



Evaluation Brief

February 2013

Office of Shared Accountability

Parent Feedback About Individualized Education Program Team Meetings: A Pilot Study with Parents of Prekindergarten Students

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Executive Summary

The Office of Shared Accountability (OSA) joined with the Office of Special Education and Student Services (OSESS) to gather feedback from parents of students who receive special education services. The goal was to use the information to improve services and implement staff development. This brief concerns a pilot study for gathering parent feedback; overall, the results were very positive.

The pilot study focused on parents' experiences at Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings. The study also explored parent satisfaction with delivery of special education services.

The sample for the pilot study was all parents of students who receive special education services and are enrolled in a Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) class that serves prekindergarten students with disabilities. To collect data, a paper and pencil survey was mailed to each parent during spring 2012. Usable surveys totaled 349, for a 26% response rate.

Nearly all responding parents (typically at least 95%) reported positive experiences with their child's most recent IEP meeting, with respect to the following:

- Implementation of process as intended
- Communication during meeting
- Understanding of purpose and of process
- Climate at meeting
- Satisfaction with meeting

In addition, nearly all respondents (at least 98%) were highly satisfied or satisfied with each special education service received.

Analysis of these largely positive survey results identified a few areas for improvement, as reflected in the following program recommendations:

- Continue current procedures and strategies with respect to IEP meetings for parents of

prekindergarten students, with an additional focus on the areas noted below.

- Further enhance the IEP process for parents of prekindergarten students by providing additional information or more focus on four topics: 1) instructional accommodations, 2) least restrictive environment and the continuum of services, 3) extended school year (as appropriate), and 4) what a parent should do if he/she disagrees with a decision.
- Further enhance parent satisfaction with IEP meetings by confirming that the parent agrees with the accuracy of information presented about their prekindergarten student.

Recommended next steps for gathering parent feedback are as follows:

- Identify a group of parents with students in a different grade level to receive the survey.
- Revise survey items, as necessary, to be appropriate for the new group of parents.
- Shorten the survey and improve methods of announcing it and of reminding parents to complete it, as a way to increase the response rate.

Background

OSESS added a goal regarding parent outreach to its strategic plan for 2011–2012. To support this goal, OSESS formed a Parent Outreach Committee that included parents of students who receive special education services, along with staff members from OSESS, OSA, and the Division of Family and Community Partnerships. The committee's charge is to develop systematic processes for gathering parent feedback as a way to improve services and implement professional development.

The committee reviewed current and previous efforts to collect feedback from parents of MCPS students with disabilities. The goal was to generate a common set of survey questions and then customize them for

varied groups of parents, as appropriate. The committee chose to focus on IEP team meetings.

An IEP is a written statement and a legal document of the educational program designed to meet a student's individual needs. Every student who receives special education services must have an IEP. There must be a review and revision (if necessary) of the IEP at least once each year at an annual review meeting. Thus, IEP meetings are a common experience for parents, as they are invited in writing to participate in all IEP team meetings.

The committee's focus was on how to improve the IEP process for parents and whether parents felt included and understood during IEP meetings. Members also wanted feedback from parents about delivery of special education services.

Study Questions

The study addressed two questions:

1. What are parents' experiences with IEP meetings? Topics to explore include:
 - a. Implementation of process as intended
 - b. Communication during meeting
 - c. Understanding of purpose
 - d. Understanding of process
 - e. Climate at meeting
 - f. Satisfaction with meeting
 - g. What is working
 - h. What needs improvement
2. How satisfied are parents with the delivery of special education services?

Methodology

Sample

For this pilot study, parents of prekindergarten students were selected because this group is relatively small and can be consistently reached by sending documents in the student's backpack. The eligible sample consisted of parents of all prekindergarten students with disabilities enrolled in one of the following programs:

- Collaborative Autism Preschool Program (CAPP)
- Prekindergarten Deaf/Hard of Hearing Class
- Prekindergarten Language Class
- Prekindergarten Physical Disabilities Class

- Prekindergarten Vision Class
- Preschool Education Program (PEP)

The sample did not include parents of prekindergarten students receiving itinerant special education services.

Survey Development and Structure

A paper and pencil survey was developed to address the study questions. The Parent Outreach Committee brainstormed ideas for categories of survey questions, generated specific questions, reviewed proposed questions, and provided feedback about the final draft of the survey. This process ensured face validity and content-related validity of the survey questions.

