Designing and Assessing an Evidence-Based Support Resource for Parents of Children Included in Special Education in a Small, Rural School District

By

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Capstone Final Paper Approval Form

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We, the undersigned, recommend that the Capstone Final Paper completed by the student listed above, in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements, be accepted by the Georgia State University.
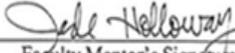
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The above-referenced study has been determined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be exempt from federal regulations as defined in 45 CFR 46 and has evaluated for the following:

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A Status Check must be submitted three years from the determination date indicated above. When the study is complete, a Study Closure Form must be submitted to the IRB.

This determination applies only to research activities engaged in by the personnel listed on this document.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to ensure that the IRB's requirements as detailed in the Institutional Review Board Policies and Procedures For Faculty, Staff, and Student Researchers (available at gsu.edu/irb) are observed, and to ensure that relevant laws and regulations of any jurisdiction where the research takes place are observed in its conduct.

Any unanticipated problems resulting from this study must be reported immediately to the University Institutional Review Board. For more information, please visit our website at www.gsu.edu/irb.

Sincerely,
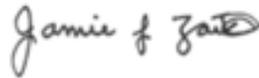
Jamie Zaikov, IRB Member

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This work is dedicated to my son and our journey navigating his special education support. He inspires me not only to be the best mother I can be but also, he inspired my aspiration to become an occupational therapist. I also want to acknowledge the school district that inspired this capstone. They are a small school district with a big heart making a whole lot happen with limited resources. You are always where you are supposed to be at any given moment; serving this county at the time I did, and helping support their students and families was a cherished gift and experience.

Abstract

This capstone project aimed to address educational gaps and enhance parental involvement in a small, rural school district by designing and evaluating an evidence-based parent support resource, the IEP Meeting Guide. The existing problem centered around observed gaps in parental knowledge and confidence, particularly in advocating for academic support during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The research question focused on assessing the outcomes of designing and evaluating such a resource within the context of a rural school district. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving the creation of the IEP Meeting Guide and subsequent assessment through surveys among parents, educators, and staff involved in special education. Quantitative measures evaluated overall satisfaction, ease of use, likelihood of use, perceived effectiveness, and clarity of information. The results indicated high levels of satisfaction among both parents and staff, with parents showing slightly higher satisfaction levels. Staff, particularly those with extensive educational experience, endorsed the use of the resource to support families in IEP meetings. Despite demographic variations and study limitations, including a small sample size and potential biases in self-report data, the findings underscored the perceived effectiveness and value of the developed resource in supporting collaborative efforts between parents and educators in the IEP process. Addressing the unique needs of rural communities and fostering inclusivity in resource design are crucial for enhancing parental involvement and improving outcomes for students with special needs. Further research and ongoing feedback are essential for refining and tailoring parent support resources and tools to meet the diverse needs of all the stakeholders involved in special education.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Background

The road navigating special education can often be steep with twisting and winding paths, unexpected obstacles, and no access to a road map for parents! This was certainly my experience as a parent with a child in need of special education support. This was also an observed experience of parents during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, with whom I had the opportunity to serve while training to become an occupational therapy provider.

The IEP process can be profoundly challenging for parents due to its complexity and multifaceted nature. Parents find themselves navigating mazes of educational jargon, legal terminology, and procedural requirements, which can be overwhelming and intimidating. The IEP process also involves parents being able to have effective collaboration and communication with educators, administrators, specialists, and providers including speech-language pathologists (SLPs), physical therapists (PTs), occupational therapists (OTs), and psychologists, each with their own perspectives and priorities. This essential collaborative aspect can sometimes lead to disagreements, conflicts, and poor results regarding the appropriate educational interventions and services for children. Furthermore, parents often face logistical challenges such as scheduling conflicts, transportation issues, and accessibility barriers when attending meetings and accessing resources. These factors add to the emotional toll of advocating for a child with special needs within the educational system. This immense mental strain over time can lead to feelings of

frustration, stress, and uncertainty about a child's future. The IEP process presents many challenges for parents, highlighting the importance of providing them with adequate support, resources, and guidance to navigate the complex terrain effectively.

This capstone idea was inspired by wanting to give back to a community that helped me learn so much not only as a new occupational therapist but also as a parent whose child receives specialized education. Drawing from insights gained through firsthand observation while serving this rural community and through informal interviews with knowledgeable informants, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted. This capstone aimed to evaluate and explore the potential benefits that a custom-tailored parent support resource could offer.

Existing Problem and Research Question

School staff within a rural community have expressed concerns about parent educational gaps when advocating for academic support for their children involved in their school district's special education program, especially during IEP meetings. This capstone seeks to determine if these gaps in knowledge can be addressed by creating a parent support resource that is easy to access and use. Effective parent support can help improve parent involvement and understanding. Providing parent-focused support and assessing its impact could potentially help inform the creation of future supports aimed at improving the performance and engagement of parents with kids served in special education classrooms. This can help pinpoint any areas needing improvement and promote the development of resources that enrich the experiences of parents, their students, and everyone involved on IEP teams. This capstone project explored the outcome of creating and assessing an evidence-based parent resource tool for a small, rural school district and answered the research question, *"What are the outcomes of designing and*

assessing an evidence-based parent resource for families included in special education within a small, rural, public school system?"

Purpose of Capstone

The purpose of this capstone project was to design and assess an evidence-based parent support with the objectives of advancing knowledge, enhancing communication, and fostering better collaboration with educators and providers for parents of children included in special education. The outcome of the project provided evidence of the inclusion parent support programming has on improving parent understanding and confidence to appropriately advocate for the educational needs of their children in a smaller, rural school district.

Specific Aims

| Specific Aim 1 Assessing the Current Landscape | → | Specific Aim 2 Designing an Evidence-Based Parent Support Resource | → | Specific Aim 3 Assessing the Parent Support Resource's Potential | → | Specific Aim 4 Analyzing the Parent Resource's Potential Impact | → | Specific Aim 5 Documenting Lessons Learned and Recommendations |
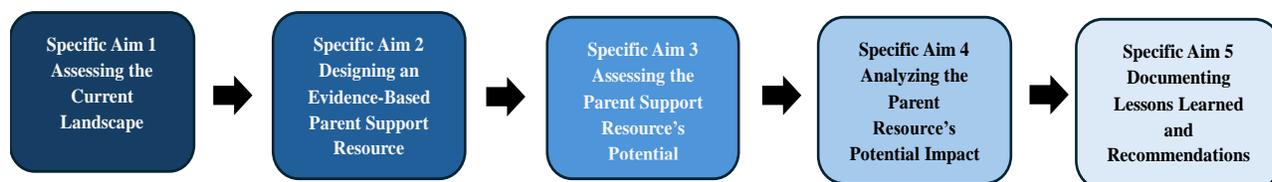
Figure 1

Specific Aim 1

Assessing the Current Landscape was completed by conducting a comprehensive literature review of how existing parent support programs and educational resources are constructed and made available to parents of children included in special education, especially in rural school districts.

Specific Aim 2

Designing an Evidence-Based Parent Support Resource highlighting the IEP process. This developed and tailored resource aimed to advance knowledge, improve communication, and foster better collaboration between parents, educators, and providers. The findings from specific aim 1 supported its development.

Specific Aim 3

Assessing the Parent Support Resource's Potential in collaboration with the targeted rural school district, and the support resource was reviewed by parents and staff. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through a survey. The potential impact the resource could have on parents' understanding and confidence in communicating and collaborating with educators when advocating for the academic needs of their children was assessed.

Specific Aim 4

Analyzing the Resource's Potential Impact on Parental Advocacy Skills was done by examining the feedback gained from parents and staff on the support resource's content. Their thoughts on its usefulness to support parents' advocacy strategies and confidence were assessed.

Specific Aim 5

Documenting Lessons Learned and Recommendations was addressed by synthesizing findings and identifying successful strategies, and recommendations for the future implementation were provided to inform the design and usage of parent support resource tools in similar rural school districts. A comprehensive report outlining key lessons learned along with actionable recommendations for future developments was compiled.

Output

The output of this capstone is this written article. Its goal was to provide evidence of the impact of designing and assessing a parent support resource has on parents of children included in special education in a smaller, rural school district. The objectives of the tailored parent resource were to advance knowledge, enhance communication, and foster better collaboration with educators and providers. The main goal of the capstone output is to help inform the implementation of future program developments of tailored resources to assist parents in smaller counties and school districts.

Significance

A tailored resource for parents can hold significant importance for a smaller, rural school district's special education program in several ways:

Enhanced Parental Engagement: In smaller rural communities, where resources and support systems may be limited, parental involvement in the special education process is crucial (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). Tailored resources can empower parents by providing them with the necessary knowledge and tools to actively participate in their child's education. Increased engagement can lead to more collaborative and effective decision-making, in turn benefiting the child's educational outcomes (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Smith & Krieg, 2022).

Improved Communication and Collaboration: Tailored parent resources can facilitate better communication and collaboration between parents, educators, administration, and providers within the school district (LaRocque et al., 2011). By offering clear guidelines and strategies for effective communication, the resource can help bridge any existing gaps between home and school, ensuring that everyone is working towards the same goals for the child's education.

Increased Understanding of the IEP Process: Many parents in rural communities may have limited knowledge about the IEP process and their rights within it (Mereoiu et al., 2016). The tailored resource can demystify the IEP process, providing parents with a comprehensive understanding of the various components involved (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Smith & Krieg, 2022). This increased understanding can empower parents to advocate more effectively for their child's needs and rights (Mereoiu et al., 2016).

Customized Support for Unique Challenges: Rural communities often face unique challenges, such as limited access to specialized services or resources (Cummings et al., 2017; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Smith & Krieg, 2022). A tailored tool has the potential to address these specific challenges, providing parents with guidance and resources that are relevant to their local context (Cummings et al., 2017). Customized resources can help overcome barriers to access and ensure that all children receive the support they need to succeed (Cummings et al., 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Smith & Krieg, 2022).

Community Building and Support: In smaller communities, relationships between parents, educators, and other stakeholders are often more closely knit (Turnbull et al., 2015). The development and implementation of tailored supports can potentially serve as a catalyst for community building and other types of support, fostering stronger partnerships and helping create a more supportive network for families of children with special needs (LaRocque et al., 2011; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Overall, resources that are custom and designed for parents can play a vital role in strengthening the special education program in smaller rural school districts. By empowering parents, improving communication and collaboration, increasing understanding of the IEP process, addressing unique challenges, and fostering community support, these resources can

contribute to better outcomes for children with special needs and create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment with better collaboration with families.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) established the Individualized Education Program or IEP for students with disabilities in the United States; it should serve as a roadmap that helps educators, parents, and providers navigate the design of academic supports for students with disabilities (Mereoiu et al., 2016). Designing appropriate academic support for students improves their educational outcomes and fulfills each child's unique potential (Turnbull et al., 2015). IEP team meetings can prove to be challenging due to the several diverse stakeholders at the table. Professionals and parents find themselves in a context in which collaboration is crucial to achieve the best outcomes, yet this process is easier said than done. Mereoiu et al., (2016) found that the collaboration and communication challenges derived primarily from "the difficulty in negotiating and navigating multiple perspectives and experiences from team members, and more often than not the needs and goals of families are overlooked". Several studies have discovered that parents and educators have reported that the IEP process can be challenging for several reasons; moreover, parents being able to communicate the educational needs of their student confidently and effectively has specifically been mentioned as being very difficult without support (Byrd, 2011; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Collaboration in special education is essential for establishing and maintaining strong partnerships between all IEP stakeholders. As well as recognizing the value of collaboration and actively engaging parents in the educational journey of their child is crucial for ensuring the best outcomes (LaRocque et al., 2011; Mereoiu et al., 2016). Parents need to be supported in sharing their expertise and involved as active participants throughout the building of educational

supports for their children. Also, a team-based approach should be established that respects each IEP team member's contributions and promotes open communication, this can ultimately enhance student success (Mereoiu et al., 2016; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Yet, parents continue to be an underutilized part of the educational system, especially when they have children who require special academic support. Research overwhelmingly shows that when schools work to involve and support parent competency the outcomes are positive for students and staff (Byrd, 2011). A study looking at parent involvement found that parents' lack of knowledge in the IEP or general education contexts did not hinder their interest in growing their competency in that area indicating that parents desire programming and resources that help them positively support their child's academics (LaRocque et al., 2011). Literature also shows that parents from all backgrounds, including race and socioeconomic status, care for, and value their children's education (Ishimaru et al., 2014). An older study in 1995, looked at parent involvement in special education, found that there was a strong correlation between parent participation during IEP meetings and parent satisfaction with their child's special education services and school environment (Plunge & Kratochwill, 1995). Byrd (2011) noted that teachers and related service providers including OTs, PTs, and SLPs, are instrumental in the process of educating and involving parents, and they should take an active role in encouraging participation and explaining interventions. Additionally, related service providers can create checklists of key areas to address during the development of parent programming and resources (Byrd, 2011). When parents are more involved in the special education process, teachers and administrators save time, energy, and resources when creating processes and programs for students and families.

