

# **Building Capacity in Special Education: A Statewide Initiative to Improve Student Outcomes Through Parent–Teacher Partnerships**

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## **Abstract**

School improvement efforts to increase student performance are sought by states throughout the nation. One Midwestern state implemented a statewide initiative to do just that. The purpose of the initiative was to improve instruction and learning for students with disabilities as well as other at-risk learners through a districtwide state improvement process. Two phases comprised this initiative. The first phase involved districtwide reform efforts designed to support school improvement through capacity building, differentiated instruction, and process coaching. The second phase was to expand the school improvement initiative through parent–teacher partnerships in school districts and in institutions of higher education (IHEs). Each individual district’s involvement was to teach current teachers and parents how to work together to improve student outcomes. The IHEs were chosen as part of a comprehensive sustainability effort to train teacher candidates how to work with parents and families, thus building capacity among current and future teachers and parents. This article describes the implementation efforts of 80 school districts and the teacher preparation programs of seven IHEs regarding statewide school improvement efforts through parent–teacher partnerships.

**Key Words:** parent–teacher partnerships, teacher preparation programs, statewide initiative, school improvement, capacity building, students with disabilities, special education, university, colleges of education

## Introduction

Parental involvement in the education of children has been shown to increase student achievement, improve attendance, and reduce dropout rates (Barnard, 2004; Grundmeyer & Yankey, 2016; Sheldon, 2003). Specifically, parent–teacher partnerships have been shown to be an effective method of involving parents in the education of their children, and the benefits are well documented (Barnard, 2004; Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel, 2015; Lasater, 2016; Sheldon, 2003). When parents and teachers become partners, these partnerships have been associated with fewer student retentions and fewer referrals for unacceptable behavior. Moreover, parent–teacher partnerships have been identified as a stress reducer, which, in turn, can help students be ready and able to learn (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Barnard, 2004; Rouse & O’Brien, 2016; Talts, Piht, & Muldman, 2017).

Parent–teacher partnerships are defined as relationships built on respect in which a parent and teacher have parity and a shared role in educational decision making (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009; Murray & Mereoiu, 2016). Although many professionals acknowledge the value of partnering with parents, most admit that effective parent–teacher partnerships are difficult to achieve (Murray, Mereoiu, & Handyside, 2013). Although parent–teacher partnerships are not innate, both parties fortunately can be taught to be effective partners. The more focused the educational training is in providing teachers with multiple opportunities to interact with parents, the more likely they are to be equipped with the knowledge, ability, and confidence needed to partner with parents (Murray & Mereoiu, 2016). If educators are not trained, they likely will engage in more hierarchical decision making rather than in collaborative educational decision making in which everyone’s contributions are equally valued (Mereoiu, Abercrombie, & Murray, 2016).

One important aspect of parent–teacher partnerships training is knowing how to value parents as equal partners in educating their children. Research indicates that parent–teacher partnerships are essential to teacher practice, optimally starting in the early years of teacher preparation programs (Murray & Mereoiu, 2016). Unfortunately, research literature is sparse on teacher preparation programs in institutions of higher education (IHEs) that address the need for parent–teacher partnerships, especially given that teacher preparation standards call for parent–teacher partnerships to be an integral component of educator preparation curricula (Brinks et al., 2010; Council for Exceptional Children, 2015).

Although some teacher preparation programs provide students with instruction in family involvement and some involve the parents indirectly, most

programs do not meet the goal of fully preparing teachers to successfully engage with families (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Flanigan, 2007; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). For example, universities have attempted to address the training of relationship-building between teachers and parents of students with disabilities by holding class discussions on parent and family topics with teacher candidates. In addition to these class discussions, universities have allowed parents to participate in one-time panel discussions in highly structured environments to strengthen relationships between parents and teachers (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Graves, 2013; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Other university teacher preparation programs require preservice teachers to attend events with parents and work with students with disabilities. These programs also invite parents to participate in interviews with teacher candidates as well as serve as guest lecturers (Flanigan, 2007; Handyside, Murray, & Mereoiu, 2012; Stoddard, Braun, & Koorland, 2011). Presently, only a few universities that offer parent-teacher partnerships provide their teacher candidates opportunities to interact with students with disabilities and their families.