The first section of the survey concerned the most recent IEP meeting attended by the parent. The majority of items in this section used the following four-point scale to measure the extent of agreement:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

At the end of the first section, there were two open-ended questions—one about what worked well at the IEP meeting and one about ways to improve the IEP meeting. OSA staff members reviewed responses to these questions and grouped them into common categories.

The second section of the survey concerned special education services that the child received. Items in this section measured the extent of satisfaction with each service with the following 4-point scale:

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

Data Collection

On May 1, 2012, the associate superintendent for OSESS sent a letter to the parents of each prekindergarten student, announcing the upcoming survey. On May 11, OSESS mailed 1,358 surveys with a due date of May 29 and included a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope for returning the

survey.¹ Parents who had requested Spanish as a language for correspondence from MCPS received surveys in both English and Spanish. Parents could contact their child’s teacher or school to request the survey in another language. A reminder letter with another copy of the survey went home to parents in their child’s backpack on May 30.

Six surveys came back from the initial mailing as undeliverable. Parents returned 354 surveys; 5 were excluded because they were duplicates or the parent had not attended an IEP meeting. Thus, there were 349 usable surveys, for a 26% (349/1,352) response rate. This rate is somewhat lower than the 32% response rate from elementary school parents to the MCPS 2011–2012 survey of school environment.

Results

Background

The number of respondents with students in each program, as reported by parents, was as follows:

- CAPP: 32
- Prekindergarten Deaf/Hard of Hearing Class: 8
- Prekindergarten Language Class: 49
- Prekindergarten Physical Disabilities Class: 0
- Prekindergarten Vision Class: 3
- PEP: 224
- No answer: 33

The most recent IEP meeting was also the child’s first IEP meeting for two fifths (40%) of respondents (Table 1). Three quarters (77%) of respondents had attended the meeting in the 90 days prior to completing the survey.

Table 1
Background Questions (N = 349)

Question (number of responses)	Yes		No		Don’t know/Not sure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Was this meeting the first IEP meeting ever held for this child? (n = 331)	133	40.2	186	56.2	12	3.6
Was your meeting held in the last 90 days? (n = 338)	260	76.9	73	21.6	5	1.5

Note. Excludes no responses.

¹ The Division of Family and Community Partnerships provided money for postage through a Maryland State Department of Education grant.

Question 1: Experiences With IEP Meetings

Nearly all responding parents reported positive experiences at their child’s most recent IEP meeting.

Implementation process as intended. Respondents indicated that the IEP meeting process was implemented as intended (Tables 2 and 3). At least nine out of ten responding parents reported that their meeting started (96%) and ended (92%) on time (Table 2). Nearly all respondents (98%) said there was enough time to cover all the information at the meeting.

Table 2
Responses to Items on Implementation of Process as Intended (N = 349)

Question (number of responses)	Yes		No		Don’t know/Not sure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Did your meeting start on time? (n = 343)	330	96.2	10	2.9	3	0.9
Did your meeting end on time? (n = 337)	309	91.7	9	2.7	19	5.6
Was there enough time at your meeting to cover all of the information? (n = 343)	335	97.7	8	2.3	0	0.0

Note. Excludes no responses.

Lastly, almost all respondents (99%) were able to give input (Table 3).

Communication during meeting. Almost all respondents reported positive communications during the IEP meeting (Table 3). Specifically, at least 96% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were able to ask clarifying questions (99%) and that there was at least one member of the school-based team to contact (96%).

Table 3
Level of Agreement With Items About Implementation of Process or Communication (N = 349)

Item (number of responses)	Strongly agree		Agree	
	n	%	n	%
I had the opportunity to provide input throughout the meeting. (n = 341)	243	71.3	93	27.3
I was able to ask clarifying questions. (n = 343)	258	75.2	80	23.3
There is at least one member of my school-based IEP team who I feel comfortable contacting. (n = 340)	239	70.3	86	25.3

Note. Excludes no responses.

Further, almost all responding parents strongly agreed or agreed that there was enough explanation during the meeting about a variety of topics (Table 4). These topics included educational services (99%); the child’s skill, abilities, and needs (98%); goals and objectives for the child (98%); related services (98%); instructional accommodations (98%); supplementary aids and services (97%); the least restrictive environment (97%); and extended school year (95%). The highest level of strong agreement (74%) was for two explanations: 1) child’s skill, abilities, and needs and 2) goals and objectives for the child.

