



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SURVEY QUALITATIVE REPORT 2017-19

REPORT

Qualitative analysis across three years of Indicator 8 Family Engagement Survey Data, 2016-17 through 2018-19.

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Executive Summary

Each year, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WI DPI) surveys families of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) being educated in public schools as part of a federally required data collection, Indicator 8, to identify the “percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.” The survey allows parents the opportunity to provide open ended comments to WI DPI and their local school district. This report describes themes in three years of written feedback on this Family Engagement Survey (2017 - 2019), that inform two key questions: 1) what are the areas that families feel are working well in their child's IEP meetings and special education services, and 2) what are the areas where families feel they need more support? Comments relevant to these two key questions were further broken down into these specific topics: Positive Staff Experiences, Individualized Education Programs, Communication, Inclusion, Child Improvement, Knowledge of Impairment Areas and Associated Disability-Related Needs, Community Programs, Transition Needs, and Peer Relationships.

Areas working well for families included the following:

- supportive staff interactions, beneficial relationships between staff and children, and staff efforts to help children learn and grow;
- respectful, informative, thorough, and adaptable IEPs that effectively serve their child’s needs;
- an inclusive school environment with children in classrooms and activities with students without IEPs, thriving in a school experience customized to their needs and abilities;
- growth for their child’s life, such as academic progress, social gains, increased skills, and positive changes in confidence and attitude;
- and informative, consistent, proactive, receptive, and frequent communication with school staff.

Areas where families felt they needed more support included the following:

- challenging, insufficient, or disrespectful communication with school staff
- a gap in staff knowledge about specific impairment areas and associated disability-related needs as well as the need for training in educational and developmental practices that help children with these impairment areas and associated disability-related needs;
- understanding IEP processes and options, scheduling IEP meetings, feeling valued, and ensuring the IEP best meets the needs of their child and is followed as written;
- community programs, services, and resources to connect with;
- transition between schools and grades, and life after high school;
- and social elements such as bullying, mentoring, and peer interactions.

Survey Background

Families play a valuable role in the education of their children. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that parents with a child in public school have the opportunity to participate on Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams for their child. As outlined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (<https://dpi.wi.gov/sped/about/state-performance-plan/indicators/8-parent-involvement>), rights and procedural safeguards should be explained to parents throughout the special education process, and parents can participate in any meetings about their child's identification as a child with a disability, their child's evaluation, and their child's educational placement, as well as any meetings about the provision of a free appropriate public education to their child. More details about parents' rights in the special education process can be found here:

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sped/families/rights>.

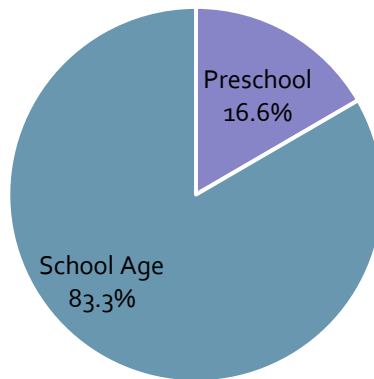
Each year, states must measure how well schools are facilitating engagement among families with children receiving special education services. The results of this assessment are one of sixteen indicators reported to the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in each state's Annual Performance Report (see <https://dpi.wi.gov/sped/about/state-performance-plan/apr> for more information about Wisconsin's Annual Performance Report to OSEP). Indicator 8 assesses the percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.

Wisconsin's Family Engagement Survey gathers feedback from families of both school age and preschool age children, to collect data for Indicator 8. The state is divided into 5 groups of Local Educational Agencies (LEAs, commonly known as school districts), and each of these groups are designed to be representative of the state as a whole. A different group is surveyed every 5 years. The survey is typically administered in spring and summer, either online or on paper, and it can be completed on behalf of the family member by someone else if needed. Quantitative results from this survey are analyzed by staff at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and are not a part of this report. Respondents can provide optional written comments on the survey, and choose whether their comments will be shared with the Special Education Director of their child's school district. Not all survey respondents provided written feedback for analysis. This report summarizes themes and content in families' comments that inform the two key questions of analysis: areas working well for families in their IEP meetings and special education services, and areas where families feel they could use more support.

