

PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

TOWARDS THE IEP MEETING

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The purpose of the study was to investigate how parents of students with autism perceived individualized education program (IEP) meetings. I determined factors that contributed to the belief held by parents that their children were or were not being properly served by IEP meetings. Parental relationships with educators, IEP meeting experiences, IEP outcomes, and treatment by educators were revealed through participant input. Parents were asked to share their experiences of previous IEP meetings. Additionally, parents provided input regarding practices that school districts could take to improve IEP meetings, and actions that parents could take to serve as better advocates for their children.

Research findings indicated that parents did not perceive themselves as being treated as equals during IEP meetings. Parents believed that their input was not valued or welcomed by educators. Not having an equal voice toward their child's education prevented parents from positively influencing outcomes in their child's IEP meetings in terms of obtaining quality services and building positive relations with educators.

Parents further revealed that educators failed to implement proper IEP protocol. According to parents, student objectives agreed upon in IEP meetings were often not always fully implemented for students receiving special education services. Research findings concluded that parents new to the IEP process often experienced difficulty understanding special education law, and were unaware of services that school districts should provide for their children.

Suggestions for improving IEP meetings include: educators valuing parents as equal partners during IEP meetings, educators properly adhering to IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings, and both educators and parents taking measures to becoming more knowledgeable of special education law and the IEP process.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and its subsequent amendments (e.g., P.L. 101-476, P.L. 105-17) mandates active parental participation toward all aspects of educational programming for students receiving special education services (Fanning, 1977; H. Res. 5, 1997; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hullums, 1998). Participation includes parental involvement towards the development of their child's individualized education program (IEP) (Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). P.L. 94-142 further advocates partnerships between parents and educators, which permits schools to share decision-making authority with parents (Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978).

Prior to the passage of P.L. 94-142, parental input concerning educational programs was of secondary importance, as decision-making was traditionally regulated to professional educators, psychiatrists, and psychologists (Lewis, Busch, Proger, & Juska, 1981). P.L. 94-142 was created to ensure that equal educational opportunities and parameter responsibilities be provided to both schools and parents (McAfee & Vergason, 1979). Congress assumed under the passage of P.L. 94-142 that parental participation is beneficial to both parents and professionals, while serving as a vehicle for holding schools accountable towards parents and students (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wheat, 1982).

The requirement of an IEP for students receiving special education services is the primary component of Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), as well as Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997 (IDEA: P.L. 105-17) (Pruitt et al., 1998). An IEP provides guidelines for the delivery of services for

students receiving special education services (Huefner, 2000), as well as direction and monitoring of all components of a student's special education program (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). The IEP documents educational needs, annual goals, short-term instructional objectives, educational programming, placement, and evaluation criteria for students (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979).

An IEP team meeting must be conducted regarding a student receiving special education services at least annually. During this meeting, the IEP team members determine placement, evaluation, and instructional decisions pertaining to the educational program of the student. Members of an IEP team must include the parents of the student receiving special education services, the student's special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a local campus administrator. A professional knowledgeable of the instructional implications and evaluation results must be part of the IEP team. The IEP team members can also include students, if appropriate, local educational agency representatives, and other individuals deemed necessary by either the school or parents (Drasgow et al., 2001).

Despite a mandate for parental participation under the passage of P.L. 94-142, Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) claimed that parents are often not active decision-makers during the IEP process. Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, and Lasky (1988) concluded that parental influence has not increased within the IEP process despite the conceptualization and intent of the law under P.L. 94-142. Simpson (1996) further stated that federal mandates do not ensure positive relationships between parents and educators. Factors that hinder positive relationships between parents and educators include the parents' lack of

knowledge of special education law, the lack of communication prior to IEP meetings, and the discouraging of parental participation by educators (Vaughn et al., 1988).

Pruitt et al. (1998) concluded that educators have been unsuccessful in promoting collaboration with parents because so many professionals underestimate the significance of parental involvement. Professionals tend to dominate the decision-making process during IEP meetings (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Rock (2000) labeled the traditional IEP meeting as being dominated by educators who dictate educational programs to unchallenging parents. In addition, educators are likely to view educational concerns as too complex to accommodate extensive parental involvement (Kelly, 1973). Educators often perceive parents as providers of information, but not as active decision-makers (Yoshida et al., 1978).

Statement of Problem

Despite the passage of P.L. 94-142, which mandates parental participation in the educational planning of students receiving special education services, educators are likely to dominate the decision-making process regarding educational outcomes of these students. Often times, IEP meetings have failed to build an equal partnership among parents of students with autism and educators. Many school districts have been unsuccessful in building quality relationships with parents of children with autism. Due to parental perception of unequal status, many parents may become discouraged from becoming actively involved in their child's education while other parents are likely to attempt to obtain equal status with educators in IEP meetings through due process or other forms of litigation measures.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how parents of students with autism perceived IEP meetings as well as how they perceived being valued by educators during the process. I attempted to determine factors that contributed to the belief held by parents that their children are or are not being properly served by IEP meetings. This study further sought to determine what measures parents believe both families and school districts may take towards improving IEP meetings. Additionally, the study investigated whether parents becoming knowledgeable of special education law facilitated positive outcomes for their children.

Significance of Study

A majority of the literature covers educator perceptions of IEP meetings. Parental perceptions are limited, especially with regards to parents of children with autism. This study identified steps that can be implemented in helping parents and educators become equal partners in IEP meetings. Through the identification of communication barriers between parents and educators, properly developed educational programs can be implemented to effectively serve students with autism. Educational outcomes are likely to become more positive when IEP teams utilize the knowledge, input, and resources from both parents and educators.

Limitations

1. Parents may have had emotional and subjective perceptions regarding their children that may have hindered study.

2. Initially, parents were most likely to become members of a parent support group similar to Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC) due to negative experiences of school districts.
3. Professional educator perceptions were not represented in this study.
4. Parents may not have understood rights entitled to them under federal law.
5. Results from this study were only as accurate as the perceptions of the participants involved in this study.

Delimitations

1. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods of research.
2. Subjects had children representing numerous school districts throughout Texas.
3. Subjects had children representing both primary and secondary grade levels.
4. This study focused exclusively on perceptions of parents of children with autism.
5. This study exclusively highlighted perceptions of parents toward IEP meetings.

Definition of Terms

Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC): A Texas based, non-profit child support group that provides support and resources for families who have children with neurological disabilities and autism. AFNIC focuses on creating an accessible environment for children with neurological disabilities. AFNIC provides five main services, which include parent training, teacher training, peer training, support at IEP meetings, and “critical intervention” for emergencies (Retrieved January 14, 2004, from <http://www.afniconline.org>).

Audit trail: A system for tracking, systemizing, cross-referencing, and prioritizing mass amounts of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Autism: Autism is a developmental disability that adversely affects a child's educational performance due to deficiencies in social interaction, as well as both verbal and nonverbal communication. Common characteristics associated with autism include engagement in repetitive activities, resistance to changes in daily routines and environmental change, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. Educational deficiencies primarily attributed to serious emotional disturbance do not fall under the definition of autism (Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities, 1997).

Confirmability: Postpositivistic term for objectivity, which is established through conducting an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Constant comparative method: Method used to compare categories, construct meaning, and derive theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility: Postpositivistic term for internal validity. Credibility is established through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability: The positivistic equivalent to reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Education professional: Educational professionals consist of school district employees who serve on IEP teams. Educational professionals consist of teachers, administrators, special education supervisors, and support personnel. Support personnel can include diagnosticians, speech pathologists, psychologists, and occupational therapists (Brooks, 1984).

Emergent design: Rather than prematurely constructing design, permitting research design to unfold due to unforeseen unpredictable and mutually shaping events. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Gatekeeper: An individual or individuals having control over the accessibility of resources, such as names and addresses of potential participants in a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Grounded theory: Theory that flows from data rather than precedes data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997): Formally entitled the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), IDEA provides federal mandates for schools to strengthen academic opportunities for children with disabilities. IDEA mandates that each special education student be entitled to an individualized education plan. IDEA additionally mandates active parental participation in all aspects of educational programming for youth with disabilities (Retrieved January 30, 2004, from <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSER>).

Individualized education program (IEP): The IEP is the primary component of Part B of IDEA, as well as Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). The IEP functions as the blueprint for the delivery of services to be provided for special education students (Huefner, 2000). IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent, accountability, and responsibilities of educational agencies. The IEP must include statements of a child's present levels of educational performance, annual goals, short-term instructional objectives, projected dates for initiation of services,

and evaluation procedures for determining the success of short-term objectives (H. Res. 5, 1997; Kaye & Aserlind, 1979).

Inductive data analysis: Process used to increase opportunities to identify multiple realities found in data, fully describe settings, transfer decisions across settings and identify mutually shaping interacting influences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Natural setting: Conducting research in a natural environment or within the context of the entity of which the study is proposed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Parent: Refers to the natural parent, guardian, or foster parent who represents the special education student during the IEP meeting (Brooks, 1984).

Qualitative methodology: Dependent upon the human instrument, natural setting, inducted data analysis, and grounded theory. Qualitative methodology derives from naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Redundancy: Terminating the sampling process when no new information is forthcoming from newly sampled units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Thick description: Specifying all that a reader may need to know in order to fully understand the findings (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability: Positivistic equivalent to external validity; established through the thick description of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation: The utilization of multiple methods and sources to collect qualitative data in order to enhance the validity of research (Coldeway, 1988).

Trustworthiness: Established through incorporating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability methods in a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Questions

1. What factors contribute to the belief held by the parents of children with autism that their children are, or are not, being properly served by IEP meetings?
2. How do parents of children with autism perceive themselves as being treated and valued by educators during IEP meetings?
3. What changes would parents of children with autism desire to effect in IEP meetings?
4. What do parents perceive that school districts may do to improve IEP meetings?
5. What measures can parents of children with autism take in becoming equal partners with educators during IEP meetings?
6. What evidence is there that parents who are knowledgeable of special education law and the IEP process likely to have a more positive experience during IEP meetings?

Summary

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) mandates active parental participation towards all aspects of educational programming for students receiving special education services (Pruitt et al., 1998). Despite the mandating of parental participation under the passage of P.L. 94-142, parents are often not active decision makers during the IEP process (Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982). Professionals tend to dominate the decision making process during IEP meetings (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Rock (2000) labeled traditional IEP meetings as being dominated by educators, who dictate educational programs to unchallenging parents. Perceptions that parents of

students with autism have toward IEP meetings were investigated by me through surveying and interviewing participants of a family support group.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter II consists of a literature review pertaining to the components of the Individualized education program (IEP) process as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 105-17, IDEA 1997). I define IEP, detail the historical evolution of IEP law, and I discuss the inconsistencies between the intent of creating the IEP and poor professional practices regarding implementing federal mandates pertaining to the IEP. The chapter focuses on the parental experiences and perceptions IEP meetings. I further highlight characteristics for implementing a successful IEP through positive collaboration, communication, and role sharing among educators and parents. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the significance of utilizing qualitative methodology in conducting his study.

References were obtained for my literature review through acquiring journal articles from the University of North Texas Library dating back to the conception of Public Law 94-142. I cross-referenced sources previously obtained to review original works from authors. An electronic copy of IDEA 1997 was obtained through the United States Department of Education web site. Additionally, ERIC, EBSCOhost and Digital Dissertation databases were utilized to acquire references to enhance my review of literature.

Evolution of the Individualized Education Program

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act [P.L. 94-142, 1975] (H. Res. 5, 1997), along with re-authorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA: P.L. 101-476; P.L. 105-17) mandated active parental participation in all aspects

of educational programming for students receiving special education services (Fanning, 1977; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998). Public Law 94-142 was created for schools and parents to share responsibility in ensuring accessibility of equal educational opportunities for students receiving special education services (McAfee & Vergason, 1979). Likely the most radical provision of P.L. 94-142, parental participation was based on the assumption that parental involvement was beneficial to both parents and professionals, while serving as a vehicle to holding schools accountable to parents and students (Lewis, Busch, Proger, & Juska, 1981; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wheat, 1982).

Under P.L. 105-17 (H. Res. 5, 1997) Congress intended to strengthen parental participation in educational decisions, and to increase parent/educator collaboration (Rock, 2000) through the creation of a cooperative environment between parents and schools (Morgan, 1982). Meaningful parental involvement consists of parents being able to effectively communicate with educators and having input in the educational programs of their children (Bordin & Lytle, 2000; Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001).

Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), parental participation in educational programs was of secondary importance. Decision-making was regulated to professional educators, psychiatrists, and psychologists (Lewis et al., 1981). Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Laskey (1988) further concluded that parents were often viewed simply as recipients of information from educators.

Individualized Education Program Defined

The IEP was the primary component of Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and has maintained importance through the

reauthorization of IDEA 1997. The IEP serves to direct and monitor all components of a student's special education program. These components include educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, present levels of educational performance, and duration of programming modifications. (Drasgow et al., 2001; H. Res. 5, 1997).

The IEP functions as the blueprint for the delivery of services to be provided for students receiving special education services, as IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, as well as responsibilities of educational agencies (Huefner, 2000; Kaye & Aserlind, 1979).

According to IDEA 1997, student educational plans should be reviewed at least annually to address progress toward annual goals and objectives, re-evaluation results, parental information, and anticipated needs of the student (H. Res. 5, 1997). Either parents or school district personnel have the option to request a due process hearing to resolve disagreements. Drasgow et al. (2001) concluded that a properly implemented IEP increases the likelihood of students receiving meaningful educational benefits. Schools are provided strong legal stability when programs are specifically designed to benefit special education students, and document progress on a consistent basis.

IDEA 1997 mandates parental involvement in the development of the IEP (Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). Partnerships are to be developed that allow schools to share decision-making authority with parents. Parents are given authority to participate in decisions regarding initial eligibility, placement, modifications, accommodations, and evaluations (Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Rock, 2000).

Parents are to be notified regarding changes in a child's educational program. Furthermore, parents must give consent for changes and invited to planning meetings for their children (H. Res. 5, 1997). Under IDEA 1997, parents must be provided written notification prior to a student's evaluation, prior to a placement team meeting, and prior to the implementation of the special education program recommended by the placement team. Written consent provides school districts with a means of involving parents early in the decision-making process of a child's education plan.

Inconsistencies of Law and Practices / Negative Parent Experiences

Despite the fact that parent participation is mandated by law, legislation alone is not enough to get parents involved in schools (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999; Valle & Aponte, 2002). Parental roles have not increased in IEP meetings, and positive relationships between parents and educators have not been ensured despite the conceptualization and intent of the law under P.L. 94-142 (Simpson, 1996; Vaughn et al., 1988). Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) highlighted that parents are typically not active decision-makers during IEP meetings, as Scanlon, Arick, and Phelps (1981) further concluded the low attendance figures of parents of students receiving special education services in IEP meetings is not consistent with the intent of P.L. 94-142.

Parents are unlikely to participate in decision-making efforts due to previous negative experiences with educators and failure of schools to provide welcoming atmospheres for parents (Taymans & Frith, 1983). Many parents feel guilty, intimidated, disenfranchised, and alienated towards educational systems (Goldstein, 1993; Kroth & Edge, 1997; Lewis et al., 1981). Parents often view the IEP meeting as an opportunity for educators to brief them on the failures of their child. Parents are therefore,

embarrassed to encounter educators resulting in their providing little input during IEP meetings. Passive participation among parents towards the IEP process is likely to hinder productive planning of a student's education (Werts, Mamlin, & Pogoloff, 2002).

Vaughn et al. (1988) concluded from a study that parents tended to ask few questions and provide little responses during IEP meetings due to the lack of communication from educators prior to the IEP meetings. Based on the author's study, parents perceived that educators simply wanted them to sign forms, and to cooperate with the actions that schools implemented. Lusthaus, Lusthaus, and Gibbs (1981) and Yoshida et al. (1978) further concluded, in separate studies, that parents were most likely to serve in the role of information givers and seekers over having decisional control and actively participating in the IEP meetings.

Based on conclusions from a study conducted by Hoff et al. (1978), parental preparation in the IEP meetings was considered "haphazard," as parents were unaware of their rights to challenge or introduce information to the placement teams. Because of deficiencies in knowledge, parents lacked accurate clarification regarding final decisions. Parents were unaware of certain decisions made by placement teams because they lacked the conceptual framework pertaining to the IEP process. Furthermore, schools that improperly documented the IEP decisions weakened clarification among parents.

Many parents feel ill-equipped to address the educational needs of their children as they are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Vaughn et al., 1988). Parents are at a disadvantage as they often lack the expertise of their professional counterparts. Parents who feel ill equipped in making educational decisions regarding their children allow educators to easily

convince parents that decision-making should be left to them (McAfee & Vergason, 1979; Rock, 2000).

Poor Professional Practices

Rock (2000) labeled the traditional IEP meeting as a “meaningless ritual,” as educators implement and expect parents to approve pre-determined educational programs. Decreased parental feedback and participation towards IEP meetings have facilitated legally inappropriate and educationally unsound educational programs for students receiving special education services.

While some parents choose to limit participation, many other parents believe that educators deter participation. Despite the emphasis of family-centered interactions towards educational planning under IDEA 1997, education professionals still tend to dominate the decision-making process in educational planning (Dabkowski, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Over the years, educators have attempted to devalue the expertise of parents in favor of decisions from professional educators (McAfee & Vergason, 1979). While many special educators value the importance of parental involvement, a number of educators believe that the complexity of special education should limit the need for parent involvement (Kelly, 1973).

After analyzing forty-five public due process hearings, Yell and Drasgow (2000) concluded that many schools failed to develop educationally beneficial and legally valid IEPs. These court cases involved parents of students with autism challenging school districts. Several school districts lost court cases due to making procedural errors by not making parents equal partners in IEP meetings. Substantive errors included lack of individual programming to identify student needs.

Some educators fail to understand the significance of parental participation, as many have been unsuccessful in promoting positive collaboration and facilitating successful parental involvement (Pruitt et al., 1998). According to McAfee and Vergason (1979), the majority of educators perceive parents as junior partners. Schools have traditionally failed to realize that parents serve as the strongest influence on students, that disenfranchised parents will not actively seek support from schools, and that simply informing parents does not guarantee support. Yoshida et al. (1978) concluded from questioning 1500 planning team members that the majority of educators demonstrated resistance towards meaningful parental involvement. Meaningful parental involvement was defined to include evaluation, monitoring, and management of school programs.

Determining placement for students prior to determining goals and objectives is a violation that educators frequently practice during IEP meetings (Dragow et al., 2001). Hoff et al. (1978) and Vaughn et al. (1988) concluded, in separate studies, that parents were misconceived over special education placement decisions. While parents became more informed from attending the IEP meetings, they developed misconceptions of educational program placement implemented by IEP teams. Over 30% of the respondents from the Vaughn et al. study were cautious or confused over the placement decisions determined by IEP teams.

Lytle and Bordin (2001) cited that many educators are frustrated over the passive participation among parents. Educators often perceive the apathy of parents to their lack of understanding concerning special education practices. Further, they emphasized that the subjectivity of parents may deter positive relationships with educators. Educators are likely to have objective perceptions of student needs. Parents, on the other hand, are

likely to be more emotional, subjective, and narrowly focused when discussing educational programs for their children.

Importance of Parental Involvement

The increased probability of successful educational achievement is dependent on parental involvement. Parents cannot simply practice passive, surface level participation. Parents have the potential to be productively involved towards facilitating effective instructional planning for their children. Parents must involve themselves in their children's schools based upon individualized needs, parental constraints, and changing needs of the schools (Kelly, 1973; Renihan & Renihan, 1995).

Muhlenhaupt (2002) cited that IEP teams can utilize the unique interests that support students receiving special education services only through active parental participation. Identifying opportunities to reach families is as important as discovering effective ways to teach students (Floyd, 1998). Family participation in schools results from educators making parent involvement a top priority through well planned, consistent, and persistent efforts (Kirschenbaum, 1999).

According to Lewis et al. (1981), parental reaction towards IEP meetings can often be directly influenced by the treatment from educators. Without commitment and implementation from the classroom teacher, an IEP will have high probability of not effectively serving students. Deslandes et al. (1999) emphasized that parents are more likely to become involved with schools when they believe they are making a difference in their child's education.

Brooks (1984) concluded from a study that both educators and parents cited the importance of parents serving as decision-makers, advocates, and providers and receivers

of information during IEP meetings. In this study, both educators and parents recognized the importance of strong parental involvement, as parents could serve as a valuable tool toward problem solving, future planning, and identifying student interests. While parents in this study indicated active involvement within IEP meetings, they were still not perceived as being equal participants. Despite parents not considering themselves as equal decision-makers, educators within this study showed acceptance towards parental involvement.

Collaboration and Information Sharing

Huefner (2000) emphasized that the mandates of IDEA 1997 require educators and parents to effectively collaborate during the evaluation, eligibility process, placement decisions, as well as during the IEP development and revision. Educators should cooperate in building full partnerships with parents rather than becoming adversaries with parents. Additionally, parents and educators must share responsibility in the IEP process, as both parties have the right to provide input to each other's "territory." Furthermore, parents should not be solely responsible for making certain that they receive progress reports and IEP goals regarding the child (Drasgow et al., 2001; McAfee & Vergason, 1979; Taymans & Frith, 1983).

Effective collaboration between parents and educators can improve IEP practices (Rock, 2000). Collaboration involves parents and educators working together to identify student needs, strengths, and present levels of performance. Rather than the IEP meeting functioning as a "meaningless ritual," IEP meetings should provide an opportunity for parents and educators to brainstorm ways to effectively serve students. Educators should attempt to communicate with parents prior to the IEP meetings, in order to build trust,

respect, and acceptance by parents. Increased parent participation and meaningful dialogue during IEP meetings can take place if parents are exposed to information prior to the meetings (Gilliam, 1979).

Educators must establish a working relationship with parents of students receiving special education services if they are to function as active decision-makers in educational planning (Shevin, 1983). Taymans and Frith (1983) concluded that parents are likely to become uninvolved in IEP meetings when educators are unable to effectively collaborate in providing quality educational programs for children receiving special education services. Educators who have positive working relationships with parents will be less likely to conflict with each other if disagreements arise. Disagreements will more likely to be resolved when all parties have informed participation (Shevin, 1983).

