



April 2026

NASET Special Educator e-Journal

Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

Table of Contents

Special Education Legal Alert	3
Buzz from the Hub	6
Update from the U.S. Department of Education	9
Using a Classroom Microphone to Increase Student Engagement during Brain Breaks in a Special Day Class	15
Collaborating Between Schools and Culturally Diverse Families of Students with Disabilities	23
Acknowledgements	28

Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel
April 2026

This month's update identifies two recent decisions that respectively illustrate the fuzzy "need prong" for special education eligibility under the IDEA and the relatively rare legal appearance of counteractions to IDEA and Section 504/ADA protection, here extending to "anti-SLAPP" laws. For related publications and special supplements, see perryzirkel.com

On March 26, 2026, a federal district court in Texas issued an unofficially published decision in *Sarah J. v. Austin Independent School District*. In this case, student S.T. became ill at the start of grade 9. On September 29, his parents informed the school that the diagnosis was mononucleosis, which he previously had in grades 5 and 7. On October 4, the district put him on a waitlist for a general education homebound instructor. On October 26, the parents received and notified the district of a revised diagnosis, which was chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). The district provided him with a 504 plan based on CFS and dysgraphia. The homebound services belatedly started on February 9 and continued for the rest of the school year whenever he was unable to attend school. Due to this 4-month delay, his grades and course completion suffered despite being given the opportunity to make up his assignments and tests after the school year ended. Meanwhile, on March 9, his parents formally requested an eligibility evaluation under the IDEA. The district did not take action until August 4 to obtain their written consent, which the parents provided on August 7. In grade 10, S.T. only attended the first two weeks before becoming too ill to continue attendance. On October 17, based on the timely-completed evaluation, the IEP team concluded that S.T. was not eligible under the IDEA but recommended continuing the Section 504 accommodations, including extra time, reduced assignments, and breaks as needed. In immediate response, the parents requested, and the district agreed to, an independent educational evaluation (IEE) at public expense. On November 2, the parents submitted the physician's CFS report, which recommended shortened school days, frequent rest breaks, access to the nurse's office, and the ability to go home if symptoms worsened. On December 14, the physician issued an updated report, prescribing home confinement for the next six months. By then, S.T. was sleeping about 18 hours per day and tired quickly during instruction. On April 14, the IEE report was issued, recommending IDEA eligibility under other health impairment (based on CFS) and specific learning disability (based on dysgraphia). Soon thereafter, the IEP team met, discussed the IEE report, and decided that the instructional recommendations could be implemented through the Section 504 accommodations and homebound services rather than an IEP. On June 6, the parents filed for an IDEA due process hearing. On April 14 (of S.T.'s grade 11), the hearing officer ruled that S.T. was eligible under the IDEA based on CFS but not dysgraphia. The parties appealed.

<p>Focusing on the second prong for eligibility, the district argued that S.T. only needed accommodations, not special education.</p>	<p>Rejecting this claim, the court agreed with the hearing officer that the district’s reduction of instructional time and adjustment of its implementation to accommodate S.T.’s severe CFS amounted to adaptation of the delivery of instruction, per the definition of “specially designed instruction” in the IDEA regulations.</p>
<p>Although this decision also had a reasonable-time Child Find issue, its ruling for the boundaries between special education and responsive general education, including Section 504, is a reminder of this inevitably gray rather than black-and-white area of law.</p>	