Table 4
Level of Agreement With Items About Explanations During the Meeting (N = 349)

During the IEP meeting there was enough explanation about... (number of responses)	Strongly agree		Agree	
	n	%	n	%
the educational services to be provided for my child. (n = 336)	231	68.8	100	29.8
my child's skill, abilities, and needs. (n = 342)	252	73.7	84	24.6
the goals and objectives for my child. (n = 339)	250	73.7	81	23.9
related services. (e.g., occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), speech, etc.). (n = 320)	222	69.4	92	28.8
the instructional accommodations for my child (e.g., multiple or frequent breaks). (n = 318)	200	62.9	111	34.9
the supplementary aids and services for my child (e.g., break tasks into smaller steps, step-by-step directions, repetition of directions). (n = 323)	213	65.9	101	31.3
the least restrictive environment (LRE) for my child. (n = 296)	176	59.5	110	37.2
extended school year (ESY) for my child (as appropriate). (n = 266)	171	64.3	82	30.8

Note. Excludes no responses and not applicable.

The lowest levels of strong agreement about explanations concerned least restrictive environment (60%) and instructional accommodations (63%). Out of 349 respondents, more than 50 skipped the item or checked not applicable for least restrictive environment and for extended school year.

Understanding of purpose and process. Almost all respondents agreed that they understood the IEP meeting’s purpose and process (Table 5).

Table 5
Level of Agreement with Items about Understanding the Meeting’s Purpose and Process (N = 349)

Item (number of responses)	Strongly agree		Agree	
	n	%	n	%
I understood the purpose of the IEP meeting. (n = 342)	272	79.5	68	19.9
I understood the materials sent to me prior to the IEP meeting. (n = 340)	228	67.1	104	30.6
I am clear about what services my child will receive. (n = 342)	246	71.9	88	25.7
I am clear about what accommodations my child will receive. (n = 339)	222	65.5	108	31.9
I know what to do if I disagree with a decision. (n = 338)	185	54.7	117	34.6

Note. Excludes no responses.

Nearly all responding parents strongly agreed or agreed about understanding the purpose of the IEP meeting (99%) and the materials sent prior to the IEP meeting (98%). Fewer respondents strongly agreed about understanding the materials (67%) than the meeting purpose (80%).

Further, almost all respondents strongly agreed or agreed with three items related to understanding the IEP process (Table 5). These items included clarity about what services the child will receive (98%) and future accommodations (97%). Fewer respondents (89%) strongly agreed or agreed about knowing what to do in case of a disagreement; this item had the lowest level of agreement (i.e., strongly agree plus agree) of any item on the survey. However, as noted earlier, 96% of responding parents strongly agreed or agreed there was at least one member of the school-based team to contact.

Climate. Almost all responding parents reported a positive climate during the IEP meeting (Table 6). At least 96% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that school-based members of the IEP team made the parent feel welcome (99%), addressed the parent’s concerns (96%), and considered the parent’s viewpoint (97%). Lastly, 96% of respondents felt included as a team member.

Table 6
Level of Agreement With Items About Climate of the Meeting (N = 349)

Item (number of responses)	Strongly agree		Agree	
	n	%	n	%
The school-based members of the IEP team ... made me feel welcome. (n = 344)	283	82.3	58	16.9
addressed my concerns. (n = 343)	265	77.3	64	18.7
considered my viewpoint. (n = 341)	257	75.4	73	21.4
I felt included as a member of the IEP team. (n = 342)	233	68.1	95	27.8

Note. Excludes no responses.

Satisfaction. Almost all respondents expressed satisfaction with the IEP meeting (Table 7).

Table 7
Level of Agreement With Items About Satisfaction With the Meeting (N = 349)

Item (number of responses)	Strongly agree		Agree	
	n	%	n	%
The school-based members of the IEP team provided information relevant to my child's needs. (n = 341)	250	73.3	85	24.9
The school-based members of the IEP team made decisions in the best interest of my child. (n = 344)	260	75.6	74	21.5
I felt the information presented was an accurate description of my child. (n = 341)	217	63.6	114	33.4

Note. Excludes no responses.

At least 97% of responding parents strongly agreed or agreed that school-based members of the team provided relevant information (98%), made decisions in the child's best interest (97%), and presented information that accurately reflected the child (97%).