Lytle and Bordin (2001) concluded that educators and parents will be more at ease with each other after a number of effective interactions. Steps that parents can take to facilitate collaboration include utilizing logbooks, communicating with service providers, and volunteering in assisting with special education services. Educators can facilitate communication through inviting parents to visit classrooms, conducting home visits and phone calls, and by avoiding use of unfamiliar special education jargon.

True collaboration will not be possible without educators acknowledging the importance of parental participation (Pruitt et al., 1998). Parental input must be recognized, internalized, and acted upon by educators. According to Gilliam (1979), educators should make efforts to encourage parental participation by exchanging knowledge relevant to improving the educational services for their children.

Roles of IEP Team Members

Climate or tone established by the IEP team members in addition to team culture can influence parent participation in IEP meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). The culture of the IEP team typically dictates the way the IEP team members share information, who speaks, how influential each member is towards the decision-making process, and determination of outcomes. Parents should possess equitable roles during IEP meetings, as the essential insight they possess concerning their children facilitates the success of the IEP process (Pruitt et al., 1998).

Gilliam and Coleman (1981) concluded from a study that parents were perceived to be minimal contributors in influencing IEP meetings. While psychologists mostly impacted diagnostic decisions, special education teachers heavily influenced planning and implementation decisions. They cite that educators have the most influential roles due to their professional expertise. Educators frequently perceive that parents do not have expertise regarding special education issues. According to these authors, educators gain higher influential roles due to their presenting of data material that includes test scores and diagnostic reports. Unfortunately, parents are often left out of the assessment process.

The IEP team members, especially the parents, are likely to create positive decisions and outcomes regarding educational programs when each member has clearly defined objectives (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Roles of parents should include insight regarding medical history, routines, habits, strengths, weakness, and interests. As the reauthorization of IDEA 1997 has expanded parental roles as being a significant

contributor towards IEP meetings, parents should be acknowledged as experts on the team.

Communication

The IEP conference should serve as an effective communication avenue for educators, parents, and students to enhance educational programs (Scanlon et al., 1981). Effective communication among the IEP team members is essential in providing best possible programs for students receiving special education services (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Three types of communication used during the IEP meetings include verbal, nonverbal, and written communication. Nonverbal communication accounts for up to 80% of total communication implemented by the IEP team members. Examples of nonverbal communication include facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other forms of body language. Educators should be aware of nonverbal communication, as positive nonverbal communication can facilitate more effective communication with parents during the IEP meetings.

Factors which attribute to communication problems between teachers and parents of children receiving special education services include having insufficient opportunities to communicate, differences in attitudes and expectations, and lack of teacher knowledge pertaining to students receiving special education services (Munk et al., 2001). Parents often complain that teachers do not initiate enough communication, and they fail to communicate with parents until problems worsen (Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001; Munk et al., 2001). Schools can effectively facilitate communication between parents and teachers through the employment of non-threatening and positive communication strategies (Polloway, Bursuck, & Epstein, 2001).

Hoff et al. (1978) concluded from a study that educators overlooked responsibilities in effectively communicating with parents. Neglected responsibilities included (a) properly informing parents of placement team decisions, (b) providing sufficient notice to encourage parental participation, and (c) communicating through written documentation.

Pruitt et al. (1998) recommend that special educators can facilitate effective communication partnerships with parents through listening to parental concerns and input, identifying strategies to improve quality of communication with parents, being sensitive to needs of families, increasing knowledge of disabilities, and respectfully accommodating individual needs of students. Additionally, teachers must consider family needs of students by tailoring school services and providing information about community services.

Actions that educators can take to enhance positive communication during the IEP meetings are to send information home to parents prior to meetings in order for parents to prepare themselves for the IEP process. Communication can be enhanced through written journals, phone calls, and informational meetings (Pruitt et al., 1998). Dealing with controversial issues before the IEP meetings can further deter potential negative experiences and misunderstandings during the IEP meetings. Gilliam and Coleman (1981) suggested providing parents with written summaries of data reports to be discussed prior to the IEP meetings. Providing summaries would allow parents to be better informed, and more effective contributors during IEP meetings.

Measures that parents can take in enhancing communication with educators is asking for information prior to the IEP meetings, and preparing questions prior to

meetings. During IEP meetings, Lytle and Bordin (2001) concluded that parents should dress professionally, as well as take notes to organize thoughts. Hoff et al. (1978) cited that parental participation can be hindered by insufficient timing of the school's communication. Educators should provide parents with ample notice to allow them sufficient time to effectively prepare for the IEP meetings. Preparation includes assembling information, seeking advice, consulting school records, and making scheduling arrangements to attend the IEP meetings.

Parental Training

Federal legislation does not consider the lack of training that parents and educators have towards developing effective special education plans, or in interacting with one another ("IEP Conference," 1980). Many educators lack training in dealing with parents as "equal" participants. Many school district administrators are concerned over new teachers' lack of skills towards establishing positive parent relationships necessary to produce family-centered and legally sound IEP programs (Werts et al., 2002). Teacher preparation programs must improve in training school personnel how to communicate effectively not only with parents, but also among themselves. Programs must also be developed that educate parents how to effectively communicate with school district personnel ("IEP Conference," 1980; Vaughn et al., 1988).

According to Brooks (1984), both parents and educators should participate in training programs reflecting all possible roles. Training for educators is essential to assist them to recognize the unique contributions that parents have to offer during IEP meetings. Dabkowski (2004) further concluded that IEP team members can benefit from

professional developmental training that promotes communication, collaboration, and team building.

Characteristics of a Successful IEP

Characteristics of a successful IEP include the process of joint decision-making among parents and professionals, as well as properly recorded documentation (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979; Simpson, 1996). Additional attributes include positive social support, proximity, distinctiveness, similarity, and fairness. Individual commitment from all IEP team members in making parent involvement a top priority will facilitate trust, effective communication, and rational decision-making (Kirschenbaum, 1999; Lytle & Bordin, 2001).

Steps that educators can take to increase parental involvement include having educators examining parent perspectives (Brooks, 1984), evaluating teacher expectations, respecting differences, and creating a duplicate IEP for parents (Rock, 2000). Teachers should conduct monthly parent meetings and utilize district parent-teacher conference days to schedule pre-IEP planning sessions. Furthermore, educators should be responsible for ensuring that parents receive and understand procedural components regarding the IEP process.

Dabkowski (2004) stated that educators can reduce parental stress during the IEP meetings through analyzing the dynamics of the IEP team to ensure that the structure promotes active parent participation. Educators can reduce parental stress through focusing on shared visions, resources, training, monitoring, and school culture. Shared visions revolve around making sure that all team members are able to provide input in decision-making. Parents who are initially supported and encouraged to actively

participate in IEP meetings will be more likely to continue participating in their child's educational programs for their entire academic career.

The IEP teams should provide a private, distraction free, and comfortable environment (Dabkowski, 2004; Rock, 2000). Steps for creating a comfortable environment include using round table seating if possible, distributing agendas and copies of the IEP for each participant, and having each IEP team member introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting. Dabkowski further cited the importance of the physical layout of meeting rooms in making the IEP experience an inviting environment for parents. In addition to creating a seating arrangement using round conference tables, having the IEP team members sitting beside each other can increase the equality perception among parents.

Other steps that educators can take to assure parental involvement in IEP meetings include utilizing parent advocates and social workers, as well as reducing technical jargon (Nadler & Shore, 1980). Additional acts to initiate parental involvement include informing parents of the IEP team meetings by telephone and not just through written notification, having greeters meet parents, and taping conferences for staff to review (Goldstein, 1993). Further, the IEP meeting should serve as a working conference to effectively plan goals and objectives for a child's education instead of serving as a formalized gathering to simply sign documents.

Parental involvement in the IEP meeting establishes a more effective educational program for the student (Vaughn et al., 1988). IEP team members can increase parental knowledge through explicit data sharing, by appointing case managers for meetings, and by involving parents in the data gathering and assessment process (Gilliam & Coleman,

1981). Data sharing involves providing parents with detailed information pertaining to problems, progression, and placement of the student. Case managers can be responsible for scheduling, monitoring of relevant data, contacting appropriate personnel, and distributing copies of data sharing forms. Parents can contribute to the assessment procedure by assisting to identify specific needs of their children in non-academic settings.

Educators can facilitate social supports for parents by encouraging parent participation in local support groups, informing parents about local resource centers, and referring parents to other parents who have experiences in attending IEP meetings. Through treating parents with equity and fairness, obtaining parental feedback, valuing parent expertise, and acknowledging parent needs, educators can establish parental trust (Lytle & Bordin, 2001).

Benefits of Support Groups

Family and social supports enhance quality of life, maintain well-being, and provide autonomy for families who have children receiving special education services (Singer, 2002). Support groups provide opportunities for families to exchange knowledge of information and resources with other families faced with similar challenges. Parent programs can assist families in accessing proper accommodations and positively adjusting to demands placed upon them. According to McCurdy, Gannon, & Daro (2003), family support programs promote positive parent behaviors in addition to assist parents in coping with the stress of rearing a child receiving special education services.

Boyd (2002) concluded from studying mothers of children with autism that stress and depression prompted their seeking of social supports. Parent support groups served as the most effective source of formal support for mothers of children with autism. In groups meetings, mothers were able to freely express concerns, as increased levels of social support reduced their depression and anxiety.

Judge (1998) concluded from a study that the utilization of social supports enhanced family strengths. Social group participation provided parents an effective means for acquiring problem-focused coping strategies in addition to emotional support. Furthermore, social group participation taught parents within this study to maintain a more positive outlook in dealing with the challenges of supporting a child with special needs.

Utilization of Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology derives from naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry is a movement towards complex realities, holographic images, indeterminacy, and mutual causality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative methodology is dependent upon the human instrument, natural setting, inducted data analysis, and grounded theory. Grounded theory is theory that follows rather than precedes data. The human instrument is essential, as human research requires full understanding, cooperation, and interaction with respondents.

Qualitative methodology was utilized in this study, as qualitative research focuses on understanding behaviors, thought processes, and perspectives of subjects being studied. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes which satisfied the natural setting characteristic of qualitative methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I served as the

human instrument in this study through data collection, and further utilized qualitative methodology by relying on intuitive knowledge in picking up particular cues during the interviews. Constant comparative method was used to construct meaning from the interviews. I compared incidents to each category, integrated categories, delimited the theory, and wrote the theory.

Through qualitative methodology, I established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I satisfied credibility and dependability through triangulation, which was the utilization of the survey tool, semi-structured interviews, and a previous focus group study on Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC) participants. Confirmability was established through the conduction of an audit trail. An audit trail was created through the researcher being provided access to participant addresses and phone numbers. Transferability was established through his specification of all components that readers of the study must have known (thick description). This thick description of the data permitted others to draw conclusions from the findings.

Summary

IDEA 1997 mandates parental involvement towards development of the IEP (Hoff et al., 1978; Yoshida et al., 1978). Congress intended to strengthen parental participation in educational decisions, and to increase parent/educator collaboration through the creation of a cooperative environment between parents and schools (Morgan, 1982; Rock, 2000). Parental roles have not increased in IEP meetings, and positive relationships between parents and educators have not been ensured despite the conceptualization and intent of the law under P.L. 94-142 (Simpson, 1996; Vaughn et al.,

1988). Parents should possess equitable roles during IEP meetings, as the essential insight they possess concerning their children facilitates the success of IEP meetings (Pruitt et al. 1998).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The chapter details the methodology and procedures involved in the study dealing with parental perceptions of the individualized education program (IEP) meeting. The chapter highlights the research questions related to parent relationships with educators, IEP meeting experiences, IEP outcomes, treatment by educators, parental knowledge of special education law, and areas for improvement pertaining to IEP meetings. In addition to the research questions for this study, I identify the respondents, data collection procedures, instrumentation, and data analysis.

The purpose of this study was to investigate parental perceptions of students with autism towards IEP meetings. I attempted to determine if parents considered themselves to be equal partners with educators regarding making decisions about educational outcomes for their children. Additionally, the study investigated whether parental knowledge of IEP meetings facilitated positive outcomes for their children.

Despite the passage of Public Law 94-142 and its subsequent amendments, which mandates parental participation in the educational planning of students receiving special education services, educators tend to dominate the decision-making process regarding educational outcomes for these students. The IEP process should be an equal partnership among parents of students receiving special education services and educators. Many school districts fail to build quality relationships with parents of children with autism. Furthermore, many parents are not properly educated and informed about programs that school districts are required to provide for students receiving special education services under federal law.

Based on the literature review, parental decision-making during IEP meetings often face strong opposition among educators. Educators tend to view parents of children with autism as junior partners during IEP meetings. Parents are not expected to actively participate in the decision making process, but rather serve as a source for information. Parents on the other hand, are frustrated over the sense of inequity during IEP meetings, as parents believe that they should be equal partners in the educational planning for their children.

Research Questions

The research questions conducted for this study focused on how parents of students with autism perceived IEP meetings as well as how they perceived being valued by educators during the process. This study sought to determine the differences in experiences between satisfied and non-satisfied parents towards IEP meetings. Parents were asked to share their experiences of previous IEP meetings and to provide input regarding not only measures that school districts may take towards improving IEP meetings, but actions that parents may take to serve as better advocates for their children. This study addressed the following questions pertaining to parental perceptions of IEP meetings.

1. What factors contribute to the belief held by parents of children with autism that their children are, or are not, being properly served in IEP meetings?
2. How do parents of children with autism perceive themselves as being treated and valued by educators during IEP meetings?
3. What changes would parents of children with autism desire to effect in IEP meetings?

4. What do parents perceive that school districts may do to improve IEP meetings?
5. What measures can parents of students with autism take in becoming equal partners within IEP meetings?
6. What evidence is there that parents who are knowledgeable of special education law and the IEP process likely to have a more positive experience during IEP meetings?

Selection of Respondents

Respondents participating in this study consisted of parents of students with autism who had attended public school districts in the State of Texas. All respondents were members of the Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC). AFNIC is a Texas-based, non-profit child support group advocating quality educational services for children with neurological disabilities including autism. Participants had at least one student diagnosed with autism currently attending or had previously attended either primary or secondary school, and all had previous experience attending IEP meetings.

Participants were selected to be interviewed based upon their consent, and upon the researcher's random selection of completed surveys received from these participants. The researcher attempted to coordinate interviews during weekends for those participants residing outside of north Texas who wished to participate in an interview. In addition to North Texas, participants of this study resided in the greater Houston, Austin, and San Antonio metropolitan areas.

Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. I utilized one gatekeeper in order to obtain study participants. The gatekeeper provided the researcher with residential addresses of 110 AFNIC families.

One hundred and ten AFNIC families received a letter explaining the purpose of the study and asking if they would be willing to participate in the study (Appendix A). Additionally, each family received one response card, and one stamped, self-addressed envelope from me. Having addresses and names of respondents enabled the researcher to create an audit trail to help systemize, cross-reference, and prioritize data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail established confirmability towards this study. Those participants who checked “yes” on the response cards were sent a letter with instructions pertaining to completing the survey, one survey instrument, one interview contact form, and one stamped self-addressed envelope (Appendix B).

Initially, 51 responses were received of which 27 indicated their willingness to complete a survey. Eleven respondents noted on their response cards that they would have been willing to participate in the study, but that their child did not fall under the diagnosis of autism as defined by the Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities (1997). A second letter, asking parents to complete a survey and response card were mailed to the 59 families who failed to return their first response cards to the researcher one week after the requested deadline to turn in responses. Seven of the 59 families requested that a survey to be mailed to them. Nine of the respondents indicated that they did not wish to participate in the study.

Forty-three families failed to turn in their response cards. While an eventual total of 34 respondents checked “yes” to participate in the study, 26 participants returned surveys.

I asked respondents if they were willing to expand their feedback and input through an interview. Participants who answered “yes” in wanting to be interviewed filled out an interview contact form (Appendix B). In addition, a statement was placed at the end of the survey citing that parental feedback from this study would be anonymous.

The semi-structured interviews served as the qualitative component of this study. Qualitative research is appropriate in dealing with potentially multiple realities, mutually shaping influences, and value patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews serve the purpose of “obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities” (p. 268). Each interview participant was audio recorded for accuracy, and audio recording was transcribed for data analysis. The semi-structure interviews concluded once similar outcomes became saturated. Interview questions derived from survey results (Appendix C).

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in this study consisted of a survey instrument (Appendix B), and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. The survey instrument consisted of a 34-item questionnaire formatted according to six sections: (a) parental feedback concerning general information about their child, (b) relationship with educators, (c) treatment by educators, (d) previous IEP experiences, (e) IEP outcomes, and (f) support group participation. The survey concluded with parents being provided

with the opportunity to provide input revolving around areas for improvement within the IEP meeting through three open-ended questions.

Survey questions were created utilizing literature review research, research questions from this study, and experiences of IEP meetings by the researcher. Interview questions were developed based upon the six sections of the survey instrument. The researcher asked at least one question related to each section.

The survey instrument was pilot tested through the utilization of nine volunteer parents who had children with autism. Participants in the pilot study were not affiliated with AFNIC. The parents were asked to complete the survey, and provide input to the researcher pertaining to the clarity and relevance of the instrument. The researcher utilized feedback from pilot test participants to enhance the presentation and clarity of the survey tool.

Data Analysis

I utilized descriptive statistics to analyze data received from the surveys. Interviews were conducted in order to uncover parental perceptions of the IEP meeting. The researcher looked for any re-occurring themes obtained from participant feedback.

The audio-recorded data obtained from the interviews were transcribed for facilitating increased in-depth knowledge. I utilized inductive data analysis once interviews were completed and transcribed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers are likely to identify multiple realities, fully describe the setting, and likely to identify mutually shaping influences during the implementation of inductive analysis.

Data were transcribed and I analyzed the data collected based upon categories to construct meaning through the constant comparative method. Lincoln and Guba (1985)

defined constant comparative method as a “means for deriving theory”. This method was utilized to code and categorize like-responses.

Stages of constant comparative method include the comparing of incidents applicable to each category, the integration of categories and their products, the delimitation of theory, and the writing of theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the transcribed data, I uniquely identified single pieces of information by particular ideas or units through color-coding. I then organized data based upon seeking emergent categories revolving around similar characteristics. Color -coding was utilized to label and distinguish among categories of the data.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION

Parents of students with autism who were members of the Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC) were asked to complete a survey pertaining to their perceptions of the individualized education program (IEP) meeting. Interview participants were randomly selected from those parents who agreed to be interviewed. The interviews allowed parents to expand upon their responses from the survey questions. Inductive data analysis was utilized once interviews were completed and transcribed. After transcription, data were analyzed according to categories in order to construct meaning through the constant comparative method.

After sending surveys to 110 AFNIC members, 26 were completed and returned (See Table 1). Follow-up response cards were sent to parents three weeks and five weeks following initial mailing. The low participation of parents completing surveys resulted from a significant percentage of AFNIC support group members not having children falling under the diagnosis of autism as defined by the State of Texas. Upon receiving 26 surveys, participants were randomly selected to be interviewed. Table 1 provides general information regarding students of interviewees. Interview responses reached a point of saturation at the conclusion of interviewing the seventh parent.

Table 1

General Information of Children of Parents Interviewed (*N*=7)

Participant Information	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	Mean
Age of Children	13	8	12	10	13	11	12	11.9
Grade Level Children	7	1	6	4	6	5	7	5.9
Years Diagnosed with Autism	2	2	4	6	11	4	2	4.7
Years Receiving Special Education Services	3	5	4	6	10	5	2	5.5
Number of Times Transferred to Different School District	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	.65
Number of IEP Meetings Attended by Parent	14	7	10	9	20	20	7	15.2

Research Question 1

What factors contribute to the belief held by parents of children with autism that their children are, or are not, being properly served by IEP meetings?

The majority of participants surveyed indicated that their overall IEP experiences had been generally negative. Only 20% of parents surveyed had mostly positive IEP experiences (See Table 2). Parents were surprised to discover that the views of educators were often not consistent with the implementation of ideas that parents believed to be the best approach for serving their children.

Table 2

Experiences Encountered by Surveyed Parents during IEP Meetings (<i>N</i> =26)					
Experiences	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Positive IEP Experience	24%	40%	16%	20%	0%
Discussion of IEP Goals	12%	8%	40%	32%	8%
Time Utilization	20%	16%	40%	16%	8%
Welcomed Input	12%	8%	32%	36%	12%

Similar to survey findings, most of the parents interviewed indicated that their overall IEP experience had generally been negative. Parents who were interviewed (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7) encountered negative IEP experiences due to disagreements with educators regarding proper implementation of services. Disagreements pertaining to services stemmed from improper student diagnosis (P1), academic curriculum (P2, P4, P7), student placement (P3), access to assistive technology (P5, P6, P7), and transition opportunities into local communities (P4, P5).

According to P1 “everything has a roadblock for services.” P1 discussed her struggles with her son’s school district, as for years he did not have the proper diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome. As a result, services that were granted him by the school district prior to his proper diagnosis were inappropriate. After initiating outside independent assessments, the school district finally acknowledged the student’s true diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome. According to the parent, the student was “falling through the cracks” prior to properly being diagnosed as having Asperger’s syndrome. Following his proper diagnosis, this child received proper instruction under appropriate

classroom placement. Furthermore, classroom teachers and school district administrators became more empathetic towards his disability.

One parent (P2) believed that her son was not properly served in IEP meetings due to inappropriate academic curriculum decisions. P2 discussed how her child's school district placed too much focus on social skills, while neglecting other academic subjects. P2 argued with IEP team members that her son's classroom teacher needed to complement social skills development with the exposure to interesting academic curriculum.

Their philosophy, prior to this year, was that they wanted to get all the behavior stuff taken care of and under control and out of the way, and then start academics. So he got nothing in academics last year. Not one thing. Not one thing. It was all behavior. They basically baby sat him (P2).

P3 summarized that IEP meetings had been detrimental towards her son's education. Her son's IEP meetings resulted in the implementation of ineffective discipline plans, aggravation among both parent and student, and inappropriate placement of student.