D was a fourth grader with an IEP in a public elementary school in Massachusetts. According to his parents, other students in his mainstreamed classroom, including T, regularly bullied him. At times his behavior became dysregulated, most recently causing the classroom to be evacuated. On the next school day, the teacher sent an email to all the parents except Mr. & Mrs. D, reporting the incident and inviting those with questions to contact him or the principal. Later that day, the parents of classmate T emailed a letter to the school principal, the superintendent, and the school board, with copies to the classroom teacher and the parents of four other students in the same classroom who—according to a P.S. in their letter—shared their concerns. The Ts’ letter asked the school officials to address the allegedly disruptive behavior by a specific, but unnamed, student in their son’s class. The identified behaviors included obscene language, racist remarks, bullying other students, and endangering school property. The prompt actions they demanded included implementation of the school’s code of discipline and appropriate support for the teacher. Referring to the recent classroom evacuation, they expressed support of the “least restrictive environment” but questioned its application when the other students “are REMOVED from their classroom.” Upon learning of the letter and inferring that it referred to their son, Mr. and Mrs. D filed suit in state court, claiming that Mr. & Mrs. T were liable for defamation, infliction of emotional distress, and violation of D’s right to FAPE under the IDEA. The Ts moved for dismissal based on Massachusetts’ anti-Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP) statute, which protects petitions of public concern against meritless lawsuits. Approximately two thirds of states have anti-SLAPP laws. Although they vary somewhat in their scope and strength, they generally provide for expedited dismissal and shifted attorneys’ fees. Under the Massachusetts statute and its subsequent case law, to obtain dismissal, the Ts needed to show that (1) their claims were based entirely on their protected petitioning activity and (2) the Ds had failed to show that their petitioning activity was “devoid of any factual support or any arguable basis in law.” Finding that the T’s had met these two criteria, the trial judge granted their dismissal motion. The D’s filed an appeal to the state’s intermediate, appellate court. On February 26, 2026, said court issued its officially published decision in *Doe v. Thorell*.

<p>For criterion #1, the Ts argued that the P.S. in the letter, which reported that the Ds first communicated their concerns with other parents, did not constitute protected (i.e., public) petitioning.</p>	<p>The appellate court rejected this argument, concluding that the pre-mailing discussion, the mailed result, and the cc’ing to the other parents qualified for one of the five alternate categories in the anti-SLAPP law’s definition of protected “petitions” per applicable case law—“any statement reasonably</p>
---	--

	likely to enlist public participation in an effort to effect ... consideration [by a governmental body].”
For criterion #2, the Ts argued that the Ds’ lawsuit relied on hearsay and lacked information from anyone with personal knowledge of events in the classroom.	Disagreeing, the appellate court reasoned that the applicable case law did not exclude all hearsay and that the information from the teacher, the Ds’ son, and the children of the other four parents were based on personal knowledge of the classroom event; thus, the Ds failed to show that the Ts’ letter was frivolous.
This case is of interest for two reasons. First, it extends educators’ legal literacy to an introductory awareness of anti-SLAPP statutes and provides an example of their application in the school context. Second and more generally, it illustrates the occasional case law expression of the backlash-type perception that prevails among some parents and other individuals that is counter to the direction and protection of the IDEA and Section 504.	

Buzz from the Hub

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-march2026/>

What If Everyday Routines Were STEM Moments? A New Podcast Series

Want to learn simple ways to embed STEM learning with your child into everyday routines and activities? The STEMIE Family Hotline podcast series is designed for busy families and can be listened to on the go. Each short episode offers practical ideas to help you turn everyday moments into meaningful STEM learning opportunities.

You can listen to the STEMIE Family Hotline podcast series on [Spotify](#) and [Apple Podcasts](#), or stream the episodes directly on their website <https://stemie.fpg.unc.edu/blogs/>.

Every few months we'll feature a Parent Center on our website and we will now be including the featured parent center in the Buzz!

Encircle Families is the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the state of Arizona. Encircle Families began in 1979 as a grass-roots effort of families, professionals, and community leaders determined to provide support and information for parents of children with disabilities and special health care needs.

Encircle Families has virtual trainings and workshops for families and professionals on topics such as IEP Development, Positive Behavior Supports, Understanding 504 Plans, Bullying Prevention, and many others.

Check them out!

Pathways to Partnership: Early Childhood Education

This guide by School House Connection explains how school district homeless liaisons and service providers can work together to connect young children experiencing homelessness with early childhood education programs.

Read the guide [here](#).

School Choice Lets Parents Decide How Much AI Belongs in Education

This blog post from the U.S. Department of Education's *Homeroom Blog* argues that because the long-term effects of AI in classrooms aren't yet clear, school choice should let parents decide whether they want their children's schools to embrace AI technologies or stick with more traditional, teacher-centered approaches focused on cultivating independent thinking.

Read the blog post [here](#).

