



## Advancing Inclusive Family Engagement in Teacher Preparation for Students with (Dis)abilities

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For many families, advocating and engaging in their child's education feels like an uphill battle. Immigrant families, families of color, and low-income families of students with (dis)abilities have shared stories of exclusion from full participation in the education of their children when engaging with schools.<sup>1</sup> One mom explains,

"...But in her teen years it got worse...it caused her to [regress] because [the right services] weren't provided versus the K to 3, early intervention program...by the time they get to 5th grade, if you really haven't covered those gray areas, some of the school's personnel feel like nothing's going to change. You know, they just say, okay, we done it or whatever."

Unfortunately, *Rhonda's* experience is not an anomaly but is representative of many parents' experiences navigating issues of inclusion and advocating for services that can support their children's success in general education settings.

### Barriers to Inclusive Family Engagement

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) clearly states the right of parents to have full and equal participation in the special education process. In accordance with federal law, states have developed procedural safeguards to protect parent participation. If full participation is a legally required mandate, why are parents continuing to face exclusionary practices?

Research demonstrates that these exclusionary practices often happen in subtle and indirect ways. Educators, related service providers, and other members of the Individualized Education Program Team (IEPT)—the group responsible for developing personalized education plans for students with (dis)abilities—may unknowingly engage in exclusionary practices that discriminate against families of children with (dis)abilities. Additionally, parents may not know their rights under IDEA, the process of engaging in mediation may be unclear, or they may not have the financial privilege or time to take school districts to court for violations of IDEA and the right of their children to have a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Who is in the position to support parents and ensure their rights are protected? The very people who teach and support their children in inclusive settings – teachers. But, teachers can't do this alone. Natasha M. Strassfeld, an education scholar at University of Texas at Austin, highlights that teachers hold a complex position, not only do they have "responsibilities and obligations to both the school district and to parents," but "both parties may have competing interests and goals that a teacher has to manage carefully." Without the proper training to help them identify structural inequities, discriminatory practices, and methods to disrupt

them and the support of their administrators, teachers are placed in a difficult position. Here is where teacher education and continuing education for teachers plays an important role in giving them the foundational knowledge they need to begin to identify and respond to barriers that inhibit family engagement.

Karen Mapp and colleagues developed a report on family engagement through the Carnegie Foundation and highlighted that only 17 states have general education teacher education standards focused on family engagement. Additionally, in states that do have standards, they range in specificity. An added challenge is that there is minimal to no language related to teacher's participation and collaboration with parents during the special education process – a process essential to the success of students identified with (dis)abilities in schools. As we move to greater inclusion of students with (dis)abilities in general education settings, integrating collaboration with their families in teacher standards can lead to more focused and intentional professional development for teachers.

## Finding a Solution

Responding to this issue requires a multifaceted approach:

- **Establish National Family Engagement Standards:** Integrate clear family engagement standards in teacher preparation for both general and special education teachers (and related service providers) across the United States. These standards should include language focused on building the collaboration and advocacy skills for teachers to support students identified with (dis)abilities and their families during the special education process. The development of these standards should include the voices of parents, students, and educators across race, culture, gender, class, (dis)ability, region, and other social identities.
- **Incorporate Practice-Based Learning Opportunities:** Teacher preparation programs should leverage simulated experiences with trained parent actors who have *experience working in schools, working with children and families, and supporting teacher learning*. These simulations help future teachers develop a better understanding of race, ability, and other aspects of identity that shape students' experiences.
- **Create Meaningful Family Interactions During Fieldwork:** Teacher preparation programs should also provide teacher candidates with opportunities to interact with families during field-based experiences under the supervision of mentor teachers and/or university staff/faculty. Additionally, mentor teachers should receive training in providing appropriate feedback to support teacher candidate reflection on their biases and disrupting inequitable practices.
- **Promote Ongoing Reflection on Equity:** Engaging teacher candidates and beginning teachers in continued reflection over the course of their teacher education program and their first years of teaching in their school district. This ongoing reflection ensures they are unpacking biases and disrupting inequitable practices as they engage in partnership with families.
- **Invest in Professional Development:** Federal and state legislators should advocate for increased funding for teacher education programs and school districts to provide ongoing professional development. These activities should focus on enhancing family and community engagement skills for teacher candidates and early-career educators.

Students with (dis)abilities and their families matter. We have to do more than communicate this through speech but also through action. We must hold ourselves accountable to them by including their voice, developing standards for teacher practice, and providing teachers with the support they need to collaborate with **all** families.

I intentionally use the term (dis)ability to counter the emphasis on what a person cannot do and instead highlight what they *can* achieve. The parenthesis bring to our attention the abilities that people who identify as (dis)abled and/or are labeled (dis)abled possess — abilities that are too frequently overlooked by the very systems meant to support them. Read more in “ [Seeing the Unseen: Applying Intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory \(DisCrit\) Frameworks in Preservice Teacher Education](#)”

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