A study in 2022 by Smith and Krieg explored other barriers to parent involvement in planning for educational support for their children included in special education in rural communities. They found parents believed they lacked necessary information to advocate for their kids and reported the IEP documents were too difficult to understand due to the way it was worded. Furthermore, this study reported parents had negative emotions with the planning process, and they thought this barred them from being active during team meetings (Smith & Krieg, 2022). The development of resources aimed at empowering parents to recognize their expertise in understanding their children is essential (Mereoiu et al., 2016; Smith & Krieg, 2022). It is crucial to acknowledge that parents already possess valuable insights and information necessary for informing educational planning for kids with special needs, alongside educators and professionals. By providing support and guidance to parents in understanding these aspects, we can enhance their advocacy potential while simultaneously reducing negative experiences (Hong, 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2014; Smith & Krieg, 2022).

When designing effective programming and tools to educate parents, research supports getting direct feedback from families, using creativity in methods of delivery, and closely attending to potential barriers (Byrd, 2011). The Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Research Project in 2014 by the University of Washington found three indicators of parent engagement that centered around parent feedback. This included: "parents' confidence about their ability to support their children's learning, parents' belief of whether or not their school provides a welcoming and culturally responsive learning environment, and whether or not parents have access to leadership opportunities that influence decision-making at their school" (Ishimaru et al., 2014). When meaningful time is spent early on focusing on the parent and special educator alliance and building up parent's confidence to effectively support their children's needs this

yields a long-term positive effect on increased student achievement (Byrd, 2011). Parent support tools can foster the belief that parents are a valuable and knowledgeable resource, and they are key in helping their students succeed (Ishimaru et al., 2014; LaRocque et al., 2011; Parent Mentors, n.d.).

In addition, utilizing parent feedback to create supportive tools is effective in providing a forum to motivate families to be more involved (LaRocque et al., 2011; Solomon & Barker, 2001). Assessing supports can help schools indicate how they are doing in educating and supporting their families included in special education is essential in determining what would be most effective (Byrd, 2011; Hong, 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2014; Soloman & Barker 2001). Parenting support practiced in group settings can help parents develop skills that improve competency and confidence (Moodie et al., 2016). Hong (2021) developed the ecology of parent engagement, which is a three-phase framework that considers settings, contexts, relationships, and levels of engagement that determine and optimally shape parent participation, shared leadership in schools, and the development of resources utilized by parents. This three-part framework emphasizes that supportive parent resources can improve and inform parental involvement; they have the potential to help parents gain greater insight into the expectations of their students' classroom experiences and aid them in team meetings discussing reasonable goals to achieve desired outcomes (Hong, 2021).

Research also suggests that increased involvement of occupational therapists (OTs) in the IEP process leads to more comprehensive and effective support for students with disabilities, better collaboration among team members, and greater satisfaction among parents (Benson, Szucs, & Mejasic, 2016; de Oliveira Borba, Pereira, de Souza, & Lopes, 2020). All related service providers are skilled in educating parents on interventions that may support their child's

educational progress in their related field. However, OTs in particular, offer crucial support to students with disabilities to enhance their participation in educational activities and routines while utilizing a more holistic/family-centered approach (American Occupational Therapy Association {AOTA}, 2017; de Oliveira Borba et al., 2020; Prigg, 2002). During IEP meetings, OTs play a vital role in providing input regarding the student's functional abilities, identifying barriers to participation within their educational environment, and recommending appropriate accommodations or modifications to support student success. OTs are skilled in offering strategies for implementing interventions both within the classroom, other school-related settings, community settings, and at home to help promote the student's overall well-being (Prigg, 2002). They collaborate with parents and educators to develop goals that address the child's specific needs related to their motor skills, sensory processing, activities of daily living, and environmental adaptations (AOTA, 2017; Prigg, 2002). While their primary role during the IEP process is to assess and address students' functional needs within the educational environment, OTs are often knowledgeable about the IEP process and can help parents understand the goals, accommodations, and services being discussed. Additionally, they can offer guidance to parents on advocating for their child's needs, understanding assessment results, navigating the special education system, and serving as a resource during the design of tailored parent tools (Benson, 2013). Overall, OTs can be valuable allies for parents seeking to actively participate in the IEP process and support their child's educational journey.

Collaboration, especially during IEP meetings, requires a combination of effective communication between parties, mutual trust, shared common goals, defined but equal roles, adaptability, and the commitment to working together (Friedman, Hubbard, & Seruya, 2023). An older study that looked at increasing parent participation during IEP meetings, found that "when

parents were able to present clear goals and concerns about their child's needs during IEP meetings there were significantly greater contributions and goals generated for children by parents and parents reported a high level of satisfaction post-meeting" (Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1986). When parents contribute more during meetings educators and related service providers, including OTs, PTs, and SLPs, reported significantly more home programming suggestions to parents to help meet educational goals (Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1986). This demonstrates that when parents are valued as equal stakeholders and supported, they contribute meaningfully, push the planning process in a favorable direction, and remain more involved.

Therefore, recognizing parents as the foremost experts on their children is paramount in fostering collaborative and effective IEP meetings within special education. Parents possess unique insights and perspectives into their child's strengths, challenges, and individual needs that go beyond what formal assessments and educational professionals may capture. Valuing parents as experts establishes the foundation for meaningful collaboration, ensuring that their perspectives contribute significantly to the development and refinement of the child's IEP (Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1986; Hong, 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2014; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Smith & Krieg, 2022). This inclusive approach not only enhances the accuracy of goal setting and intervention strategies but also strengthens the partnership between parents and educators, creating a supportive and cohesive team dedicated to the child's success. By acknowledging and leveraging the expertise of parents and supporting them, IEP meetings become more comprehensive, person-centered, and better aligned with the specific needs and aspirations of the child and their families.

Chapter 2: Needs Assessment

Overview

School staff in a rural community have served as informants, expressing concerns regarding educational gaps among parents when advocating for academic support for their children in the special education program, particularly during IEP meetings. Effective parent support tools can enhance the involvement, understanding, and confidence of parents (Mereoiu et al., 2016). Implementing a parent-focused resource tool and assessing its impact is an effective way to get feedback from stakeholders (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). The evaluation of this tool could help inform the development of future support initiatives aimed at enhancing the performance and engagement of parents with children in special education classrooms. The goal was to identify some specific areas requiring improvement and create a resource tool addressing those areas, potentially enhancing the experiences of parents, students, and all involved in IEP teams. Themes emerging from informal interviews, conversations, and prior observations in this community have highlighted areas where parents may benefit from additional support, and they are listed below and in Figure 2:

- Fully Understanding the IEP Process

- Best Practices for Involvement and Communication

- Awareness and Understanding of their Child's Progress

- Appropriate and Effective Advocacy

- Currently Available/Limited Resources and Supports
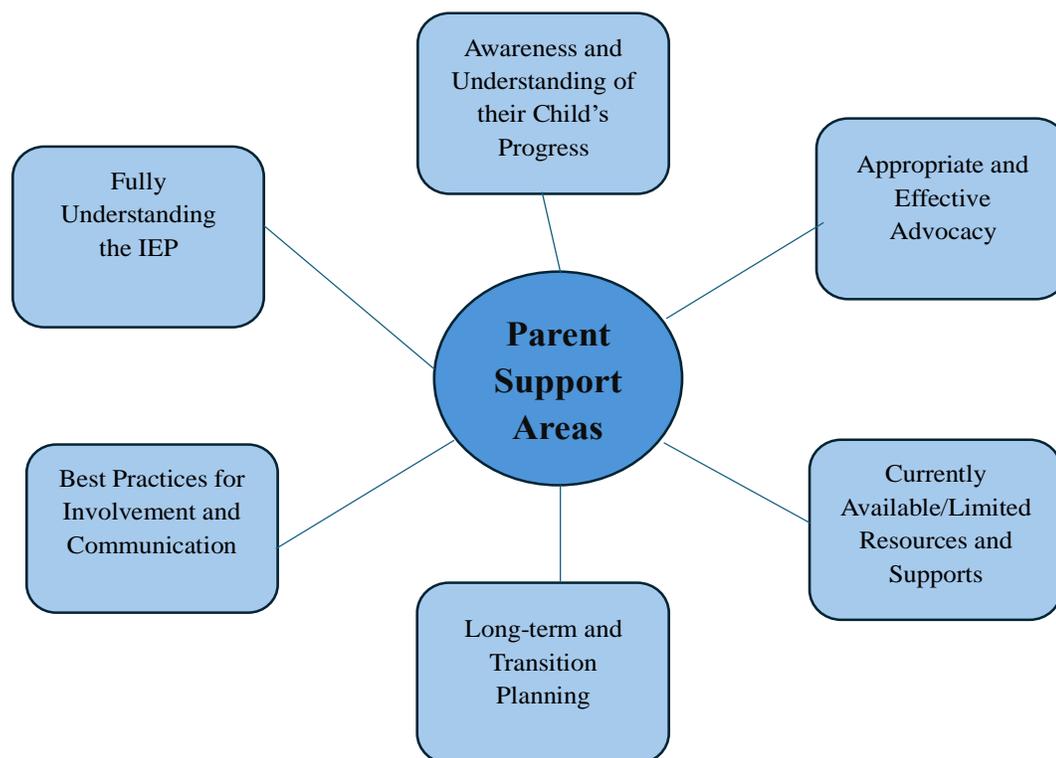
- Long-term and Transition Planning

Figure 2

Discussion of Emerging Themes

Informal conversations with staff, educators, and providers serving the community in this study revealed parents' incomplete understanding of the components of an IEP, including goals, accommodations, and services, coupled with a lack of awareness of their rights and their child's rights within the special education process, significantly impacts their ability to fully comprehend the IEP progression for their child. The lack of understanding is believed to contribute to parents not actively engaging or having limited involvement in the IEP process. Insufficient communication with the school can worsen the difficulties parents experience in expressing concerns and challenges to administrators and educators constructively. Additionally, a hesitancy in asking questions during IEP meetings have been observed, even when non-verbal cues, such as limited eye contact, inability to follow the topic, or exhibiting a "deer in the

headlights" facial expression, indicate discomfort. Some of this confusion is believed to stem from challenges in fully grasping their child's progress, as reports can be difficult to follow, which hinders parents from effectively assessing and understanding their child's development.

Special education teachers in this community have also informally reported noticing during IEP meetings especially, some parents face challenges in advocating effectively for their child's needs and accommodations. Effective parent advocacy is crucial in ensuring that children receive appropriate support within the educational framework. Many parents have been observed to have difficulty communicating a comprehensive understanding of their child's strengths and challenges, which is essential for tailoring the IEP to meet the child's unique needs. Additionally, it was noted that parents sometimes lack a clear vision or plan for their child's future educational and developmental goals hindering the appropriate advocation of educational support for their children. Disparities in access to resources are evident as there is a lack of external support systems, such as parent support groups and community programs, particularly among parents in more rural regions or in other specific demographics. Limited access to resources can hinder parents' understanding of special education and the intricacies of the IEP process. Addressing these aspects collectively can contribute to a more inclusive and informed IEP process for all involved.

It is important to note that teachers, providers, and staff must approach the observations of parents with sensitivity and recognize that numerous factors, including cultural and demographic differences, socioeconomic status, and individual circumstances, can influence parents' engagement in the IEP process. Schools can take steps to provide additional support, resources, and communication to ensure that parents are well-informed and actively involved in their child's education. Collaboration between educators and parents is crucial for the success of

the IEP process and the overall well-being of students involved in special education. The IEP Meeting Guide (see Appendix A3) was considerately developed with these themes in mind.