Understanding the Differences between High School and College

This guide was created by the Think College Transition team to help teachers, families, and students prepare for college. It discusses the need to plan for the ways that higher education will be different from high school, including higher academic expectations, increasing independence, and new social environments.

Access the guide [here](#) (available in English and Spanish).

WIOA, IDEA, Perkins Measures Crosswalk

Developed by VRTAC-QM and NTA:CT:C, the guide, *Transition Programs – Performance Accountability*, was developed to outline intersection points across three primary pieces of legislation that have a transition focus, the Workforce Investment Opportunities Act (VR

Performance Indicators), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Part B Indicators), and the Perkins V (accountability indicators).

Access the guide [here](#).

Guiding Principles of Collaborative Advocacy

CADRE's short video, *Guiding Principles of Collaborative Advocacy*, combines highly effective communication strategies, facilitative behaviors, interest-based problem-solving skills, and most importantly, a collaborative approach to empowering students with disabilities, their families, and other advocates for the student to effectively navigate the IEP process.

Watch the video [here](#).

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education>

Available Grants

<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants>

Victories for American Taxpayers: Eliminating Fraud, Waste, and Abuse Across Federal Student Aid Programs

April 2, 2026

The Trump Administration continues to tackle fraud, waste, and abuse across higher education programs.

U.S. Department of Education Initiates Title IX Investigation into New Hampshire School District Over Alleged Use of Girls-Only Spaces by Biological Men

March 31, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) opened a complaint into the Contoocook Valley School District (the District) in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Next Steps for Borrowers Enrolled in the Unlawful SAVE Plan

March 27, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education began issuing guidance to all borrowers enrolled in the unlawful SAVE Plan, directing them to exit the plan and enter a legal federal student loan repayment plan.

Victories for Higher Education: Raising Academic Standards and Ensuring Admissions Transparency

March 27, 2026

Raising Academic Standards and Ensuring Admissions Transparency: Institutions are raising the bar — bringing back excellence in higher education and returning to admission based on merit.

U.S. Department of Education to Downsize Footprint in Washington, D.C. and Save Taxpayers Over \$4.8 Million Annually

March 26, 2026

In a prudent step to save hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars and further reduce the federal education bureaucracy, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon announced that the U.S. Department of Education will move out of the LBJ headquarters.

U.S. Department of Education Celebrates More Than 10 Million FAFSA® Forms Complete and Additional Transparency Measures

March 26, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) celebrates that more than 10 million 2026–27 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) forms have been successfully completed by students and parents and processed by Federal Student Aid.

Indiana First Lady Maureen Braun Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event

March 26, 2026

Today, First Lady of the State of Indiana Maureen Braun visited Hamilton Southeastern High School as part of the Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Kansas

March 25, 2026

Today, Katie Gorka, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education, visited Wabaunsee Senior High School as part of the U.S. Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

FACT SHEET: Victories for Higher Education, Making College More Affordable and Expediting Workforce Readiness

March 25, 2026

Today, institutions of higher education are changing the game because President Trump is bringing back America’s Golden Age — shifting the culture and restoring our nation’s institutions to greatness.

Secretary McMahon’s Commencement Address for The Apprentice School at Newport News Shipbuilding

March 25, 2026

On March 21, 2026, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon gave commencement remarks for The Apprentice School at Newport News Shipbuilding.

U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Issues Letter of Impending Enforcement to San Jose State University on Title IX Compliance

March 24, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights issued a Letter of Impending Enforcement Action to San Jose State University for its ongoing refusal to comply with Title IX.

U.S. Department of Education Officials and Education Leaders Highlight Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Events in Tennessee and Missouri

March 24, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka and President and CEO of the Andrew Jackson Foundation Jason Zajac visited Stewarts Creek High School in Smyrna, Tennessee.

U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Opens Two New Probes into Harvard University for Continued Discrimination on Campus

March 23, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights opened two new investigations into Harvard University amid allegations that it continues to discriminate against students.

U.S. Department of Education Leaders Highlight Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Events in Vermont and West Virginia

March 20, 2026

Today, leaders from the U.S. Department of Education visited schools in Beckley, West Virginia and Newport, Vermont as part of the Department of Education’s national 'History Rocks!' Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of the Treasury Announce Historic Federal Student Assistance Partnership

March 19, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of the Treasury today announced the Federal Student Assistance Partnership to enhance the administration of Federal student aid programs.