Research describes two university programs that provide teacher candidates with opportunities to interact with parents of students with disabilities. One program is administered at a southwestern university that, throughout the semester, pairs preservice special education students with families who have at least one child with special needs (Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel, 2015). Another university program provides multiple opportunities to interact with parents of students with disabilities. For example, a professor and the parent of a child with a disability co-teach the class. In this co-taught class, parents participate in the class together with in-service and/or preservice teachers. Classwork is paired with experiential learning by requiring teacher candidates not only to spend time with families of students with exceptionalities but also to complete projects together with these parents (Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013). Teacher candidates as well as parents of students with disabilities who participated in the class reported growth in confidence and empowerment as well as increased trust between parents and teachers when paired for the purpose of learning more about each other (Murray, Handyside, et al., 2013). This effort to model effective parent-teacher partnerships by actively involving parents of students with disabilities with preservice and in-service teachers has been documented as an effective method of training teachers (Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Handyside, et al., 2013). This article describes a statewide effort to increase student outcomes through meaningful partnerships between (a) parents of students with disabilities and (b) in-service teachers or teacher candidates.

## Overview of a Statewide Initiative for School Improvement

School improvement and increases in student performance were the impetus for a State Professional Development Federal Improvement Grant that was awarded to a Midwestern state. The purpose of the grant was to improve instruction and student learning for students with disabilities, as well as other at-risk learners, through a districtwide state improvement process (SIP). As part of a districtwide continuous improvement program, the SIP focused on significantly improving the quality of instruction provided to students receiving special education services and other struggling learners “at risk” of being identified as having a disability.

This grant was comprised of two phases. The first phase involved districtwide reform efforts designed to support school improvement through capacity building, differentiated instruction, and process coaching. The second phase was to expand the school improvement initiative through parent–teacher partnerships in school districts and in IHEs. The purpose of the district involvement was to teach current teachers and parents how to work together, thus improving student outcomes. The decision to involve IHEs was made as part of a comprehensive sustainability effort to train teacher candidates how to work with parents and families, thus building capacity with current and future teachers and parents.

### Phase One: Districtwide Reform Efforts

In order to initiate the SIP reform, the State recruited 16 school districts each year for five years (80 districts total). Districts were chosen based on their need, which was determined by the state’s district report cards and school improvement scores.

Phase One consisted of three components:

- Component One: Capacity building was the focus of a comprehensive effort to improve teaching and learning for all students. To build capacity and improve instruction, shared leadership and accountability were promoted at all levels of the district. This was accomplished through work on leadership and growing one’s own instructors. Principals, superintendents, and district special education leaders were participants in this year-long training.
- Component Two: The next directive was to use (a) differentiated instruction based on formative instructional practices, (b) teacher collaboration, and (c) continuous professional development to support higher levels of student learning. The audience for this year-long training consisted of general and special education teachers as well as principals, superintendents, and school leaders.

- Component Three: Process coaching allowed participants time to practice what they learned and reflect on their newly acquired skills. The teachers and administrators participated in this year-long training.

The goal of the statewide initiative was to incorporate all three components simultaneously into a comprehensive training program for teachers/districts in order to improve student learning.

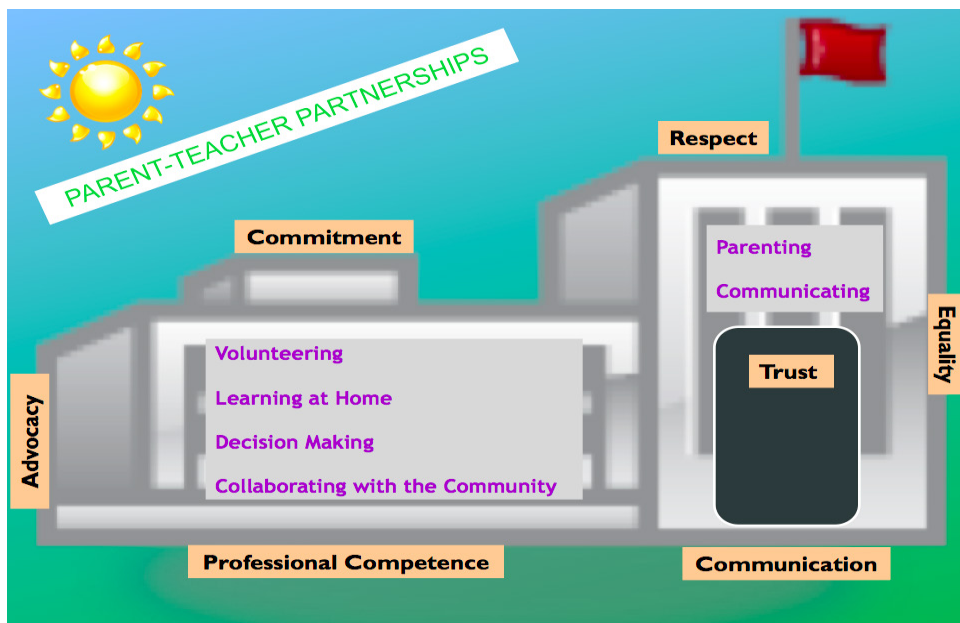
## **Phase Two: Parent–Teacher Partnerships**