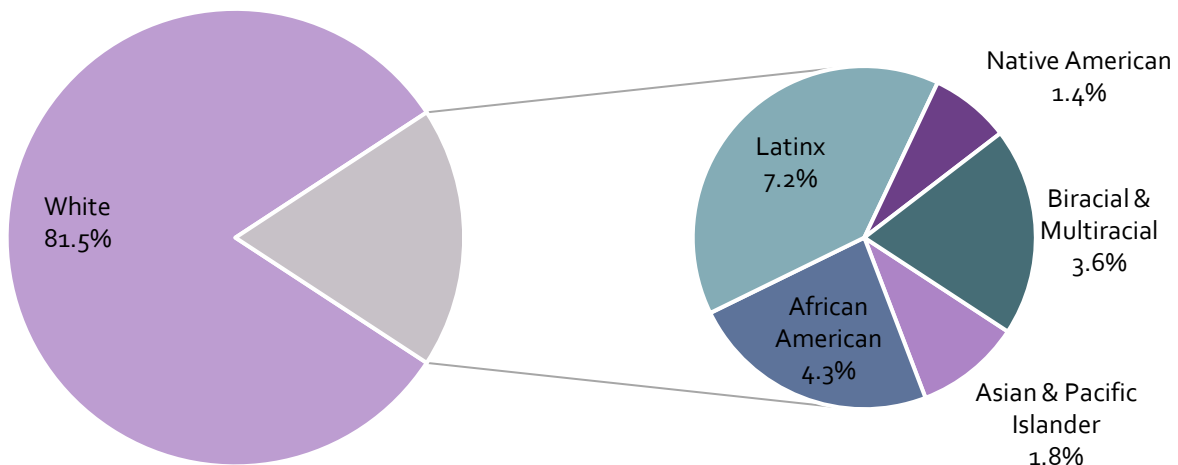
Results

Respondent Demographics

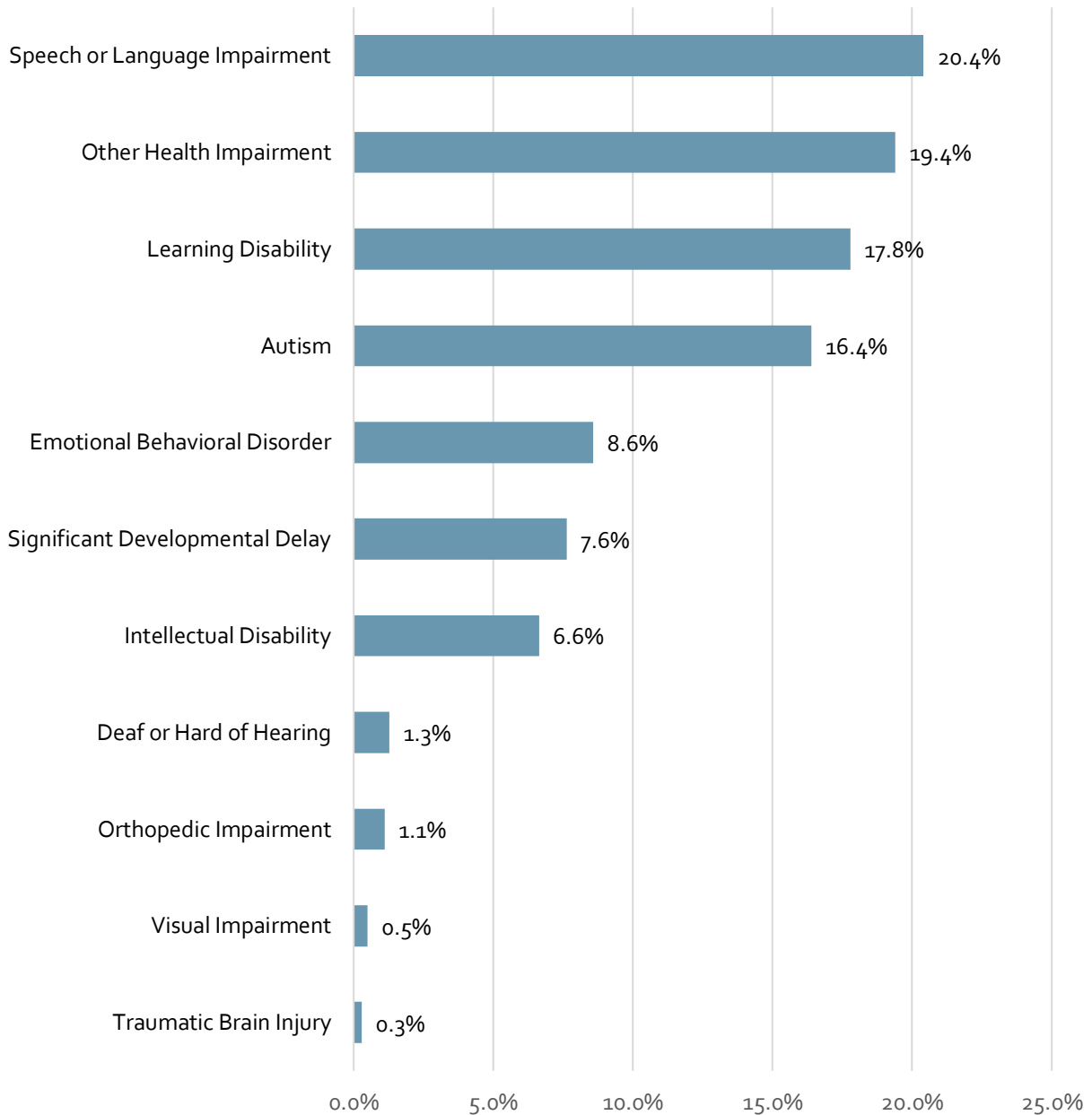
A total of 1794 qualitative responses were analyzed for this report. The majority of responses reflected the experiences of school age children (about 83% of responses were from families of school age children and 17% from families of preschool children, consistently each year).