SWOT Analysis

To further add to the needs assessment, a SWOT analysis was utilized as a strategic planning tool to help identify and evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats for *"having an IEP resource guide for parents included in special education in a rural school district."*

Strengths	Opportunities
Empowerment of Parents: Providing a resource guide empowers parents with the information they need and helps them more efficiently and actively participate in the design of their child's educational supports. **Improved Communication:** It enhances communication between parents and educators, fostering collaboration and a better understanding of the child's needs. **Compliance with Regulations**: It demonstrates the school district's commitment to meeting legal requirements related to special education and IEPs.	**Community Partnerships**: Collaborating with local organizations and parent support groups can enhance the effectiveness of the resource guide and increase its reach. **Technology Integration:** Leveraging technology, such as creating an online version of the guide, can improve accessibility and ease of use. **Parent Support Resources:** Establishing support resources for parents with children in special education can provide a platform for sharing experiences and utilizing the resource guide effectively.
Weaknesses	**Threats**
Limited Resources: Rural school districts may have limited resources, making it challenging to develop, distribute, and maintain comprehensive resource guides. **Awareness and Accessibility:** There might be challenges in ensuring that all parents are aware of the resource guide and accessing it could be difficult for those with limited internet or technology support. Busy parents may also find it challenging to complete the guide prior to IEP meetings or attend trainings to use the guide properly. **Training Needs:** Educating parents about how to effectively use the resource guide may be necessary, and the district might need additional resources for training sessions.	**Budget Constraints:** Limited funding may hinder the development, distribution, and promotion of the resource guide. **Resistance to Change:** There might be resistance from some parents or educators who are not accustomed to using such guides, leading to a slow adoption rate. **Stigma and Perception:** There could be a stigma associated with special education, and parents may feel reluctant to openly engage with the resource guide due to concerns about how their child may be perceived or how they, as the parents are perceived by educators.

Figure 3

Chapter 3: Capstone Experience Protocol

Description of Project

Overview of Methods

Special education parents, teachers, administrators, and staff included in the selected school district served as the target population in this study. Participants were asked to review the IEP Meeting Guide, which was the content created to support parents in the IEP process (see Appendix A3). Then the participants were given a post-review of the IEP Meeting Guide survey (see Appendix A5a and A5b). Administrators from the primary, elementary, and middle/high schools in the school district were given a brief one-pager about the study (see Appendix A2), a digital copy of the IEP Meeting Guide (see Appendix A3), and a sample email draft (see Appendix A4a and A4b) to send to their special education teachers, families, staff, and administration to participate in the review of the IEP Meeting Guide parent resource and survey.

The IEP Meeting Guide parent resource consisted of what should be done before, during, and after IEP meetings. Participants were given access to the IEP Meeting Guide and the survey on email communication, with embedded links to the content. The survey (see Appendix A5a and A5b) was completely anonymous through Qualtrics, a survey, online platform, and its purpose was to assess the potential impact this resource had on parent knowledge and confidence, which is one of the main indicators of parent engagement (Mereoiu et al., 2016). The practicality and perceived usefulness of the content were assessed. To maintain confidentiality between participants, no identifiable information was collected or stored. Any communications made to school administrators or staff was made with no identifiable information to protect the privacy of

all participants. In addition, no identifiable information from this school district is published in this capstone (see IRB Approval on pages 3-4).

Recruitment

The special education department in the chosen school district collaborated on the recruitment of participants. Participants include parents, school staff, teachers, and administration involved in special education in the chosen school district. The type of sampling employed was purposive sampling. This approach was used to select participants based on criteria relevant to the capstone objective. Due to targeting a specific school district and having a particular interest in the opinions of individuals within that specific context, this targeted approach provided valuable insights into the perceptions of the IEP Meeting Guide resource for parents in the selected school district.

Support Resource Design

The creation of an IEP Meeting Guide was driven by the goal of empowering, supporting, and enhancing the organizational skills of parents. Aligned with the capstone project's objectives to advance knowledge, improve communication, and foster collaboration among parents of children in special education, this 10-page document was meticulously structured to guide parents through the phases of IEP meetings—preparation, the meeting itself, and post-meeting considerations.

The introduction features a motivational statement and general information about the various types of IEP meetings. Here, parents find a dedicated space to record crucial details about their child's meeting and acquire strategies to maximize their effectiveness during their session. Part 1 assists parents in systematically organizing their thoughts on their child's health

and medical updates, academic concerns, and behavioral concerns. This section also includes a segment focused on organizing the insights and thoughts of their children if appropriate, coupled with a reflection area for parents to truly prioritize their goals for their kids.

Part 2, addressing the meeting itself, provides guidelines on important actions to take during the session. It has a space to record attendees' names and contact information, emphasizes the significance of the IEP draft document, and reminds parents of the potential challenges it may pose. Additionally, there are designated areas for parents to take notes on general questions and observations that may arise during the meeting and a section to list any changes to their child's IEP goals and services. The section concludes with a list of prompted questions from the PACER Center designed to empower parents to leverage their expertise and collaborate effectively with other team members. The PACER Center, which originally stood for the "Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights" (but now operates under just PACER Center), is a nonprofit organization based out of Minnesota with a mission to provide a wide range of resources, programs, and services to support and improve outcomes for families, young adults with disabilities, and professionals working in special education (PACER Center, 2007).

At the end of Part 2, there is an area for parents to make note of recommendations of activities to perform at home that assist with progress toward IEP goals. Part 3 highlights post-meeting activities; it offers crucial reminders for the after-meeting follow-up and provides a space for parents to reflect upon and highlight key insights from the meeting. This comprehensive guide was thoughtfully organized and designed with families in mind. The IEP Meeting Guide's goal is to equip parents with valuable tools to confidently navigate the complexities of the IEP process.

Survey Design

In designing a survey to assess the potential impact and usability of the IEP Meeting Guide, consideration was given to gather comprehensive insights and feedback from parents, educators, and staff ethically involved in IEP progression. The Georgia State University (GSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) was consulted to review the research protocol as an exempt protocol category 2 to assess compliance with ethical principles, regulatory requirements, and institutional policies. The IRB committee granted approval; the study met the requirements to be exempt from federal regulation as defined by 45 CFR 46 as it falls within one of the eight exempt categories, and it was determined to meet GSU's IRB ethical standards (see GSU IRB Approval Form on pages 3-4). The survey was designed in two forms, one for educators/staff/administration (see Appendix A5a) and one for parents (see Appendix A5b) to ensure that questioning was unique and relatable to the survey-taker.

The survey was structured to serve a dual purpose: firstly, to collect crucial demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, and years of experience (for educators/staff), and grade of students with an IEP (for parents), thereby providing a detailed understanding of the diverse perspectives and experiences of potential guide users. This demographic data was recognized as indispensable in tailoring future resources to meet the specific needs of families within this community. Secondly, the survey incorporated a range of numerical/Likert scale ratings covering aspects such as overall satisfaction, ease of use, likelihood to recommend, effectiveness, and clarity of information. These quantitative measures were strategically employed to objectively assess the guide's potential success and identify areas requiring improvement. Additionally, the inclusion of an open-ended question at the end further enriched the survey. It served as a qualitative component that encouraged participants to share insights to

better support families and make sure to address the unique needs of the diverse parent population within the community.

The Selected District Site

This district is a close-knit community of less than 5,500 people. They strive to offer a dynamic and enriching educational environment for students and are committed to fostering academic excellence. There are less than five schools in the district, who all strive to prioritize a well-rounded education encompassing a rigorous academic curriculum and a range of extracurricular activities. Like many districts, their focus is on student growth and development while providing a supportive community where students are encouraged to explore their interests and talents.

Similar to many school districts in the United States, the district is funded through a combination of local (property taxes), state (allocation by state's department of education), and federal sources (grants and education financial programs). The selected district site in previous years had estimated revenue comprised of about 60% state funds, 35% local funds, and 5% federal funds (US News & World Report, 2024). Considered a small city school district, they are located within a town characterized by agricultural and natural areas and have a relatively small population density. Additionally, the selected district has limited access to amenities commonly found in urban areas such as healthcare facilities and public transportation.

The population in this area faces unique challenges that stem from their distinct environment and resource limitations. With a smaller special education (and general education) student population and more expansive secluded geographical area, the district, and others like it,
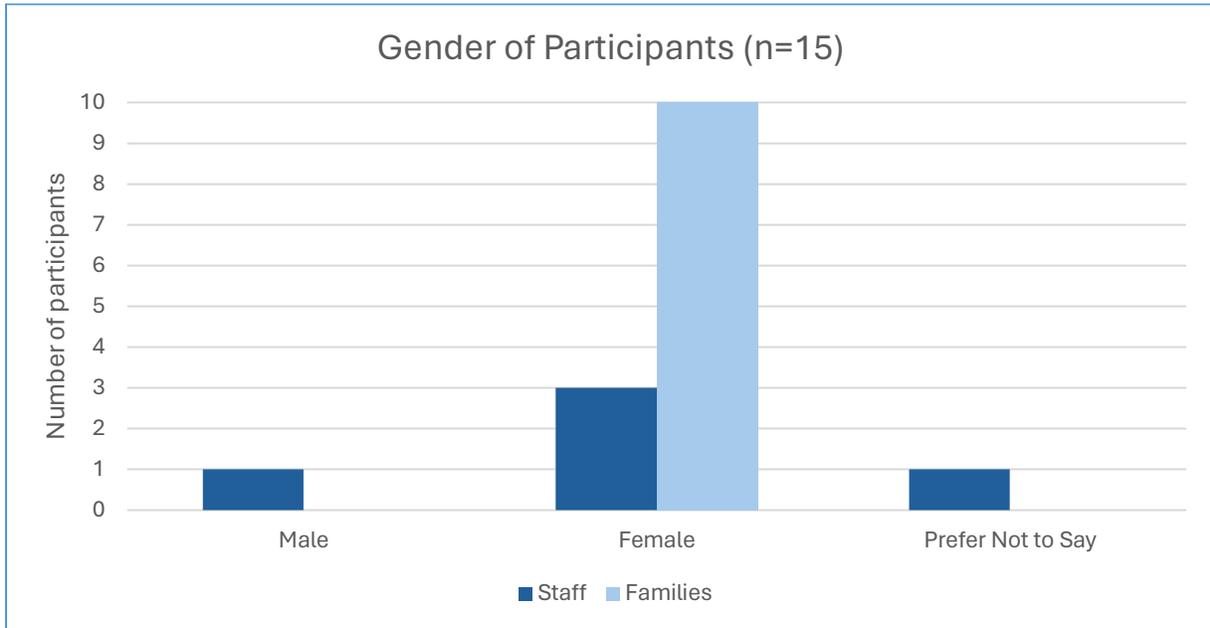
often grapple with insufficient funding, transportation issues, lack of reliable broadband infrastructure, and challenges to attract and retain educators over the lure of more well-resourced, urban districts. These factors impact everything from teacher salaries to facility maintenance. Moreover, sometimes this means limited access to advanced coursework, or specialized support for students with IEPs and their families. Which can hinder students' overall development and potential. Despite these challenges, rural school districts like this one often have intertwined communities where educators, students, and families can work collaboratively and supportively to overcome those obstacles and uphold quality education and support in the face of adversity.

Chapter 4: Results

List of Charts

Demographic Information

Chart 1 *shows the gender distribution of participants who reviewed the IEP Meeting Guide. The total number of participants was 15 (n=15), 5 were special education staff and 10 were parents with children involved in special education. Of the parents who participated in the study 100% were female. Of the staff 60% were female, 20% male, and 20% preferred not to disclose their gender.*
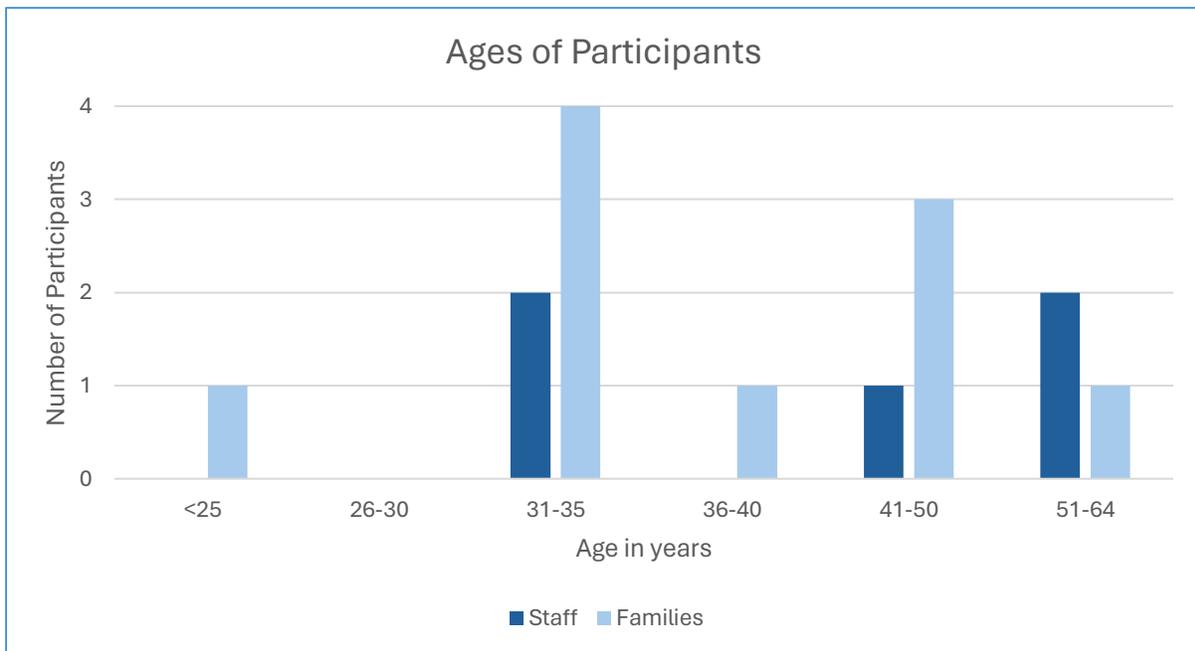
Chart 2 *shows the age distribution of participants who reviewed the IEP Meeting Guide. Of the staff 100% were > 31 years old, 40% were between 31-35 years old or 51-64 years old and 20% were 41-50 years old. The parents who participated in the study were more variable with 30% being between 41-50 years old, 40 % being 31-35 years old (highest percentage), and the other 30% were <25 years old, 36-40 years old, or 51-64 years old (10% in each age range).*

