

Using the Full Individual Evaluation (FIE) Process to Create Strong Family-School Partnerships

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Abstract

Adhering to practices that establish strong family-school partnerships increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for children, especially children with disabilities. Family participation is directly outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) federal law, however, parents/families of a child with a disability can feel like they are unheard and/or are unequal partners (Rosetti et al., 2017), which can lead to dissatisfaction and limited collaboration. This article highlights strategies and tools that educational diagnosticians can use to support family-school partnerships starting at the full and individual initial evaluation (FIIE) process and can lead to an increase in positive outcomes and collaboration.

To address the emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students, it is essential to have strong, meaningful partnerships between family and school professionals (Underwood, 2010). A family-school professional partnership can be defined as a relationship in which families and professionals have the ability to share resources and build on each other's knowledge in an effort to collaboratively develop and implement a plan that benefits the student, the family and professionals (Turnbull et al., 2015). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (2004) was designed to recognize that parental involvement is a fundamental right by which schools are mandated to facilitate throughout the special education process and is known to be one of the greatest predictors of growth and well-being for students with disabilities across ages and grade levels (Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017). In special education, parental (family) involvement is often defined as active participation in Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee meetings, communication with teachers, and working with the student within the home to address learning gaps. Meetings where decisions about a child's assessment or individual education plan (IEP) provide parents crucial opportunities to provide input that could impact their child's education and it is necessary that educational diagnosticians aid in the facilitation of this process starting at the full and individual initial evaluation (FIIE) process.

Although the educational diagnostician does not typically have daily interaction with students, they play an important role in the development of meaningful family-school partnerships well before the ARD committee meeting, as educational diagnosticians play a leading role on the campus multidisciplinary team (MDT) (e.g., educational diagnosticians, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists) and are typically the primary contact for parents with questions regarding the IEP, the FIIE, and the implementation of specialized instruction for their student (Snider et al., 2023). As a liaison between families and school personnel throughout the special education process, educational diagnosticians can help create effective family-school partnerships that can improve the academic and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities.

Barriers to Meaningful Family-School Partnerships

Although family-school partnerships have been found to benefit students with disabilities, parents/families have identified the special education process as a stressor and barrier to meaningful participation. Fish (2006, 2008) investigated parental perceptions throughout the special education process and found that parents did not feel welcomed, felt rushed during meetings, left out of providing input, or got confused by educational jargon used in conversation. Additionally, parents reported

communication difficulties, transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, and a limited understanding of special education as barriers to active participation in school meetings and events (Garbacz et al., 2022; Gerdes et al., 2022; Sheppard, 2017). Research has found that families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds have reported that they feel they are in less control of decision-making and can be very intimidated by school teams, and do not see themselves reflected within the practices of the school which can result in the perception of a power imbalance between families and school teams (Daniel, 2015; McWayne et al., 2022; Sheppard, 2017). While fostering collaborative relationships with families can be difficult, school professionals can intentionally work to overcome potential barriers in order to build meaningful partnerships with all families.

Fostering Collaborative Parent-School Partnerships

When school and family collaborative partnerships occur, students benefit from appropriate strategies and supports that increase academic achievement and social-emotional outcomes, improved social skills, and decreased inappropriate behaviors (Azad et al., 2018; Garbacz et al., 2022; Gerdes et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2020; Talapatra et al., 2019). For many children with disabilities, their family's first opportunity to work closely with school teams is during the FIIE process. Parents of young children often enter the FIIE process with little to no understanding of the special education system, the impact of disability upon learning, or a point of reference regarding appropriate child development (Sheppard & Moran, 2022). For older children, parents may enter the FIIE process with a history of frustration with the school, resulting from years of limited communication with school professionals, only receiving communication when there are academic or behavioral concerns to discuss (Goldman et al., 2019). Regardless of when the parent enters the special education process with their child, the educational diagnostician must work to gain the trust of the family. Below are strategies that educational diagnosticians can use as they work with parents to foster collaborative partnerships.