What is working. When asked what worked well at the IEP meeting, three quarters of parents (259, 74%) provided at least one positive comment. Close to one third of these respondents mentioned helpful information (31%) or the good relationship between staff and child (29%) (Table 8). Further, one quarter of the positive comments were for the meeting's organization (25%) and one fifth concerned the IEP team's willingness to listen to and involve parents (21%). About one tenth of respondents commented positively about the process of setting goals or making plans (15%). Slightly fewer parents made positive comments about the meeting in general (12%) or about collaboration at the meeting (11%).

Table 8
Most Frequent Comments About Things That Worked Well at the IEP Meeting (N = 349)

Comment (n = 259)	n	%
Helpful information (e.g., the IEP team provided explanations and information or answered questions)	80	30.9
Good relationship between staff and child (e.g., staff works well with, communicates well about, or expresses concern about my child)	76	29.3
Meeting's organization (e.g., good use of time; appropriate staff in attendance; staff was prepared, professional, and on time)	65	25.1
IEP team listened to or involved parents	54	20.8
Set goals or made plans (e.g., made changes to or adjusted IEP; made plan for my child)	38	14.7
Positive, general comments (e.g., IEP meeting is fine; parent happy with everything)	31	12.0
Collaboration (e.g., brainstormed together, collaborated as a team to make a decision, shared information with each other)	29	11.2

Note. Excludes no responses. Respondents could provide multiple responses.

The remaining comments came from fewer than 10% of parents who responded to this question (see all categories in Table A1, Appendix A).

What needs improvement. When asked about ways to improve the IEP meeting, 191 parents (55%) provided a comment. However, only about one quarter of respondents made a suggestion (95, 27%). Instead, more than 40% replied that they were happy with the meeting (43%) and another 15 (8%) did not have any suggestions for improvement (Table 9). The three most frequent suggestions were to involve or listen to parents (8%); to have more meetings, longer meetings, or more timely meetings (7%); and to provide an interpreter or other specialist (5%).

Table 9
Most Frequent Comments About Ways to Improve the IEP Meeting (N = 349)

Comment (n = 191)	n	%
Happy with IEP meeting	82	42.9
Involve parents; listen to parents	16	8.4
No suggestions to change IEP meeting	15	7.9
More meetings, longer meetings, or more timely meetings	14	7.3
Provide an interpreter or other specialist	9	4.7
Explain educational language, terms, activities, placement process, etc.	7	3.7
Provide information to be discussed or about the meeting before the meeting	7	3.7
Provide more information about my child, IEP goals, or services available; be available for questions after the meeting	7	3.7

Note. Excludes no responses.

Other suggestions, each from seven parents (4%), related to providing more information in four ways: explain language, terms, or activities; provide information prior to the meeting; provide more information about the child, IEP goals, or available services; or answer questions after the meeting.

The remaining comments came from 3% or fewer of these respondents (see all categories in Table A2, Appendix A).

Question 2: Satisfaction with Services

Responding parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the special education services received (Table 10). Nearly all respondents were highly satisfied or satisfied with each service: accommodations (99%), consistency of delivery (99%), instruction (98%), transportation (98%), range of services (98%), and related services (98%).

Table 10
Level of Satisfaction with Special Education Services
(N = 349)

How satisfied are you with each of the following? (number of responses)	Very satisfied		Satisfied	
	n	%	n	%
Accommodations (n = 334)	234	70.1	96	28.7
How consistently the services recommended are provided for my child (n = 339)	225	66.4	109	32.2
Instruction (n = 344)	253	73.5	85	24.7
Transportation (n = 334)	245	73.4	83	24.9
Range of educational services available to my child (n = 342)	239	69.9	95	27.8
Related services (e.g., OT, PT, speech, etc.) (n = 335)	223	66.6	105	31.3

Note. Excludes no responses. Respondents could provide multiple responses.

The services with the highest percentage of very satisfied (74%) were instruction and transportation. The service with the lowest percentage of very satisfied (66%) was consistency of delivery.

Limitations

In interpreting the survey results, it is important to recall that the response rate was 26%. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to all parents of prekindergarten children receiving special education services.