### *School District Level*

In addition to the three components listed above, in order to meet the school improvement goals and increase student success, parent–teacher partnerships were chosen as an additional catalyst for change in Phase Two. The same 80 school districts that participated in the statewide school improvement process were selected to participate in this two-year phase of the grant.

The state department of education (SDE) developed a parent–teacher partnership model that was implemented utilizing a train-the-trainer approach. Each of the 80 districts chose one parent and one teacher to attend bimonthly training sessions for two years. The training sessions were facilitated by a parent of a child with a disability and a university professor who was an expert in collaborating and working with families. The trainers developed training modules focused on trust, honesty, advocacy, communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, and equality (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). These modules were then paired with the six types of parental involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) making decisions, and (f) collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2009). On the following page, Figure 1 depicts the content covered in the parent–teacher partnership sessions. The background in the figure represents a school district/building. Within the “structure” of the building, the highlighted concepts represent Turnbull et al.’s (2015) principles of partnership. The titles within the school building are the effective strategies of involvement developed by Epstein et al. (2009).

As noted above, the trainers met every other month with the teams (one parent and one teacher from each district) to model the delivery of the content. The parent–teacher teams were taught content and pedagogy one month and then trained others in their district the next month. Specifically, these trained parent–teacher teams went back to their districts and subsequently recruited and worked with approximately 10 parents and 10 teachers in between the training sessions (every other month). Teachers were compensated with a stipend from the district, and parents were provided a small gift card purchased with funds from the grant.



*Figure 1.* Parent–teacher partnerships. Based on the work of Epstein et al. (2009) and Turnbull et al. (2015), this visual representation was designed by Ms. Tanya Braden, parent co-facilitator.

A key goal of the training was for the parent–teacher teams to learn how to vary the content and its delivery to meet the specific needs of their unique demographic areas. When the participants returned to their districts and simulated the training with their district parent–teacher partners, they implemented the modifications that fit their geographic and demographic area. For example, one district’s modifications included preparing materials in Spanish and offering one meeting in Spanish for native Spanish-speaking families. Another district adapted the materials to an appropriate reading level for their parent–teacher teams. The day and time of their meetings varied among the districts, although some districts spent much more time on socialization and less time on content. All districts provided childcare and either snacks and/or a meal.

This model was implemented for two years. At the end of the two years, 80 school districts were trained on parent–teacher partnerships. The research on this train-the-trainer model indicates that the positive attitudes and dispositions of teachers and parents can be increased significantly, but most importantly, student outcomes can be improved as a result of parent–teacher partnership training (Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011).

### *Institutions of Higher Education: The Model University*

Teacher candidates need to be able to relate positively to parents of students with disabilities in order to provide optimum education. In order to teach the teacher candidates how to work with parents as a team, an experiential course was developed in a Midwestern IHE. This section of the training focused on a course that IHEs offered to undergraduate/graduate teacher candidates towards the end of their degree program. This Midwestern IHE served as the model university for this grant initiative and offered one or more model classes each semester annually for eight years (Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008). Parent and preservice teacher data were collected during the same eight-year timeframe.

Research indicates that the skills, attitudes, and dispositions of teacher candidates and parents were positively changed after providing them with multiple opportunities to interact together during a 16-week course (Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray et al., 2008; Murray, Mereoiu, et al., 2013). The course was designed to develop parent–teacher partnerships in an authentic environment where they can naturally develop relationships and dispel myths while also developing accurate beliefs about parents and teachers.

Typically, 30 students enroll in the course, which was co-taught by a university professor and a parent of a child with a disability. The parent was an equal partner with the professor in all regards (teaching, planning, grading, etc.). Ten parents of children with disabilities were embedded in the course and attended for the entire 16 weeks. Students met with the parents outside of class for 20 hours throughout the semester.