I think it has hurt him more because of them putting him in the transition unit. They took him out of general education and put him in the transition unit. They didn't know what else to do and that was his total downfall. He became suicidal there (P3).

P4 indicated that her child had not benefited from IEP meetings. P4 perceived IEP meetings to simply serve as a forum for educators to provide 'lip service' to parents. "It's not going anywhere. Yes, we'll hear you gripe, yada, yada, and that's it." The parent argued to IEP team members that his son should had been provided with opportunities to generalize learned social skills by interacting with the general education population within his school. When the parent asked IEP team members for

opportunities for his son to interact with a general physical education class, the parent was told that “we (school) do not have anyone trained in that”.

Another parent (P5) believed that IEP meetings did not properly serve her son due to lack of transitioning opportunities within the local community. This parent thought that her son’s school district had not provided practical education pertaining to transition in addition to daily living skills and occupational preparation. When asked if the school district was reluctant to provide proper services for her son, she responded “very much so.” P5 addressed the importance of her son learning important daily living skills necessary for his being placed in a quality assisted living establishment after completing high school.

I want my son at Pizza Hut taping coupons on a box. I want him at Garden Depot. And they don’t start that until they are 16 or 17 and that is just not enough time to learn job skills. I would like for (my child) to go to the barber shop one day, to the grocery store, out in the community for about an hour or hour and a half each day. Daily living skills, transition, and getting out in the community – transition big time (P5).

Three participants (P5, P6, P7) highlighted that assistive technology was another service that they had difficulty securing for their children with autism. P5 stated “I have really, really pushed for some assistive technology and get no where with that.” P6 added “like for assistive technology evaluation. They weren’t going to give him one. They weren’t going to give me computers, but I was persistent.”

P7 explained how her son was not being properly served in IEP meetings due to his gifted and talented needs. Educators had difficulty dealing with behavioral issues revolving around his autistic disabilities, while providing gifted and talented curriculum to adhere to his IEP goals and objectives. Similar to P5 and P6, this parent was

dissatisfied with the amount of assistive technology the school district provided for her son.

Research Question 1 Summary

Most of the participants indicated that their overall IEP experience had been negative. Parents were surprised to discover that the views of educators were often not consistent with the implementation of ideas that parents believed to be the best approach for serving their children. Factors contributing to the beliefs held by parents that their children were or were not being properly served by IEP meetings revolved around how school districts handled student discipline, services, and IEP implementation.

Several parents disagreed with educators regarding services that should be provided for their children. Parents expressed concern over the lack of transition and occupational services provided by local school districts. Parents believed that students could be better served by having their children become periodically exposed to community settings. Additionally, parents believed that students would be better served through periodic interaction with general education student population.

Parents who believed that their children were properly served by IEP meetings were those who experienced years of resistance from school districts. Through heavy persistence and becoming knowledgeable of special education law, these parents were able to assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for students to be successful. Additionally, through parents' building positive relations with school districts, educators became more empathetic towards the disabilities of students.

Research Question 2

How do parents of children with autism perceive themselves as being treated and valued by educators during IEP meetings?

The majority of participants surveyed agreed that they were treated equally (48%) and respectfully (44%) by educators during IEP meetings. While survey results cited that parents were provided the freedom to discuss topics openly with IEP team members, 44% of the parents disagreed with the idea that they were valued by educators (See Table 3). Furthermore, parents exhibited stronger relationships with classroom teachers who interacted with their children on a daily basis in comparison to campus and school district administrators who were less familiar with their students receiving special education services (see Table 4).

Table 3

Parental Treatment by Educators during IEP Meetings (N=26)

Measures of Treatment	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Treated with Respect	8%	24%	24%	28%	16%
Treated As Equal	24%	20%	8%	28%	20%
Welcomed by Educators	12%	16%	20%	36%	16%
Freedom to Discuss	12%	16%	20%	28%	24%
Valued by Educators	32%	12%	12%	40%	4%

Table 4

Parental Relationships with School District Personnel (N=26)					
Types of Educators	Very Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neutral	Somewhat Positive	Very Positive
School District	20%	20%	24%	24%	12%
Special Education					
Teacher	8%	4%	24%	16%	48%
Campus					
Administrator	16%	12%	36%	28%	8%
Special Education					
Administrators	20%	12%	40%	28%	0%

All participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7) interviewed indicated that they had experienced negative treatment at one time or another by IEP team members. Parents presented the notion that at least on one occasion they felt as if they were the only individuals in IEP meetings who sought what was best for their child. While P1, P2, P5, and P6 received more positive treatment among IEP team members after they built rapport with particular school district teachers and administrators, adversarial relationships still existed among P3, P4, and P7.

Who's to Blame?

P1 was accused of being unreasonable by educators due to requesting services that her child's school district believed to be unnecessary or too expensive. IEP team members found the parent to be especially unreasonable when discussing measures pertaining to discipline. While the parent advocated for better behavioral management

practices, her child's school district originally opted for more punitive approaches in dealing with inappropriate student behaviors.

In the beginning it was very much that I was being unreasonable because they would just flat point out to me – “are you trying to say that your son's disabilities are what could be keeping him from making right decisions all of the time (P1)?”

Three of the parents interviewed (P3, P6, P7) discussed how they had been blamed by educators for their child's academic and behavioral deficiencies. Instead of educators attempting to find effective ways to manage inappropriate behaviors, parents indicated that IEP teams tended to implement zero-tolerance practices.

They would intimidate me and act like that I was doing something wrong. ‘Are there any changes going on?’ (IEP team members would ask). They would always try to make it like that there was something wrong with the home, and there really wasn't. They pointed fingers at me, and they asked “did you do drugs when you were pregnant? Did you drink alcohol when you were pregnant? You and your husband? (P6).”

P3 stated:

They treat me like a bad parent. They say “what do you let him watch?” They always accuse me of letting him watch R-rated movies, which I don't. Like the principal. He said ‘quit sticking up for him.’ So – they are good teachers so he (student) must have gotten that (bad behavior) from me.

P3 continued to elaborate her negative treatment by the district psychologist, who also served as the IEP team leader by saying that “she (school district psychologist) is the kind of person who blames me basically for all of these problems and I don't think that it helps my son.”

Treatment by IEP Team Members with Advocate Present

One common theme among interviewing parents (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6) revolved around IEP team members treating parents differently in the presence of an advocate. Parents indicated that they were treated more respectfully by school district personnel

when an advocate was present during IEP meetings in comparison to when parents were the sole representatives of their child. Educators tended to adhere more carefully to IEP process protocol and preparation with an advocate present in IEP meetings. Educators were especially seen as paying attention to proper IEP protocol in the presence of an advocate from AFNIC.

One parent (P1) discussed how her son's school district once called her and attempted to cancel an IEP meeting that was to be scheduled for later that day. The school agreed to meet as scheduled once the parent informed one of the campus administrators that an advocate had planned on being present. The parent noticed that more administrators attended her child's IEP meetings whenever she brought an advocate with her. When asked if she was treated differently by IEP team members with an advocate present, she responded: "Yes, they were more respectful. I thought when my advocate was present."

In addition to being treated more respectfully by educators, P4 elaborated how IEP meetings appeared to be more of a group effort in the presence of an advocate. According to P4, educators were more willing to include his input in making decisions regarding his child's educational program. He highlighted that while having an advocate present provided an adversarial atmosphere at times, this parent's advocate was able to routinely keep him calm and rational during potentially heated debates with IEP team members.

P5 sensed that educators felt threatened and intimidated whenever she brought an advocate with her during her son's IEP meetings. Additionally, she noticed that educators created a less adversarial and more of a welcoming atmosphere towards her

during the presence of an advocate. “Yes, they were more respectful, I thought, when my advocate was present. The language tone and the responses are not immediately no. The tone and demeanor is much more friendly (P5).” P6 concluded how the school district can be intimidated by advocates by stating “the minute they have an advocate, everyone starts sweating bullets. They start paying attention. And the teachers are informed step by step about the IEP – what they need to do when there is an advocate involved.”

P3 mentioned that her advocate was treated more professionally by IEP team members in comparison to how they treated her without the attendance of an advocate. “I think (educators) are a little defensive. Like ‘we know what we are doing. We don’t need you to tell us how to handle a kid with a disability.’” Despite the presence of an advocate, P3 discussed the adversarial relationship that continued to exist between her and IEP team members. IEP team members were unwilling to accept feedback from her advocate during IEP meetings. Administrators and teachers in her son’s school were reluctant to accept outside input regarding managing behaviors.

Relationships Then and Now

Several of the parents (P1, P2, P3, P6) interviewed indicated that their current relations with school district employees had improved since the time their children were first placed in their respective school districts. Most of the parents cited they had initially encountered resistance from school district personnel during IEP meetings. Relationships between educators and parents strengthened through increased awareness of student disabilities among educators in addition to parents becoming more knowledgeable of the IEP process.

After years of being treated negatively by educators, P1 discussed how her son's school district became more empathetic towards the needs of her child. When asked about whether this parent had been treated more positively by her child's school district than in the past, she responded:

Before, yeah – I was treated very differently. Currently things are good, but we had to fight for a long time to get them where they are now. Before I gained any knowledge, we were just falling through the cracks and he wasn't learning. Right now, we have the best teacher we've ever had, but it's been the longest road (P1).

P6 mentioned how she was able to build a more positive relationship with school personnel once she knew the parameters of IEP meetings and laws pertaining to special education services. According to the parent, school district personnel adhered more readily toward her child's needs when educators witnessed how positive the student responded to properly implemented services. P6 emphasized that while initially her relationship with educators was unstable, she was currently being treated respectfully by both classroom teachers and administrators. "The current one (classroom teacher) actually fabulous. She goes above and beyond in what I require from her as far as meeting his needs and doing what the IEP says. She really goes out of her way to thoroughly do it (P6)."

P6 was equally complimentary of her son's school district administrators by stating:

Same way about them (campus administrators). They are very supportive. They are caring. They listen and they understand that we have been through hell. When I walk in (IEP meetings) I get respect and hugs. School employees in the past would be nasty when he (child of P6) would act out. I was very passive aggressive and I took a lot of crap from the principal. I hope that I never see her (former principal) again.

When asked to compare her IEP experiences to when her son began receiving special education services, she stated "currently awesome (IEP experience). The old days, I felt

like nothing, but (currently) they totally respect me. I can get it (services) pretty much if it is realistic for his needs.”

Similar to the experiences of P1 and P6, P2 elaborated how conflicts between her and her son’s classroom teacher initially revolved around the teacher’s unwillingness to accept parental input in dealing with student behavioral outburst in the classroom. Despite complaining about the student’s behavior and academic performance, the classroom teacher refused to implement suggestions from the parent. According to P2, once her son’s teacher accepted her recommendations, her child’s classroom performance improved as well as her relationship with the teacher. She commented on her experience with her son’s classroom teacher by stating the following:

She had her own ideas on how things were going to go. She didn’t want any input from me about my son and how things might work for him, like sensory issues. How the classroom might set up a little bit better to help him with his sensory problems. I felt with her, that it was me against her. In the end I asked her to get him out of this class. It kind of caused a big stink. But she really came around, which really surprised me. Now, she’s the best teacher that I could ask for (P2).

When asked about her relationship with school district administrators, P2 stated:

I think that I have a decent relationship with them. I don’t think that they love me, but I don’t think that they hate me either. I’ve been told by an administrator that I have a good reputation in the district as someone who is good to work with. We work well together, but especially at the higher levels (administrators). I feel that I have a good relationship with them.

P3 discussed her experiences of being treated negatively by school district personnel at a new school. While the parent had established positive relations with school district personnel at her son’s elementary school, she felt like she had to go through the process all over again when her son was promoted to middle school. Faculty at the middle school was less familiar with his disabilities. The parent had yet to establish positive relations with school personnel at the new school. P3 mentioned that while there

were some people in the school district that she really liked, there were others that she wished she never had to encounter.

For the last couple of years, he (student) had pretty much the same people on his ARD (admission, review, and dismissal) committee, but now we have new people because we are at a new school. We are at a middle school. So I was used to certain people who I felt has his best interest at times. Now, it is totally different. So, I am having quite a time with the people now; the administrators; the teachers (P3).

Relationships with Teachers versus Administrators

Feedback from participant interviews complemented the results from the surveys regarding relationships with campus and school district administrators. Despite teachers having ideas to better provide services for her child, P1 believed that teachers were often controlled by what input they provided during IEP meetings. “The teachers generally don’t know what to do. They don’t make much eye contact. They won’t speak up and they follow the lead of the administration. In other words, they follow the lead of the psychologist (P1).”

P4 additionally perceived teachers as reluctant to provide input during IEP meetings in order to adhere to desires of administration.

Teachers want to do what is right, but are held back by what I think by the principal. She (special education director) is in denial about her principal. You can’t touch the principal. And there is nothing that you can do to get a principal out if they are bad. That’s sad (P4).

When asked if P4 had ever witnessed disagreements among educators during IEP meetings, he responded: “No. Are you kidding? The teacher wouldn’t be there. That principal rules the roost.”

P4 along with P5 revealed that they had the most positive relationship with the student’s classroom para-professionals. According to P4 and P5, the para-professionals

had more involvement with the daily activities of the student than their classroom teachers. Both families indicated that para-professionals should be permitted to participate in IEP meetings due to their daily hands-on interaction with their children.

Most of the parents feel that because the aides are with our children most of the time, the aids need to be involved in the IEP process, but they are not. They are not able to attend. They are not involved with the child's IEP team, but they are with (child of P4) most of the day. The people who have less to do with his actual education are the ones who are being much more formable and rigid with what happens to (child of P4). The further down you go, the more willing they are to help. The further away you get from (child of P4), the further the strangle hold, the further the rigidity (P4).

P5 indicated that having para-professionals participate in IEP meetings was recommended at the Arc State Convention recently:

I just got back from the Arc State Convention and they told us that the most important thing we can do to improve the IEP process is to include para-professionals in the IEP process. So we have requested that our para-professionals, or at least one of them come to our ARD, and it was declined. And our teacher told us that that offended her (P5).

Unlike classroom teachers who knew the daily struggles that students encountered, most parents perceived administrators as being disconnected from daily student routines. Parents (P1, P3, P4, P5) felt uncomfortable about administrators who served as IEP team leaders and made important decisions regarding student programs without completely understanding ramifications of those decisions being made. "The school psychologist, I think, has been the biggest problem this year. We don't have a good relationship. I feel that she does not know my son at all to be making recommendations for him (P3)."

P5 further questioned her child's administrators' experiences and training in special education. The last two teachers who effectively worked with her son left the

local school district due to disagreements and negative feelings revolving around their school administrators.

I have had very unfortunate problems with the principal on campus for the last three years. He came from a regular education background, and we had previously always had principals with degrees in special education prior to that.

Research Question 2 Summary

Most of the participants indicated that they had previously experienced negative treatment at one time or another by educators during IEP meetings. Parents were accused by IEP team members as being unreasonable and were often blamed for the behavioral and academic deficiencies of their children. Parents were perceived as being unreasonable due to requesting services that school districts believed to be unnecessary or too expensive. Educators additionally found parents to be unreasonable when discussing measures pertaining to student discipline. Additionally, parents revealed how they were often intimidated by IEP team members.

One common theme that emerged from interviewing parents revolved around educators treating parents more positively within the presence of an advocate, particularly an advocate from AFNIC. Most of the parents indicated that they were treated more respectfully and professionally by educators when an advocate attended IEP meetings. Additionally, educators tended to adhere more carefully to IEP meeting protocol and preparation when an advocate was present in IEP meetings.

Several of the parents indicated that current relationships with educators had improved since the time their children were first placed in their respective school districts. Most of the parents cited that they initially encountered resistance from school district personnel regarding receiving of appropriate services, diagnoses, and empathy

that the parent believed should have been granted to their children. Relations between educators and parents strengthened through increased awareness of student disabilities among educators in addition to parents becoming more knowledgeable of the IEP process. While many of the parents interviewed and surveyed received more positive treatment among educators as they built rapport with school districts, adversarial relationships still existed among several of the parents.

Research Question 3

What changes would parents of children with autism desire to effect in IEP meetings?

Changes that participants desired to effect in IEP meetings included decreasing adversarial relations between themselves and educators. Disagreements with educators fueled negative encounters that parents experienced during IEP meetings. According to the survey results, 36% of the parents indicated that disagreements with educators during IEP meetings revolved around disciplinary issues (see Table 5). A significant percentage of participants surveyed cited “other” as parental causes for disagreements with educators. Other causes for disagreements were identified through participant interviews.

Table 5

Cause	Percentage of Responses
Discipline	36%
Academic Curriculum	20%
No Disagreements	8%
Placement	16%
Other	20%

According to the participants interviewed, parents desired to change how educators disciplined students with special needs. Educators' lack of understanding of students with disabilities often resulted in school district personnel advocating punitive discipline practices during IEP meetings. Parents further desired to effect how educators improperly implemented IEP objectives. Programs and services that were agreed upon during IEP meetings were often not fully implemented by educators. Additionally, parents desired to effect how frequently school districts referred to financial constraints as justification to deny students services.

Punitive Discipline Practices

Educators' misunderstanding of student disabilities fueled disagreements regarding discipline. School districts were prone to provide discipline measures that were uniform and consistent with those used with the general student population. Three of the parents interviewed (P1, P3, P6) indicated that educators interpreted student inappropriate behavioral acts as intentional instead of manifestations of their disabilities.

P1 attempted to explain to educators during IEP meetings that her son often did not understand the ramifications of traditional consequences. Unfortunately, other IEP team members often persisted in the belief that this student with autism adhere to standard codes of conduct.

She (school counselor) was telling me, "yeah, you know. I'm going to have to draw a line with (child of P1) and – I'm going to have to draw a line with him." And I thought, you are going to draw a line with him? That's the worst thing that you could do. I knew she was setting him up to fail, setting herself up to fail and setting herself up for a lot of frustration (P1).

P6 often disagreed with how her child's school district handled discipline issues stating that "they were suspending him (child of P6) all of the time." One month, the

parent was docked over \$200.00 pay for leaving her work early to pick up her son from school for inappropriate behavior. According to P6, her child's behavior improved once the school district learned how to handle incidents in less punitive and more empathetic ways.

P3 also disagreed with her son's school district regarding discipline issues. The IEP team, without the agreement of P3, placed her child in a transition unit for violent, emotionally disturbed students. The IEP team leader, who made this particular placement decision, had not even met the child. According to the parent, the school district informed her that she was not to be granted her 10 day recess to protest the placement despite the fact that she was entitled to this action by federal law.

P3 stated "from the beginning, she (school psychologist) just said things like they're fact." The student was placed into a transition unit following the child's cursing at a teacher. In addition to placing her son in a transition unit for violent students with emotional behavioral disorders, the student was also arrested for cursing at a teacher. "In my mind it (the arrest) was ridiculous. It was not a violent outburst or anything – he just cursed. If they could manage his disability then they wouldn't need the police. Don't arrest kids for their disability."

One month following the interview with P3, this parent received a response from a complaint that she filed with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) against her son's school district. TEA ruled in favor of the parent, granting revisions towards procedures and related documents pertaining to her rights with "specific regard to non-consensus ARD meetings."

IEP Implementation

Most of the parents interviewed (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7) indicated the desire to affect how educators implement IEP objectives. These parents cited that IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings were often not fully implemented among educators. According to parents, IEP objectives were not being completed, and IEP goals were not being updated on a consistent basis. The IEP process tended to serve more of a formality process among educators rather than a means for accommodating students through the practical application of IEP educational objectives. According to participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6), IEP goals and objectives were often simply not carried through.

Prior to P1's first experiences in IEP meetings, she assumed that school district personnel would automatically have had exceptional interest towards making sure that her son received the most effective special education services. P1 was surprised to discover that the views of educators were not consistent with the implementation of ideas that she believed to be the best approach to serving for child.

In the beginning, I really didn't know what my rights were. I guess that I just trusted that, you know. They were going to tell me what to do to help my son. I think – honestly, they have such different input (P1).

Classroom teachers were accused by P5 of not adhering to objectives agreed upon in IEP meetings. According to P5, her son's classroom teacher implemented strenuous physical education curriculum to his entire class even though the curriculum was neither within the son's nor his classmates' IEP objectives. Meanwhile, the classroom teacher did not address any of the goals agreed upon in IEP meetings. "In fact, in our bad year – this was a ridiculous amount of 46 goals and not one bit of progress. Not one of them had ever been addressed. So our IEPs are really only paperwork."

P5 further concluded that she believed that either IEP student objectives were too difficult to master or that her son's teachers simply failed to update IEP goals in order to decrease levels of paperwork and lesson plan adjustments. The IEP process was simply viewed as a formality by educators. "It's in the paperwork. It's on the recording. It's written in the minutes, but it's just never done. It's a meeting they have to have, but really a lot of it is never really carried through."

P3 and P6 additionally noted that the IEP process often appeared to be just a formality.

It seems like that everyone would come up with very good ideas when you leave there (IEP Meetings). But if it's the teacher who didn't do what they were supposed to do, then you come up with these good ideas, but then if the teacher doesn't do them, then that is very frustrating (P3).

P6 added "note that these teachers hardly ever read the IEPs. Most of those teachers get a folder and they never even open them up. The schools should make them do this stuff."

Furthermore, parents complained that schools often focused on the same particular goals year after year (P1, P4). P4 believed that classroom teachers documented sufficient student progress towards IEP goals in order to adhere to IEP documentation procedures despite objectives not having been fully mastered his child. "He is doing the stuff he did 2 years ago. My kid is behind and you are not even keeping up with the chronological curve. And they could not understand that actually."

P4 recalled a time when he visited his son's classroom.

Teachers went through the lesson plans with (student of P4) and gave him check marks. He was quiet and you gave him credit for knowing it. And you ask him right now and doesn't know what the heck you are saying.

Budget and Allocation

Five of the seven parents interviewed (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6) cited that educators mentioned budgetary restraints as reasons for not providing services that parents believed necessary for their children. Parents desired for school districts not to address financial constraints as justification for not providing quality services for students with special needs.