U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Concludes D.C. Public Schools Discriminates Against Students with Disabilities

March 18, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights concluded that the District of Columbia Public School System has violated Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Victories for Higher Education: Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports

March 18, 2026

The Trump Administration is changing the culture in higher education. Just over a year ago, we saw men claiming victories in women’s athletics. Today, institutions of higher education are changing the game.

U.S. Department of Education Deputy Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Sarah Wilson Highlights Civics Education at 'History Rocks!' Event in Ohio

March 17, 2026

Today, Sarah Wilson, U.S. Department of Education Deputy Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, visited Monfort Heights Elementary School as part of the Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Announce First Grant Competition Under Postsecondary Education Partnership

March 17, 2026

Today, the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor issued the Fiscal Year 2026 competition for the Talent Search Program.

U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Concludes Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado Has Violated Title IX

March 13, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights concluded that Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado has violated Title IX by permitting male students to access female bathrooms, locker rooms, and to compete in female sports.

U.S Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Massachusetts

March 12, 2026

Today, Katie Gorka, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education, visited Mystic Valley Regional Charter School (MVRCS) as part of the Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

America 250 Civics Education Coalition Executive Director Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in New Hampshire

March 10, 2026

Today, Katie Gorka, Executive Director of America 250 Civics Education Coalition, visited The Founders Academy as part of the Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Education Dr. Murray Bessette Visits Wisconsin on ‘History Rocks!’ Tour

March 6, 2026

Today, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Education Dr. Murray Bessette visited Brookfield Central High School in support of the U.S. Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Department of Education Issues Proposed Rules to Implement Working Families Tax Cuts Act’s Workforce Pell Grants

March 6, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education today issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to establish the new Workforce Pell Grant program, a key provision of President Trump’s historic Working Families Tax Cuts Act.

U.S. Department of Education Initiates Title IX Investigation into Wisconsin School District Over Alleged Use of Women’s Restrooms by Biological Men

March 5, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights initiated a directed investigation into the New Richmond School District in New Richmond, Wisconsin.

Secretary McMahan and Secretary Kennedy Celebrate Medical School Commitments to Increase Nutrition Training for Future Doctors

March 5, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education convened leaders from 53 of the nation's top medical schools today to announce commitments to require meaningful nutrition training for future doctors.

Using a Classroom Microphone to Increase Student Engagement during Brain Breaks in a Special Day Class

By Hapibel Duque

Abstract

This article describes a classroom strategy implemented in a Special Day Class (SDC) using a handheld microphone to increase student engagement during brain breaks and free-choice singing activities. The strategy encouraged voluntary participation, peer interaction, and confidence-building for students with Autism and Speech-Language Impairment (SLI). Observational outcomes indicated increased vocalization, improved peer interactions, and smoother transitions back to instructional tasks. Practical tips are provided for educators working in similar special education settings.

Introduction

A Special Day Class (SDC) is a specialized classroom designed for students with moderate to severe learning disabilities whose needs may be difficult to meet in a general education classroom. These classrooms are typically smaller in size, allowing for more individualized attention from trained teachers. As a result, SDCs offer a structured and supportive environment that addresses academic, behavioral, social, and communication needs more effectively than what is typically possible in a traditional classroom, promoting meaningful learning and student growth (Markley, 2024).

However, engaging students in SDCs can be challenging, particularly during brain breaks or free-choice activities. Research shows that children with developmental disabilities tend to

engage less frequently with peers, spend less time participating in interactive activities with educators, and are more likely to remain passively disengaged (Golubović et al., 2022). In my classroom, several students are hesitant to participate due to communication needs, limited verbal language, low confidence, or sensory sensitivities. During unstructured time, some students remain passive, while others require frequent prompting to engage. These patterns highlight the need for intentional, supportive strategies that encourage active participation while respecting students' individual comfort levels and needs.

To address these challenges, I introduced a classroom microphone strategy. This approach has gained popularity in recent years, particularly in large higher-education settings, where teachers use wireless microphones to encourage spontaneous student participation rather than relying on a single microphone passed around the room. Research suggests that this technology can effectively enhance classroom interaction when paired with appropriate teaching and learning activities (Chiu, Wong, & Im, 2018).