Ethnicity of Families

- African Ameriican/Black
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latina
- Preferred not to say

Ethnicity of Staff

- African American/Black
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latina
- Preferred not to say
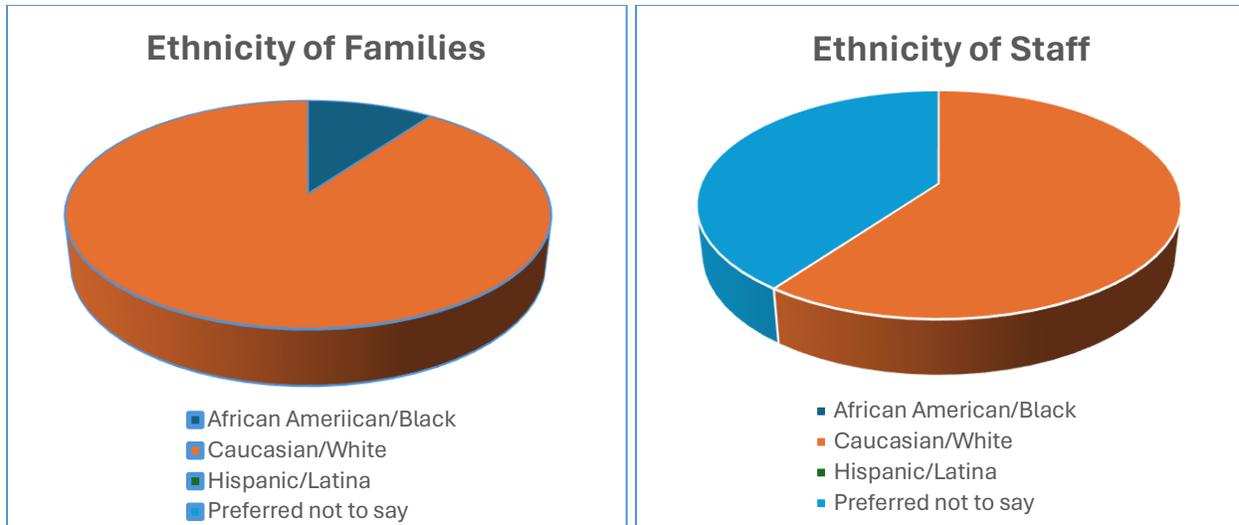
Chart 3 a & b *show the ethnicity distribution of participants who reviewed the IEP Meeting Guide. Of the parents who participated in the study 90% were Caucasian and 10% identified as African American. Of the staff, 60% identified as Caucasian and 40% preferred not to disclose.*

Family Survey Question Result
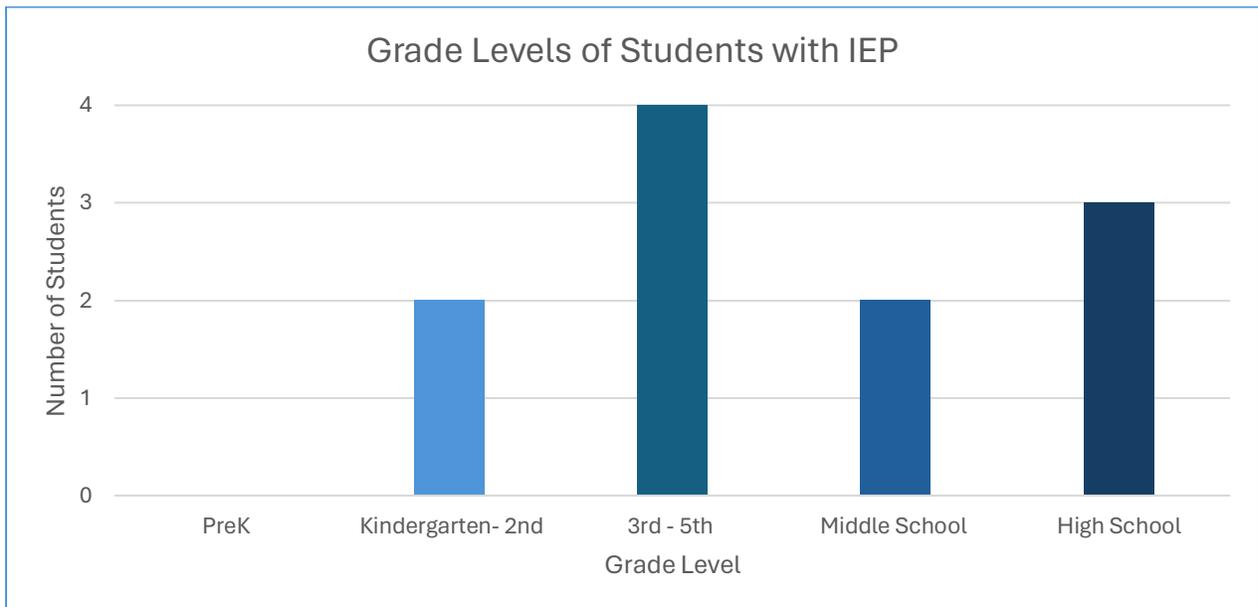
Chart 4 *shows the distribution of the grade levels of students involved in special education; this question was only asked to families who participated (n=10). This chart includes 11 children, as one of the families had 2 children included in two different grade levels. The highest percentage of kids with IEPs whose families reviewed the IEP Meeting Guide were in 3rd- 5th grades (~36%). The percentage of high school students was ~27%. It was evenly dispersed (~18% each) between kindergarten-2nd and middle school.*

Staff Survey Question Result
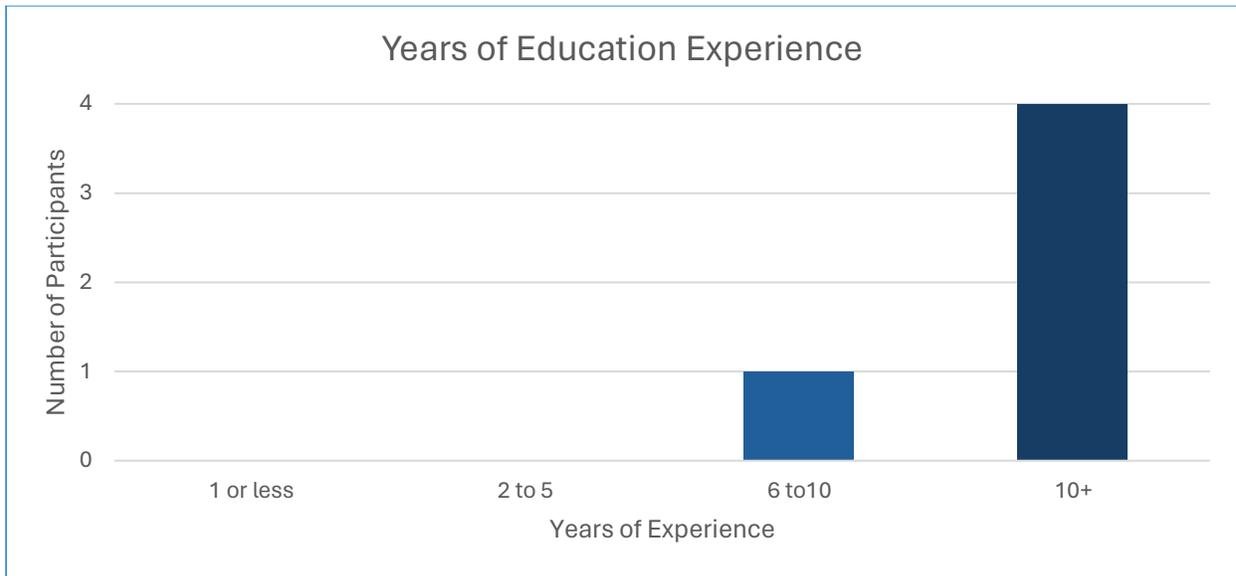
Chart 5 *shows a distribution of the years of education experience, this question was only asked to staff who participated in the study (n=5). The majority (80%) indicated that they possessed 10 or more years of educational experience and 20% indicated that they had 6-10 years of educational experience.*

IEP Resource Guide Survey Question Results
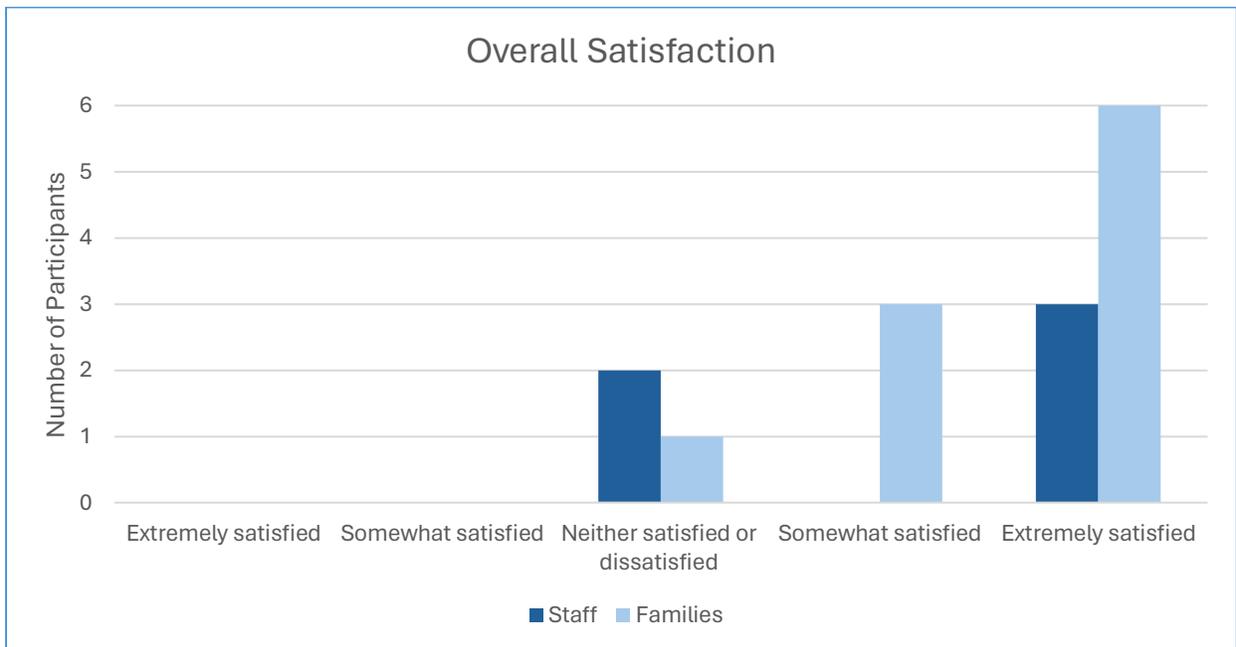
Chart 6 *shows the results of staff and parents that indicated their overall satisfaction with the IEP Meeting Guide. Parents were satisfied with the resource overall, with10% being "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" and 30% being "somewhat satisfied". Most parents (60%) were "extremely satisfied" with the guide. 40% of staff were "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied", and similarly to parents 60% of the staff were also "extremely satisfied" with the guide.*
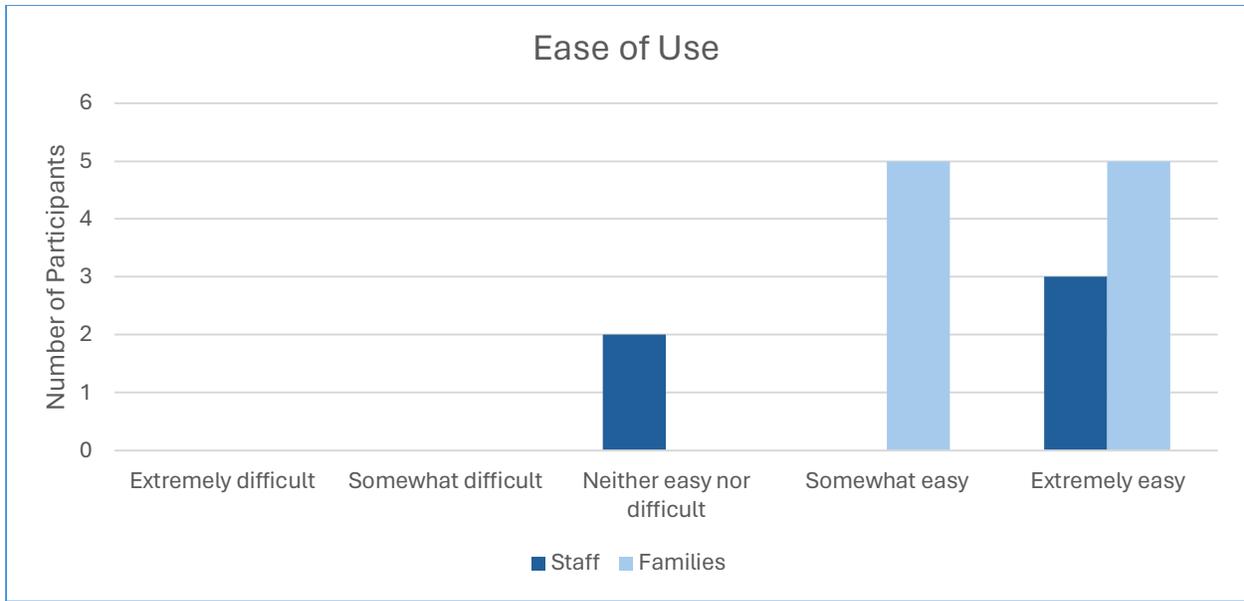
Ease of Use