Due to the success of this university model, the SDE incorporated the IHE parent–teacher partnership component into the state grant. The SDE requested that IHEs submit a request for proposal (RFP) to replicate the course at their IHE in any creative format grounded on the research-based model. Seven grants were awarded in seven different geographic regions throughout the state to increase sustainability as well as to build capacity of parents and teachers.

### *Institutions of Higher Education: Seven Subject Universities*

The IHE portion of the training was guided by the lessons/data gathered from the model Midwestern state IHE (Murray, Mereoiu, et al., 2013). Under this guidance, the IHEs offered a course every semester co-taught by a faculty member and parents of children with disabilities. The course content and concepts were identical to those delivered to the school district parent–teacher partnership teams and focused on the following: trust, honesty, advocacy, communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, and equality (Turnbull et al., 2015). The course content and concepts also were paired with

the same six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community (Epstein et al., 2009).

Below are descriptive data from seven IHEs' experiences throughout the two years of the grant. The majority (6) of the IHEs offered the course at the undergraduate level, while the seventh institution offered the course both to graduate and undergraduate students. Six of the IHEs offered the course in the traditional face-to-face format, while one utilized both face-to-face and hybrid (partially online) delivery formats. Five out of the seven institutions required groups of two to three students to individually spend between 10 and 20 hours during the semester with an assigned parent and his or her family members. This requirement allowed for preservice teachers to learn about the family's personal experience regarding the many and varied processes involved with special education.

The institutions reported at least three key objectives in offering the course: (1) increase the collaboration skills of preservice teachers and parents, (2) understand the roles of parents and teachers and the importance of parity in educational decision making, and (3) improve the attitudes of preservice teachers and parents toward each other in order to advance the educational progress of students. Not all IHEs created a brand-new course; rather, some modified an existing course, thus allowing these particular IHEs to avoid the traditional internal bureaucracy often associated with the approval of a new course. One institution determined it was best practice to embed the content into a series of three courses rather than employing the typical one-course format utilized by the other six IHEs.

All seven institutions spent the first year developing the basic constructs of the course. Such first-year activities included selecting textbooks as well as developing coteaching roles, course content, rubrics, grading procedures, and course objectives. IHEs that developed a new course used this time to usher the course through the university approval process. Four IHEs utilized an advisory committee to assist in developing the course during this first year. A typical advisory committee was comprised of parents of students with disabilities, content area teachers, educators, and agency representatives. These committees provided recommendations about the curriculum, provided guidance about assignments, and evaluated the effectiveness of the course(s). Finally, it was imperative to start the parent recruitment and selection process during the first year, which required a considerable amount of time given the busy schedules of the parents and teachers.

During the second year of implementation, every IHE completed the initial preparatory work and officially offered the course. All IHEs determined the



best geographic location for parents' convenience in order to attend class. Those institutions with an advisory committee considered the recommendation of the committee when determining a site. Courses were offered on campus (4 institutions) and off campus (3 institutions), and two off-campus courses were offered in a public school building. The class assignments included creating student portfolios, developing digital stories, mapping curriculum, reviewing case studies, conducting mock interviews, and keeping a daily/weekly activity log. Parent storytelling was a powerful part of the course for each institution. One institution placed parent stories on its website to share with all students.

Parents contributed to the course in two distinct ways: in-class participation, and out-of-class participation. In-class participation included such activities as guest lecturing, grading, and serving as an experiential expert. However, an equally impactful contribution was made with the preservice teachers outside the classroom. For instance, time spent with the families of students may have included participating in meal time; game night at the home; helping the student prepare for school in the morning or for bedtime in the evening; attending speech, occupational, and/or physical therapy with the student and parent; or attending sporting events in which the student participated (e.g., football, cheerleading, soccer).

Three final observations were noted in reports submitted to SDE from the seven IHEs at the conclusion of the grant. First, institutional enrollment did not impact the type of course that an IHE offered. In fact, it is noteworthy that enrollment increased for all IHEs, and non-majors consistently requested to enroll in the course. Furthermore, neither the setting of the IHE (i.e., rural, urban, suburban) nor the enrollment designation (i.e., large, medium, small) impacted the course offering. Lastly, the findings were inconclusive about whether the status of an IHE (i.e., public or private) made a significant difference due to the low number of private institutions involved in the study.

See Table 1 on the following pages for an overview of the seven IHE models.