P1 believed that monetary issues had “always been in the forefront” with school administrators when discussing special education services. P6 further noted that the primary objective for school administrators was to “save school money.” P3 feared that monetary concerns among school district personnel often took precedence over the welfare of students receiving special services. She stated “I think it’s about the money on their end. They try not to spend too much on your kid.”

While P4 understood the responsibilities faced by public school administrators, he did question the effectiveness of how financial resources are allocated within school districts.

I don’t want to hear anymore about funding. That’s not it. They start talking about funding and I say: No, it’s not a funding issue, it’s an allocation issue - how much did your administrator make last year? The whole thing is what’s good for them and not what’s good for the child.

P5 described her first IEP meeting at her son’s current school district. After attending IEP meetings in two different districts for her child, she was not used to a school district denying her request for particular services due to monetary reasons. While the parent understood the financial restraints faced by school districts, she did not believe that her school district should always use financial reasons as an excuse not to implement effective practices for students receiving special education services. “I am constantly

told no because of money. ‘We don’t have the money for special integration training for our occupational therapist. We don’t have the money to do that’.”

Research Question 3 Summary

Participants desired that IEP meetings serve as less of a cooperative venture and more of an adversarial encounter. Adversarial IEP experiences that parents encountered were primarily due to lack of educators’ understanding student disabilities and improper IEP implementation. Parents believed that educators’ reliance on traditional punitive discipline practices was indicative of school district personnel misunderstanding of student disabilities.

Parents pointed out that IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings were often not fully implemented among educators. Parents indicated that IEP meetings tended to be more of a formality than serve as a means for meeting student educational needs. Parents believed that formality and rigidity of IEP meetings created barriers toward implementing necessary changes to educational programs.

Research Question 4

What do parents perceive that school districts may do to improve IEP meetings?

Parents were asked through an open-ended survey question about measures that school districts could take to improve IEP meetings. Building positive relationships with parents and making IEP meetings easier to understand were cited the most by parents as measures that educators could take to improve IEP meetings (see Table 6). Educating parents about the IEP process and making the IEP meetings more of a democratic process were two more measures commonly mentioned parental survey responses.

Table 6

Measures that School Districts Can Take to Improve IEP Meetings (N=26)

Recommended Measures	Frequency of Responses
Build Positive Relations with Parents	7
Make IEP Process Easier to Understand	7
Make IEP Meetings More Democratic	6
Educate Parents About IEP Process	6
Practice Proper IEP Implementation	5
Educate School Personnel about IEP Process	1
Include Para-Professionals in IEP Process	1

Common themes indicated by parents interviewed as to how educators could improve IEP meetings revolved around building quality relationships with parents and making IEP meetings more of a democratic process where parents felt as equal contributors (P2, P3, P5, P6, P7). According to parents (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6), educators could improve positive outcomes by making IEP meetings less vague and less formal. Parents additionally indicated that school districts should not only educate parents regarding special education law (P1, P2, P3, P6, P7), but that teachers and administrators should become better trained and educated in special education practices (P1, P5, P6).

Building Positive Relationships

Parents (P2, P3, P4) believed that if school districts were less adversarial then IEP meetings would be a more positive experience for both parents and educators. According to parents, educators could build more positive relationships with them through honesty

and being less deceitful. P2 said that educators met prior to her son's IEP meetings to discuss "secret agendas" behind her back. She stated:

It's like a chess game. If they make a move, then I've got to figure out what their strategy is and what they're thinking. I know that they have staff meetings about my son all of the time. You know that I'm not included in. So I know that there is an agenda that they should probably share with me. I have to figure out what it is.

P2 went on to state that educators in past IEP meetings made her very uncomfortable.

"It's kind of intimidating. You go in there and there are 10 to 12 people sitting around a table and you're the only one on your side."

Another parent (P3) quickly learned that school districts often did not adhere to special education law with regards to providing her equal footing in IEP meetings. She described her overall IEP experience as "very adversarial." This parent further concluded that she often believed that it was solely her against the rest of the IEP team when she attended meetings for her son. "It's 10 of them against me. I'm sure that I'm not the only one who comes out of every meeting crying."

P4 went as far to say how educators would try their best to knock down parental suggestions. He stated that the IEP meeting "seems so adversarial before getting in the door. So, I can't say anything good about it. I don't believe in the system."

Instead of attempting to intimidate parents, P4 believed that educators should try to work with parents in creating educational programs to better serve students with special needs. Similar to P3, P4 believed that it was often him against the rest of the IEP team. P4 stated "I don't want to have an adversarial relationship. It's a lose or lose to me. It can't be adversarial."

A Democracy

Parents believed that IEP team meetings consisted of pre-determined agendas among educators. While the intention of IEP meetings was for educators and families to collaborate together regarding educational programs for students, parents (P2, P3, P5, P7) witnessed that paperwork was often completed before meetings even started.

They have it all figured out before you get there, which I don't think is right. Having some ideas, yeah – but don't have it all. And it's a done deal that everyone is going to agree with – the administrators, the psychologist, who is ever in charge (P2).

P3 believed that she was simply left out of the decision making process. Parental input was rarely welcome by educators in determining placement, discipline, and instructional decisions pertaining to her child.

Half of those boxes are already checked and filled out. It's all just cut and paste. Just because one person is in charge says that that's the way it's going to be, it is assumed that everyone else in the room agrees (P3).

P5 further described the frustration that parents face when educators attempted to make decisions without parental input.

I noticed since we moved to (school district of P5) 9 years ago, we walk into a meeting with a stack of papers already completed – and they read it and we are asked to sign it. So, all of the decisions have been made without parental input.

P7 was surprised to discover that IEP meetings served as less of a cooperative venture and more of an adversarial encounter. This parent stated, “I feel like that I am kept out of the loop” during IEP meetings. P7 additionally concluded that “educators tend to have set plans prior to meetings.” She cited that parental input was not valued by educators during her son's IEP meetings. P7 mentioned how she had previously brought professional literature to IEP meetings only to be ignored by educators.

Parents indicated that their children would be better served during IEP meetings if educators valued and listened to parental input during these meetings. The students who had been successful were those children whose IEP meetings consisted of positive and equal interaction among both educators and families. “One of the biggest help for them was to include me in the decision making because he is doing a lot better (P6).”

Fuzzy Formalities

Parents (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6) interviewed cited that IEP meetings were too vague and difficult to understand. P1 mentioned that IEP meetings needed to be developed to where parents were provided more freedom to adjust to the needs of students. P3 agreed that IEP meetings needed to be more user-friendly and flexible to better serve students receiving special education services by emphasizing “if it’s about the kid, then they should be a little more accommodating and accountable. I think that there are simple, better ways to help kids if you really want too than the way they are doing it.” P3 went on to state “they need to give parents more information in advance – not just check some boxes. You need to know what is going to be covered when you get there.”

P4 blamed special education law and not the teachers for the inflexibility and vagueness of IEP meetings. “I think it’s the laws. The whole IEP thing has gotten too bureaucratic. That time goes by while the child suffers. It needs to be more flexible. It needs to be more accommodating and genuine.” P4 went on to address that the formality and rigidity of IEP meetings created barriers in implementing prompt changes in educational programs that might be necessary. This parent stated “so the IEP doesn’t help. We can’t change it unless we have an ARD. We have an ARD. We do that to have a change again. It’s too regimented. It’s not flexible enough.”

P6 suggested that educators provide a better service to parents during IEP meetings by making the presentation of paperwork easier for parents to understand. The parent requested her son's school to enlarge copies of IEP paperwork so that she could more easily read content.

You know those IEP papers (forms). Those papers are so condensed. I have a problem with them. I can't read it because it gets copied so much. The IEP forms need to be bigger so that you can write in them (P6).

P5 elaborated how she became an equal participant during her son's IEP meetings by requesting written copies of goals and objectives 10 days prior to each IEP meeting. This allowed her time to make sure that she not only understood proposed objectives, but agreed with educational plans set forth by her child's school district.

Education for the Parents

Parents who were interviewed (P1, P2, P3, P6, P7) cited that school districts could improve IEP meetings by educating parents about IEP procedures. The majority of parents who first participated in IEP meetings had very little knowledge pertaining to the ramifications, rights, and protocol of the IEP process. As P1 stated "I didn't even know I could call an ARD. I didn't know what an ARD was." Most school districts are only required simply to provide a condensed brochure summarizing rights that parents have during the IEP process.

One parent (P6) recounted her experience of receiving literature from her son's school district.

They give us a booklet that is like 50 pages long that gives us a glossary of the different terms. And I mean it's so much information. So many different disabilities, the visual, the blindness, this, that, all of these different areas to cover and detail and it's too much for regular folks to read it and understand it all. And there are so many different points and different steps in an IEP and in the ARD process period.

When P6 was told by an administrator not to discuss a particular topic because it was not considered ARD information, the parent replied “if you would tell me what is ARD information and what is not, [and] make it in a clear way, then I would know how to behave properly.”

P6 believed that school districts could better educate parents by using advocates to serve as teacher-liaisons. These liaisons could be used to serve as a sounding board for parents and assist them in becoming more knowledgeable and familiar with special education law. P6 concluded her discussion about school districts educating parents by stating “if they have once a week or at least twice a month, parent support type meetings. Have continuous support, designated place where we can go to receive information. If they could educate us and walk us through different steps.”

P2 discussed how parents new to the IEP process were unaware of rights available to them. According to P2, parents who had a complete understanding of IEP meetings would be less intimidated and more cooperative with educators when planning educational programming for their children receiving special education services.

Other parents don't understand the game and they are very intimidated when they go in there and they pretty much do whatever they are told to do. They don't realize how much choice they have or how much power they have (P2).

P2 further stated:

So I guess the recommendation for me would be if there is any way that other parents could be educated in what their rights are and how to handle themselves in these meetings, then it would make their IEP better, as well as my IEP. I think it's good (IEP experience), but I think its good because of me. Before I had my son I worked in business for years and years in kind of a professional level. So I had lots of experience with meetings, agendas, and how to handle controversy in the board room.

P3 recommended that school districts could better serve parents of students receiving special education services by providing formal training and workshops to educate parents about IEP meetings. “If they would have some kind of class for the parent about IEPs. How the whole process works and if what you are agreeing too – the long term effects of that.” P3 went on to conclude that school districts educating parents about IEP meetings might give parents the impression that educators do care and really want parents to understand the process because “I never got the feeling that they ever wanted me to understand at all.”

P7 discussed how her school district was reluctant to provide her with all of the opportunities available to her son. Only through her own research was the parent able to obtain knowledge regarding the full spectrum of services that were available to her son. One recommendation that P7 suggested that school districts do to improve IEP meetings was to “provide information to parent, teacher, and other people involved in decision making process of programs and services in district.”

Education for School District Personnel

These parents (P1, P5, P6) concluded that school district personnel often lacked the training in effectively educating students with special needs in the classroom. Additionally, parents noted that educators were often not knowledgeable about how to properly conduct IEP meetings. According to P6, “teachers that are doing IEPs – a lot of them are good. A lot of them are not. And a lot of them don’t know what they are doing.”

P1 stated that educators would be able to more positively impact IEP meetings if they were more knowledgeable of special education law as well as understanding their

role in IEP meetings. According to P1, school districts should provide better training towards their staff regarding educating students receiving special education services. When asked if school districts could better improve the IEP process if educators had more knowledge and if educators knew their role in IEP meetings, P1 responded:

Exactly. I know that they're – that they have to do so much training and all that, but I don't know how much they actually budget to send them to experts – to the conferences to get the knowledge to – to have strategies and interventions. I mean especially like at the counselor level. I think if they had more of that then we wouldn't – it wouldn't have to go so far to bring in a psychologist.

P5 observed the importance of having administrators properly trained in special education practices. This parent commented on how both teachers and administrators in her child's school district did not understand the importance of IEP meetings by stating “they just seem so unfamiliar with the ARD process. They don't realize how important the ARD process is and that you really have to do what is written on those pages.”

P5 discussed her experience of her son having a teacher who had little training in special education. The parent noticed marks on his arms and thighs where this teacher forced her son to participate in physical education activities. According to the parent, a properly trained educator would not have conducted these particular activities since they were not part of the student's IEP. Furthermore, experienced teachers would have been less likely to place bruises on student's body in forcing him to attempt sit ups. The parent recommended that school districts should further educate school district personnel about special education instructional practices to better serve students with special needs.

Research Question 4 Summary

Parents interviewed and surveyed believed that educators could improve IEP meetings by making these meetings more of a democratic process where parents felt they

were equal contributors. Parents cited that they would not be as defensive in IEP meetings if educators viewed IEP meetings as more of a team effort between schools and families. Furthermore, parents emphasized that if school districts were more honest, friendly, and less deceitful, then IEP meetings would be a more positive experience for both parents and educators.

Instead of attempting to intimidate parents, participants believed that educators should try to work with parents in creating educational programs to better serve students receiving special education services. Parents indicated that their children were better served in IEP meetings when educators valued and listened to parental input. The students who were more successful as a result of IEP meetings were those children whose IEP meetings consisted of positive and equal interaction between educators and parents.

Parents expressed a need for making special education law and IEP meetings easier to understand. Many of the parents interviewed mentioned that IEP meetings should be developed so that parents were provided more freedom to adjust to student needs. Furthermore, parents believed that IEP meetings needed to be more user-friendly and flexible to better serve students receiving special education services.

According to participants, school districts could further improve IEP meetings by educating parents about the IEP process. Parents suggested that educators can provide better service to parents during IEP meetings by providing information and making the process easier for parents to understand. Measures that participants recommended to educate parents included formal training provided by school districts and workshops on special education law and the IEP process.

Parents recommended that school districts should not only educate parents regarding special education law, but that school districts should also better train teachers and administrators to become adequately informed in special education law. Parents further believed that school districts should effectively train educators about special education instructional practices. According to parents, educators would be able to more positively implement IEP meetings if they were more knowledgeable of special education law and had a clearer understanding of their role during IEP meetings.

Research Question 5

What measures can parents of children with autism take in becoming equal partners with educators during IEP meetings?

Parents were asked measures that they could take in becoming equal partners with educators. The most common response cited by participants was for parents to obtain knowledge about the IEP process and special education law (See Table 7). Becoming proactive was another frequently cited recommendation for gaining equity. The majority of parents strongly agreed that their involvement in IEP meetings had benefited their child (See Table 8). While students benefited from parental participation in IEP meetings, parents still desired stronger influence and involvement with their child's education.

Table 7

Measures Parents Can Take in Becoming Equal Partners in IEP Meetings	
Recommended Actions	Frequency of Responses
Obtain Knowledge about Law	12
Become Proactive	9
Utilize Advocacy Services	6
Do Not be Intimidated by Educators	3
Remain Non-Offensive to Educators	1

Table 8

Parental Perception of IEP Outcomes (N=26)					
Outcomes	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Parental Involvement					
Benefited Child	8%	8%	8%	24%	52%
IEP Process Benefited					
Child	8%	12%	28%	40%	12%
Parental Decisions					
Influenced Outcomes	8%	16%	36%	32%	8%

Based on interview feedback, parents (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7) indicated the importance of becoming active participants in IEP meetings. Parents addressed the significance of being persistent in requesting appropriate services for their children receiving special education services. Furthermore, parents (P2, P4, P5, P6) believed that educators were more willing to listen attentively to their suggestions when they communicated in a non-threatening manner.

Proactive Parents

Five of the parents interviewed (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7) indicated that their involvement in IEP meetings benefited their children. Parents were able to acquire educational resources and services that they believed their children would not have received if not for their parental involvement towards IEP meetings. Two of the parents (P6, P7) indicated that they had to initiate strong persistence in order to obtain the desired services for their children. “I have to go overboard in order to get things accomplished. My influence has definitely had an impact (positive) on my son’s IEP process (P7).” Due to the persistence and involvement of P6, her son benefited from a crisis classroom, behavioral specialists, case workers, and in-home training services.

They want to do right I think because they know that I will raise hell. But also because they see the results of doing what the IEP says. Don’t trust them. You need to be involved and don’t trust them to do it on their own (P6).

Both P6 and P2 mentioned how their involvement had created a cooperative atmosphere between themselves and educators in IEP meetings. IEP meetings provided these parents and educators opportunities to work together in discussing measures to better serve their students receiving special education services. These parents believed they, along with educators were able to learn more about student disabilities from different perspectives through the IEP meetings. Through teamwork, parents and educators decided appropriate educational programs and services that provided maximum benefits to students with special needs. P2 elaborated on the cooperation that she experiences during IEP meetings when she stated:

But I think it’s been really good for me, services wise. You know, anything that I’ve asked for or we’ve discussed as an issue that has to do with his behavior problems or his sensory problems or his motor problems. They have been really good in the IEP meetings to either accept whatever suggestions I make (P2).

According to P1, her involvement in her son's IEP process benefited him when he was first placed in special education programs. She cited the significance of being persistent in making certain that her child received the proper services from school districts. As P1 noted "if my son is having trouble, you know I'll camp out there until I get answers." This parent believed that she often served as the only advocate for her child. Without her involvement in her son's IEP meetings, P1 believed that her child would have simply "fallen through the cracks."

Two of the parents interviewed (P4, P5) highlighted that they had gone as far as to initiate meetings several times per year with local school district superintendents and special education directors in order to express their concerns regarding special education services. Without her involvement, P5 believed that her son would have never gotten the services he currently received from his school district.

I think it has been positive because at least they know what they are looking for with (student of P5). I think (without parental involvement) they would be babysitting all day long. The only reason I get what I get in my child's IEP is because I go up and monitor what is going on (P5).

Creating a Non-Threatening Environment

According to four parents interviewed (P2, P4, P5, P6), participants were more likely to have their demands and requests implemented by educators when they communicated in a non-threatening manner. Parents noted that educators tended to be more responsive when parents attempted to express needs and concerns calmly and collectively. "I don't think they dread me coming into the office because they know I'm not going to rant and rave and throw a temper tantrum (P2)." "Go into it with a nice attitude (P4)." "Not be defensive. Be open minded (P5)."

P6 discussed how she respected the difficult work that her child's educators did despite not always agreeing with them. This parent showed appreciation to educators by providing food and drinks at all of her son's IEP meetings.

Research Question 5 Summary

Based on survey and interview results, parents indicated the importance of becoming equal participants in IEP meetings. Avenues that parents discussed in becoming proactive included becoming knowledgeable regarding special education rights and laws. Participants recommended that parents take the initiative in educating themselves about special education issues.

Parents cited the significance of being persistent in making sure that their children receive the proper services from school districts. Parents discussed the importance of not backing down and not being intimidated by school district personnel. Parents also believed that educators were more willing to listen attentively to their suggestions when they communicated in a non-threatening manner.

Many parents utilized AFNIC for their services in providing advocacy representation in IEP meetings and providing education to parents regarding special education issues. The attendance of an advocate in IEP meetings provided parents with an expert to guide them through the process. Additionally, educators were more willing include parents in the decision making process when in the presence of an advocate.

Research Question 6

What evidence is there that parents who are knowledgeable of special education law and the IEP process are likely to have a more positive experience during IEP meetings?

Parents surveyed cited seeking support group and advocacy assistance as a means to become equal partners with educators during IEP meetings. AFNIC in particular provided parents with resources to become more knowledgeable of the IEP process and special education laws. Based on survey results, parents improved their knowledge of special education law since becoming members of AFNIC (See Table 9).

Table 9

Parent Level of Knowledge of IEP Law Prior to and Since Becoming Members of AFNIC

Knowledge Level	None	Little	Somewhat	Very	Extremely
Prior to Joining AFNIC	12%	8%	38%	12%	30%
Since Joining AFNIC	0%	4%	23%	38%	35%

According to participant input from interviews (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7), being knowledgeable of the rights entitled to their children under federal law assisted parents in requesting and acquiring services for their students during IEP meetings. All seven interviewees cited that without their knowledge of special education law, they would have been unaware of all of the services that school districts were required to provide to their children receiving special education services.

P1 elaborated on the importance in becoming knowledgeable about the IEP process by saying “it is all about educating yourself too – it’s about – if you expect someone to do it for you, no one is going to do it for you.” P1 went on to discuss how parents needed more information about special education law than just the material that was provided to them by school districts.

Everything isn’t always easy to understand. I mean, no one explains that to you. They hand you your booklet or procedural safeguards and so forth. But I think it can be difficult to understand. Especially, when you’re in progress already, and

you're just overwhelmed with the information that they give you. And no one explains it to you (P1).

P4 and P7 also recommended that parents should educate themselves about special education law. "If the parents didn't know the rules and become educated, they would just be lost" (P4). P7 concluded by saying "seek out information and become experts because the local school personnel are not."

Unlike most parents who have children receiving special education services, P7 discussed how she had an advantage in IEP meetings by having an occupation which provided her access to resources on special education laws and services. Similar to P7's experiences, P2 addressed how educators tended to be more prone to listen to her concerns and were more honest with her due to her persistence in becoming knowledgeable about special education services.

I think that they know that I know a lot and the things I don't know, I'm going to find out. I think that they know that. And I think that goes a long way in how they deal with me and how they react to me and what they offer to me because they know that I'm going to find out what is available and what's legal and what's appropriate (P2).

P2 wished that more parents of children receiving special education services were knowledgeable of services that were available to them. P2 emphasized that most parents did not realize how much they could positively influence their child's education.

According to P3, her son's school district was often reluctant to inform and educate her about special education law. She believed that school districts inadequately informed her about special education law because school administrators feared that the more this parent knew about the law, the more services she would request. According to P3, "they (school district) don't want you to know everything." As a result, she recommended that parents should educate themselves as much as they could before

participating in IEP meetings. She also recommended that parents “bring a lawyer with them” to IEP meetings. “Make sure that you can read everything humanly possible before you go there and start talking to them.”

P5 cited that special education law was difficult to understand and confusing. This parent was initially unaware that her son was entitled to year-round services. After she understood the services that her son was entitled to under federal law, she fought the school district for her son to attend summer school through the assistance of an attorney. Her son now attends school year round. “I don’t know what I would have done because I would have never known what our legal rights were because the school district has never told me.”

Keeping written documentation and acquiring student assessments from independent sources were some of the many proactive measures that P6 practiced during IEP meetings. P6 recommended that parents can not just be proactive without proper preparation. Parents needed to constantly educate themselves about rights and laws.