Chart 7 shows the results of staff and parents that indicated the "ease of use" of the IEP Meeting Guide. Parents felt the guide was easy to use overall and were split evenly, with 50% saying it was "somewhat easy" to use and 50% saying it was "extremely easy" to use. 40% of staff were "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" with the IEP Meeting Guide's ease of usage. However, most staff (60%) indicated that they were "extremely satisfied" with the guide.
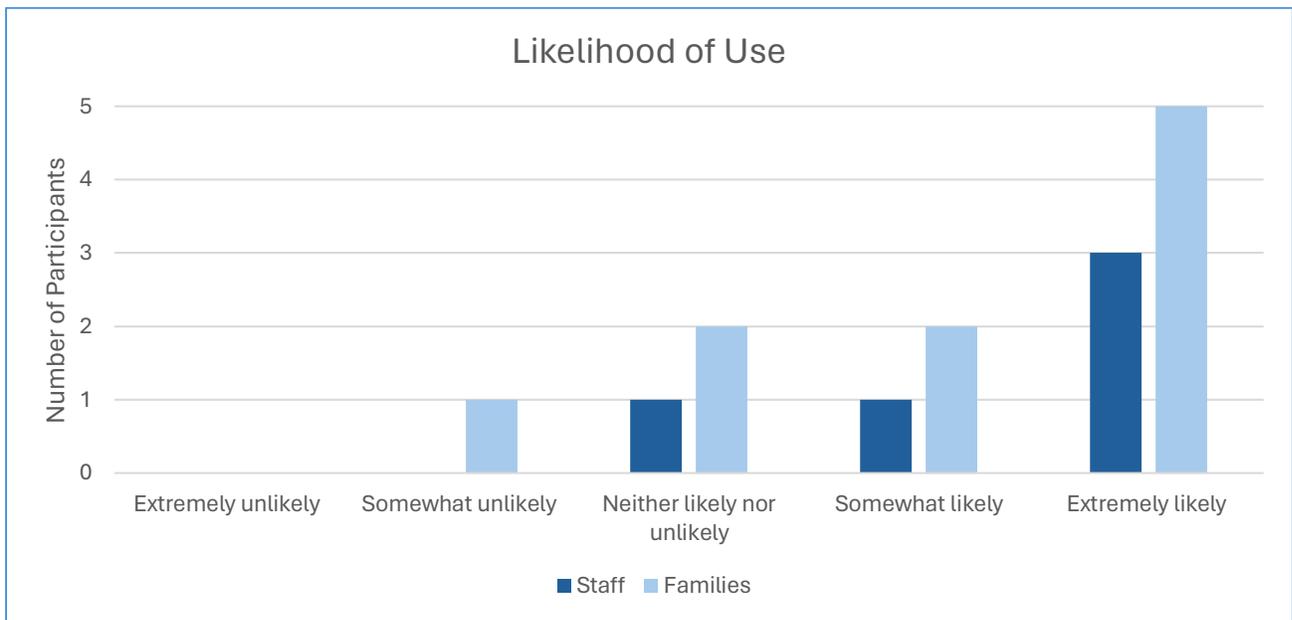
Likelihood of Use

Chart 8 shows the results of staff and parents who indicated their likelihood of use of the IEP Meeting Guide in an IEP meeting. Parents answered equally across "neither likely nor unlikely" and "somewhat likely" (20%). Most parents (50%) expressed that they would be "extremely likely" to use the IEP resource guide in an IEP meeting. 20% of staff were "neither likely nor unlikely" and 20% indicated that they were "somewhat likely" to recommend the use of the guide in an IEP meeting to the families they serve. Most of the staff (60%) said that they were "extremely likely" to recommend the use of the guide to the families they serve.
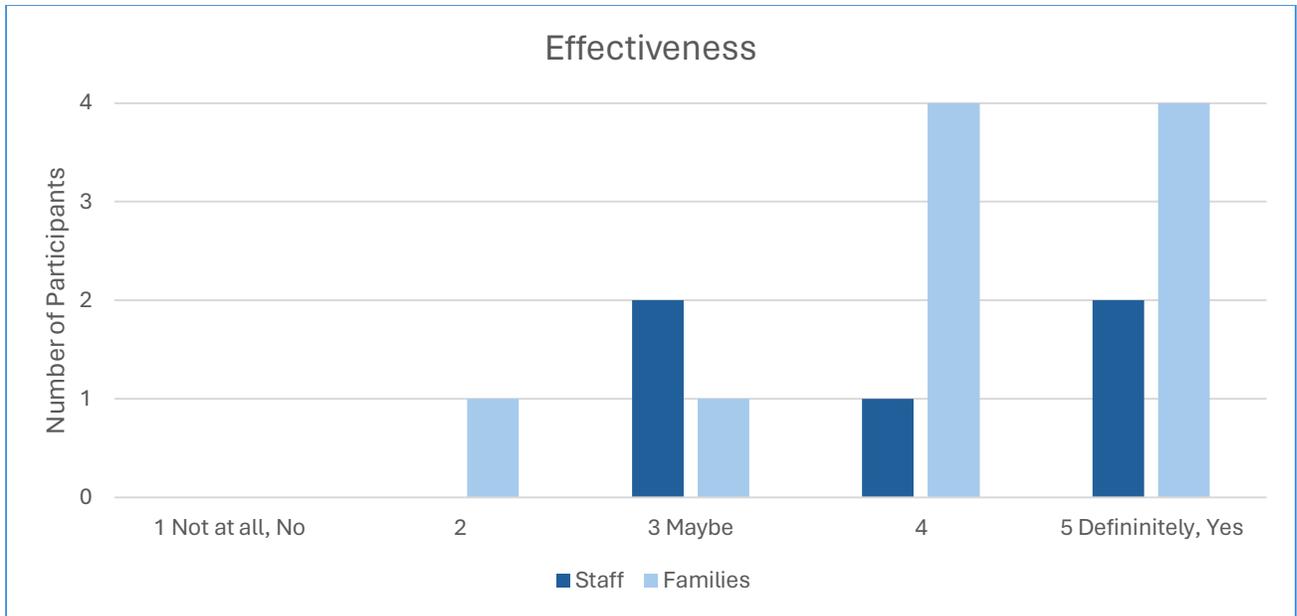
Effectiveness

Chart 9 shows how the IEP Meeting Guide was rated by staff and parents on its potential effectiveness (on a scale from 1 to 5) in aiding parents to contribute during IEP meetings. Most parents indicated a high potential effectiveness of the IEP Meeting Guide, 40% of parents gave the resource a 4 out of 5, and 40% gave the guide a 5 out of 5. 40% of staff gave the resource guide a 5 out of 5 or a 3 out of 5 on its potential effectiveness to help the families they serve; while 20% of staff gave the resource guide a 4 out of 5.

Clarity
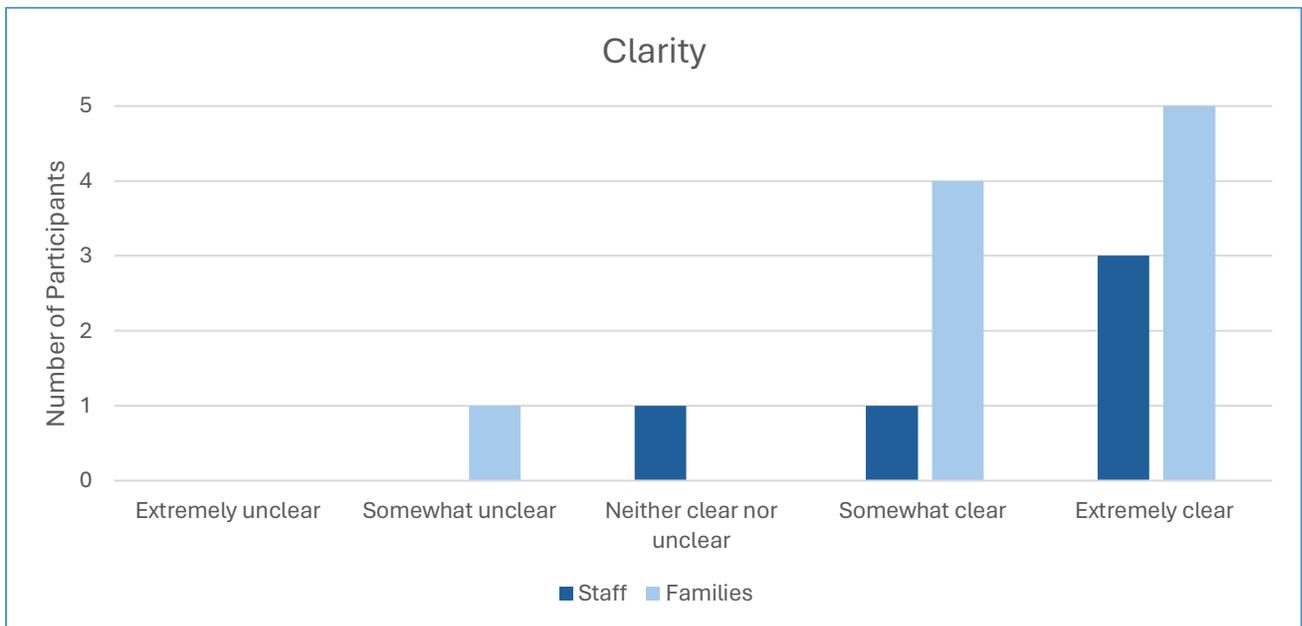
Chart 10 shows the results of staff and parents who thought the information presented in the IEP Meeting Guide was clear. A small percentage of parents (10%) thought the IEP Meeting Guide was "somewhat unclear". The percentage of parents who thought the guide was "somewhat clear" was 40%. Most parents felt the guide was "extremely clear" (50%). 60% of staff felt the guide was "extremely clear"; the other 40% of staff were equally distributed for the clarity of the guide between "neither clear nor unclear" and "somewhat clear".
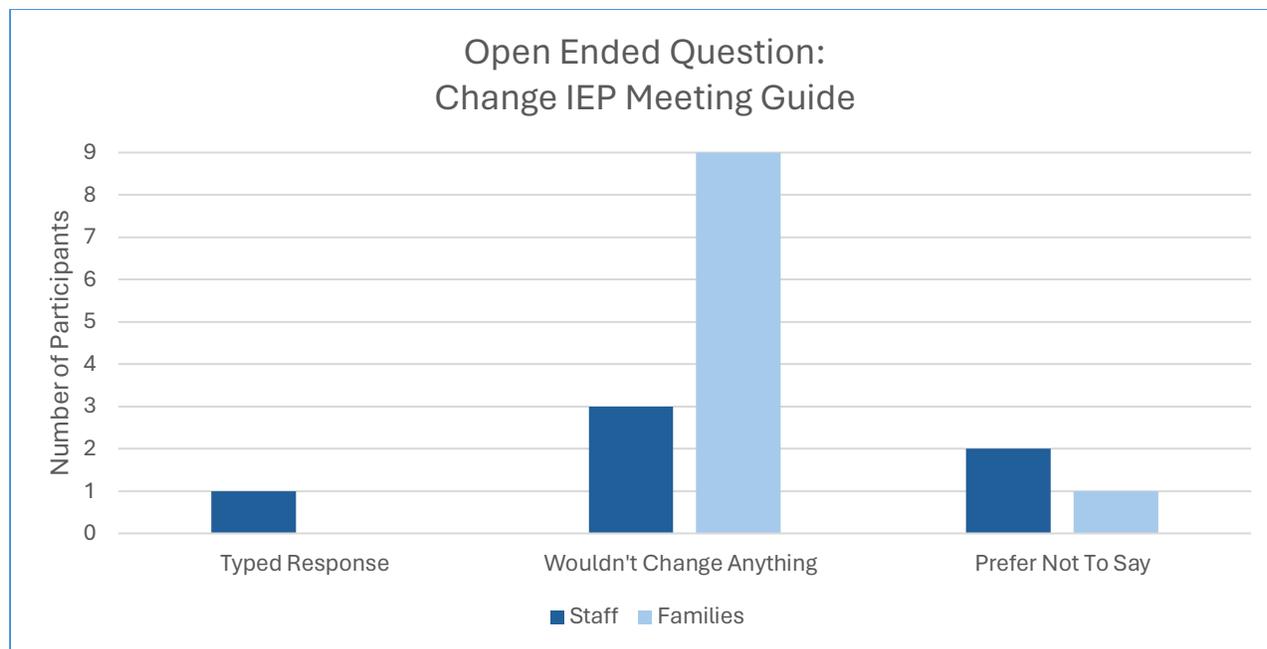
Chart 11 *shows the results of the open-ended question, "What would you change about the IEP Meeting Guide to better support your needs?" Most indicated that they wouldn't change anything, 60% of staff and 90% of families. 20% of staff and 10% of families preferred not to say what they would change about the guide. The one staff typed response was: "This is the consequential plan that we have at home to address inappropriate behaviors," this may indicate that there is a similar tool in place for parents to address inappropriate behaviors.*