Adapted for my Special Day Class, the microphone strategy was incorporated into singing activities to create a fun, low-pressure, and inclusive environment. Music has been shown to increase social interaction and strengthen communication processes within learning environments (Stephenson, 2006). In particular, the use of music in special education supports emotional responsiveness and the development of expressive skills (Youngshin, 2004, as cited in Sağırkaya, 2023). Through this approach, students were encouraged to participate voluntarily, practice communication skills, and engage in positive peer interactions in a way that felt both safe and motivating.

Methods / Implementation

Participants and Setting

This strategy was implemented in my Special Day Class consisting of **15 students** (11 kindergarten and 4 first-grade students). Students had primary diagnoses of Autism, with many also presenting Speech-Language Impairment (SLI). Communication levels varied and included verbal speech, gestures, and AAC use.

Procedure

The microphone strategy was implemented during **brain breaks and free-choice periods**, typically lasting **5–10 minutes, 2–3 times per week**. Activities primarily involved familiar children’s songs with repetitive lyrics and simple movements (e.g., “Point Your Finger Up,” greeting songs, and movement songs).

Students were **invited—not required—to use a handheld microphone** to sing, vocalize, or participate in their preferred way. Turn-taking expectations were modeled, and students were encouraged to cheer for peers. Songs were kept short to maintain engagement and prevent overstimulation.

Observation Period

Students were observed over approximately **8 weeks**, with attention to:

- Vocal participation
- Nonverbal participation (gestures, dancing)
- Peer interaction and turn-taking
- Level of prompting needed

- Transitions back to instructional tasks

During the “Point Your Finger Up” song, three students who rarely vocalized voluntarily took turns using the microphone. They smiled, looked toward peers, and encouraged one another—an outcome not observed prior to introducing the microphone.

Observations / Results

The microphone strategy led to noticeable improvements in student engagement and participation.

- Students who were typically silent became more willing to sing or vocalize.
- Peer interactions increased as students shared the microphone and cheered for classmates.
- Student confidence improved, resulting in smoother transitions back to academic activities.

Table 1. Student Participation Before and After Microphone Strategy

Measure	Before Microphone Strategy	After Microphone Strategy
Students singing or vocalizing	3	8
Students participating nonverbally (gestures/dancing)	4	10
Students taking turns with peers	2	7
Students requiring prompts to participate	10	5
Smooth transitions back to instruction	Low (3–4 students)	High (9–11 students)

These observations suggest that the microphone increased motivation and reduced anxiety associated with group participation.

Discussion / Practical Takeaways

In this study, the effects of the microphone strategy in a Special Day Class (SDC) setting were successfully evaluated. The strategy was effective because it allowed students to participate **voluntarily**, without pressure. Familiar songs, predictable routines, and peer encouragement created a supportive environment where students felt comfortable engaging at their own level. As noted by Chiu, Wong, and Im (2018), the effectiveness of this strategy depends largely on the suitability of the teaching and learning activities designed to meet students’ specific needs.

From my classroom experience, the microphone served not only as a tool for engagement, but also as a way to promote communication, social interaction, and confidence. Fostering an encouraging and respectful classroom allows students to practice essential social skills needed to build meaningful relationships with their peers (Sharma & Sokal, 2016, as cited in Hidayah, Hadi, & Amin, 2025). This student-centered approach encourages children's active involvement in their own learning, helping them become more independent, improve their academic performance, and strengthen social and emotional growth (Hidayah, Hadi, Amin, 2025). Moreover, the sense of agency that results from student-centered learning supports the development of resilience and confidence, two traits that are critical for lifelong learning (Sharma & Salend, 2016, as cited in Hidayah, Hadi, & Amin, 2025).

Tips for Teachers

1. Use short, familiar songs to reduce anxiety and increase participation.
2. Explicitly teach microphone-sharing rules and model turn-taking.
3. Encourage peer cheering and positive reinforcement.
4. Adapt activities to meet individual sensory and communication needs.

