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Factors Contributing to Parent-School Conflict in Special Education

Researcher Jeannie Lake interviewed 44 study participants including parents of children with disabilities (22), school officials (16) and mediators (6) who had taken part in a special education appeals process in the state of Massachusetts in order to identify factors that escalate and deescalate parent-school conflict. For purposes of the study, conflict was defined as real or perceived differences that arise from specific educational circumstances that engender negative emotion as a consequence (Deutsch, 1873).

The participants were asked questions that primarily dealt with the following concerns:

- critical incidents prompting requests for mediation
- actions, if taken, that could have reduced the conflict
- factors other than the core issues that inflamed the conflict
- why the conflict wasn't resolved at the school level
- in hindsight, different steps that should have been taken before and during conflict
- other possible options for resolving parent-school conflicts

FINDINGS

The study found eight categories of factors that have a bearing on how parent-school conflict intensifies or cools down:

- differing (discrepant) views about a child or a child's needs
- knowledge
- service delivery
- reciprocal power
- constraints
- valuation

- communication
- trust (this is the basis for many of the conflict-related issues)

In any given conflict, more than one of these categories can be operating simultaneously in ways that escalate, de-escalate or limit conflict. Here are the study findings for each category.

► **Discrepant views of a child or a child's needs**

Ninety percent of participants identified this as a factor that causes or fuels conflict. Parents thought that differing views happened for two reasons: either the school did not view their child as an individual with unique talents and abilities, or it saw their child through a deficit-model perspective, focusing only on the child's weaknesses. School officials reported that parents would become "single-minded" about what was right for their child and, therefore, reject good programming suggestions. One mediator perspective was that students may display a skill outside of school, but not in school, and that parents may see only the former while school personnel see only the latter, so each side draws different, incomplete conclusions.

► **Knowledge**

Parents, educators and mediators all cited the lack of two things – problem-solving knowledge and communications strategies – as conflict-escalating factors. One school official's suggestion was that special education directors and school personnel ought to readily provide that knowledge to parents, lest they seek it from outside agencies. Parents lamented that an "imbalance" of knowledge – where parents lack the information that school officials already have – makes it very hard to advocate on behalf of their children. All three groups said parents are unsure if the knowledge they have is sufficient to make sound judgments about the evaluations and services their children are receiving. Too often, parents discover their lack of knowledge when the first conflict arises over their children's educational program.

► **Service delivery**

Parents, educators and mediators all touched on the lack of programming options that existed, along with the inability to effectively anticipate and plan in advance for what children with disabilities need. Giving parents a role in early-stage planning made it more likely that parents would buy into programs. Two mediator viewpoints were noteworthy: schools should continuously reassess their program options for relevance, and when parents want a private placement, school officials should have a supportive dialogue with them to determine why they want that outside program. Parents reported the use of independent advocates and evaluators to assist them with the "gray areas" of disagreements over quality of services, definition of inclusive services, instructional programs and case management.

► **Constraints**

Resource constraints – on time, money, personnel and materials – are factors affecting conflicts. Finances, in particular, made conflicts worse, according to parents, special education directors and mediators alike. They tended to create "turf battles", where parents of children with severe disabilities feel too much money is going to serve mildly-disabled children, while parents of less severely-disabled children think the funding bias goes in the

other direction. Suspicions could arise about money being the unstated, hidden reason to deny services. School principals also fought over allocations between general and special education funding.

► **Valuation**

It was important to both sides to be considered partners in the relationship. Devaluation happened when either party felt lied to or suspected the other party withheld information. Parents felt devalued if they believed that school officials shortchanged or underestimated their children. School officials noted that conflicts got worse if parents were not entirely honest with them or open about their feelings. Parents were sensitive to perceived condescension from school officials and felt let down if they thought the school system could not properly serve their children's needs.

► **Reciprocal power**

Parents and school administrators engaged in power plays to get the upper hand in conflict, either consciously or unconsciously. Parents had to be more tenacious to get their way, but whoever won, the struggle took an emotional toll on everybody involved.

► **Communication**

When communication was lacking, misunderstood, untrue, deceitful or withheld, conflicts tended to escalate. The same was true if people felt they were not being heard or listened to. Parents felt intimidated from communicating when the schools brought too many officials to team meetings. On the flip side, parents and school officials alike praised mediation with a neutral third party for allowing them to feel safe and comfortable, open up, and achieve true communication about their needs and feelings, often for the first time.

► **Trust**

If parents felt they could trust school personnel, it was much easier to tolerate small glitches or minor mistakes. When that trust was broken or lacking, parents lost faith in the process and school officials and disdained suggestions from them. School officials were, in some cases, unaware of the point at which a parent chose to stop trusting or believing in the school's ability to make things right for the student. In time, parents who did not trust the school stopped hoping for good outcomes or mutual communication, and started asking for out-of-district placements, changes of schools, mediation or due process hearings.

DISCUSSION

Some basic conclusions could be draw from this study, among them:

- When factors that lead to conflict are identified, it is easier to understand the conflict.
- If school officials can identify what parents need, and separate those needs from the parents' positions, they can bridge gaps between parent and school perspectives. The same thing happens when educators take seriously the parents' long- and short-term goals for their children.

- Educators must pay attention to the whole child – strengths, desires, needs and goals – and not just the child’s deficits.
- Financial constraints can impede the ability of IEP Teams to make important decisions about a child’s educational programming.
- Parents cannot advocate for their children if they do not have enough knowledge to understand if particular service offerings are appropriate.
- Power struggles between parents and schools can be defused when educators develop strong, reciprocal relationships with parents and children. Good communication, problem-solving and negotiating skills are vital to these relationships.
- Both parents and educators are responsible for building and maintaining trust. It is up to both to have conciliatory and collaborative attitudes when disputes happen.
- Conflict is not necessarily bad if both sides view it as an opportunity for growth, change, creative problem-solving and improved self-assessment and skill testing.

As the researchers who conducted this study noted, too little is known about how parents involved in special education conflicts view the dynamics of those conflicts. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) promotes early resolution to special education disputes. Understanding the parental perspective, especially on the handling of situations that escalate conflict, is crucial for developing effective resolution strategies.

The Research: An Analysis of Factors That Contribute to Parent-School Conflict in Special Education, Jeannie F. Lake and Bonnie S. Billingsley. Published in Remedial and Special Education, Volume 21, Number 4, July/August 2000, Pages 240-251.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Useful Ideas for Special Education Advocates and Parents: A Mini-Guide To Alternative Dispute Resolution, The Advocacy Institute, 2006.
Available at: <http://www.advocacyinstitute.org/resources/ADRMMini-Guide.pdf>



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