The majority of respondents' children were White (81.5%), and 18.5% were children of Color (primarily Latinx, African American, and Biracial and Multiracial).



Responses were largely from families of children with the primary impairment areas of Intellectual Disability, Significant Developmental Delay, Specific Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment, Autism, Speech or Language Impairment, and Emotional Behavioral Disability. Responses were rare from families of children with the primary impairment areas of Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, or Deaf or Hard of Hearing (10 or fewer each year).



Themes in Responses

Summaries of themes in respondents' descriptions of areas working well for them and areas where they need more support are provided below. For some themes, there were descriptions both of this area working well and this area needing more support, and for others, the descriptions were focused on either working well or needing more support.

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

Successful IEPs: Working Well for Families

These comments described experiences with the IEP process and content that were respectful, informative, thorough, adaptable, and served their child's needs well. Respondents referred to staff accommodating their busy work schedules when scheduling the IEP meetings, being responsive to requests for initial evaluations, explaining each step of the process, and working very closely with the family. In IEP meetings, respondents described decisions being made as a team about what would best meet the needs of their child. Respondents expressed appreciation that IEP meetings were student-centered, focused both on their child's strengths and strategies to help address their weaknesses.

Respondents described feeling like an equal player and active decision maker during IEP meetings, never feeling rushed. Respondents expressed that their input was welcome, and their concerns were heard and attended to in a way that best met the needs of their child. IEP meetings were referred to as helpful, focused, comprehensive, easy, constructive, thorough, and timely, with staff that were patient, concerned, supportive, and professional. Respondents described being happy with accommodations and instruction their child received through the IEP, and noted that the school was doing a good job of following through on it, providing outstanding services and taking appropriate actions to ensure a quality education for their child, with additional IEP meetings set for any necessary changes.

IEP Issues: Families Need Support

These comments described understanding IEP processes and options, scheduling IEP meetings at accessible times, accessing evaluation and assessment for their child, feeling valued during IEP meetings, and ensuring the IEP is best meets the needs of their child, is documented accurately, and is followed as written. More explanation of the IEP laws, standards, family's role, rights, and steps were mentioned as being useful for families new to the IEP process, as well as explanations for jargon used in an IEP.

Respondents described challenges with getting their child assessed and evaluated in a timely manner, and struggles with the burden of testing falling to the parents instead of the school. A lack of cooperation from the school was also detailed, such as staff discouraging an IEP even though the child qualified, needing to see the child fail before accepting that the child needed supports, resisting an assessment because the child lacked the behavior problems teachers saw in other children, or refusing mediation.

The timing of IEP meetings during parents' working hours was listed as a challenge. Respondents described difficulty getting the school to agree to schedule an IEP meeting, even following a behavioral issue. Respondents described being treated as though they had done something wrong by simply asking for a mutually agreeable IEP date. Some respondents noted they had not been contacted for an IEP meeting at all this year. Legal timelines for IEPs were described as not being adhered to and legally required personnel not present. Rather than focusing IEP meetings on ensuring it was written in adherence with the proscribed format or a focus on the child's behavior, respondents expressed a preference that IEP meetings be more focused on content, positives, academics, and specific input from specialists. Respondents described wishing staff involved with their child would attend IEP meetings, such as paraprofessionals and nurses.

Respondents explained that it felt as though decisions about their child had already been made by school staff prior to the meeting - they were told how it would be rather than allowing opportunities for feedback, negotiation, or customization for their child's specific needs. IEP documents were described as preset boilerplates, repeating the same language and goals from previous years, with dated information presented as current. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with a sense that convenience for the school took precedence over services that would best serve their child, and dissatisfaction with a mentality that anything not identified during the IEP meeting did not have to be provided during the year. Respondents expressed feeling that the school only paid lip service to Special Education law, offering their child the bare minimum of what was required. IEP meetings were described as feeling disorganized, threatening, and unproductive, and that meetings felt like a witch hunt to find problems. During IEP meetings, respondents described feeling rushed, bullied, ignored, ganged up on, dismissed, and handled and as though they did not know what they were talking about.