Limitations

- Observations were limited to one classroom and may not generalize to all settings.
- This article reflects practitioner-based evidence rather than formal experimental research.

Conclusion

Using a classroom microphone during brain breaks and free-choice singing activities is a simple and effective strategy for increasing engagement, communication, and peer interaction in Special Day Class settings. The microphone gave students the freedom to participate at their own pace, without pressure, which helped them feel more comfortable expressing themselves. Small, intentional changes to classroom routines can have a meaningful impact on student participation and confidence, particularly for students with Autism and Speech-Language Impairment. This experience reinforces the value of student-centered practices that can make a lasting difference in students' confidence, independence, and overall sense of belonging in the classroom.

References

Chiu, P. H. P., Wong, C. S. K., & Im, S. W. T. (2018). Using throwable wireless microphone technology to enhance classroom interaction in a large class. *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Education Technology and Computers*, 326, 326–329.

doi:10.1145/3290511.3290572

Golubović, Š., Đorđević, M., Ilić, S., & Nikolašević, Ž. (2022). Engagement of preschool-aged children in daily routines. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(22), 14741. doi:10.3390/ijerph192214741

Hidayah, W. N., Hadi, S., & Amin, B. A. (2025). Holistic approach in inclusive education: Its effectiveness in addressing the diversity of elementary school students' characteristics. *Journal of Education and Social Science*, 1(2), 38–42. doi:10.70716/jees.v1i2.106

Markley, T. (2024). *Special day class (SDC) in special education*. Kaltman Law. Retrieved from <https://www.kaltmanlaw.com/post/what-is-sdc-in-special-education>

Sağırkaya, B. (2023). The use of music elements in the lessons by teachers of students with mental disabilities and their music-based competencies. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 11(2), 10–21.

Stephenson, J. (2006). Music therapy and the education of students with severe disabilities. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 41(3), 290–299. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23880202>

Collaborating Between Schools and Culturally Diverse Families of Students with Disabilities

By Mattie Davis

Introduction

As the field of special education advocacy grows and the population of students with disabilities in the United States becomes more diverse, it is crucial to understand how advocates work with culturally diverse families of individuals with disabilities. Despite the growing diversity of students with disabilities in the US and globally, culturally diverse families continue to face systematic barriers to meaningful collaborations with schools and special education processes. These barriers include deficient access to resources and exclusion from the decision-making process. While some strategies and models, such as culturally responsive advocacy, and inclusive community practices, have shown promise, their implementation remains inconsistent and under researched. These challenges are compounded by systematic inequities, cultural disconnects, and a lack of culturally responsive practices. There is a critical need to investigate how schools, educators, and advocates can effectively engage culturally diverse families in equitable, culturally responsive, and collaborative special education practices.

Literature Review

Systemic Barriers to Collaboration

The most common barriers culturally diverse families face in collaborating with schools regarding special education services involve cultural differences in education level, linguistics, socioeconomics, and access to resources. Despite laws being in place to ensure students with disabilities are guaranteed the right to free appropriate public education, the special education system can be difficult for parents to navigate (Burke and Goldman 2018). Burke and Goldman

(2018) found in a pilot study that families of students with disabilities face multiple barriers when collaborating with schools. Burke and Goldman (2018) found that one of the most glaring barriers to parent-school collaboration was that the procedural safeguards put in place to make families aware of their rights were written at the 16th grade reading level. Since only 30% of adults have bachelor's degrees, parents having to read on a college level to understand their rights limits many families' accesses to part of the educational process. Through a study aimed to explore the educational context in the Arab community Jorban et al., (2024) found that external barriers such as language significantly affect parental participation in the educational process. Many times, interpreters are not scheduled into the meeting and sometimes parents even dismiss interpreters in an effort to be seen as more amendable. Stanley (2015) found that a lack of basic needs such as transportation can also limit the access culturally diverse families have to resources and services provided by the school. In a study examining the advocacy experiences of African American mothers while understanding the experiences they face with navigating the educational system. Before COVID, many families were unaware of their options for participating via the phone or virtual conference call in various meetings at the school.