Research and prepare for your kid and his educational needs. They (parents) can’t just go in there with their regular knowledge and raise hell because you can’t go anywhere with that. With a special needs kid you have to prepare yourself. Prepare, prepare, prepare (P6).

All parents interviewed either utilized AFNIC for their services in providing advocacy representation in IEP meetings or for their services in providing education to them regarding special education law. As two participants stated “it’s to the point now to where if you really want to get something done, you have to get (my advocate) or better. There is no way. There is so much of it. The amount they know of. I would highly encourage it. That is the only way to go (P4).” “AFNIC has been real knowledgeable about legal rights (P5).”

Research Question 6 Summary

Participants mentioned how they were able to build more positive relations with school district personnel once they knew the parameters of the IEP process and laws as they pertained to students receiving special education services. According to participants interviewed and surveyed, being knowledgeable about their children's rights under federal law assisted parents in acquiring services for their students during IEP meetings. Parents additionally indicated that educators were more prone to listen to parental concerns when they knew that they were knowledgeable of special education law.

Parents cited that without their taking the initiative to become knowledgeable about special education law, they would have been unaware of all of the services that school districts were entitled to in order to provide special education services to their children. Parents were able to acquire educational resources and services that they believed their children would not have received if not for their acquired knowledge in the IEP process.

Summary of Findings

Most of the participants indicated that their overall IEP experiences had been negative. Additionally most parents had previously experienced negative treatment at one time or another by educators during IEP meetings. While many of these parents received more positive treatment among educators as they built rapport with school districts, adversarial relationships still existed for several of the parents. Students who were more successful in the IEP process were those children whose IEP meetings consisted of positive and equal interaction between educators and parents.

Parents believed that school districts could further improve IEP meetings by educating parents about special education law. Participants further addressed the importance of taking the initiative in educating themselves about special education issues. Through persistence and becoming knowledgeable of special education law, these parents were able to properly assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for them to become successful.

Disagreements between educators and parents regarding discipline, education services, and IEP implementation contributed to beliefs held by parents that their children were not being properly served in IEP meetings. Changes that parents desired to effect in IEP meetings included making IEP meetings more of a cooperative venture and less adversarial. Parents additionally desired for educators to adhere to proper protocol during IEP meetings, which included having all required personnel in attendance. Parents highlighted the importance of building positive relations with educators through seeking advocacy support to assist them in IEP meeting representation and education pertaining to special education law.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following chapter of the study includes the purpose of the study and a summary of research findings. Implications of the study and recommendations from the researcher are discussed to address parental perceptions of the individualized education program (IEP) meetings. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study.

Summary of Findings, Implications and Recommendations

The study investigated parental perceptions of students with autism toward IEP meetings. Parental relationships with educators, IEP meeting experiences, IEP outcomes, and treatment by educators were revealed through participant input. Parents were asked to share their experiences of previous IEP meetings and to provide input regarding practices that not only school districts may take towards improving IEP meetings, but also actions that parents may take to serve as better advocates for their children.

Participants of the study consisted of parents having at least one student diagnosed with autism that currently attends or had previously attended public schools in the State of Texas. All parents had previous experiences attending IEP meetings for their children. A survey instrument and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were used in the study to obtain parental feedback regarding IEP meetings. The researcher utilized descriptive statistics to analyze data received from surveys. Data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed based upon categories to construct meaning through the constant comparative method.

Research findings indicate that parents do not perceive themselves as being treated equally among educators during IEP meetings. Parents believe that their input is not valued or welcomed by most educators. Instead of being kept out of the decision making process, parents desire to be treated as equal contributors towards their child's IEP meetings. Implications resulting from these findings are that the unequal treatment by educators in IEP meetings towards parents creates an adversarial and intimidating experience for parents of children receiving special education services. Not having an equal voice towards their child's education prevents parents from positively influencing outcomes towards their child's IEP meetings in terms of obtaining quality services and of building positive relations with educators.

I recommend the following actions: (a) educators should value parents as equal partners during IEP meetings in order to facilitate a cooperative rather than an adversarial environment during IEP meetings (b) educators should welcome and encourage parental input when planning educational programs for students receiving special education services and (c) parents and educators should collectively work together to provide appropriate IEP outcomes to effectively serve students receiving special education services.

Research findings indicate that most educators fail to implement proper IEP protocol. According to parents, student objectives agreed upon in IEP meetings are not always fully implemented for students receiving special education services. Implications from educators not conducting IEP meetings properly results in educators' viewing the IEP process simply as a formality. Furthermore, students do not benefit from the IEP process when objectives set forth in IEP meetings are not taught and practiced by

educators. I recommend that educators properly implement and adhere to IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings in order to facilitate success and positive outcomes for students receiving special education services.

Based on research findings from the study, parents perceive that many educators lack the knowledge necessary to create effective IEP goals and objectives to properly serve students receiving special education services. Additionally, parents believe that many educators are unaware of special education law, and lack the ability to understand disabilities of students receiving special education services. Implications from these findings are that educators who are properly trained in special education practices have the knowledge to understand student needs, which allows school district personnel the ability to implement programs to better serve students receiving special education services. School district personnel effectively trained in special education are more likely to understand the importance of organizing properly conducted IEP meetings and treating parents as equal partners during the IEP process. I recommend that school districts routinely train educators about how to initiate productive IEP meetings, and how to create effective special education programs in order to facilitate the proper implementation of services for students.

Research findings conclude that parents new to the IEP process often experience difficulty understanding special education law. Therefore, many parents are unaware of services that school districts should provide for their children. Parents perceive that school districts do an inadequate job of providing information about special education services entitled to their children under special education law.

Implications from these findings are a result to school districts' inability to effectively educate families about IEP meetings. Many parents take the initiative to educate themselves. Parents having a complete understanding of IEP meetings provide better IEP outcomes to effectively serve their children receiving special education services. I recommend the need for school districts to educate parents about special education services and the IEP process. The development of workshops and seminars conducted on a periodic basis are ways for school districts to educate families about special education laws and practices. School districts providing services to educate parents will likely provide the perception to families that educators do value the importance of facilitating positive relations with them.

Parents acquire more positive outcomes and IEP experiences as a result of their having knowledge about special education law and IEP meetings. Results from the study cite the effectiveness of utilizing the services of advocacy support groups, in particular AFNIC, in providing the knowledge necessary for parents to acquire in assisting their children in IEP meetings. Furthermore, parents feel less intimidated by educators when an AFNIC representative is present in IEP meetings.

Implications of these findings are that parents who educate themselves about special education services and the IEP process are likely to create positive outcomes towards their child's IEP meetings in terms of obtaining quality services and building positive relations with educators. Furthermore, parents are better prepared to contribute in IEP meetings when they utilize the knowledge and services provided by the Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC). I recommend that parents prepare themselves before they attend IEP meetings by proactively educating themselves

about special education services and the IEP process. I further recommend that parents utilize advocacy and support groups as a resource to become knowledgeable about special education.

Recommendations for Further Research

While the study discussed the importance of parents and educators collaboratively working together, additional research is necessary to study ways that IEP meetings can further benefit students receiving special education services. Furthermore, there is a need to determine how to effectively educate parents and educators about special education law and the IEP process in order to provide maximum benefits to students. The study focused exclusively on parent perceptions of IEP meetings. Additionally, participants were parents of children diagnosed with autism. Recommendations for further study include:

1. Further research needs to be conducted on parent perceptions of IEP meetings having children diagnosed with other disabilities besides autism.
2. Further research is necessary to acquire educators' perceptions of the IEP meetings regarding serving children with autism.

Final Reflections

The purpose of conducting IEP meetings is for all IEP members, including parents, to collaborate in implementing the best appropriate services for children receiving special education services. The student suffers when adversarial relationships exist between parents and educators. Parents who feel welcomed and respected by educators will more likely become open to accept educator input regarding the planning of educational programs for their children. Educators who value the input from parents

providing unique insight toward their children will likely be able to create effective programs that tailor specifically towards the needs of students. Providing the consistency of educational programs that serve both academic and domestic settings of the student begin with collaboration between parents and educators in IEP meetings.

APPENDIX A

COVER LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS AND RESPONSE CARD

Dear AFNIC Member:

My name is Wade W. Fish, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas. Additionally, I serve on the Board of Directors for AFNIC and I teach students with neurological disabilities and autism. I am in the process of writing my dissertation entitled *Perceptions of Parents of Students with Autism towards the IEP Meeting*. From this study, I am seeking ways that both parents and educators can improve IEP meetings to better serve students with autism.

My study will consist of using AFNIC members as research participants, who 1) have had previous experience in participating in IEP meetings, and 2) have a child with a disability, which falls under the category of autism. The State of Texas defines autism as a developmental disability that adversely affects a child's educational performance due to deficiencies in social interaction, as well as both verbal and nonverbal communication. Common characteristics associated with autism include engagement in repetitive activities, resistance to changes in daily routines and environmental change, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

Topics that I would like to research include parent relationships with educators, treatment of parents by educators, and IEP experiences and outcomes of parents. Additionally, I would like parental input regarding ways that both educators and parents can improve IEP meetings. Enclosed is a stamped, self-addressed response card for your use if you are interested in participating in this study.

Your responses to this study will remain anonymous, as the researcher will assure that this study will be conducted in an ethical manner. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you have the right to withdraw at any time. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of North Texas Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, 940-565-3940. Additionally, the survey instrument for this study has been reviewed and approved by both the President and Executive Director of AFNIC.

If you have any questions regarding this study please feel free to email or call me. My email address is xxxxxx@xxx.xxx, and my phone number is xxx-xxx-xxxx. My Committee Chair is Dr. Lyndal M. Bullock, Regents Professor for Programs in Special Education at the University of North Texas; xxx-xxx-xxxx. I appreciate your participation.

Sincerely,

Wade W. Fish

Perceptions of Parents of Students with Autism towards the IEP Meeting

Please check one response.

_____ **Yes, I would be interested in completing a short survey pertaining to parents of children with autism towards the IEP meeting.**

_____ **No, I am not interested in participating in this study.**

Please return this stamped, self-addressed response card by April 15, 2004. If you check "yes", you will receive a survey shortly upon the researcher receiving your response card.

Thank you for your time.

*Wade W. Fish
AFNIC Board Member*

APPENDIX B

SURVEY COVER LETTER, SURVEY, INTERVIEW CONTACT FORM

Dear AFNIC Member:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study on *Perceptions of Parents of Students with Autism towards the IEP Meeting!* I have recently received a response card from you indicating your willingness to complete a short survey. Enclosed you will find a stamped, self-addressed envelope and a 34-item survey. Please complete the survey and mail it by May 1, 2004, or at your earliest convenience.

The last question of the survey asks if you would be willing to participate in a tape-recorded interview, which will allow you the opportunity to expand upon your survey responses. If you do not wish to participate in the interview, please check “no” on question 34 but still complete the survey – your input is valuable.

If you are willing to participate in the interview, please fill out the enclosed “Interview Contact Form” and place the form along with your survey in the stamped, self-addressed envelope. The interview will take no more than 30 minutes.

Your responses to this study will remain anonymous, as the researcher will assure that this study will be conducted in an ethical manner. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you have the right to withdraw at any time. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of North Texas Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, 940-565-3940. Additionally, the survey instrument for this study has been reviewed and approved by both the President and Executive Director of AFNIC.

If you have any questions regarding this study please feel free to email or call me. My email address is xxxx@xxx.xxx and my phone number is xxx-xxx-xxxx. My Committee Chair is Dr. Lyndal M. Bullock, Regents Professor for Programs in Special Education at the University of North Texas; xxx-xxx-xxxx. I appreciate your participation.

Thank you once again for your cooperation and for your valuable input. I hope that through your survey responses and my conversations with you, we can improve IEP meetings.

Sincerely,

Wade W. Fish

Please refer to your **oldest child with autism** receiving special education services.

PART I: General

1. How old is your child? _____
2. What grade is your child attending? _____
3. How many years has your child been diagnosed with autism? _____
4. How many years has your child been receiving special education services? _____
5. How many times have you transferred your child to a different school district attempting to find better services for your child? _____
6. Your child spends the majority of the academic day in: *(please check only one)*
 _____ self-contained classrooms _____ general education environments
 _____ resource classrooms _____ alternative placement settings
7. How many IEP meetings have you attended for your child? _____

Part II: RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATORS

For questions 8-16 and 18-30, please circle one number response per question.

8. My relationship with my child’s school district

1	2	3	4	5
Negative		Neutral		Positive

9. My relationship with my child’s special education teacher

1	2	3	4	5
Negative		Neutral		Positive

10. My relationship with my child’s campus administrators

1	2	3	4	5
Negative		Neutral		Positive

11. My relationship with special education district administrators/directors

1	2	3	4	5
Negative		Neutral		Positive

Part III: TREATMENT BY EDUCATORS

12. I am treated respectfully by IEP team members.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

13. I am treated as an equal decision maker during my child’s IEP meetings.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

14. Educators provide a welcoming atmosphere for me during IEP meetings.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

15. I am able to discuss openly and freely with educators during IEP meetings.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

16. My decisions are valued by IEP team members.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

Part IV: IEP EXPERIENCE

17. My disagreements with educators during IEP meetings primarily pertains to:
(please check only one)

no disagreements placement discipline
 academic curriculum other _____

18. My IEP experiences have been positive.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

19. During IEP meetings, my child's goals are thoroughly discussed.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

20. IEP meetings are productive as educators use allotted time wisely.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

21. Educators provide me enough time during IEP meetings for me to express my concerns, ask questions, and provide input regarding my child's educational programming.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

Part V: IEP OUTCOMES

22. My involvement in IEP meetings has benefited my child.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

23. Overall, IEP meetings have benefited my child.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

24. My decisions influence outcomes of IEP meetings.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

25. How much influence would I like to have in my child's IEP meetings?

1	2	3	4	5
Less Influence		No Change		More Influence

26. What impact have IEP meetings had on my involvement with my child's education?

1	2	3	4	5
Less Involvement		No Change		More Involvement

27. What level of involvement would I like to have in planning my child's IEP?

1	2	3	4	5
Less Involvement		No Change		More Involvement

Part VI: SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPATION

28. I am knowledgeable of special education laws and rights entitled to my child **prior** to becoming a member of AFNIC.

1	2	3	4	5
No Knowledge		Somewhat Knowledgeable		Extremely Knowledgeable

29. I am knowledgeable of special education laws and rights entitled to my child **since** becoming a member of AFNIC.

1	2	3	4	5
No Knowledge		Somewhat Knowledgeable		Extremely Knowledgeable

30. My relationships with educators have improved since obtaining the education and services provided by AFNIC.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree

Part VII: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

31. What can school districts do to better improve IEP meetings?

32. What measures can parents take in becoming equal partners in IEP meetings?

33. Please note any other comments that you would like to provide regarding your experiences pertaining to IEP meetings.

34. Would you be willing to participate in an interview with the researcher?

- Yes ___ - No ___

If you check yes, please complete attached interview contact form and mail with survey.

Thank you for your participation. The researcher is committed in assuring that the names and addresses of the participants in this study remain confidential. Participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

Interview Contact Form

Please provide your contact information below so that I can set up a time and location that will be most convenient for you. Your contact information will remain confidential, as this information will only be used to contact you to set up a date for the interview.

Name: _____

Would you rather be contacted by phone or e-mail?

Phone Number: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Please place this form along with your survey in the stamped, self-addressed envelope.

I will randomly select names for those who wish to be interviewed. If your name is randomly selected, I will contact you upon receiving this form and survey.

Thank you,

Wade W. Fish

APPENDIX C

THANK YOU LETTER AND QUESTIONING ROUTE

Date

Name of Interviewee:

Thank you for participating in an interview regarding your perceptions towards IEP meetings. Your feedback was valuable and greatly appreciated. I enjoyed my conversation with you in discussing measures that you believe both parents and educators can take in improving IEP meetings. I hope that you and your family have a great summer.

Sincerely,

Wade W. Fish

Questioning Route

1. Describe your relationship with your child's school district.
 - classroom teacher
 - campus administrator
 - district special education administrator
2. Describe your overall IEP experience.
3. What disagreements with educators have you had during IEP meetings?
4. How are you treated and perceived by IEP team members?
5. What impact have IEP meetings had on your child's education?
6. How has your involvement impacted IEP meetings?
7. What impact has being knowledgeable of special education law had towards your child receiving proper special education services?
8. What can school districts (teachers, administrator) do to improve IEP meetings?
9. What can parents do to improve IEP meetings?

APPENDIX D
TRANSCRIPTION DATA

INTERVIEW (P1)

BASICALLY, THESE QUESTIONS HERE — THESE ARE JUST SOMEWHAT OF AN OUTLINE FROM THE SURVEY. THE FIRST AREA THAT I WANTED TO GET INTO WOULD BE TO HAVE YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATORS, RANGING FROM THE PARAPROFESSIONAL TO THE CLASSROOM TEACHER TO THE CAMPUS PRINCIPAL ALL THE WAY UP TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION.

Okay. Well, I don't know how far you want me to — I'd have to go back. Currently, things are good, but we fought a long time to get them where they are right now. So in the beginning, we didn't know — we didn't know the correct diagnosis. We just went on what the school district was giving us, and they gave us a diagnosis and then they took it back, and we just weren't getting the services until now. And that was in — it started — the trouble started, I guess, in about 1999 until 2004 and we finally got to where we are now. So that's a long — that's a lot of not learning for him, because he just fell through the cracks as a behavior problem.

SO ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY, YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE SAME DISTRICT?

Yes. Yes, that's right. And then that's just when we were first — took him, you know, to have him appraised for ADHD. And then each teacher felt that there was much more going on than that — I didn't even know I could call an ARD. No one ever told me that. And his first grade teacher told me she was thinking about calling an ARD and I didn't know what an ARD was. And then she came back and she told me, no, that they had done some observations and they really just — they just thought that it was just basic. It could be managed by behavior management was all they really thought he needed. And then because he was always sharp and he was — he was learning, but as he got older he got so much more anxiety and the dysgraphia really began to show. His hand writing wasn't changing at all. He could read really well, but he couldn't comprehend other things. Again, they did more observation, I guess you would say. And we finally did have a doctor who observed him for, I think, three or four days, and she diagnosed him as Asperger's. Then when we went to the ARD, she had taken that back. She did that over the summer. While school was out, she did an assessment on him with the special education board of services. And then of course I went and did everything I could to find out about it. And then when we went to the ARD at the beginning of the school year, and at the school she had said that she was very sorry, but it was really just Tourette's. If it was Tourette's, it was the whole autism spectrum, actually. So we did then get an assessment. And they agreed with that assessment. So then we asked for another outside assessment. This time it just confirmed everything. So, I guess, in answer to your question, it's good now, but before I just — before I gained any knowledge, we were just falling through the cracks and he wasn't learning

SO, HE WAS FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS BEFORE HE WAS PROPERLY DIAGNOSED. AND THEN ONCE HE WAS PROPERLY DIAGNOSED —

I had to fight for the services. For her to — she wouldn't agree with the diagnosis. She agreed with the recommendations for services. But without the diagnosis, he wasn't going to get those services under just other health impaired and the Tourette's. So, yeah, once we did get the diagnosis pushed through, which was just this last time —

THE LAST TIME HE —

Last fall. We had assessments again last summer, and this time they accepted them.

SO BEFORE THIS ACADEMIC YEAR, IT WAS ROUGH. BUT SINCE — BEGINNING THIS SCHOOL YEAR IT'S BEEN PRETTY GOOD BECAUSE —

Yes. We have a teacher who I believe really tries to use all the AFNIC training she would use. She accepts suggestions, strategies. She asks for those, rather than just, you know, saying, well, you know, we're going to do this, and if it doesn't work, you know — and then I'd have to go and get him, last year. Sometimes almost every single day I'd have to go and get him early. And a lot of the time it was just frustration. I think a whole lot of the time it was because when he would be in class — I think his class went to 13. And there were so many kids in there with different needs and behaviors and different modifications, and it's hard to be this for this student and not be it for another student. And, you know, we still run into that, but this teacher, I think, manages it really well.

TALK ABOUT YOUR IEP meeting or ARD meeting experience prior to —

Prior to last year?

YES

In the beginning it would only be me and my husband, the principal, sometimes it would be the assistant principal, and the diagnostician, and sometimes the school psychologist. And I really didn't know what my rights were, I guess. I just trusted that, you know, they were going to tell me what to do to help my son. I think — honestly, they all just have such different input. I think even they are limited on the approach that they each need.

THEY BEING THE DIAGNOSTICIAN AND EDUCATORS?

Yes, also the IEP team.

OKAY.

And I don't see — I think they sometimes are reluctant to throw out a simple idea for — you know, that they do learn by consequences. And, you know, my son understands consequences but he couldn't — when he's that frustrated, he couldn't deal with it.

SO PRIOR TO THIS YEAR, YOUR PRIMARY DIFFERENCES OR DISAGREEMENTS IN THE MEETING REVOLVED AROUND THE PROPER DIAGNOSIS. AND THEN YOU MENTIONED DISCIPLINE. SO I GUESS —

As far as punishment, a lot was knowledge. I don't think that — I think they're often grasping for strategies and interventions to use with these children. And definitely recognize like that, because I wouldn't know what to say other than to tell them — the school counselor, she — simply, she didn't know what to do with him, because she didn't. And she was telling me, “Yeah, you know, I'm going to have to draw a line with Michael and — I'm going to have to draw a line with him.” And I thought, “You're going to draw a line with him? Yeah, that's the worst thing you can do.” So each time she would tell me something she was going to do, I knew she was setting him up to fail and setting herself up to fail also. And setting herself up for a lot of frustration. And then the whole time we just, you know, we were just continually troubleshooting and putting out fires all day, so he wasn't learning. And he's very, very smart. But it takes someone — he needed so much one-on-one. And I think that's what we were fighting for, and they were fighting for him, you know, not — they just couldn't have one teacher to one student.

