National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Positive Communication Strategies for Collaborating with Parents of Students with Disabilities

In order to impact students' lives in pervasive and sustainable ways, special education teachers must build strong partnerships with their students' parents and help them in supporting their children's needs (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Colarusso & O'Rouke, 2007). Since its inception in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (then known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) has had as a core and fundamental provision parental involvement. Helping parents and finding successful ways to collaborate with them must continue to be a priority for educators throughout a student's school experience.

One area where collaboration with parents is critically important is in the development of the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The involvement of parents in the IEP process can increase the teacher's understanding of the student's environment, add to parents' knowledge of the student's educational setting, improve communication between parents and the school, increase the school's understanding of the student, and increase the likelihood that, with improved understanding between school and home, mutually agreed upon goals will be obtained. Too often parents feel ill equipped to be fully engaged participants in the IEP process. Some barriers to effective collaborative partnerships with parents include failure to take a positive, proactive approach in communicating with parents prior to IEP meetings, the use of educational jargon, cultural dissonance between the school and home, and failure empower parents as equal participants within the IEP team.

Teachers must assume the responsibility for establishing positive communication with parents prior to the IEP meeting. In order to do so teachers must take a positive, proactive approach to communicating with parents. Strategies for positive, proactive communication include setting the stage before school begins by sending home a letter welcoming students and parents to the classroom that outlines expectations for the year in a concise way that is easy to understand. Inviting suggestions, sharing contact information and providing several forms of contact information (phone number, email address, etc.), and letting parents know when you are most available to take their calls also helps establish

positive communication. Within the first week of school call parents to share at least one positive thing their child has done at school. Share three positive comments for every one negative comment. When discussing problems, whether in writing or in conversation, always present possible solutions for dealing with the problem and solicit suggestions from parents for dealing with the problem. Encourage parents to visit and participate in class activities and field trips, invite them to have lunch at school.

Avoid jargon and 'educationalise'. Communicate in direct, straightforward ways. Never talk down to parents. Avoid using acronyms and legal terms. When sharing assessment information, report scores in terms that have meaning to parents rather than using statistical terms and data. For example, report grade level equivalencies rather than t-scores. Check for understanding, making sure that parents fully understand what you are saying. Be willing to backtrack to ensure there is no confusion.

Respect parents' roles and cultural backgrounds in their children's lives. Recognize that you play a very different role in a student's life than the parent (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012). Remember parents are the experts on their children and their children's needs and strengths (Beckman, 2002). Ask parents (in person or through questionnaire) for information about their children (e.g. likes, dislikes, accomplishments, struggles, strategies that have worked in the past). Do this at the beginning of the year and whenever a new student is placed in your class. Ask parents if there is any disability-specific information they would like to share with you or any sources of information they would recommend so that you can gain knowledge of their child's disability. Have them share strategies and accommodations they use at home that might be helpful at school. Show interest in the child's total needs (e.g. social, behavioral, health) rather than focusing on academic needs exclusively. Invite parents to bring an interpreter to the IEP meeting and let them know other family members are welcome to serve in that capacity if applicable. Attend a community event or activity in which the family participates to get to know them better and to demonstrate your commitment to their child. Ask parents if there is anything they would like you to know about them or their families that might help you better serve their child (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012).

Empower parents by making sure they recognize their role as members of the IEP team. Very often parents feel intimidated or marginalized when coming to IEP meetings where there are a group of school personnel already in place around the conference table, papers and folders in front of them. Avoid this scene by greeting parents at the door, offer them refreshments, make introductions, have everyone seated at the same time and distribute materials after everyone is seated. Have a clearly written agenda that includes parental input and concerns, establish roles within the team, establish ground rules, and avoid using jargon. During the IEP meeting: Communicate clearly and listen carefully; Ask and welcome questions for clarification; Respect others' views; Share views willingly; Be open to different ideas and views; and Look to the future, not the past (Diliberto & Brewer, 2012).

Special education teachers must establish positive communication in order to collaborate effectively with the parents of their students with disabilities. This is especially true in the development of IEPs. Barriers to effective collaborative partnerships with parents include failure to take a positive, proactive approach in communicating with parents prior to IEP meetings, the use of educational jargon, cultural dissonance between the school and home, and failure empower parents as equal participants within the IEP team. Strategies can be implemented to overcome these barriers thus establishing positive communication and strengthening collaborative partnerships with parents of students with disabilities.

References

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