

Do We Really Want Parents Involved?¹

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The Petersons:

“Honey, my water has broken,” yelled Mrs. Peterson at 3:00 a.m. Her husband jumped out of the bed. While running to the bathroom, he slipped in the embryonic fluid and fell. “Are you okay?” yelled Mrs. Peterson. Other than injuring his pride, Mr. Peterson didn’t sustain any physical injuries from falling. They immediately left for the hospital. Mr. and Mrs. Peterson, a happily married couple, had one daughter, Barbara, and were expecting a son.

“Stop pushing! The cord is wrapped around the baby’s neck!,” the doctor yelled in the delivery room. Terrified, Mrs. Peterson prayed that the baby be allowed to live. She didn’t believe she could handle losing her baby. “Hand me scissors,” the doctor barked to the nurses in the delivery room. The couple waited anxiously and hoped that all would be well. “Okay, push now... everything is fine,” said the doctor. After delivery, the couple was assured that all went well. Mom and son were discharged within 48 hours.

“Mmmooommm, the baby is shaking!,” screamed big sis, Barbara. An emergency room visit six months later was the beginning of an ordeal that this family was not prepared for. After a team of doctors at the local children’s hospital conducted intensive tests, this couple was told that Brandon, their child, had severe brain damage in the left

¹This case is inspired by the following action research papers: *Empowering Parents of Color—A Moral Obligation*, by Barb Rubin, TNLI MetLife Fellow—Wisconsin and *A Closed Mouth Doesn’t Get Fed: Talking About Parent Involvement*, by Richard A. Gadsby, TNLI MetLife Fellow—New York City.

side of his brain (left hemi paresis), resulting in a seizure disorder. The family was referred to a birth-to-three program for identification of a disability and early intervention services. Mr. and Mrs. Peterson were overwhelmed and confused.

Mrs. Banks:

“Congratulations and welcome aboard”, the head of Human Resources said. The urban public school district had hired Mrs. Banks, a newly certified special education teacher. Excited to have the opportunity to provide special education services for students identified with disabilities, she believed that all students could learn and develop to their full potential. “Emotional intelligence is just as important as academic intelligence,” Mrs. Banks proudly announced during her interview.

She believed that parental involvement was a very important determinant of student success and set about developing a partnership with her students’ parents. She mailed introductory letters to homes prior to the first day of school. She made introductory calls within the first two weeks of school to inform parents how thrilled she was to have an opportunity to work with their child.

After school, Mrs. Banks went shopping for school supplies. “Why are you spending all your money on those students?,” her husband asked.

“Some families are struggling and can’t afford to buy supplies for their children. Besides, I am eliminating all excuses as to why the student won’t be able to do their work,” replied Mrs. Banks. Using personal funds, she purchased extra school supplies for students in need, classroom materials to make her classroom inviting to her students,

incentives to increase on-task behaviors, and high interest, low-level books to ensure that she had a literacy-rich classroom that met the reading level of each of her students.

Mrs. Williams:

Having demonstrated a high level of leadership as a special education teacher for an urban public school district, the newly hired Special Services Supervisor (SSS) was excited to begin working. Mrs. Williams was assigned six schools—three high schools located in a multiplex building that previously housed one large high school, one behavioral reassignment school, and two alternative high schools.

After intensive training, Mrs. Williams began working within each assigned building. Her many job duties included: (1) monitoring and support to ensure that IEP's (Individualized Education Plans) were implemented; (2) making sure that appropriate IEP procedures were utilized by IEP teams; and, (3) providing oversight, guidance, and training to ensure compliance with state and federal requirements for all IEP evaluation and programming activities.

“What do you do in your new position?,” her mom asked Mrs. Williams.

“Basically, I make sure that the IEP meeting is convened with the legally mandated team members as well as make sure that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is followed,” replied Mrs. Williams. “The IEP team meeting is important because the previous educational plan is reviewed and the next educational plan is developed.” Parental participation was necessary during the IEP team process. She was adamant about three conscious attempts to inform, invite, and facilitate parental involvement. As the LEA (Local Education Agency) representative, she attended all

initial evaluations for students with suspected disabilities to determine eligibility for services.

This is just one day...

“Hello, may I speak to Mrs. Peterson?,” a strange voice stated over the phone.

“Who is this?” Mrs. Peterson replied.

“My name is Mrs. Banks. I am calling because I need to schedule an IEP meeting for Brandon at school.”

Mrs. Peterson was invited to an IEP meeting where there would be a psychologist, social worker, diagnostic teacher, occupational therapist, physical therapist, nurse, and LEA representative (whatever that was), the principal, a gym teacher, and the special education teacher. Since this was Mrs. Peterson’s first IEP meeting at the school, she was afraid the psychologist would tell her that something was terribly wrong with her child or even herself; the social worker would think she was an unfit mom for her son and take her children away; the teacher would tell her that her child would never learn; the nurse would tell her that her child wouldn’t live that long; and she had no idea what to think about the therapists and LEA representative.