HOW DO THE OTHER IEP TEAM MEMBERS AND THE EDUCATORS TAKE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS AS A PARENT? YOU KNOW, AS FAR AS YOU'RE SAYING, “WELL, THIS DOESN'T WORK. HE NEEDS ANOTHER LINE. THE AUTHORITARIAN — OR THE CONSEQUENCES, THE WAY YOU IMPLEMENT DOESN'T WORK. TRY IT THIS WAY.” HOW WAS THAT RECEIVED BY —

In the beginning it was very much that I was being unreasonable, because they would just flat point it out to me, “Are you trying to say that your son's disabilities — that could be keeping him from making the right decisions all of the time?” And then, “Are you going to say that every decision is — you know, has to do with that?” And I just told them, “Yes, it could be, because I'm not a doctor. And I don't think my doctor would sit here and say, if — you know, given all the circumstances from — you know, that if he had his favorite clothes on, whether he had what he wanted to have for lunch, whether — any little detail during the day could have added up to this frustration that caused the trouble that he was getting in, I mean, all day long. Then you would have to say this was his disability. So when it came to that and I said I'm not a doctor, I can't say, but he cannot do that all the time, because for the longest time they did try and say that he could follow the student code of conduct, but he may get the student code of conduct. If he could read it to you all day long, he could write it, he could, you know, look at it all day long but if — he couldn't — he can't follow it in the moment. When he's in crisis, he can't follow it. And I couldn't get them to understand that.

DO THEY HAVE — YOU KNOW, THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD IT. DO THEY RESPECT YOU? HOW WERE YOU TREATED OR PERCEIVED BY THE EDUCATORS?

I think unreasonable a lot of the time. His teachers generally — the teachers generally don't know what to do. They don't make much eye contact, they — you can tell they're not sure of their — you know, they won't speak up. And they follow the lead of the administration. In other words, they follow the lead of the psychiatrist. At one point, you know, our psychiatrist does — you know, I was really leaning on her. And so she was, you know, saying things like, "Yes, your son should understand that. Yes, he needs to write a letter of apology." And as far as, you know, I was trying to get him to be able to do the work on the computer. Well, they said, "No, his keyboard is too far out." That was the class he did mainstream in at that time. He was having so much trouble in, because it was just too much over stimulation from all the — that was a class that he didn't need to be in at that time. And he was having so much trouble in there, and I was thinking. They said we can't give him the services to do his work because he can't keep up. I said that's a motor skill. It's going to be not much different than handwriting. But I didn't care if he did it with two fingers because he could do that very well. But it's just, you know, one more roadblock. Everything has a roadblock for services.

YOU MENTIONED A LITTLE WHILE AGO ABOUT THE FACT THAT HE IS FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT, WITHOUT YOUR INFLUENCE, THAT HE WOULD STILL BE WHERE HE IS?

Absolutely. I know he would.

YOUR INFLUENCE IS POSITIVE?

Yes. Yes.

AND, OVERALL, DO YOU THINK THAT THE IEP PROCESS HAS BENEFITED (MY SON)?

Because of myself and the resources and the support that I've gotten, yes. Definitely.

AND THEN YOU ALSO MENTIONED THAT BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE OF SPECIAL ED LAW — THAT WAS ANOTHER QUESTION THAT I HAD THAT I BELIEVED YOU ANSWERED. THE FACT THAT — BECAUSE YOU ARE AWARE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW, THAT YOU BELIEVE THAT HAS BENEFITED HIM AS WELL?

Yes. Yeah, very much, because everything isn't always easy to understand. I mean, no one explains that to you. They hand you your booklet of procedural safeguards and so forth. But I think it can be difficult to understand. Especially when you're in progress already, and you're just overwhelmed with the information that they give you. And no one explains it to you. And I just got to the point where, you know, they would become very frustrated with the fact that the ARDs would take so long, hours and hours. And I just couldn't understand that, because if I couldn't understand what — to me, it was my right to — I mean, that was my son. If we have to stay there all night until I understood that I made sure I knew what was going to happen, I was going to do that. And I think I

was — well, I definitely was, you know, treated like, well, we're not going to stay here all night for this.

WHAT COULD SCHOOL DISTRICTS DO TO BETTER ENHANCE THE IEP PROCESS?

Let their — I think, giving everyone and their team more freedom, more knowledge, more information, because I don't believe that everyone just absolutely doesn't — would not be trustworthy to help enhance a student's career, school career. I just don't believe that they would do that. I think that they don't know exactly what they're — how much they're allowed to offer, you know, these children.

WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT IF EDUCATORS HAD MORE KNOWLEDGE, AND IF EACH EDUCATOR KNEW THEIR ROLE IN THE PROCESS?

Exactly.

OKAY.

And then also, I've had counselors ask me about training, more conferences. I mean, I know that they're — that they have to do so much training and all that, but I don't know how much they actually budget to send them to experts — to the conferences to get the knowledge to — to have strategies and interventions. I mean, especially — like at the counselor level. I think if they had more of that, then we wouldn't — it wouldn't have to go so far to bring in a psychologist.

DO YOU FIND THAT YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT IS MORE RESPONSIVE AND MORE RESPECTFUL TO YOU NOW THAT YOUR SON DOES HAVE THE PROPER DIAGNOSIS?

Now, yes.

JUST A DIFFERENT TONE, OVERALL?

Exactly. They know that I'm not going to — that I'm not afraid to call them on anything. I don't mean to be adversarial. Just get our permission and get questions or find out why. But I'll — you know, if my son is having trouble, you know, I'll camp out there until I get answers. I'll talk to whoever I have to. Before, yeah, I was treated very differently. Even to the point of, you know, if they call me at home just to see — just a few hours before an ARD to say that they cancelled your ARD. And my response is, you know, "How can you do that?" And I said, you know, My husband has taken off work, I have advocates and support that are already on their way and said, "We will see you there." And they did.

ANOTHER QUESTION I HAVE IS ABOUT ADVOCATES. YOU SAID THAT THEY TREATED YOU DIFFERENTLY WHEN AN ADVOCATE WAS PRESENT IN THE ARD MEETING?

Yes.

IN WHAT WAY?

I don't think they were maybe as intimidating as they would have been otherwise, because — well, definitely I can say this that informing them that I did have advocates coming with me of course always had a room full of people, of administration.

YOU'RE SAYING THAT THEY FEEL MORE INTIMIDATED WHEN AN ADVOCATE IS PRESENT, OR YOU FEEL LESS INTIMIDATED?

They were more respectful, I thought, when my advocate was present.

HOW ABOUT PARENTS? WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

Basically, have their own assessment.

YOU MEAN TESTING FROM AN OUTSIDE SOURCE OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT?

Yes. Yes, outside of the school district. Or finding out on their own someone that — even a doctor that may be on the district school list, but that they've researched and found out how qualified that person is to do the assessment. And then find out from — you know, get support, network with other families that are parents. And get all the information they can to help their child, because if you don't know what to ask for for your child — that's what was wrong in the beginning. I didn't know what to ask for. I didn't know what services were even available to him.

YOU WERE UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE SCHOOLS WERE GOING TO HELP YOU AND PROVIDE YOU WITH INFORMATION, AND YOU FOUND OUT THAT YOU HAD TO GET THAT INFORMATION FOR YOURSELF.

Right. Right. I found out — looked for all the resources. I looked on the Internet, I looked for support groups and how, you know — found doctors — and just calling up doctors. And I would even have doctors on the school assistant list who would tell me, you know, "We really don't do — we don't really specialize in that." And you can imagine that I was shocked and surprised that they didn't, you know, have him go there for that. It is — it is about educating yourself to — it's about — if you expect someone to do it for you, no one is going to do it for you. I mean, a parent is the best advocate for their child, because nobody else is going to do that for you. You're going to have to do

that — do all the documentation, keep track of every piece of paper that comes through your hands from the school district.

SO PARENTS CAN IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS BY BEING PROACTIVE.

Exactly.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS YOU'D LIKE TO MAKE OR ANY OTHER AREAS THAT YOU'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THAT I DIDN'T COVER?

Right now, we have best teacher we've ever had, but it's been the longest, hardest road. And he is going through the hardest years of his life.

HE'S A SEVENTH-GRADER?

Uh-huh.

AND RIGHT NOW HE'S IN A SELF-CONTAINED ROOM FOR ASPERGER'S OR HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM?

Well, it's a transition unit. And there are eight students in there. The ratio is two to eight there. They have three to eight in there right now. Really, he needs to be one-on-one. He's allowed to — you know, they'll allow him to do the things that he needs to do. He could never go in a mainstream class. But they are still pushing him, to try and make him real excited about it, but —

OH, SO HE WANTS THE MAINSTREAM?

Oh, yeah.

WHAT I FIND IS, WITH THE STUDENTS THAT I'VE HAD IN THE PAST, IS THAT THE STUDENTS WOULD PREFER THAT SELF-CONTAINED BECAUSE THAT'S THEIR LITTLE SANCTUARY. SO IT'S GOOD THAT HE DOES WANT THAT.

He does. He does. You know, that's what we're trying to teach him, is that everybody's different. Everybody's different. Basically, you know, we continue to have the same IEP year after year after year. And I think that if we could have had earlier intervention, we would have — we would have met more of those goals. Not that we haven't come a long way, but I don't think it should take that long for things to come along.

SO YOU HAVE HAD THE SAME GOALS FOR A FEW YEARS NOW?

Yes.

YOU THINK MAYBE THAT THOSE GOALS WERE MAYBE TOO UNATTAINABLE AT ONE TIME, OR DO YOU THINK THAT MAYBE FOR TEACHERS IT'S JUST A FORMALITY THAT — IT'S EASIER JUST TO QUIT. YOU KNOW, A WORK IN PROGRESS AND —

Right. Well, I think, with each teacher — I think it's different in how she works through that process with him, whatever the goal is. And, you know, whether they really work on that, whether they're able to due to the — either the ratio of a class, or the students in the class, or — I know the hardest thing for (my son) last year was it was constantly changing. They started out with like three students, and when (my son) quit, it was 13. There is continually someone coming in all the time, constant change. And they had about the same students in a class all along, and it's just good stability. You know, he knows what he is going to do, and he knows how this person will push his buttons. And really, that's been, you know, the greatest thing for him to learn. Yes so and so is going to do that, and, you know, that may be one of his goals, is engaging in someone else inappropriate behavior with them. Being able to just stay on his work, where before there was just no chance of that. The whole class would be disrupted. But I think the teacher has really been able to work with him. She also, I think, delegates to her aide very well. What's best to follow through with. I think that are always going to try to stop the IEPs. But, you know, like I said, how much are they allowed to do that because of everything that's going on in those classes all the time? There's got to be extremely difficult.

[PAUSE]

I think it's just that the more knowledge you have — that's the only way to get certain things, is to know what to ask for.

RIGHT.

In every area.

[PAUSE]

I just think that — I hope that they do put their needs and concerns — they are becoming more educated about their policies and budgets.

SO YOU THINK THAT SOMETIMES THAT POLICIES AND BUDGETS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER THE BOTTOM LINE?

I think that's always been in the forefront.

OF THE CLASSROOM TEACHERS, OR THE ADMINISTRATORS OR —

Of administration. They have to oversee. [Inaudible]

OKAY. THANK YOU.

INTERVIEW (P2)

HI, THIS IS WADE. ARE YOU READY?

Yep, I'm ready.

GOOD DEAL. AGAIN, THIS IS ON PERCEPTIONS OF THE IEP PROCESS AND ALSO JUST REMIND YOU THAT THIS CONVERSATION IS RECORDED. IT'S BEING RECORDED FOR TRANSCRIBING PURPOSES. NO ONE ELSE WILL HAVE THIS TAPE IN THE END. AFTER THE STUDY I WILL DESTROY THE TAPE. ALSO, YOUR RESPONSES WILL BE ANONOMOUS AND YOUR NAME AND LOCATION WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL. THIS IS BASICALLY JUST MAYBE ABOUT EIGHT QUESTIONS TO KIND OF EXPAND UPON THE SURVEY. THE FIRST ONE IS GOING TO BE JUST DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL DISTRICT. THAT CAN INCLUDE TEACHERS, CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS, OR THE DISTRICT SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS.

You want me just to talk about it.

SURE.

Okay. I think I have a feeling I have a descent relationship with them. I don't think they love me, but I don't think they hate me either. I've been told by an administrator that I have a good reputation in the district as someone who is good to work with. I don't always agree with everything they do, and I don't think they agree with me either, but we don't...I think we try so hard to keep it on a professional level. Even though there are disagreements, I don't think they dread me coming into the office because they know I'm not going to rant and rave and throw a temper tantrum. You know, we're going to sit down...sit down at a table and try to work it out and try to come to a mutually acceptable conclusion to whatever problem there is. So I think we have a pretty good relationship. I don't think they just say, "Oh, I just love (me) and I'm ready for her to come visit us." But I don't think they dread it either.

THERE'S A PRETTY MUCH, ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE BOARD, BASED ON THE CLASSROOM TEACHER TO THE CAMPUS ADMINISTRATOR OR PRINCIPAL, UP THROUGH THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR?

Yes. Especially in the higher level. I have to say I have had trouble with (my son's) teacher this year, to the point that I had to write a letter to the principal explaining all my issues with her. But I'll have to say she's a first year teacher who really didn't know, or really understanding what she was getting in to. However, she had no experience relating to parents. After I wrote my little letter, and we had our little falling out, I have to give her credit that she took the high road, which I didn't expect her to do. She took the high road and now we get along great. I think we're on the same page. We work well

together. But especially the higher levels, I feel I have a good relationship. But now after my little problem with her this year, I have a good relationship with her too.

AS FAR AS THE INITIAL PROBLEM WITH THE TEACHER, WOULD YOU MIND ELABORATING WHAT THE PROBLEM REVOLVED AROUND?

Well, part of it was that she was a first year teacher, and I've been doing this since....my son is only in first grade, but he's been in the school system since he was three because he was in the Early Childhood Program. So this is his fifth year in school. I know what I'm doing. This first year teacher, right out of school...she's very, very good teacher...but she had her own ideas on how things were going to go. She didn't want any input from me about my son and how things might work for him. Like sensory issues, how the classroom might be set up a little bit better to help him with his sensory problems. He had extreme behavior problems, so instead of...I'm used to the teachers being very on my side. The teacher and myself are a team working to help my son. And I felt with her, that it was me against her and that every day when I picked him up, she was just beating me up about all his bad behavior for the day. I'm like, "Duh? That's why he's in here. What do you expect?" It was like she was shocked and amazed that he had all these problems and yet he's in a self-contained behavior classroom. I mean, I didn't just put him in there for my health. He's in there because he has behavior problems. And every day I dreaded picking him up because she goes on and on and on about every single thing he did wrong all day long. No only did I feel upset, but my son was listening to her and he started having more behavior problems because he was listening to her complaining at the end of every day. So he didn't even want to go to school any more. But after...and also she tended to be pretty free with information, so I knew a whole lot about all the other kids in the class, and every one of them was Special Ed. So I felt sure that all the other parents knew a whole lot about my kid too. So it was that...it just kind of all revolved around that. It's just like a big, huge mess. I wrote a letter to the principal...it was like a five page letter...and I tried really hard to compliment the district, compliment all his past teachers, kind of gave a history of his educational experiences in the school system and then went into this issue. You know, this is my problem this year. I'm at a loss. And in the end I asked her to get him out of this class. It kind of caused a big stink. But she really came around, which really surprised me. I didn't think she had the maturity to do it, but she did. Now, she's the best teacher I could ever ask for.

GREAT. THAT'S GREAT. THE SECOND QUESTION I HAVE IS BASICALLY JUST TO DESCRIBE YOUR OVERALL IEP EXPERIENCE.

I think it's good. But I think it's good because of me. I don't say that to be conceited or anything, but before I had my son I worked in business for years and years and years in kind of a professional level. So I had lots of experience with meetings, agendas, and how to handle a controversy in the board room, and I feel like that's exactly what I'm going into every time I go to one of those meetings. I feel like I'm going to a meeting at my old company where there's no telling what's going to happen. So when I go, I don't just go to the meeting. I prepare. Every time I go I have an agenda and I have it typed up in

numbered form, #1, a,b,c, and #2, a,b,c. All the things that I want to talk about and hit on. I make copies for everybody. Sometimes I've taken copies of legal briefs that I've gotten off of wrightslaw.com. I make copies for everybody. I take a...I have a notebook that I keep this year and I have every single piece of paper that has ever come across me, organized by reports, report cards, school correspondence, IEPs, medical information, and I take that to every meeting. There's been lots of times when they wanted to see a copy of a Progress Report and nobody could find it, but I had it because I had it in my notebook. So I think it's because I go in and I kind of...I don't let them intimidate me. Its kind of intimidating. You go in there and there is 10 or 12 people sitting around a table and you're the only one on your side. So I go in and I kind of take charge. I don't think I do it in an obnoxious way. I just do it in a natural way, because that's what I'm used to doing when I use to work full time. I think they treat me differently because of that. I mean, they treat me with a lot more respect and professional attitude than I hear some of the other parents say that they treat them. And I think it's because I kind of take control. I kind of moderate and say, "Okay, what do you think about this, principal?" You know, the occupational therapist, "What do you think about this?" Or "I think this may be an issue we may want to discuss, nurse." So I'm kind of running the whole thing.

YOU MENTIONED IN YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE, AT FIRST YOU'RE WILLINGNESS TO DEAL WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN MEETINGS, BUT IT LEADS TO THE NEXT QUESTION. WHAT IMPACT HAS BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE TOWARD THE CHILD RECEIVING PROPER SPECIAL ED SERVICES?

You want to know what my knowledge is?

WHAT IMPACT HAS YOUR KNOWLEDGE IN SPECIAL ED LAW, HAD TOWARDS YOUR CHILD RECEIVING THE PROPER SERVICES?

Oh, okay. I would say a lot. I think it's not so much that I had to spout out sections and codes, but just because of the way I head up the meetings, and because I bring information, sometimes it's legal cases, or summaries of law, I think that they know that I know a lot and the things that I don't know, I know how to find out. I think they know that. And I think that goes a long way in how they deal with me and how they react to me and what they offer to me because they know that I'm going to find out what is available and what's legal and what's appropriate, if they don't offer it in the first place, I'm going to find. So we might as well see up front and get it over with. I really do. My Aunt says that even though everything is very civil between me and the school district and everyone is more than happy...you know, professional and friendly...My Aunt always says that they know I'm a force to be contended with and so there's no point in going there. You know, it's not because I go in there ranting and raving and screaming and throwing fits and making demands. It's just that they know that I know, and if I don't know, I'm going to find out. See what I mean?

RIGHT. WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER, ORIGINALLY, YOUR DIFFERENCES REVOLVED AROUND ACADEMIC AND THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID IN THE

SURVEY. AS FAR AS WHAT AGREEMENTS OR DISAGREEMENT THAT YOU HAD DURING THE IEP PROCESS, WOULD THAT ALSO INCLUDE THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM OR BEHAVIORAL ISSUES?

Probably the biggest thing that we've had disagreements about is academic, because he is in a behavior classroom, and of course they do know his history because he's been in the school district since he was three. So he's got quite a reputation that precedes him. He's really smart. The kid is smart. But he is so hard to reach because of his behavior problems. The philosophy behavior group in the administrative side, not necessarily for this school, but like for the whole school district. Their philosophy, prior to this year, was that they wanted to get all the behavior stuff taken care of and under control and out of the way, and then start academics. Well, that's not going to happen. He's bi-polar with autistic characteristics, and he's always going to have this. There might be medicines that can control it, or make it less, but it's always going to be there. And my big beef with them was that, yeah, we need to be working on the behavior side and social skills and all this stuff, but over here on this lane we need to be pushing through on academics because he's smart. He can learn if you can just give him interesting literature. He can learn. Last Spring it finally came to a head. He was in this behavior class last year for kindergarten. And he's in the same behavior class this year for first grade, but it was two different teachers. Last year was a very good teacher who was really, really nice. She was just trying to do what administration told her do, which was deal with behavior and once that's out of the way, then the academics. So he got nothing in academics last year. Not one thing. It was all behavior. They basically baby sat him. I was really getting upset because I know he can learn and I finally in an ARD last Spring, I made them write an academic IEP and include it with IEP, because he'd never had one before. It was all just behavior and social goals. I did a write-up...this was one of those deals where I did a write-up and included all the academic things that I wanted him to cover and included some legal papers that proved that you've got to work on academics at the same time. You got to work on academics. I had a paragraph at the beginning stating something to the effect of "my son has a neuro-biological disorder that cases him to have severe behavior problems. You just need to work on academics at the same time that you're working on the social skills and behavior problems. It's like dealing with the Autistic kid...it's always going to be Autistic. You will never make the Autism go away, so you have to work on the Autism problem and the academic at the same time, and that's the way I want you to treat my son. I want you to work on the behavior problems, which have some Autistic characteristic, as well as the bi-polar, and I want you to work on the academics at the same time." I told them that I receive this on the IEP and included that paragraph in the write-up of the ARD meeting and IEP. And they did it.

SO I GUESS BASICALLY TO SUMMARIZE UP TO THIS POINT, THE IMPACT AT THE IEP PROCESS IS ON YOUR NOTIFICATION WITH YOUR INVOLVEMENT THAT HAS IMPACTED THE IEP PROCESS IN A POSITIVE WAY?

Yeah, I think it has. Not so much on the academic side, you know, I just told you that. Although this year, academics has been great because of this teacher. She's really good.

But I think it's been really good for me, services wise. You know, anything that I've asked for or we've discussed as an issue that has to do with his behavior problems or his sensory problems or his motor problems, they have been really good in the ARD meetings to either accept whatever suggestions I make. Like maybe he needs a...he has an auditory processing disorder, so we were talking about...or asked if he could get those headphones, you know, that help clean out the noise. No problem, no problem, you know. They brought them right in. Or like at the ARD that's coming up in two weeks, we're already kind of discussing his fine motor problems. So we're already discussing getting him some type of...what do you call them – assertive writing things like the keyboard or auditory commands that makes the computer work. And they are like “no problem, that's great. We'll put it in the IEP.” It's been good because they never give me any trouble about putting things in and always agreeing. Everybody knows what has to be done.

