process and the options in understandable terms.

Creating a culture of collaboration with parents

Over the last several years, many school leaders familiar with the special education system have retired. Oftentimes, their replacements, through no fault of their own, are unfamiliar with the multiple procedures and mandates – and corresponding acronyms – that are a part of the system of special education. These

same site leaders are essential to creating a culture of collaboration, conducting successful special education meetings and strengthening the parent/school relationship.

To help public education leaders and special education practitioners in their quest to be effective partners, our firm created a short DVD titled *Acronym Soup*, which has been successfully used in professional development settings by districts, counties and SELPAs throughout the state. Using humor, this video reminds everyone of the importance of breaking down acronyms to help build trust between schools and parents of children with special needs. It is accompanied by an acronym tip sheet, which can be customized with your district or school logo and contact information, reproduced and distributed to parents.

The video and tip sheet can be accessed at www.fagenfriedman.com and clicking on Resources, or by calling Brian Padgett at (323) 330-6339.

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