Collaboratively gathering parent input. Because parents can enter the FIIE process with limited understanding of special education, little understanding of the implication of disability upon learning, or fractured relationships with

school professionals (Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Goldman et al., 2019; Sheppard & Moran, 2022; Talapatra et al., 2019), fully engaging the family throughout the FIIE process can begin to foster trust and empower parents to make decisions for their child. Educational diagnosticians can foster parent engagement by using collaborative practices in the FIIE process. By gaining parent input across the FIIE, evaluators are better able to comprehensively evaluate all areas of suspected disability and parents can be confident that their voice was heard throughout the identification process.

One method to establish and foster parent collaboration with the educational diagnostician and the MDT is the utilization of an FIE

Collaboration Tool (**Table 1**). Through use of this tool, educational diagnosticians can ensure that parents are treated as full members of the MDT and their input is incorporated in all sections of the FIIE. This tool can organize parent information more efficiently and can help educational diagnosticians ensure that parent input is included in each section of the evaluation report as a purposeful mechanism to include parents as full members of the MDT. To use this tool effectively, the educational diagnostician would conduct a series of informal parent interviews throughout the FIIE process to gain parent opinions on the cognitive, academic, and functional development of their student. Parent input would then be

documented within the tool to be used within the FIIE report, or to assist the MDT in planning next steps. The example shown in Table 1 indicates that the parent reported their child having a recent diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety. Because this information may not have been included in the original referral question or the developmental history form, obtaining this information through a parent interview after the evaluation process has begun would lead the evaluation team to obtain an Other Health Impairment (OHI) form from the child's physician and consult with the school psychologist to consider the educational impact of these diagnoses upon the child's educational perfor-

Table 1. Sample FIE Collaboration Tool

Student Name:		Date of parent Interview	
FIE Due Date:			
FIE Section	Formal/Informal Data	Parent Input	What now?
Speech/Language	E.g.,: native English speaker, no other languages spoken in home, student presents with receptive language deficits (SS = 70) and age-inappropriate articulation errors (/r/, /l/, /th/)	E.g.,: parent reports that student is difficult to understand sometimes, because he is talking too fast; parent also shares that they have implemented a 3 second pause before answering any question (Parent asks, "what would you like to drink" and student pauses three seconds before answering); parent would like to collaborate as a group (parent, private therapist, school therapist) in order to consistently implement strategies across settings	E.g.,: Obtain Consent for Disclosure form to allow collaboration with private therapist; schedule zoom call with private therapist and parent to discuss strategies and implementation within the home
Physical	E.g.,: Student has passed all vision and hearing screenings; student can independently access all areas of the building; previous evaluations and school records indicate no health concerns/diagnosis	E.g.,: Parent reports that student has just recently been diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety; Parent reports that medication makes him tired, and she has seen a drop in appetite	E.g.,: Obtain Consent for Disclosure or provide OHI form to the parent to consider additional eligibility; consult with School Psychologist
Academic Achievement	E.g.,: letter-word identification (SS=81) (WJ-IV), reading comprehension composite SS=88 (WJ-IV), CTOPP phonological awareness composite (SS=70)	E.g.,: parent reports consistent struggles in reading since approximately 2nd grade. Parent reports that reading homework is incredibly frustrating and the student now cries when presented with reading tasks	E.g.,: work with the ARD committee to consider accommodations in the IEP such as shortened reading assignments, oral administration accommodations, and access to audio books. Consult with the campus dyslexia therapist- consider provision of direct dyslexia instruction
Emotional/ Behavioral			
Cognitive			
Adaptive Behavior			
Sociological			

mance. In this case, utilizing ongoing parent interviews throughout the evaluation process allowed the evaluation team to ensure that all areas of suspected disability were considered while completing this FIIE report.

After the FIIE report is complete and a disability determination (if applicable) has been made by the MDT, the team, with its strong collaborative foundation, will grow to include campus staff who will be directly responsible for implementing the student's IEP (e.g., special education and general education teachers, administrators, and school counselors). Educational diagnosticians can assist in the continued communication and collaboration by providing families with the opportunity to provide input in the IEP prior to the ARD meeting. Prior to the ARD meeting, educational diagnosticians can support parents by providing and reviewing resources like the Parent's Guide to the Admission, Review, and Dismissal Process (TEA, 2021), the Notice of Procedural Safeguards (TEA, 2022), and/or facilitate a pre-ARD planning meeting (Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017). These resources can help the parent to understand the purpose of the ARD committee and can assist parents

in preparing for the decisions they will be asked to make during the ARD committee meeting, anticipate when specific conversations may take place during the meeting, and ask questions to provide input to the team.