Importance of Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive practices and advocacy have a significant impact on the effectiveness of special education interventions for culturally diverse students because they allow the parent to play an active role in ensuring the success of their student at school. A positive and collaborative partnership between parents and schools is required to improve the education of children with special educational needs. In order for culturally responsive practices to be beneficial, families need to be receptive. In their study, Burke and Goldman (2018) found that in addition to barriers, culturally diverse advocates also found support in connecting with families and as well as

working with families and schools. Burke and Goldman (2018) noted that families are more likely to respond to culturally responsive practices when an advocate from their own community or culture reaches out to them. Having an advocate that understands how the educational system works and has a unique familiarization of the cultural background of the families provides a level playing field for the families of the students with disabilities. Working with 20 parents of children with different special education needs, Jorban et al., (2024) found that it was crucial to recognize the unique cultural and traditional aspects of minorities and address specific challenges due to language barriers and legal factors that may influence their participation in the education activities. Stanley (2015) found that without culturally responsive practices, families feel disrespected and have minimal parental participation within the IEP meeting.

Advocacy and Informal Support

The role of the school as a tool to assist parents is imperative, with the aim of empowering families and encouraging parents' active participation in the school's processes. Burke and Goldman (2018) discovered that for advocacy to be effective, the challenges culturally diverse advocates face and schools must also be identified. Training advocates should focus on biases that families and advocates experience in collaborating with the schools (Burke and Goldman, 2018). Jorban et al., (2024) also found that support through parenting workshops must be available to begin and maintain effective school family partnerships. While focusing on advocacy efforts, Stanley (2015) discovered that researchers identified multiple ways to promote collaboration and parental advocacy including frequent communication, a feeling of commitment to the student and their family, equity in the decision-making process, competence, trust, and respect.

Empowerment Through Inclusion and Communication

Schools can better empower culturally diverse families to participate in the decision-making process related to their child's education by providing training workshops (Burke and Goldman 2018). To promote the ongoing continued partnership between families and schools, Jorban et al., (2024) noticed that organizing workshops on topics that were relevant to their children made parents more likely to participate, making the workshops an important and effective tool for empowering parents. Stanley (2015) found that these workshops also encouraged consistent communication with families.

Conclusion

Legislation maintains expectations that educators form partnerships with parents, specifically within the field of special education, and requires schools to allow parents to participate in all phases of educational assessment and planning for special education students. However, many parents still encounter barriers in their advocacy efforts. This literature review focused on research on parent involvement and special education by examining the advocacy experiences of culturally diverse families with children with disabilities. Through these studies, multiple barriers and supports were identified that can help improve the practice of advocacy within culturally diverse communities. It is worth noting that Stanley (2015) acknowledged that little is known about the advocacy efforts and experiences of parents of children with disabilities from culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged backgrounds that do not exhibit linguistic diversity. In the future more research could be done to focus on the lower-income African American communities that do not speak a second language since most of the current research focuses on culturally linguistically diverse families, not taking into consideration their socioeconomic background or their educational foundation.

References

- Burke, M. M., & Goldman, S. E. (2018). Special education advocacy among culturally and linguistically diverse families. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 18(Suppl.1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12413>
- Jorban, M., Cachón-Zagalaz, J., Mecías-Calvo, M., & Navarro-Patón, R. (2024). Facilitators of and barriers to inclusive education in the Arab community of Israel: The parents' perspective. *Education Sciences*, 14(5), Article 525. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14050525>
- Stanley, S. L. G. (2015). The advocacy efforts of African American mothers of children with disabilities in rural special education: Considerations for school professionals. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 34(4), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/875687051503400402>

Acknowledgements

Portions of this or previous month's *NASET's Special Educator e-Journal* were excerpted from:

- Center for Parent Information and Resources
- Committee on Education and the Workforce
- FirstGov.gov-The Official U.S. Government Web Portal
- Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals (JAASEP)
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth
- National Institute of Health
- National Organization on Disability
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Education-The Achiever
- U.S. Department of Education-The Education Innovator
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U.S. Department of Labor
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration
- U.S. Office of Special Education

The **National Association of Special Education Teachers** (NASET) thanks all of the above for the information provided for this or prior editions of the Special Educator e-Journal

Sarah S. Ayala, LSU | Associate Editor, NASET e-Journal