Overview of Findings

Participant Demographics

Fifteen participants engaged in the review of the IEP Meeting Guide, comprising five special education staff and ten parents with children enrolled in special education in the selected district. Among the parents, the gender distribution was entirely female (100%), while among the staff, 60% identified as female, 20% as male, and 20% preferred not to disclose their gender. Regarding age distribution, staff members were over 31 years old (100%), with 40% falling within the age brackets of 31-35 years old or 51-64 years old, and 20% aged between 41-50 years old. Parents exhibited a broader age range, with the highest proportion (40%) falling within the 31-35 years old category. Other significant age categories for parents included 30% in the 41-50 years old range, and the remaining 30% distributed across <25 years old, 36-40 years old, or 51-64 years old (10% each). Ethnicity distribution indicated that among participating parents,

90% identified as Caucasian, while 10% identified as African American. Staff ethnicity distribution showed 60% identifying as Caucasian and 40% choosing not to disclose their ethnicity.

Family Survey Question Result

Chart 4 revealed the distribution of students' grade levels included in special education, based on responses from 10 families (n=10). The highest percentage of students with IEPs whose families reviewed the IEP Meeting Guide were in 3rd-5th grades (~36%), followed by high school students (~27%), and an even distribution (~18% each) across kindergarten-2nd grade and middle school.

Staff Survey Question Result

Among staff participants (n=5), Chart 5 demonstrated that the majority (80%) possessed 10 or more years of educational experience, while 20% had 6-10 years of experience.

IEP Resource Guide Survey Results

Regarding overall satisfaction with the IEP Meeting Guide (Chart 6), parents expressed high satisfaction, with 60% indicating they were "extremely satisfied," and the remaining 40% divided between "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" and "somewhat satisfied." Staff satisfaction mirrored parents', with 60% reporting being "extremely satisfied." Chart 7 illustrated that parents perceived the IEP Meeting Guide as easy to use, with 50% finding it "somewhat easy" and the other 50% finding it "extremely easy." Similarly, 60% of staff reported being "extremely satisfied" with its ease of use. In terms of the likelihood of use in an IEP meeting (Chart 8), most parents (50%) expressed being "extremely likely" to use the guide, while staff (60%) also indicated a high likelihood of recommending its use to the families they serve. On potential

effectiveness in aiding parents during IEP meetings (Chart 9), both parents and staff acknowledged its value, with 80% of parents and 80% of staff rating it 4 or 5 out of 5. Regarding clarity of information presented (Chart 10), the majority of both parents (90%) and staff (60%) found the guide to be "extremely clear."

Feedback for Improvement

Chart 11 revealed that most participants indicated they wouldn't change anything about the IEP Meeting Guide. Additionally, one staff member's response suggested the presence of a similar tool for addressing inappropriate behaviors at home. Overall, the findings suggest a high level of satisfaction and perceived effectiveness among both parents and staff regarding the IEP Meeting Guide's utility in supporting parents of children in special education within the rural school district.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Impact

Discussion

The evaluation of the IEP Meeting Guide unveiled significant insights into participant demographics, satisfaction levels, and the perceived effectiveness of the resource. Notably, all parent participants were female, contrasting with a more diverse mix of genders among staff members. This gender disproportionality prompts questions about factors influencing engagement in special education initiatives across different demographic groups, potentially suggesting a need for tailored resources to better engage all parents, irrespective of gender identity. The age distribution among participants showed interesting patterns, with staff falling within an older age bracket and parents spanning a wider range of ages. This variation in age demographics may influence the reception and utilization of the IEP Meeting Guide, reflecting

differing levels of familiarity and comfort with educational processes and technology. For example, families with students in younger grades rated higher levels of satisfaction with the guide. This indicates the parents at the earlier stages of their children's educational journey may find a resource, like this one, more beneficial than those parents that have been navigating the system longer. Understanding exactly how age intersects with attitudes towards support resources, like the IEP Meeting Guide, could inform strategies for effectively disseminating and implementing similar tools across diverse age groups within the community; or this could inform specially targeting a resource to a particular group. Ethnically, most participants were Caucasian, posing a challenge in ensuring inclusivity and cultural relevance of the IEP Meeting Guide for families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially within this rural community. The guide was also only provided in English. Ensuring cultural competency and sensitivity in the design and delivery of parent support materials is crucial for fostering equitable access and engagement among all community members. Future efforts should aim to involve and consult with culturally diverse stakeholders to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of parent support initiatives across diverse cultural contexts.

The evaluation of the IEP Meeting Guide also revealed generally high levels of satisfaction among both parents and staff, indicating its effectiveness in supporting the needs of families and educators involved in the IEP process. Families exhibited a slightly higher degree of overall satisfaction compared to staff, highlighting the guide's perceived value in aiding parents in navigating the complexities of IEP meetings. The guide's ease of use was positively rated by both groups, with staff showing a higher proportional level of satisfaction, suggesting its utility in supporting the families they serve. Both staff and parents displayed similar likelihoods of using the guide in IEP meetings, and most respondents overwhelmingly endorsed the likelihood

of use. Most parents rated the guide as highly effective, with a notable 4 or 5 out of 5 rating, indicating the guide's high perceived effectiveness in helping facilitate more collaborative decision-making processes within team meetings. Staff opinions regarding perceived effectiveness were more evenly distributed, indicating differing perspectives among educators. Most parents and staff found the information presented in the guide to be clear, indicating that the way the information was presented was well received and understood by the majority of participants.

Moreover, most respondents expressed satisfaction with the guide as it is, with a considerable proportion indicating they wouldn't change anything about it to better support their needs. This high level of satisfaction suggests the guide adequately meets the needs and expectations of staff and families involved in team meetings. However, it is worth noting that a portion of respondents refrained from providing feedback on potential changes to the guide. The typed response from one staff member, indicating an existing tool or strategy at home to address inappropriate behaviors, provides valuable insight into the presence of alternative resources for addressing specific issues. This suggests that existing tools or strategies may already be in place for addressing certain concerns, potentially explaining why respondents did not feel the need to suggest changes to the IEP Meeting Guide in that regard. Overall, these findings underscore the perceived effectiveness and value of the IEP Meeting Guide in supporting collaborative efforts between parents and educators in the IEP process.

Despite demographic variations and study limitations, the findings indicated high levels of satisfaction overall with the guide among respondents which suggests that it meets the needs and expectations of both staff and families involved in IEP team meetings. However, administrators and educators need to continue soliciting feedback and monitoring the

effectiveness of resources and support tools to ensure they adequately meet the needs of all stakeholders involved in the IEP process. Additionally, further addressing the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size of reviewers and the potential biases in self-report data, is crucial for future research aimed at enhancing the generalizability and validity of the findings. Overall, these results underscore the importance of considering demographic diversity and individual preferences in designing and implementing parent support resources within the special education context, especially in small communities. By addressing unique needs and fostering inclusivity, educators, administration, and providers can enhance the accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness of support initiatives, ultimately improving outcomes for students with special needs and collaboration with their families.

Potential Impact

The potential impact of an IEP Meeting Guide for parents to effectively, confidently, and collaboratively work with educators to create special educational resources is multifaceted and significant. Firstly, such a guide has the potential to empower parents by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to actively participate during IEP team meetings. It provides clear and comprehensive information about the various components of an IEP, including goals, accommodations, and services, and helps parents better understand their vital role in the overall special education process. The guide has the potential to enhance parents' confidence in advocating for their child's needs. By offering practical tips, strategies, and prompts for effective communication and collaboration with educators, the guide can help alleviate feelings of uncertainty or apprehension that parents may experience when navigating the complexities of IEP meetings. This increased confidence can empower parents to voice their concerns, ask

questions, and actively contribute to the development of appropriate support tools and services for their children.

The collaborative nature of the guide encourages parents and educators to work together as equal partners in the IEP process. By promoting open communication, mutual respect, and shared decision-making, the guide fosters a positive and constructive relationship between parents and educators. This collaborative approach not only enhances the quality of the IEP itself, but it also strengthens the overall support system for the child, ensuring that their individual needs and preferences are effectively addressed. In addition to its immediate benefits for parents and educators, the impact of the guide can extend to the child's educational outcomes and overall well-being. By facilitating the development of more tailored and effective tools and services, the guide can contribute to improved academic performance, social-emotional development, and overall success in school for children with special needs. Furthermore, the collaborative and supportive environment fostered by the guide can promote a sense of inclusivity, belonging, and empowerment for both the child and their family within the school community. Overall, the IEP Meeting Guide for parents can be a transformative tool that empowers families, strengthens partnerships between parents and educators, and enhances the educational experiences and outcomes of children with special needs. By striving to promote informed decision-making, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving, the guide has the potential to help contribute to a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive educational environment for students and their families.

Limitations

While this capstone project endeavored to design and evaluate an evidence-based parent support with the specific goals of advancing knowledge, improving communication, and

fostering collaboration among parents, educators, and providers in a small city school district, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in its design. Firstly, the study's focus on a single school district, purposive sampling, and lack of diverse respondents limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings. The reliance on self-reported surveys, although practical for this study, introduces the possibility of response bias, and the voluntary nature of participation resulted in a non-random sample, affecting the study's external validity. The survey's anonymous nature, while preserving confidentiality, precludes the ability to accurately track progress or discern specific trends among different demographic groups. Additionally, the reliance on administrators to disseminate the study information and IEP Meeting Guide introduces potential biases and may influence the voluntary participation of teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents. Finally, the IEP Meeting Guide was not used during an actual IEP meeting, preventing a direct assessment of its impact in a real-world setting. Future studies might consider evaluating the usage of a designed resource and measuring its effect. Despite these limitations, the study was still able to provide valuable insights into the potential impact of designing evidence-based parent supports and contribute to the broader discourse on enhancing parent engagement within special education in rural communities.

Sustainability Considerations

The IEP Meeting Guide should be assessed and evaluated in a real-world application before considering sustainability considerations. If the IEP Meeting Guide became an accepted resource to be utilized, consideration should be made regarding general sustainability for the guide and similar parent support resources. First, a plan should be established for regular maintenance and updates to keep the guide accurate and relevant, incorporating changes in educational policies or practices. Financial sustainability is another key consideration, requiring

budgeting for printing, distribution, and revisions. Integration with existing systems within the school district or institution ensures the guide becomes a standard resource for all involved stakeholders, embedding it into established practices. Providing training opportunities for staff and parents on effective guide utilization is crucial for long-term sustainability, including workshops or webinars for maximizing benefits. Establishing continued feedback mechanisms, such as surveys or focus groups, would allow for a necessary ongoing assessment of the guide's effectiveness. Helping consistently identify areas for improvement and addressing emerging needs of users is important for future developments of the guide. Continuous assessment and updates are crucial to ensure cultural relevance and accessibility for all diverse users, including translation into multiple languages and formats and ensuring accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Lastly, implementing an evaluation and monitoring the guide's impact over time can inform future revisions and improvements. By addressing these considerations, educators, administrators, and providers can ensure the ongoing effectiveness and value of the guide in supporting parents and improving outcomes for students with special needs in the long-term.