Recommendations

Analysis of these largely positive survey results identified a few areas for improvement (i.e., those in which less than two thirds of respondents strongly agreed that their experiences were positive), as reflected in the following program recommendations:

- Continue current procedures and strategies with respect to IEP meetings for parents of prekindergarten students, with an additional focus on the areas noted below.
- Further enhance the IEP process for parents of prekindergarten students by providing additional information or more focus on four topics: 1) instructional accommodations, 2) least restrictive environment and the continuum of services, 3) extended school year (as appropriate), and 4) what a parent should do if he/she disagrees with a decision.
- Further enhance parent satisfaction with IEP meetings by confirming that the parent agrees with the accuracy of information presented about their prekindergarten student.

Recommended next steps for gathering parent feedback are as follows:

- Identify a group of parents with students in a different grade level to receive the survey.
- Revise survey items, as necessary, to be appropriate for the new group of parents.
- Shorten the survey and improve methods of announcing it and of reminding parents to complete it, as a way to increase the response rate.

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Author Note. The author thanks Miss Maria Jose Allendes for data entry, Mrs. Trisha A. McGaughey for data analysis, and members of the Parent Outreach Committee for their contributions to the paper.

Appendix A

Table A1
All Comments on Things That Worked Well at the IEP Meeting (*N* = 349)

Comment (<i>n</i> = 259)	<i>n</i>	%
Helpful information: IEP team explained terms, services available, and process; answered parent's questions; told parent about child's demeanor while in school	80	30.9
Good relationship between staff and child: Excellent staff works with my child; staff communicates well about my child; staff expresses concern for my child and knows my child	76	29.3
Meeting's organization: Well organized; made good use of time; appropriate staff in attendance at meeting; everyone was prepared/professional; staff arrived on time	65	25.1
IEP team listened to or involved parents	54	20.8
Set goals; made changes to or adjusted IEP; made plan for my child	38	14.7
Positive, general comments: IEP meeting is fine; parent happy with everything	31	12.0
Collaboration: Brainstormed together/collaborated as a team to make a decision/shared information with each other (parent and school)	29	11.2
Parent felt welcome/comfortable; meeting located in familiar/comfortable setting	19	7.3
Information for IEP meeting sent prior to meeting	13	5.0
Provided an interpreter	10	3.9
Provided ideas/activities so I could help my child at home	9	3.5
Provided toys during meeting to help occupy child or to help them observe child	8	3.1
Glad to be able to meet child's teachers and other staff supporters and talk to them	7	2.7
Provided parents with date/time for meeting; accommodated parent's schedule	5	1.9
Other things that worked well (not classified above)	9	3.5

Note. Excludes no responses. Respondents could provide multiple responses.

Table A2
All Comments on Ways to Improve the IEP Meeting (*N* = 349)

Comment (<i>n</i> = 191)	<i>n</i>	%
Happy with IEP meeting	82	42.9
Involve parents; listen to parents	16	8.4
No suggestions to change IEP meeting (did not indicate happiness)	15	7.9
Schedule more meetings; longer meetings; meet more often; timeliness of meeting scheduled; be flexible with schedule or meeting length	14	7.3
Provide translator (make sure translator has been prepared for IEP meeting) or child advocate or specialist counselor (i.e., autism, etc.)	9	4.7
Provide explanation of educational language, terms, activities, placement process, etc.	7	3.7
Provide information to be discussed or about the upcoming meeting <u>before</u> the scheduled IEP meeting	7	3.7
Provide more information about my child, a particular condition, or IEP goals; be available for questions after the meeting; share information on services available	7	3.7
Designate leader at meeting; include all pertinent staff at meeting	6	3.1
Provide agenda, meeting minutes, summary of goals of meeting, or "What to Expect at an IEP Meeting" document	6	3.1
Simplify paperwork or documents provided	6	3.1
Act professionally; be on time; be prepared to talk about the child	5	2.6
Avoid rooms that are too small; too many people in the room	5	2.6
Provide data or work samples to document decisions	5	2.6
Simplify information provided; be concise; don't pressure parents with questions	4	2.1
Make sure parent knows everyone in room and their purpose	3	1.6
Coordinate timing of IEP meeting and kindergarten meeting	2	1.0
Don't take time from meeting with entering computer information	2	1.0
Observe child at home or in meeting; allow child to attend meeting	2	1.0
Provide child care during meeting	2	1.0
Review IEP forms prior to meeting for completeness and correctness	2	1.0
Other ways to improve IEP meeting (not classified above)	15	7.9

Note. Excludes no responses. Respondents could provide multiple responses.