Table 1. University Models

Institution 1		
Demographic Descriptors	Large, Urban, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 15	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 35
Project Outcome	Create a strengths-based, culturally sustaining, and humanizing approach to teaching, learning, and teacher education through a course designed to include all stakeholders.	
Sustainability Action Plan	Families will no longer be directly involved in course delivery, but students will be required to connect with families in some way. The course is a regular course offering that will count as “load” for a regular faculty member. Additional funds for parent consultants are being pursued.	
Institution 2		
Demographic Descriptors	Small, Rural, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 12	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 9
Project Outcome	Co-develop and co-teach a teacher preparation course (Developing Partnerships for Meeting all Students’ Needs) with parents from Saudi Arabia who have ELL students in the schools	
Sustainability Action Plan	The program will continue; parents have offered to extend their participation at no cost.	
Institution 3		
Demographic Descriptors	Large, Urban, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 10	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 12
Project Outcome	Develop a course aimed at equipping participants with the knowledge and skills to identify and involve key stakeholders, such as family, school personnel, and community and agency partners, in the transition process.	
Sustainability Action Plan	The IHE is pursuing additional grants, and parents have offered to participate on a <i>pro-bono</i> basis.	
Institution 4		
Demographic Descriptors	Mid-Size, Rural, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 8	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 30

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Project Outcome	With the parent of a special needs child, co-teach a course (with both university students and parents of children with special needs present) for teacher candidates focused on high school transition in special education.	
Sustainability Action Plan	The model will continue with no cost extension using leftover funds.	
	<b>Institution 5</b>	
Demographic Descriptors	Small, Rural, Private	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 19	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 25
Project Outcome	Pair parents of students with disabilities with teacher candidates to increase the engagement between these groups in formal courses, school classrooms, and family homes throughout the teacher candidates' program.	
Sustainability Action Plan	The IHE is soliciting donations to add to an already secured donation of \$15,000.00	
	<b>Institution 6</b>	
Demographic Descriptors	Large, Suburban, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 30	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 120
Project Outcome	Investigate the improvements in knowledge, skills, and dispositions surrounding effective parent–teacher partnerships, and develop innovative, problem-based activities and co-instructional formats for engaging parents in the preservice learning of teacher candidates.	
Sustainability Action Plan	Department funds will help to sustain this model.	
	<b>Institution 7</b>	
Demographic Descriptors	Mid-Size, Urban, Public	
Number of Participants	<u>Parents</u> 8	<u>Teacher Candidates</u> 10
Project Outcome	Co-design and co-teach a parent–teacher partnership course with the help of parents of children with disabilities in order to improve the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of preservice teachers and parents to build strong partnerships for the improvement of K-12 student outcomes.	
Sustainability Action Plan	Department funds will cover the cost of continuing this course.	

## **Sustainability**

Whenever a grant is funded, there is a risk that the grant will end when the funding has been depleted or the term of the grant has expired. In anticipation of this risk, each of the 80 school districts and seven IHEs were asked to develop a sustainability plan as a requirement for the State Professional Development Federal Improvement Grant. The plan needed to be approved by either the district superintendent or the dean of the college. Among school districts, many creative sustainability plans were developed. Some districts partnered with afterschool agencies to provide childcare and/or transportation options to assist parent participation.

In most districts, teachers and parents agreed to participate without incentives after the grant ended (even districts with unions). Other districts decided to meet quarterly rather than bimonthly, and a few agreed to meet once in the fall and once in the spring (with electronic meetings in between). All districts reported positive results (i.e., improved student outcomes) arising from the parent–teacher partnership initiative. At the time of this writing, one year after the grant has ended, 78 out of the original 80 school districts have continued the parent–teacher partnership initiative in their districts without any grant funding. The two districts that have not continued did so as a result of redistricting.

The sustainability plans that the IHEs developed included initiating the processes of (a) changing a pilot course into a permanent course and (b) continuing to involve parents in courses either without monetary compensation or by finding other ways to fund parent participation. Some IHEs found school districts and social service agencies willing to fund parent participation in courses in exchange for service positions in their districts (see Table 1). One year after the grant ended, all seven IHEs were continuing to offer the course, and parents were continuing to participate in the same manner or a similar manner as proposed through the grant.

## **Summary**

A statewide initiative to improve student learning is an enormous undertaking. Jointly utilizing school districts and IHEs for the purpose of meeting the needs of students in special education provided a strategy to build capacity both of parents and teachers, thus leading to current and future school improvement. With the success of the statewide initiative, future research efforts could focus on replicating this initiative by developing parent–professional partnership training for social work, criminal justice, nursing, and other service-oriented professions at both the agency level and the IHE level throughout the United States.

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