“What did I do to deserve this? I didn’t ask for a disabled child. I didn’t drink or smoke when I was pregnant. Maybe I should put him in an institution,” cried Mrs.

Peterson after she hung up the phone.

Mrs. Banks was excited to share student progress information at the annual IEP meetings, where the next IEP was developed. Parents were contacted ahead of time to schedule a date and time that worked within their schedule. The official IEP invite was

mailed to parents 10 days prior to the mutually agreed upon meeting date. An “Offer of Alternative Participation and Reminder Letter” was mailed five days prior to the mutually agreed upon meeting date. A reminder call was placed the day prior to the mutually agreed upon meeting date. Knowing that she was destined to be a teacher and now achieving her dream, Mrs. Banks was very satisfied with her job performance. Colleagues, mentors, and administrators told her that she was the epitome of a special education teacher.

However, not having the level of parental involvement that she desired upset her. Parents did not show up for parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, and other school-wide parent involvement opportunities. “I don’t understand how these parents can send their children to school and never come in to see how they are doing? It doesn’t make sense. These kids can’t even talk,” said Mrs. Banks to the social worker as she placed a referral for a home visit for one of her most challenging students.

Every day, Mrs. Banks spent three to four hours working at home, developing thematic units, and applying for grants to purchase much needed equipment in the classroom that exceeded the special needs funded budget. She consistently read the research articles in *Exceptional Child* so that she can stay abreast of the latest research in the field of special education.

“Hello, may I speak to Mrs. Williams?,” a caller huffed on the phone.

“This is Mrs. Williams, how may I...”

The caller interrupted. “My son isn’t receiving his services.” Most recently, Mrs. Williams had received many calls from parents expressing dissatisfaction of the IEP team process, particularly dissatisfaction as to how it related to attending and addressing their

concerns during the IEP team meeting. Some parents were expressing their dissension non-verbally, by not attending the IEP meeting at all. This concerned Mrs. Williams because she knew that parental involvement was directly linked to student achievement. She desperately wanted to increase parental participation at IEP meetings to the level that IDEA intended and expected. However, she first had to deal with the IDEA complaint against the three high schools located in the multiplex per a message left by her boss. Three small charter high schools had been placed in a building that formerly housed one large comprehensive high school. Each school had their own staff but Mrs. Williams was the supervisor for the entire building. Now she left her office to attend one of the staff meetings where the principal was expected to announce the testing results for the students.

“Our test scores have come back,” stated the principal at the staff meeting. “As usual, our special education kids didn’t make AYP,” scowled Mr. Robinson. “Furthermore, the district has been identified as a District-In-Need-of-Improvement (DIFI) because of the special education students.” Regular education teachers groaned and looked around at the special education teachers. Mrs. Banks’ colleagues blamed her.

The special education supervisor, Mrs. Williams chimed in, “We are non-compliant on 35 of the 72 compliance items per the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) audit. That means that I will be completing a checklist on all IEP’s and, if they are not legally compliant per DPI mandates, the IEP meeting will have to be convened again to correct the errors.”

After the meeting, Mrs. Banks felt dejected. “Maybe I should just leave the field of teaching. My husband isn’t happy with me. The parents don’t care. Why should I

jeopardize my marriage and my happiness, when all the work I do doesn't matter anyway," mumbled Mrs. Banks to herself as she walked to her 1996 rusted-out station wagon filled with teaching materials, copies of her monthly parent newsletters, and extra school supplies.

After the meeting, Mrs. Williams retreated to her office to return calls. "Hello, Mrs. Cleaver, I am returning..." Mrs. Williams was interrupted by Mrs. Cleaver, her boss.

"Look, I need you to immediately find out what is happening at Klinger High with the autistic classroom that has the substitute teacher," stated Mrs. Cleaver, the director of Special Services. "The complaint is online, and I need a full report on my desk within 48 hours before this parent gets an attorney. This is the second parent to call about students assigned to classrooms incorrectly in that multiplex. Also, look into Hi-Tower High and let me know why the students in the Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD) Most Restrictive Placement (MRP) room are not assigned there all day but transitioning to different classes. And by the way, there are 13 IEP's past due in that multiplex. What are the teachers doing over there?"

"I'll get back to you," was all that Mrs. Williams could say because she knew that the teachers were doing the best they could in light of the scheduling conflicts, space limitations, and classroom management skill deficits of the first year alternative certification permit teachers.

"Oh, yeah," Mrs. Cleaver added, "a school board member's wife called because their son with a learning disability isn't receiving his services in his regular education classroom at Focus High. He is supposed to have that special education teacher in his

British Authors class and the use of a laptop to take notes during class. Talk to that teacher, and tell her that she must provide services to that child. Some of these special education parents complain about everything. They just aren't satisfied." Click. Mrs. Cleaver hung up without a response from Mrs. Williams.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can parental involvement impact academic achievement for students with disabilities?
2. In what ways can increased parental involvement facilitate a higher level of compliance with DPI and IDEA mandates?
3. What can Mrs. Williams do to move Mrs. Peterson along the continuum of parental involvement?