Educational diagnosticians can also use another collaboration tool, specific to the ARD committee meeting. The ARD Committee Meeting Collaboration Planning Tool (Table 2) allows the MDT to provide parents with the opportunity to have continued, meaningful participation in their child's IEP and can provide team members with a visual representation of the link between the FIIE, the present levels of academic and functional performance of the student, and the proposed IEP goals and accommodations. The use of this collaboration tool allows for information to be shared between all members of the MDT and continues to show families that their opinion is valued and can lead to a mutually supportive partnership (Van Haren & Fielder, 2008). The example shown in Table 2 indicates how this planning tool can identify a clear link between the reading difficulties identified in the current FIIE and the benchmark information obtained by the special education

teacher. The students' reading deficits are then further documented when the parent reports historical reading difficulties seen at home. The educational diagnostician can then make sure that the parents understand this link and answer remaining questions, which will help the parent(s) to be able to clearly understand the impact of their child's disability and how the supports set forth in the IEP will be used in the classroom and/or school setting. The clear alignment between parent observation, curriculum-based assessment results, and student performance on normative academic achievement assessments helps develop true multidisciplinary conclusions regarding the educational impact of the disabling condition. Facilitating conversations between instructional staff, evaluation staff, and family members solidifies the connection between the needs identified in the FIIE and the subsequent addressing of those needs through the IEP.

Conclusion

It is vital that parents are treated like valuable members of the multidisciplinary team and that barriers are removed that may impede parent participation. The

Table 2. Sample ARD Committee Meeting Collaboration Planning Template

Student Name:		Date of Parent Interview:			
ARD Committee Meeting Date:					
Skill Area	FIIE	Teacher Input/ PLAAFP	Parent Input	Goal	Accommodations
English/Reading	E.g.: The WJ-IV indicated a low average ability (SS=81) in letter-word identification, and average abilities in reading comprehension- The CTOPP reported below average scores on phonemic awareness (SS=70)	Teachers report that the student struggles to read unfamiliar words. Student was in the 34th percentile on MAP, current grade is 76%. Effective accommodations include previewing text before reading, oral administration, audio books, provide definitions for unfamiliar words, pre-teaching of relevant new vocabulary	Parent reports that reading has always been a struggle, student has difficulty blending sounds and decoding unfamiliar words. Parent shares there is a lot of anxiety surrounding reading and it often takes the student hours to complete reading homework	1) correctly produce 2-3 letter consonant blends in isolation 2) utilize decoding skills to read unfamiliar words	- oral administration - access to audio books - preview text before reading - provide picture representations for unfamiliar words - reduce homework assignments by 50% - chunk assignments into small sections - allow for frequent breaks
Math					
Science					
Social Studies					
Behavior					
Physical/Functional					

strategies presented above provide ideas on how educational diagnosticians can support the collaboration between parents/families throughout various special education processes and procedures. When school personnel work together to create and utilize this kind of collaborative process, students' needs are addressed which leads to positive outcomes by everyone involved in each step of the process. Because of the collaborative efforts of educational diagnosticians throughout the evaluation process, parents now feel increasingly confident in their ability to provide input and make informed educational decisions on behalf of their child. It is essential though, to ensure that parents feel more comfortable and gain a deeper understanding of the FIIE process and the ARD committee meeting. The creation of strong family-school partnerships has been linked to better educational and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities and requires the development of systems that encourage communication, reciprocated trust, commitment to common goals, respect of family values and beliefs, and equality (Garbacz et al., 2022; Gerdes et al., 2022; Goldman et al., 2019; Sheppard, 2017; Smith et al., 2020). With a strong and collaborative school partnership, parents may have greater satisfaction with the IEP when they feel that they have a positive partnership with the professionals on their child's ARD committee and are viewed as equal members of the team (Reiman et al., 2010).

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