Conclusions

This study aimed to design and assess an evidence-based parent support resource, the IEP Meeting Guide. This guide was a resource tool tailored to support parents to advocate for educational support effectively and collaboratively for their children included in special education within a small, rural school district. The existing problem addressed in the study revolves around the observed educational gaps among parents, particularly in advocating for academic support during IEP meetings. The research question focused on assessing the outcomes of designing and evaluating such a resource within the context of a rural city school district, which could help bridge those education gaps for parents.

Addressing Educational Gaps and Enhancing Parental Involvement

The literature review provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by parents in navigating the special education system, particularly in rural areas. It highlighted the importance of parent involvement and collaboration with educators for improving academic outcomes for students with special needs. Studies emphasized the significance of empowering parents with knowledge, confidence, and effective communication skills to advocate for their children's educational needs. The design of the parent support resource was informed by these insights, aiming to educate and enhance parental involvement in the IEP process.

Assessment of the Parent Support Resource

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact and usability of the IEP Meeting Guide. Quantitative measures were used to evaluate overall satisfaction, ease of use, likelihood of use, perceived effectiveness, and clarity of information. The results indicated high levels of satisfaction among parents and staff, with parents showing higher satisfaction. Staff, particularly those with extensive educational experience, endorsed the use of the resource to support families in IEP meetings.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of the study have several implications for practice. Firstly, they underscore the importance of tailored parent support resources in addressing the unique needs of families in rural school districts. The positive feedback received indicates the potential of such resources to empower parents and facilitate meaningful collaboration between parents and educators. Secondly, the study highlights the role of educators, school administrators, and providers in

facilitating parent involvement and providing support resources. By engaging with parents and soliciting their feedback, schools can ensure the relevance and effectiveness of such resources.

Future research in this area could explore the long-term impact of parent support resources on student outcomes and parental engagement. Also exploring the impact utilizing OTs' expertise and knowledge in the implementation of family support interventions within schools to support special education student outcomes could add to the pool of evidence in this space. Studies could also examine the scalability and sustainability of such resources across diverse school districts. In conclusion, the study addressed the existing problem of educational gaps among parents in advocating for academic support for their children in special education within a rural school district. By designing and evaluating an evidence-based parent support resource, the study aimed to enhance parental involvement and collaboration with educators. The findings indicate overall satisfaction with the resource among parents and staff, highlighting its potential to empower parents and improve outcomes for students with special needs by enhancing collaborations with their families.

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Appendix

A1. Learning Objectives

Two major learning objectives were identified to meet the project's specific aims, they are listed below:

I. **Within 14 weeks, create an evidence-based parent resource to help improve knowledge, communication, and collaboration among educators in a rural community.**
   a. In weeks 1 - 2, continue the literature search on best practices for creating parent-based supports in rural communities.
   b. In weeks 3 - 7, create resource content for parent support programming
      i. Mentor Directed Theme: "Before, During, After IEP… What do I do?"
         1. Part 1: Before IEP
         2. Part 2: During IEP
         3. Part 3: After IEP
   c. In weeks 3- 7, determine the mode of delivery to allow the most unrestrictive access to parents.
   d. In weeks 7-12, promote the resource to staff, teachers, and parents of kids in special education classrooms in a small, rural school district and gain consent to participate study by reviewing the resource and taking a survey.

II. **Within 14 weeks, create and disseminate a survey to parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators to collect data on the review of the developed parent support resource.**
   a. In weeks 1- 4, literature searches on types of questions that best measure the impact of parent programming and resources.
   b. In weeks 3 - 6, creation of survey and determine best mode of delivery.
      i. Modify forms of survey for parents vs staff
   c. In weeks 7-12, promotion of program and survey
   d. In weeks 9-12, collect data from survey
      i. ease of delivery (usability/practicality)
      ii. usefulness
      iii. understandability of materials
   e. In weeks 12-14, compile all data gained from survey and present in study write up.

A2. Capstone One Pager

Capstone Title:

Designing and Assessing an Evidence-Based Support Resource for Parents of Children Included in Special Education in a Small, Rural School District

Faculty Supervisor: Jade Holloway OTD, OTR/L, CSLT

Student Researcher: Mirage Sanders OTS

Introduction: What is the Research Question?

What are the outcomes of designing and assessing an evidence-based parent resource for families included in special education within a small, rural, public school system?

Capstone Purpose Statement

The purpose of this capstone project is to design and assess an evidence-based parent support with the objectives of advancing knowledge, enhancing communication, and fostering better collaboration with educators and providers for parents of children included in special education. The outcome of the project will provide evidence of the inclusion parent support programming has on improving parent understanding and confidence to appropriately advocate for the educational needs of their children in a smaller, rural school district.

Methods to Conduct Capstone

Special education parents, teachers, administrators, and staff included in special education will serve as the target population in this study. Participants will be asked to review content created to support parents in the IEP process and will be given a post review of content survey. The resource content is an IEP guide for parents which will consist of what should be done before, during, and after IEP meetings. Participants will access both the resource content and survey on the email communication, with embedded links to both resource guide and survey. The survey will be completely anonymous through Qualtrics, and its purpose is to assess the potential impact a support like this could have on parent knowledge and confidence, which is one of the main indicators of parent engagement (Mereoiu et al., 2016). The practicality and perceived usefulness of the content will also be assessed. To maintain confidentiality between participants, no identifiable information will be collected or stored. Any communications made to school administrators or staff will be made with no identifiable information to protect the privacy of all participants. In addition, no identifiable information from this school district will be published in the formal write up of the capstone.

Output and Outcome of Capstone Project

The output of this capstone is a written article, which will provide evidence of the impact designing and assessing an evidence-based parent support with the objectives of advancing knowledge, enhancing communication, and fostering better collaboration with educators and providers has on parents of children included in special education in a rural, smaller school district. The outcome of this capstone will provide evidence to help inform future program development to support parents in smaller counties and school districts.

A3. IEP Resource Guide
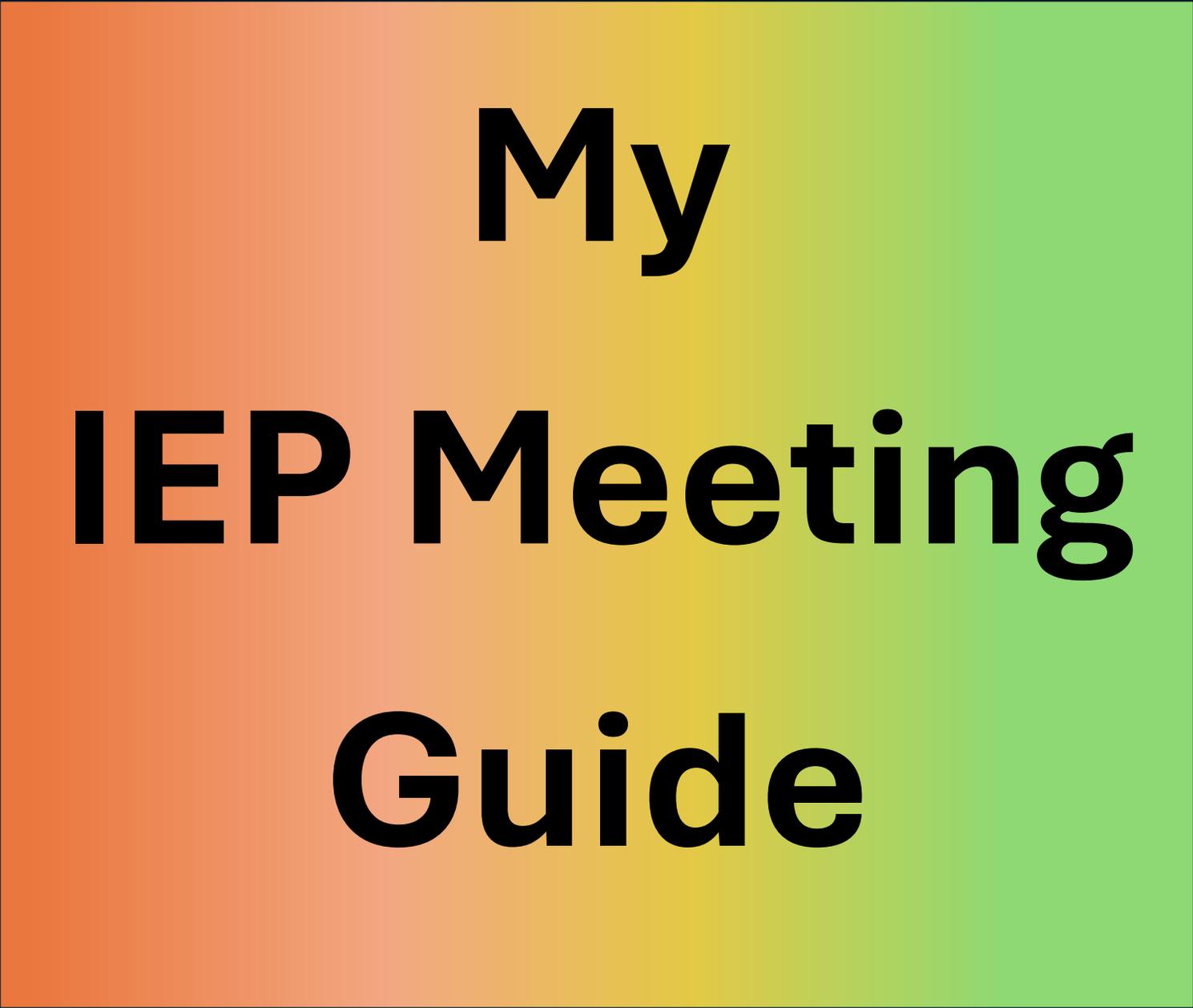
My IEP Meeting Guide

You, as a parent of a child with disabilities, are a valuable member of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Understanding that you have knowledge about your student from which IEP team members will benefit is important. Likewise, the information and professional perspectives the team members have can help you understand your child's educational services better. **COLLABORATION IS KEY**, and this guide will help organize you.

My IEP Meeting Information

Date:

Time:

Location:

Choose the Reason for my Meeting:

Initial IEP: Occurs when a student is first identified as having a disability and needs special education services. The purpose is to develop the initial IEP.

Annual Review IEP: Held at least once a year, this meeting is a comprehensive review and update of your student's IEP. The team discusses progress, assesses goals, and determines any necessary modifications or adjustments for the upcoming year.

Transitional IEP: For students who are approaching significant transitions, such as moving from elementary to middle school, this meeting is held to discuss and plan for your student's environmental changes.

Reevaluation/Determination IEP: Conducted when there is a need to reassess your student's eligibility for special education services. This meeting involves reviewing evaluation data and determining whether the student still qualifies for special education services.

Emergency IEP: This meeting is held to address urgent and unforeseen situations affecting your student's education, such as changes in health status or a significant disruption in the learning environment.

Remember YOU are the expert on your child and an EQUAL partner at the IEP table.
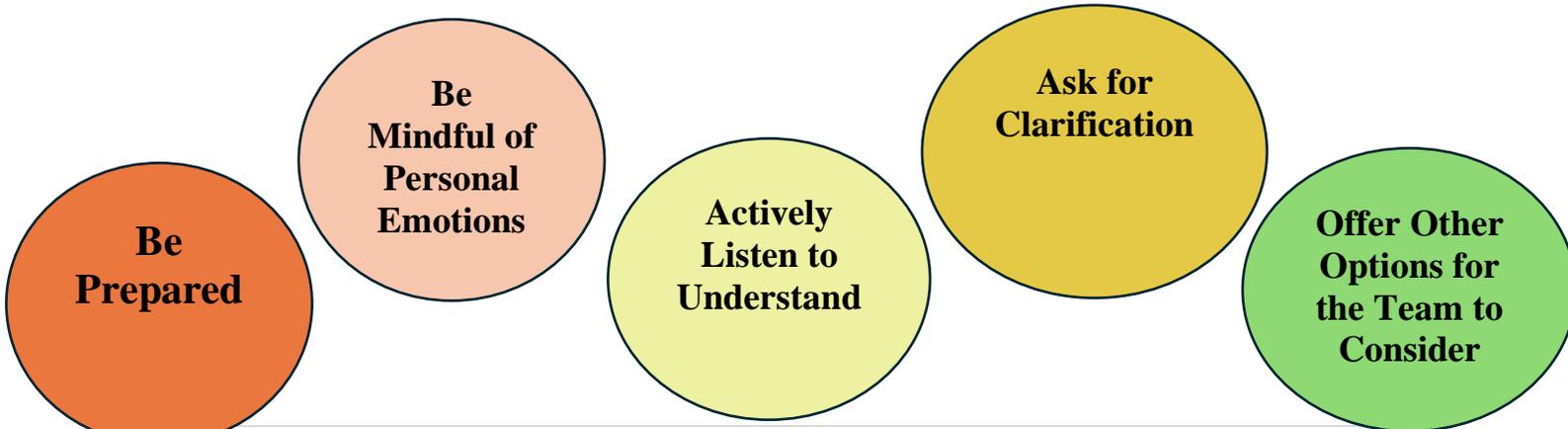
Be Prepared

Be Mindful of Personal Emotions

Actively Listen to Understand

Ask for Clarification

Offer Other Options for the Team to Consider

PART 1: BEFORE THE MEETING

STUDENT HEALTH UPDATES

The IEP team will want to know if there are any changes to your student's medications, medical diagnoses, or related information. Write that here…

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

STUDENT ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Write here, any concerns you have regarding your child's current reading, spelling, writing, and math skills...