THAT'S PRETTY GOOD. YOU MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY THAT QUOTE, “YOU THINK THAT ARD MEETINGS AND IEP DEVELOPMENT IS SORT OF A CHESS GAME.” CAN YOU ELABORATE MORE BY WHAT YOU MEAN BY A CHESS GAME?

I was kind of thinking when I was writing it. This is going to sound stupid, but do you ever read the review or watch movies that have Pierce Bronson in it. He always plays a...lots of times he either plays either a criminal that's very sophisticated. Or he plays like Bond or 007. He's very even keel, he never loses his cool, you know, there's always an agenda. You decide whether he's a good guy or a bad guy and there's an agenda, and it's who can one up the other one in the most professional way. And that's the way I kind of feel in those ARD meetings. It's like a chess game. If they make a move, then I've got to figure out what their strategy is and what they're thinking. And the whole time we're all smiling at each other and shaking our heads. We're being real professional with each other, but I have to think “What are they doing and why are they doing that, and what are they thinking.” Then I make my move and I'm sure they're doing the same thing. They're like, okay, “What's she thinking, why is she doing that, what do you think she's going to do next?” And then they do their move and then I do mine. I really feel like it's like a chess game. It's a challenge to keep up with...I know there is so much that goes on behind the school and what goes on in those ARD meetings. I know they have staff meetings about my son all the time. You know, that I'm not included in. So I know that there is an agenda that they should probably share with me. I have to figure out what it is.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT CAN A SCHOOL DISTRICT DO...WHETHER IT'S TEACHERS OR ADMINISTRATORS....TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

What did I write down?

YOU WROTE DOWN CONTROVERSIAL AND BEING PRESENT, I DON'T HAVE ANY RECOMMENDATIONS.

That's what I thought I wrote. I really don't know what could be done to make it better because the thing that I think could make it better really wouldn't affect me because I think I know how to play the game. But I know a lot of parents, other parents don't understand the game and they are very intimidated when they go in there and they pretty much do whatever they are told to do. They don't realize how much choice they have or how much power they have. So I guess the recommendation for me would be that if there is any way that other parents could be educated in what their rights are and how to handle themselves in these meeting, then it would make their IEP better, as well as my IEP.

IT'S A DIFFERENT QUESTION, BUT I GUESS THE NEXT QUESTION, AS FAR AS WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS. I GUESS IT KIND OF REVOLVES AROUND THE CHESS GAME ANALOGY LIKE WHAT YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT. AS FAR AS THE PARENT BEING PREPARED AND NOT LOSING HIS OR HER COOL. ALRIGHT. DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER THOUGHTS OR COMMENTS THAT YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE OR THAT YOU DON'T THINK I'VE ASKED OR COVERED?

I can't really think of anything. I mean, my big thing with IEP is that I just wish other parents knew how many resources are available to them and how much power they have, because I don't think they do. I think they are really intimidating, and intimidated in the process and their kids just don't get a fair shake. I wish that could be different.

INTERVIEW (P3)

DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL DISTRICT (FROM CLASSROOM TEACHER, TO PRINCIPAL, ON UP TO SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS).

I can't say it is good or bad. I guess that I would have to say it is bad if I had to pick if I had to pick just one. But there are some people in the school district that I really like and I get along with great and there are some that I wish were not there. For the last couple of years, he had pretty much the same people on his ARD committee, but now we have new people because we are at a new school – we are at a middle school. So I was used to certain people who I felt had his best interest at times and now its totally different. So, I'm having quite a time with the people now, the administrators, the teachers. But some good, some bad.

The school psychologist, I think has been the biggest problem this year. We don't have a good relationship. I feel that she does not know my son at all to be making recommendations for him.

REVOLVING AROUND THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST, WHAT DO THE DISAGREEMENTS REVOLVE AROUND?

From the beginning, she just said things like their fact. Like “when he said that, he meant this, and that was intentional.” And the first couple of months, I was upset because she had never even met him. Everything was based on teacher perception or how other teachers translated to her. And she came up with her conclusion or what ever. And at the ARD, she was the one who was calling all the shots. It used to be more so the principal – what ever she agreed with, but now it's that psychologist. So finally, after I made enough comments, she actually met him. And I don't know if that changed her opinion of anything or not – or if it was just to kind of apiece me, or she had too or whatever. But I don't think that she fully gets him like the psychologist who he had in the past. I don't know what kind of understanding she has towards his particular disability. I feel like that I know more about it than she does. She and I do not get along and she is the kind of person who just blames me basically for all of these problems- and I don't think that it helps my son.

DESCRIBE YOUR OVERALL IEP EXPERIENCE.

Well before – people on IEP committees, it seems like that everyone would come up with very good ideas, when you leave there and when you leave there. But if it's the teacher who didn't do what they were supposed to do, then you can come up with these good ideas, but then if the teacher doesn't do them, then that is very frustrating when that kind of carried over into this year. Although, now it's kind of the opposite in that teachers do more what they are supposed to do. But its very adversarial. When I have the AFNIC representatives there, it's a little less so – towards me anyway because I don't have to talk. It is not pleasant by any means.

HOW ARE YOU TREATED OR PERCEIVED BY OTHER IEP MEMBERS?

They treat me like a bad parent. Um I hate to say this on tape, but they treat me like some kind of a trailer park whore who is trying to pawn their kid off. They say like, “what do you let him watch”? They always accuse me of letting him watch R rated movies, which I don’t. We don’t have cable, he doesn’t get on the computer, but in their minds, I just let him run wild to do whatever. So I feel like I’m always having to battle that, with some of them. Like the principal, he said “quit sticking up for him.” That’s his attitude. But one of his teachers, I think that she realizes that that is not the case. In that past, I really didn’t have to battle that. I don’t know where they are getting this perception from. So – they’re good teachers so he must have gotten that from me. So that makes it very difficult. I think they don’t like me or they just think, oh she is just a poor single mother, she can’t afford a lawyer – we are just going to do whatever.

SO YOU SAY YOU ARE NOT TREATED WELL WHEN YOU ARE BY YOURSELF, BUT WHEN YOU HAVE AN AFNIC REPRESENTATIVE PRESENT, YOU ARE TREATED IN A MORE POSITIVE LIGHT?

Oh, definitely. Yea, Yea.

HOW ARE THE AFNIC REPRESENTATIVES TREATED AND PERCEIVED BY EDUCATORS? IS IT A FAKE POSITIVE OR ARE THEY SINCERE?

Some of them I think they are, but I think that they are a little defensive. Like “we know what we are doing. We don’t need you to tell us how to handle a kid with this disability”. We have offered many times for them to go to the training – (My advocate) would go to the school and do it – it still hasn’t happened. Because they say we have our own trainers.

EDUCATORS LOOK AT THE REPRESENTATIVE AS MORE OF A “WATCHDOG” RATHER THAN AN ADVOCATE?

Yeah. Its gotten better because they are a little more used to having them there. But the first time, about 4 or 5 of them would call me – “what is this guy going to talk about”. They asked if this was legal and wanting to know if they should bring their lawyers. But once (my advocate) talked and they saw what it was that he really had in mind, what he really wanted to talk about, they tried to change their tune a little bit.

WHAT IMPACT HAS THE IEP PROCESS HAD ON YOUR CHILD?

In some ways, it has helped him a little bit. But I think that it has hurt him more because of them putting him in the transition unit – they took him out of general ed., and put him in the transition unit. They didn’t know what else to do, and that was his total downfall. He became suicidal in there.

SO YOU ARE AGAINST THIS PLACEMENT?

What he is in now – I disagreed with that, they wouldn't even let me have my 10 day recess. We know it's the law, but we are not doing it.

The transition unit is for kids are violent, or emotionally disturbed. They didn't understand what the deal was, and they didn't know what else to do so they put him in that. So, they didn't listen to me, they put him in there anyway. He ended up in a psychiatric ward. That itself made me not trust them. I don't feel that they do what is the best for my kid. They need to protect the normal kids from my kid – that's how they look at it. So they say "let's get him out of here".

SO YOU THINK THAT THE IEP PROCESS IS LESS BENEFICIAL?

Yes.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE IEP PROCESS (MORE POSITIVE WHEN ADVOCATE PRESENT).

Yes. I try to be involved in it. I don't just say "what do you want to do"? I have come up with ideas. They're defensive and so am I. I have brought up, you have scheduled him to do this, but you didn't do that and stuff like that. So, that makes them mad, that makes them defensive. But they don't, I don't feel like that they are honest - what is available to the kid. They will offer you some little thing, but then you find out later that I could have gotten an aid or ... They don't want you to know everything.

HAS BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW HELPED YOUR SON TO RECEIVE PROPER SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

Yes.

WHAT CAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

They need to give parents more information in advance – not just check some boxes, you need to know what is going to be covered when you get there. No, not I think they are there to talk about what is going to happen to (my son) next year regarding transition, but they have it all figured out before you get there, which I don't think is right. Having some ideas, yea – but don't have it all... and it's a done deal that everyone is going to agree with – the administrators, the psychologist, who ever is in charge. And they could also like take a vote because it's a committee. Just because one person in charge says that that's the way its going to be, it is assumed that everyone else in the room agrees. But, no one has ever said, at least to any ARD that I have been to has stood up and said, "o.k., how many of you think that manifestation of his disability"?

SO YOU THINK THAT EVERYTHING IS PREDETERMINED BEFORE YOU WALK INTO A MEETING?

Yes. Because half of those boxes are already checked and filled out – on mine anyway. Its all just cut and paste. And they need to tell you that just because something was in there before, the next time you go to an ARD and you didn't talk about it – this is a mistake that I made, I thought that it just pretty much carried over. And anything you talked about just changed certain things. No, but that was last year. Does that mean that that just went away? How many hours of whatever? Parents wouldn't be so defensive if the school was more honest or forthcoming about information. Understanding about the initial about everything and that we don't know what their talk about...

SO, IF THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS WERE MORE HONEST AND FORTHCOMING THAT WOULD IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS FROM THEIR END?

Yes.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

Bring a lawyer with them. Or, make sure that you can read everything humanly possible before you go there and start talking to them. And it's a hard thing to avoid. I get too emotional because the whole thing is so negative. I have a horrible kid and I'm horrible and its 10 of them against me. I don't know what they can really do to change that, but I'm sure that I am not the only one who comes out of every meeting crying.

If they would have some kind of class for the parent about the IEP. Once or twice a year if you have a kid in special education to explain it to you – how the whole process works and if what you are agreeing too – the long term effect of that. I was under the impression of that. I was under the impression that my kid was going to be in TU for 6 weeks and then all of the sudden I find out that he is going to be in there for 2 years and there is nothing that I can do about it. They need to make sure – they say at the end do you understand, da, da, da,...

ANY OTHER COMMENTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

The relationship with the school district is important, but they are not going to do what they don't want to do no matter how much they like you. I think you could make it better if you had a good relationship. I think that it is about the money, on their end. They try not to spend to much on your kid. Unless school districts really want to try to spend money on the right things instead of wasting a bunch of money on the football field grass or whatever. That is the only thing that I can say is that they be honest or be willing to spend the money, or let them send your kid to attend a private school.

WORKSHOPS FOR PARENTS WOULD IMPROVE THE PROCESS?

Yes. First of all the parents would learn, and second it would give parents the impression that the schools will actually want them to understand the process. Because I never really got the feeling that they really wanted me to understand at all. Before, they can have an

assembly. And maybe they can explain to the kid about other types of disabilities. The school psychologist thought that it was a good idea, but they said no.

They need to bend the rules a little bit more. If it's about the kid, then they should be a little more accommodating and accountable. We are definitely put under the microscope as the parent. That's my opinion on what can be done – it will never happen unfortunately.

My sister-in-law is a special education teacher in the district that my son attends and I talk to her a lot – and I do hear the other side of the story. So, I am not just thinking their bad, their wrong, whatever. But I think that there are simple, better ways to help kids if you really want too than the way they are doing it. And don't tell the parents how much money you are making them spend – that may be illegal, I don't know, but “we spent \$40,000 to get that class for your kid”. Spend \$13,000 to let him go to a private school that I want him to go to. I'm o.k. to that. If they can explain the reason why the kid did certain things, and not just all policy – that would be better too.

And don't arrest kids for their disability. Police should not do the discipline that the schools are supposed to do.

HOW MANY TIMES HAS THIS HAPPENED WITH YOUR SON?

Just once, but we haven't gone to court for it yet. In my mind it was ridiculous. It was not a violent outburst or anything – he just cursed. If they could manage his disability, then they wouldn't need the police. If they can't manage his disability then he should be in a place that can, and not jail.

Once you get the parent to distrust you, its really hard ever to get it back – I think, unless its just me. It's an us against them kind of thing. And I have to send my kid there every day.

INTERVIEW (P4)

DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATORS.

The aids are doing really well. You know most of the aids. Most of the aids that (my son) has fall in love with him. So sweet and so kind and want to work with him. There strangled by what is the next step up, which is the teachers and diagnosticians. Teachers want to do what is right but are held back by what I think by the principal. (Previous school) was amazing (teacher wanted to help). But in general, that's it. It's funny. The people who have less to do with his actual education are the ones who are being so much more formable and rigid with what happens to (my son). They are covering ass as far as IEP goes. I would rather do away with the IEP and Lets do what we need to do. But we can't do it anymore. It's adversarial and so legal.

SO, THE TEACHERS, EDUCATORS, AND AIDS WHO SEE HIM EVERYDAY ARE MUCH MORE EMPATHETIC?

I think that it is proportionate to the lower down of the food chain. From the aids, to the teachers, the administrators, and the principals. The further down you go, the more willing they are to help, the more knowledgeable they are of (my son's) needs. The further away you get from (my son), the further the strangle hold, the further the rigidity,

DO YOU EVER WITNESS DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN THE TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATORS DURING IEP MEETINGS?

No. Are you kidding? The teacher wouldn't be there. That principal rules the roost. But there is, there are disagreements. There are disagreements, but they are not heard in the room. They are along the same lines. Most of the parents feel that because the aids are with our children most of the time, the aids need to be involved in the IEP process. But they are not. They are not able to attend. They are not involved with the child's IEP team. But they are with (my son) most of the day. The resource teacher is there, but not the paraprofessional, the aid. And I've seen that the teachers want to do more. Like when I first came out to (son's current school). They have said come on out with your ideas. Come on out with your ideas. What do you think of this? We're doing this and this. Then all of the sudden the next day when I heard that the aid got in trouble. I walk in there and they said o.k. lets get busy. She shut me off. She did not say good morning or nothing. And I said o.k., here we go. Teachers went through the lesson plans with (my son) and gave him check marks, and I said he has nothing to this. He was in the room. He was quiet and you gave him credit for knowing it. And you ask him right now and doesn't know what the heck that you are saying. We were told that basically, we have to cover our job, we have certain responsibilities and talking to you is not one of them. The parents are basically shut out from talking to the aids.

TALK ABOUT YOUR OVERALL IEP EXPERIENCE.

I think very adversarial. Um, if the parent goes into the meeting and probably doesn't know about the IDEA rules or any of the education that the ARC puts out or anything like that or just talking to the families the school districts would just run all over them. The parent wouldn't know and you would think that they would better help someone and they make you think that they are doing what is right for the child when really they are doing what is right and well for them (school) as a principal or what is good for the school district. What keeps them special education. What keeps them money. That whole thing what is good for them and not what is good for the child. If the parent didn't know the rules and become educated, they would just be lost.

I don't want to have an adversarial relationship. It's a lose or lose to me. You fight all these wars meantime he falls further back behind and it's sad. No, the root cause is his deficiencies. What we need is what can fix those, address those. I don't want to hear anymore about funding. That's not it. They start talking about funding and I say No, Its not a funding issue, it's an allocation issue. How much did your administrator make last year. You know. I have a couple of MBA's behind me so I definitely know the issue of who makes the most money and who is most important and who makes the least money. I'm inches away from going to the board and saying I want to see the budget. It's public domain.

Several of the families went to a meeting with (school district superintendent). Then we came back to another meeting with him and some of the administrators, principals, and teachers. There were nine families. That didn't seem to go anywhere. They came back and brought attorneys. And we as a group offered to not to talk to the attorneys because either they were trying to hide something or they were trying to pry something out of us to help their case so we opted to not even talk to the attorneys. Of course nothing ever happened. We went to the school board after that in the open meeting and had our say and nothing came out of that. But we are having meetings with (special education director) and supposedly something will happen but we will hound her until she will get us a couple of things.

Meanwhile, property taxes in this area have gone up 10 to 15% to help with the school funding. I would like to see how much of that goes into administrators pockets. So I want to find out. If it goes into their pockets, boy am I going to scream.

THE PRIMARY DISAGREEMENT PERTAINING TO THE IEP PROCESS REVOLVES AROUND SERVICES, RIGHT?

When it comes to (my son's) needs, to have a one-on-one person to do more of sitting in a desk and do ABA behavioral science stuff. like I have been doing for the past 2.5 years and he is really excelling To take him out and facilitate interaction in P.E. and meet another kid. Well we don't have anyone trained in that. Well get it. Yet, I have even volunteered my time. No, no we don't want to get parents involved. It more now we don't have the funding to get another aid for one-on-one.

HOW ARE YOU TREATED OR PERCEIVED BY IEP TEAM MEMBERS?

Very adversarial.

But I do think that services are very limited. At (my son's current school), that a lot of the parents are upset about . Sensory room, (my son) got to go two days out of the week, which for (my son) is not that big of a deal but for some of the children, they kind of need that sensory on a daily basis.

HAS YOUR IMPACT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

It's not going anywhere. Yea, well hear you gripe, yada yada, and that's it. I think that (the Special Education Director) means well. She shows concern, but I think that the system might be a tad bit bureaucratic and I think or but I can't prove it but I think that you have a few fingers on checking accounts.

And I also think that Texas seems to be lower when it comes to special education. California is one of the top states in helping their children, and Texas is low, so that probably has something to do with it. They probably put more emphasis on sports rather than in other areas.

HAS THE IEP PROCESS BENEFITED YOUR CHILD?

I think that it has benefited, but you have to fight for different things. Compromise. If you fight its so much aggravation. I came back after 2 years and this is bogus. He is doing the stuff he did 2 years ago. We've had a lot of testing involved. My ass you have had a lot of testing involved. You haven't been keeping up with the curve. My kid is behind, but you are not even keeping up with the chronological curve. And they could not understand that actually. So the IEP doesn't help. You know, you can get them in there and thing is its so foolish of an environment for (my son). Some days he has good days, bad days what ever. The IEP says this. We can't change it unless we have an ARD. We have an ARD, we do that to have a change again, Other than (son's previous school) there has never been a fluid type deal. They had to call me at the (son's current school) to get him back in line. They had to call me up there a couple of times. I would look at him and talk to him and that was it. Some days it wouldn't work, but at least they were calling me to come up and say that your son is not doing to well. And it started getting better. But that is a fluid environment. You can't put that in an IEP. It's too regimented. It's not flexible enough.

Everyone has to be present. He has 14 people involved in his last one. And to get them all to stay at a meeting what so much interrupted. So in so had to fill in for so and so, and they leave and so and so can't be here. His meetings can last 3 hours. It's difficult. It's hard to keep people around for that long.

DO YOU NOTICE A DIFFERENCE WHEN AN ADVOCATE IS IN THE IEP MEETING?

Yes, well the first time I went in there without anybody it was like I got ran over by a train. What just happened? Then the next time, I got Advocacy Incorporated involved and she helped a little bit, but did not say much. But she was at least helpful because there was somebody there who did chime in and would say this is not right. We have to do it this way or whatever. We had a problem with a teacher

The next time, we all went. Seemed to be more of a group effort although did feel adversarial at times. (My advocate) would not paint the color just red and what I was doing was apparently over the mark, but I was making an extreme point. They were listening. They were trying to pick up certain things on the minutes. They were trying their best to knock it down. I don't believe in the system. I don't know if I will ever go back, and I don't know if my son will ever go back.

HAS BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW HELPED?

I went to the first few by myself back when I was in California, and I got into the IDEA, and those folks weren't as adversarial as these folks are (Texas). It's to the point now to where if you really want to get something done, you have to get (my advocate) or better. There is no way. There is so much to it. Its like an accountant. You can do your taxes, but you can pay someone to do it. The amount that they know of. I would highly encourage it. That is the only way to go.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Go into it with a nice attitude. A win-win idea. But if it is ever so French, take a break and have your advocate say take a break and let's go outside and we need to go back in and say if they turn the ballgame around what's a better way to say it squeeze their gonads because. Its your child that you are fighting for, but unfortunately you fight for them and you put up such a bad rep, and they don't like us so much and as that does not a reflection on (my son).

IS IEP PROCESS MORE OF A FORMALITY?

They get their stuff down and they have their goals and objectives down, and I say o.k., I want to see it every 2 weeks. and what's he doing with the homework that he has brought home. I want to know the work. When you send home this packet of work, which goals does this apply too? Here are their goals. Well you are doing all of this work. Where does it apply? How do you measure whether or not you have achieved their goals. Beth and I got so fed up with it. You guys are so clueless. It's a formality, but if a parent was to say goals and objectives great. Where does it relate to, how does it relate to, which goal, and every two weeks give me a progress report. I want to know what can we do at home to catch up? You do your thing and we want to do more. And then he

would say what ever could be done at school, they could finish. No, no. So, I can't say anything good about it.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS BESIDES BEING AN ADVOCATE AND BEING PERSISTENT?

Be involved with other parents. That doesn't get anywhere. More parents become administrators. More pissed off parents like us get to change. School boards, school teachers, we need to infiltrate the system. We need to get in there and say your right this is bogus.

WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

I think that the educators are fine. I think that it's the laws. I think that every educator that I have seen want to help. The teachers who are directly involved those folks defiantly want to do things. Not the principal. But they are bound and are told. We have to get this work done. There is no fading. You don't have time to ask Scott and have him wait 5 seconds. Don't have the luxury of time. That's why if we go into the next ARD, I'm going to say this is what I want. I want a one-on-one aid. I want to have this stuff worked on, take him to a little P.E. I think when you start to get above the teachers level, it's bureaucracy. It's holding back.