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

BEHAVIORAL/SOCIALEMOTIONAL CONCERNS

Do you have any concerns about your student's social activities or friends? What about concerns with emotional or behavioral struggles, write it here...

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

ASK YOUR CHILD

If it is appropriate, include your child as much as possible in the planning process. Do they have any concerns they want you to talk about in the IEP meeting? DON'T FORGET... that your student is the one receiving these services and has valuable input about their special education experience.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

REFLECTION TIME

Using the information above, what are the top things you feel are most important to ensure your student makes progress this year? Write them here...

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

PART 2: DURING THE MEETING

Important things to remember:

❖ Keep your cool

❖ Focus on positives

❖ Keep the focus of meeting on your child's needs

❖ Clearly share your goals for your child

❖ Listen.

❖ Stop meeting when confused and ask questions

❖ Always present options in a collaborative way, think "we should consider doing this" instead of "you should" and think "yes, and..." instead of "yes, but..."

MEMBERS OF TEAM IN ATTENDANCE

Keep track of who is the case manager for just in case you have questions after the meeting.

General Education Teacher:

Special Education Teacher:

Local Education Agency Representative (LEA):

School Psychologist:

Occupational Therapist:

Physical Therapist:

YOU and Caregivers:

Others:

NEXT, THE IEP DRAFT DOCUMENT

This is a BIG document, and it can be super confusing! But just remember that YOU are a valued part of the team and have a major say in the IEP becoming official. Keep track of your notes from the meeting and any questions below...

If you lose track or get "lost in the sauce", REQUEST for the notetaker to email you MEETING NOTES with a summary of the next steps included for your review.

GENERAL QUESTIONS/OBSERVATIONS

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

MENTION THE IMPORTANT THINGS FROM YOUR REFLECTION SECTION
(In Part 1)

IEP GOALS AND SERVICES

Make sure you agree with goals and objectives, service delivery, modifications, and accommodations for your student. Here, write down notes or changes...

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

CONSIDER THESE QUESTION STARTERS TO GAIN BETTER UNDERSTANDING FROM IEP TEAM ABOUT YOUR STUDENT

• Would you tell me more about _____ ?

• That term (or acronym) is unfamiliar to me. Would you please explain it?

• How will I know if this educational plan is working?

• What will the school propose to do about _____ ?

• Could you please share the data to support _____ ?

• Could you give me more specifics about_____ ?

• How was the progress you mentioned measured?

• How long will we need to use this intervention to determine if it's successful? Can we set a date to revisit the success of this intervention after that timeframe?

• Could we look at other methods?

• Could you share the research on the effectiveness of that method?

• What are some other options?

• What assistive technology might benefit my child?

• Could you give a few examples of _____.

• What time of day does _____ usually happen?

• When can I expect to receive that report?

• What was the reason or rationale for _____ ?

• I've noticed _____ at home. What do you see at school?

• You say the policy is _____. May I please have a copy of that policy to read?

• Do we all agree that _____(summary statement)

These questions were developed by the 2020 PACER Center

WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME

Here, write down any advice you receive to help reinforce the skills your child is working on at home...

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

PART 3: AFTER THE MEETING

OK expert, it is time to take action! Look through your notes above, highlight and reflect on the meeting. Write down 1 thing you can start working on NOW with your child, and DO IT.

You totally got this!

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

After the meeting make sure to...

Ensure that you have established clear and preferred channels of communication with the IEP team

Use written communication to clarify expectations, ask questions, and share information.

Schedule regular check-in meetings for updates (in-person or virtual) with the IEP team to discuss progress and monitor your child's progress both academically and in terms of meeting the goals outlined in the IEP.

Foster an open dialogue environment. This will encourage the IEP team to share insights, observations, and any concerns they may have.

If you have concerns, address them as they come up with the IEP team members. Timely communication is key for effective problem-solving.

A4. Email Consent Letters

Email Letter A for Parents

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Parent Support Resource Study

Dear Parents,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study conducted by Mirage Sanders, a Clinical Doctorate student under the direction of Dr. Jade Holloway in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Georgia State University. The study, titled "Designing and Assessing an Evidence-Based Support Resource for Parents of Children Included in Special Education in a Small, Rural School District," aims to explore and enhance the supports available to help families contributing informally during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Study Overview: The study's goal is to design and assess an evidence-based, parent support, resource. The resource was designed to help improve knowledge, enhance communication, and foster better collaboration between parents and educators/providers for children included in our special education program.

Your Privacy and Participation: Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and anonymous. Your responses cannot be linked back to you. Ensuring the research has a high level of confidentiality to inspire you to be completely honest in your review of resource and the validity of the study. Please also note that you do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

How to Participate:

1. **View the IEP Meeting Guide.** (Please read through the IEP Meeting Guide, but do NOT use the guide in an actual meeting.)

2. **Then complete the accompanying 10-question survey, use the link below or QR code.**

   https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_erP4ozuAwUudeHY

3. **Your responses will be entirely confidential and used solely for research purposes.**

Timeline: Please review the resource and complete the survey by April 1st. Your timely participation is appreciated.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to Mirage Sanders at msanders45@student.gsu.edu or Dr. Jade Holloway at jgross11@gsu.edu.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to the success and well-being of our students and staff.

Sincerely,

Principal

Email Letter B for Staff

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Parent Support Resource Study

Dear Teachers, Administrators, and Staff,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study conducted by Mirage Sanders, a Clinical Doctorate student under the direction of Dr. Jade Holloway in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Georgia State University. The study, titled "Designing and Assessing an Evidence-Based Support Resource for Parents of Children Included in Special Education in a Small, Rural School District," aims to explore and enhance the supports available to help families contributing informally during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Study Overview: The study's goal is to design and assess an evidence-based, parent support, resource. The resource was designed to help improve knowledge, enhance communication, and foster better collaboration between parents and educators/providers for children included in our special education program.

Your Privacy and Participation: Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and anonymous. Your responses cannot be linked back to you. Ensuring the research has a high level of confidentiality to inspire you to be completely honest in your review of resource and the validity of the study. Please also note that you do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

How to Participate:

1. **View the IEP Meeting Guide.** (Please read through the IEP Meeting Guide, but do NOT use the guide in an actual meeting.)

2. **Then complete the accompanying 10-question survey, use the link below or QR code.**

   https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d0YdsXqk7CA8Jvw

3. **Your responses will be entirely confidential and used solely for research purposes.**

Timeline: Please review the resource and complete the survey by April 1st. Your timely participation is appreciated.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to Mirage Sanders at msanders45@student.gsu.edu or Dr. Jade Holloway at jgross11@gsu.edu.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to the success and well-being of our students and families.

Sincerely,

Principal

A5a. Survey Questions Staff

Survey Questions: To be used for teachers, paraprofessionals, providers, administrators, and staff.

Demographic Information:
1. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Prefer not to say
2. Age
   a. 25 or younger
   b. 26-30
   c. 31-35
   d. 36-40
   e. 41-50
   f. 51-64
   g. 65 or older
3. Ethnicity
   a. African American/Black
   b. Caucasian/White
   c. Hispanic/Latina
   d. Other
   e. Prefer not to say
4. Years of experience
   a. 1 or less
   b. 2-5
   c. 6-10
   d. 10+
5. Overall Satisfaction: On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the IEP resource guide for the parents you serve?
   a. 1 Not at all satisfied
   b. 2
   c. 3 Neutral
   d. 4
   e. 5 Very satisfied
6. Ease of Use: How easy was it for you to navigate and use the IEP resource guide?
   a. Very Easy
   b. Easy
   c. Neutral
   d. Hard
   e. Very Difficult

7. Likelihood to Recommend: On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely are you to recommend this resource to your families?
    a. 1 Not at all likely
    b. 2
    c. 3 Neutral
    d. 4
    e. 5 Very likely
8. Effectiveness: On a scale of 1 to 5, do you think this resource would help parents contribute informally during IEP meetings?
    a. 1 Not at all
    b. 2
    c. 3 Maybe
    d. 4
    e. 5 Definitely Yes
9. Clarity of Information: On a scale of 1 to 5, how clear and understandable was the information provided by the IEP Guide for parents?
    a. 1 Not clear at all
    b. 2
    c. 3 Neutral
    d. 4
    e. 5 Very clear
10. Open-ended Question: What would you change about this guide to further support the families you serve?
    a. _____
    b. I wouldn't change anything.
    c. Prefer not to say

A5b. Survey Questions Families

Parent Survey Questions: To be used for parents and caregivers.

Demographic Information:
1. Gender
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Prefer not to say
2. Age
    a. 25 or younger
    b. 26-30
    c. 31-35
    d. 36-40
    e. 41-50

    f. 51-64

    g. 65 or older

3. Ethnicity
    a. African American/Black
    b. Caucasian/White
    c. Hispanic/Latina
    d. Other
    e. Prefer not to say

4. What is your student involved in at the grade level of special education?
    a. PreK
    b. Kindergarten – 2nd (Primary School)
    c. 3rd – 5th (Elementary School)
    d. Middle School
    e. High School

5. Overall Satisfaction: On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the IEP resource guide?
    a. 1 Not at all satisfied
    b. 2
    c. 3 Neutral
    d. 4
    e. 5 Very satisfied

6. Ease of Use: How easy was it for you to navigate and use the IEP resource guide?
    a. Very Easy
    b. Easy
    c. Neutral
    d. Hard
    e. Very Difficult

7. Likelihood to Use: On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely are you to use this resource?
    a. 1 Not at all likely
    b. 2
    c. 3 Neutral
    d. 4
    e. 5 Very likely

8. Effectiveness: On a scale of 1 to 5, do you think this resource would be effective in helping you contribute during IEP meetings?
    a. 1 Not at all
    b. 2
    c. 3 Maybe
    d. 4
    e. 5 Definitely Yes

9. Clarity of Information: On a scale of 1 to 5, how clear and understandable did the IEP Guide provide the information?
    a. 1 Not clear at all

       b. 2

       c. 3 Neutral

       d. 4

       e. 5 Very clear

10. Open-Ended Question: What would you change about this guide to support your needs further?

       a. _____

       b. I wouldn't change anything

       c. Prefer not to say

A6. Capstone Supervision Plan

Level of Supervision	Low No supervision, self-directed and all tasks conducted independently	Medium Minimal supervision, support offered as needed from mentors or biweekly or weekly meetings for feedback	High Maximal supervision, daily feedback needed from mentors with a high level of support to conduct tasks
		Capstone Learning Objective 1	
	Within 14 weeks, create an evidence-based parent resource to help improve knowledge, communication, and collaboration educators in a rural community.		
(Low)	In weeks 1 - 2, continue literature search on best practices creating parent-based supports in rural communities.		

(Medium)	In weeks 3 - 7, create resource content for parent support programming
	Mentor Directed Theme: "Before, During, After IEP… What do I do?"
	      Part 1: Before IEP
	      Part 2: During IEP
	      Part 3: After IEP		

(Low)	In weeks 3- 7, determine the mode of delivery to allow the most unrestrictive access to parents.		
(Medium)	In weeks 7-12, promote the resource to staff, teachers, and parents of kids in self-contained classrooms in a small, rural school district and gain consent to participate study by reviewing the resource and taking a survey.		
		Capstone Learning Objective 2	
	Within 14 weeks, create and disseminate a survey to parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators to collect data on the review of the developed parent support resource.		
(Low)	In weeks 1- 4, literature searches on types of questions that best measure the impact of parent programming and resources.		
(Low)	In weeks 3 - 6, creation of survey and determine best mode of delivery. Modify forms of survey for parents vs staff		
(Medium)	In weeks 7-12, promotion of program and survey		

(Medium)	In weeks 9-12, collect data from survey
	      ease of delivery (usability/practicality)
	      usefulness
	      understandability of materials		

(Low)	In weeks 12-14, compile all data gained from survey and present in study write up.		

Midterm and Final Evaluations and supervision meetings were completed by faculty and site mentors to ensure steady progress of capstone