She (special education director) is in denial about her principal. You can't touch the principal. And there is nothing that you can do to get a principal out if they are bad, and that's sad.

I think that the school system and the district is so backed up that it needs to go back to the olden days when it's the responsibility of the parent takes the responsibility to raise the child. I don't think that there is a way to correct it. I think of myself as a reasonable and intelligent guy. But you are at a point punt and start over. I think they need too.

ARE THERE OTHER FACTORS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

Seems adversarial before getting in the door. Seemed very set up.

The whole IEP thing is gotten to bureaucratic, that time goes by while the child suffers. It needs to be more flexible. The parents want to help. You are under-funded. But they are pushed away all the time. You drop off your child and you need to leave. Accommodations. I guess that is the word. It needs to be more accommodating and genuine. It can't be adversarial. Trust.

Can it be a little bit more vague.

INTERVIEW (P5)

TALK ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL DISTRICT RANGING FROM HIS CLASSROOM TEACHER TO SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS.

I have a good relationship with a new teacher – this year. Very contradictory, I will get notes on how wonderful we are doing on a field trip and then the next day everything is so great and wonderful. Then I'll get a formal letter on Friday that says that he stomped on her foot – you know like she is writing an incident report. So, a little contradictory in how well is his behavior.

So mostly I communicate with a male aid in that classroom and I feel like that I do the best communication with him. I have had very unfortunate problems with the principal on campus for the last three years. And he came from a regular education background, and we had previously always had principals with degrees in special education prior to that. Had a real hard time getting services or staying in a special education center and since this new principal has come on campus we don't have a self-contained center anymore for self-contained students. And it had been a fabulous self-contained center with 100 severe, self-contained students with daily living, showers, and therapy rooms. So more of that has been turned into an early childhood center.

YOU MENTION THAT YOU HAVE A PRETTY GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CLASSROOM AID. HOW LONG HAVE YOU KNOWN THIS INDIVIDUAL?

He has been our para-professional for the past 4 years. So we have had him longer than any other teacher. My last 2 really good experience with teachers have left the district with bad feelings. And my last one was 3 hours short of her PhD in special education - fabulous. She left the state for New Mexico – for better work.

Administration – Two years ago (my son) was abused in school and that is kind of where our negative stuff began. Our teacher quit her job three days before school started and got a new teacher through alternative certification who did not have a degree in education. And we were concerned at the time because we felt like that we needed somebody more familiar with our disability. And that is when we started noticing injuries on (my son) and we started going to the doctor and to the point to where we thought that both of his hands were broken – they were real swollen – that is when the doctor had to say “we need to talk”.

WERE THE INJURIES DUE TO PEERS?

Teachers - teacher restraints. We don't know what happened to his hands. Other than that, he had finger mark brushes under the arms. Big finger mark brushes at the elbows, around the neck from forced eye contact, big thumb mark brushes bilaterally on his thighs from where he was held down. And forced to do sit ups. (My son) is non-verbal, very low functioning, and not coordinated enough to exercise. His IEP was to climb up a

small ladder to slide down a slide and pull a wagon. So, that was just kind of a bad year for us. And then once we got downtown to administration, the principal came to our house the night we witnessed the injuries and our Region 9 came – and they were both very upset. And called a meeting the next day it turned from potential child abuse to an exercise program that we had no idea was going on. And as time went on, there were 2 other children out of the 4 that had injuries. And CPS did rule that all injuries happened to my son during the school day. We never knew what happened, but we went all the way to the Level 3 complaint process with attorneys and the school board.

DESCRIBE YOU OVERALL IEP MEETING EXPERIENCE.

Our IEPs are very different. I have been in (my son's previous district) and in a different school district and in those processes we would all go in and sit around a big table – and write out (my son's) goals, and all decide what was the best plan of action for (my son).

Now I noticed since we moved to (my son's current school district) 9 years ago we walk into a meeting with a stack of papers already completed – and they read it and we are asked to sign it. So, all of the decisions have been made without parental input. So, the last year I do ask the teacher for her written goals, the OT, the PT, and the speech. I want all of the written goals 10 days prior to the ARD so that I can look at them and provide feedback. So, you know if I disagree or want them to work on a different area. But they don't do that for other people.

WHEN YOU REQUEST THIS SERVICE, IS THE SCHOOL DISTRICT RELUCTANT TO DO THIS?

Very much so, and one thing that I noticed within the last 2 years which is almost comical is that instead of saying “group therapy for 15 minutes Monday through Friday and then a 30 minute session on Monday and Wednesday private”, they will say “997 minutes per school year”. And I said “No, No, No, No. You keep it in the same language” – and I don't want to get carried in the minutes. What I want is the therapy. I have really, really pushed for some assistive technology and I get no where with that. I have really, really begged for community based instruction on a daily basis because we are a teenager now, and we are looking for a group home in the next few years – and I've given it once every thirty to sixty days, and I have been having meetings with our administrator in special education because they do have vans – and I would like for (my son) to go to the barber shop one day, to the grocery store, out in the community for about an hour or hour and a half a day. And I think that with 3 adults and 4 boys, we can do that. I don't think that that is asking for a lot. Daily living skills, transition, and getting out in the community – transition, big time.

WHAT DO YOUR PRIMARY DISAGREEMENTS IN THE IEP PROCESS REVOLVE AROUND?

To be honest with you, our IEPs are on paper only. And the only reason I get what I get in my IEPs is because I go up and monitor what is going on because there is no check list

in (my son's current school district). Now, I did have one teacher who would let me know on a monthly basis that she was addressing the IEP goals – such as dressing and buttoning, and she would keep a check list to let me know that she was actually working on skills that were needed and they don't do that. In fact, in our bad year – this was a ridiculous amount of 46 goals and not one bit of progress. Not one of them had ever been addressed. The teacher had come in and gone through this physical education exercise and decided that all of our kids were overweight and they needed to lose weight, and stop eating so much and exercise. None of us had that in our IEP. And we had no idea because our kids don't talk. So our IEPs are really in paperwork only.

ARD MEETINGS?

(My advocate) was in our last ARD and they were trying to make us leave school and it was written in the minutes that they would look into assistive technology – they have never done it. When I walked out of an ARD, the brochure (assistive technology) that we left them was still left on the table so I did that notification and that evaluation myself on my own privately. You know its part of the ARD, it is in the paperwork, it is on the recording, its written in the minutes but its just never done. They just seem so unfamiliar with the ARD process. They don't realize how important the ARD process is and that you really have to do what is written on those papers.

It's a meeting (ARD process) that they have to have, but really a lot of it is never carried through.

HOW ARE YOU TREATED AND PERCEIVED IN THE IEP MEETING?

Now I feel like with the exception of the principal – we are so bad, our Director of Special Education and the Superintendent of our school district attend our ARD meetings – and sometimes our pediatrician. So, all before it was excellent – it sometimes might be very pretentious, put on, but I don't feel at all intimidated. And I do tell them repeatedly, I have been in two other school districts and I have never have I been told no until I came here – and I am constantly told no because of money. “We don't have the money for special integration training for our occupational therapist”. “We don't have the money to do that”. And I have always learned that that is not an excuse that you are supposed to use.

WHAT IMPACT HAS THE IEP PROCESS HAD ON YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION?

I think it has been positive because at least they know what we are looking for with Philip. I think that if we did not go through the ARD process and we did not say “I want to get my son out of rehab clothing. I want him to get past and wear cute modern clothes, and to be able to get him into a group home, and learn how to make nachos in a microwave. I think they would be doing baby sitting all day long. Would be greatly reduced because everybody that I know has like none. And we really fight for that student coaching and that PT. We need it.

HOW HAS BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW HAD ON YOUR SON RECEIVING PROPER SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

It has taken an attorney and 7 years to get (my son) extended year services. We now never miss more than 2 weeks of school throughout the year. And we go year round – and this year they would let us go from 8:00 to 10:00 in the morning, but I said “no”, so now we go in the summer time from 8:00 in the morning to 2:00 in the afternoon. And this last summer was the first summer that we were able to get the therapy. And for years it was just (my son) – they would just send him to school, and now we have a program of about 7 kids that are doing extended year services.

Home training has been impossible to get and I have finally gotten home training, but it has just been a headache. They don't seem very experienced in how to come in, and I'm sure that they are a little intimidated – we have been very nice over the abuse issue. I mean extremely nice, I feel. They seem very uncomfortable and we like them to come into our home and work with (my son) and we really need some leisure activities at home. That is an area that we can really work on in this district is In-Home Training. I would say because of knowledge, because of (two psychologist outside the school district) and Autism Research International – I don't know what I would have done. Because I would have never known what are legal rights were because the school district has never told me.

BESIDES IN-HOME TRAINING, WHAT OTHER MEASURES CAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS TAKE TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

From previously MHMR, (current school district and local State hospital) – they were all one thing, they all worked together. And I think if everybody would work together and was involved – I don't know what you call them, organizations. I could never work as a nurse on weekdays because I don't have day care for (my son). You do get an after care program through the public school system through grade 6, but our kids are beyond that age so we can't work.- because there is nothing other than paying a nurse. Here, our teachers are not involved beyond the school day, nor are they members of any of these organizations. We are replacing all of the great special education teachers with alternative certification – you know with degrees in business. I think with non-verbal, vulnerable kids – I mean I have seen a huge difference in that transition – not having people trained in special education from the principals down. Even our administrator from special education here does not have a degree in special education.

DO YOU THINK THAT YOU HAVE THE BEST RAPPORT WITH THE CLASSROOM AID BECAUSE HE HAS THE MOST EXPERIENCE?

I just got back from the ARC State Convention and they told us that the most important thing we can do to improve the ARD process is to include para-professionals in the ARD process because they are unaware of what is all involved. They are unaware of all that. So we have requested that our para-professionals – or at least one of them come to our ARD, and it was declined. And our teacher told us that that offended her. I don't think

that this needs to be a defensive statement. These are people who are hands-on, that are wiping my child's bottom. They need to know what the IEP is about because they are working with my son too. I think that that would be a huge move. I would be glad to go and sit in a classroom and substitute so that they can go to those. I have been doing that for my daughter for years in regular education classrooms, so that her teachers can go on doctors appointments or what have you. But they say that I can't do that for confidentiality.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

Not be defensive, be open-minded. I took (my advocate) to my last ARD and it was beautiful – instead of a 4 hour ARD it was only 35 minutes.

DO YOU THINK THAT HAVING AN ADVOCATE MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

They feel threatened by the presence of an advocate. It depends on the advocate. Advocacy Incorporated has been to many ARDs and they don't have anybody that is any good. They didn't seem real knowledgeable about the law. AFNIC has been very knowledgeable about legal rights.

I think that they are very threatened (advocate presence) and we have a pool of more educated mothers now and we are all going to the ARDS together.

ARE YOU TREATED IN A MORE POSITIVE LIGHT WHEN YOU HAVE AN ADVOCATE PRESENT?

Yes, the language tone and the responses are not immediately no – and just the tone and the demeanor is much more friendly. And we do begin our ARD with thanking everybody present. And we do have a hard time getting people present. Because I have been to ARDs with only three people there – and I want my teacher, I want my principal, and I want my therapists. I don't consider that an ARD without their input. I know it is an inconvenience, but I think that it is so important that all of those people be there. And I think it is important that we don't go to these 3 year ARDs – I just can not imagine because we are changing so much. I have never had just one ARD per year. I like to have my goals quick and obtainable – then I like to have another ARD to work on other areas. Because we just have the generalized goals that we can never reach – and I like obtainable goals that we can master, then I like to move on to something else.

ARE THERE ANY OTHER THOUGHTS OR COMMENTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

We are having, it is supposed to be monthly, we have a group of 21 parents who is meeting with the administrator of special education. Our main concern is severely handicapped children kept in portable buildings outside of main schools with no supervision – nonverbal kids and I thought that that was a big no, no.

I want my special education center back. I'm going to be honest. That school was built on private donations for autistic children – children like my son. Two way mirrors, equipment, occupational therapy rooms with equipment, a private gym where they can all learn to ride their adaptive bicycles, a daily living center with a longer room, a kitchen and a den that has been turned into a teachers lounge this year. That breaks my heart. They had showers. They had bathrooms where they could learn bathing skills. That's a big one in preparing for group homes to learn how to dry ourselves, shave and learn to put on deodorant. Its stuff like that that is going to qualify (my son) for a nice private home.

Also, work skills. I want my son at Pizza Hut taping coupons on a box. I want him at Garden Depot. And they don't tend to start that until they are 16 or 17 and that is just not enough time to learn job skills.

So, we are really working hard on a good relationship, and I think that we are making little bits of progress.

INTERVIEW (P6)

DISCUSS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL DISTRICT RANGING FROM THE CLASSROOM TEACHER UP TO THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS.

CLASSROOM TEACHER

The current one, actually fabulous. We transferred him to his home school. She goes above and beyond in what I require from her as far as meeting his needs, doing what I want. Doing what the IEP says, and she really goes out of her way to thoroughly do it, and I can tell that she must have done this before because she kind of has done some things on her own, which I don't really have to tell her to do, which I am used to telling everyone what to do. So I really like her, and she knows when to back off when he gets to high frustration levels.

CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS

Same way about them. They are very supportive. And they are caring, they listen, and they understand what we have been through hell, and they basically or sometimes they will even call me like the other day there was an incident frustration levels and they told me the whole scenario. Now before we do anything, we want to check with you if you have any special approaches. So they totally include me and I feel like that they do everything that they can to make (my son) successful.

DISCUSS YOUR JOURNEY FROM THE PAST TO PRESENT. WHAT MEASURES DID YOU HAVE TO TAKE TO IMPLEMENT SUCCESS?

School employees would be nasty when he would act out. And I started reading and getting familiar with the diagnosis, and I fully began my journey in becoming (my son's) CEO, and I really had no idea that I would become a CEO. I was very passive/aggressive and I took a lot of crap from the principal. I don't know what's wrong with him. Do you know what's wrong with him. I remember one time we had a meeting and my Mom was there because they would intimidate me and act like that I was doing something wrong. Are there any changes going on? And they would always try to make it like that there was something wrong with the home, and there really wasn't. It was actually quite the healthy loving home. I didn't know what to do, and they pointed fingers at me, and they asked "did you do drugs when you were pregnant? Did you drink alcohol when you were pregnant? You or your husband?"

Got the ball rolling to get a 504 going. "My God, that is exactly what he needs".

The old principal was a bitch. I hope that I never see her again.

Teachers that are doing the IEP's, a lot of them are good. A lot of them are not. And a lot of them don't know what they are doing. They are just warehousing them basically and I totally saw that and I would not allow my son to fall through the cracks. So, I raised hell and I was up at that special education director's office and this is not o.k. They were still suspending him all the time. I remember one month, I got docked \$222 for the time that I missed going up there back and forth. I did not do a whole lot of documentation. Now I do everything in writing because I could have sued them along time ago and they know it. But when I started keeping records and I got an advocate and had that in writing at the ARD meeting, they started really paying attention. And when I was becoming quite assertive, I am prepared for every year that my son goes through.

With a special needs kid you have to prepare yourself so that you know how because people intimidate you.

ARE YOU TREATED OR PERCEIVED IN A MORE POSITIVE FASHION WHEN YOU HAVE AN ADVOCATE PRESENT?

Oh yes, in fact working in a school, the minute they find out that a kid has an advocate, they pay attention to that class, they make sure that all the teachers are prepared. The minute they have an advocate everyone starts sweating bullets. They start paying attention, and the teachers are informed step by step about the IEP, what they need to do when there is an advocate involved.

And I told them that I couldn't get legal services because I am a poor white girl. But I will go to the Star-Telegram if you don't educate my son and treat me decent. So they finally created a crisis classroom at (my son's elementary campus) for me. I love this. That was the first time that I had a behavioral specialist, a case worker, MHMR came to the house regularly to help me do everything I could. They created this classroom and they hired an aid and a teacher.

But ever since he committed to that everything has been awesome. He did everything that he could.

One of the biggest help for them was to include me in the decision making. Because he is doing a lot better.

The next year it got better, and I would make them walk me through step-by-step because a lot of it is language that I totally don't know about. But I made them walk me through it and tell me what it is about because it can be broken down into lay men's terms. And they did therefore I got better. They explained the whole measurement system, how they measure certain things.

SO BASICALLY YOU WENT FROM A NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE TO A MORE POSITIVE EXPERIENCE DUE TO YOUR PERSISTENCE AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR CHILD'S IEP PROCESS?

Yes

TALK ABOUT YOUR ACTUAL IEP EXPERIENCE.

Currently, awesome. The old days, I felt like nothing, but they totally respect me they think that I am crazy. Now when I go in there, they get mad because I know a lot of things but I insist on just like for assistive technology evaluation, they weren't going to give him one. And I insisted. I said I will not, and we finally got an assisted technology evaluation. They weren't going to give me computers. But I was persistent. So I can get pretty much if it is realistic for his needs. They respect me. Now they probably avoid doing that because most people are caught up in the administration building, and the politics of it. And they want to save school money. They do as little as possible, they really do. And I see it every day at my school because they are human, but for now on when I walk in I get respect and I get hugs. And a lot of times I get hugs. I am kind and assertive, and I bring food, snacks and drinks to big ARD meetings because I know that they are hard workers.

SO BEING PREPARED, WELL READ, AND KIND OF ASSERTIVE?

If I get my voice up, and say I insist, they pretty much know that most likely I am not going to raise my voice unless I'm not correct. I pretty much get respect, in fact the people up at the special ed. Department all love me. But you know (my son) has also been successful too.

Because of the stuff that we planned in the IEP through blood, sweat and tears, he turned out to be a success. But you have to implement, you have to have somebody truly doing those things and they're a success. Because of the success of him, and they made them respect me more because they see that what I demand and what we put into place and the results are so much are successful. But basically because I was raising cane back in January about getting a computer for the house, they weren't going to get me one. And when I raised cane, she told me you know I want to do this for you because he is one of our success kids. We don't want him to go back fleeing. No you don't because if he does its not because of him, it is not because of me, its because of you all.

They want to do right I think because they know that I will raise hell. But also because they see the results of doing what the IEP says.

PRIMARY DISAGREEMENTS IN THE PAST HAVE REVOLVED AROUND YOUR CHILD NOT RECEIVING PROPER SERVICES?

Just implementing the stuff in the IEP and most importantly just really paying attention to the accommodation rather it is where his desk is seated to privately punish, or to privately call him out of class. Those kind of accommodations.

Note that these teachers hardly ever read the IEPs. Most of those teachers, they get a folder and they never even open them up. The schools should make them do this stuff, but they are so overwhelmed.

It all goes back on the parents. When they are involved the schools will do it immediately but they have to be properly prepared. They can't just go in there with their regular knowledge and raise hell because you can't go anywhere with that.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS OR EDUCATORS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

If they have once a week or at least twice a month, parent support type meetings. With (my son's current school district), some people would be there. Some people who know what they are doing will be there to answer our questions. They give us a booklet that is like 50 pages long that gives us a glossary of the different terms. And I mean its so much information, so many different disabilities, the visual, the blindness, this, that, all of these different areas cover and detail and its too much for regular folks to read it and understand it all. And that there are so many different points and different step in an IEP and in the ARD process period. Not to mention, you are hanging on by a thread at the house probably if you have a kid who has all of these challenges, you are probably at your wits end a home and you don't have time to read all of this stuff let alone learn it and practice it. But if they had a place to where we could go regularly. I see people at support groups. I know that there are parents who would go and even if they don't they should offer it for the different times when we need it to go there and say o.k. explain this IEP to me.

Like they had a hard time with at an ARD meeting one time and she said that is not ARD information. Save that for another time. Let's move on. And I said if you would tell me what is ARD information and what is not. Make it in a clear way, then I would know how to behave appropriately. Until you do that, you are going to listen to me at this meeting.

Have a continuous support, designated place where we can go to receive information where without being talked like we are stupid, without being charged, and even if they would provide childcare. That would be even better.

If they could really educate us and walk us through the different steps. Rather having us go out and get an advocate, maybe if they would assign or have a couple of jobs for advocates. Like at each school, we have parent-teacher liaisons, but they are usually raising donations for functions and they are checking on kids who are truant. These parent teacher liaisons could actually be spending their time wisely talking to us parents to helping us to what the hell we are doing.

If they would have some sort of a checks and balance system of some sort from the diagnostician down to the teacher. If they had a checks and balance list from the diagnostician to the actual teacher who is personally implementing this stuff that we are working for through blood, sweat and tears that we create for the kid to be successful. To

have a checks and balance system to make sure that they are actually doing it. You can't rely on these parents. Half of these parents are mentally ill themselves. So, a checks and balances system. And make that be a priority instead of them being warehoused. That would be good for the school system.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THE IEP PROCESS?

Constantly research and educate themselves on the school system, the rights and laws. When they give you that piece of paper, the rights every time, I used to toss, but now I do again, but really read through it. Research and prepare for your kid and his educational needs.

And be involved. Totally be up there. Don't trust them. I go to all the ARD meetings. When they talk about my kid, I'm there. You need to be involved and don't trust them to do it on their own.

Really, before an ARD meeting, I tell them does anyone want to hold my hand and pray with me before we do this? I am so desperate, I would invite God in on the educational process.

YOU MENTIONED EARLIER EDUCATORS PERCEIVING YOU AS BEING STUPID. IS THAT HOW THEY OFTEN PERCEIVE YOU?

Their pre-judgment of the mental illness. Their pre-judgment of the parent that has to deal with it.

They don't look at me stupid. They are over stressed. I think that they are in a hurry number one, The longer they do it, they get used to rushing you in and rushing you out. And not too much parental involvement and the heat from administrators, budgets and all that stuff. And they want to do as little as possible.

I don't think that they perceive me as stupid. I think that they have a pre-judgment.

ARE THERE ANY OTHER COMMENTS OR THOUGHTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

You know those IEP papers. The papers alone that they are on. Those are so condense. I have a problem with them. I want you to enlarge this paper and make a half a page into a whole page. You can't read it, and when they handwrite everything in there. I can't read it because it gets copied so much. The IEP forms need to be bigger so that you can write in them.

The more prepared you are the more you are going to receive to what the world has to offer.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

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