When respondents received a written copy of the IEP, they noted it did not resemble what was discussed in the meeting. Respondents also described necessary services for their child being phased

out of IEPs, staff minimizing or eliminating accommodations their child needed, and disagreeing with a school's decision that their child no longer needed services. Respondents referred to needing to repeatedly check up on the school, or ask their child, in order to determine whether the IEP was being properly implemented. Respondents outlined the ways their child's IEP was not being put into practice, including promised accommodations and services not being provided for the amounts and times specified (or not at all), accommodations not being given during tests, old IEPs being followed instead of the new IEP, inappropriately punishing the child for things related to their disability-related needs, and their child's services being removed without an IEP meeting. Items agreed upon during mediation were described as not implemented, breaking respondents' trust in school staff. Respondents expressed that the school refused to provide services and accommodations, and had a history of involving the police so that children ended up with criminal records and the school could then kick the children out of the school.

Respondents also outlined a need for all staff who have contact with their child to be aware of the details of their child's IEP, the necessary accommodations that should be provided to their child, and explanations of behavioral triggers and appropriate discipline related to the child's disability-related needs. Respondents described regular education teachers being completely unaware that their child had an IEP or its contents, as well as regular education teachers who were insensitive to needs of children with IEPs, giving unrealistic homework expectations and testing their children without needed accommodations. Respondents listed substitute teachers, gym, art, and music teachers, bus drivers, and cafeteria personnel as examples of staff interacting with their child at school who needed to follow their child's IEP. Maintaining consistent staff instead of frequent changes was also mentioned as beneficial for their child.

Communication

Good Communication: Working Well for Families

These comments described communication with school personnel that was informative, consistent, proactive, receptive, and frequent. Families expressed appreciation for open and honest communication with their school that was helpful and consistent, that their school did a great job of keeping them in the loop and up to date, and that staff were easy to get ahold of. Respondents outlined the ways school staff thoroughly went over educational options for their child, provided great

explanations for their child's goals, detailed plans to meet their child's needs, shared information about their child's performance, answered all of their questions, and made things easy to understand.

Respondents described proactive communication efforts from the school, such as recognizing their child's struggles and immediately contacting them, asking parents to communicate any issues to them right away, sharing beneficial opportunities, and contacting the family when there was something new or different going on with their child, when their child is doing great things, and when there were changes coming (so the family could prepare their child). Respondents described experiences of staff listening well to their concerns and expectations, considering their ideas, and being dedicated to their input. Families expressed appreciation for being able to honestly express concerns, opinions, and feedback with the staff, even if these differed from staff's opinions.

Frequent, consistent contact with school staff was referenced by respondents, such as weekly or daily updates, personally connecting with them after every class, sending them regular reminders of what their child was working on and how their child was doing, and keeping them as informed through emails, phone calls, texts, and in person conversations. Responsive communication with school staff was also noted, with staff being easily contactable, promptly addressing concerns and answering questions, being available at any time, and returning calls after hours or on weekends. Respondents also mentioned being able to ask questions of anyone at the school. Helpful communication tools listed by respondents included notes sent home, a daily communication sheet, emails about grades and missed assignments, and a journal for family questions, lessons, homework, and class topics.

Poor Communication: Families Need Support

These comments described patterns of communication with school personnel that respondents felt was challenging, insufficient, or disrespectful. Respondents described wanting more frequent communication from teachers and therapists about their child's progress on homework, grades, or IEP goals, in formats like weekly updates, a monthly report, or an email every month or two. Contact information for all staff that work with their child was listed as a potentially helpful reference, as well as more communication between school staff and the child's doctors. When there were behavioral issues or academic concerns, respondents mentioned wanting to hear about these more quickly. Respondents described wanting to learn more from the school about areas their child is working on or struggling with, to maintain the continuity of these lessons and implement effective skills and practices at home, through materials, homework lists, and guidelines about how to practice at home. In addition,

respondents expressed a desire to learn more about their child's accomplishments (and not just problems) to have an opportunity to provide positive feedback to their child. Meetings only once or twice a year were explained to be inadequate in a context of children's rapidly changing needs. Parents that did not co-habitate with the other parent referenced not receiving communication from the school about their child. Specific information about what supports and services their child was receiving, in what contexts, from what staff, and with what frequency, was described as challenging to get.

Respondents also described calls from the school about the child's behavior that they considered too frequent. Questions from the school about not knowing how to deal appropriately with their child's behaviors or how to help educate their child were mentioned as uncomfortable, coming from trained professionals who respondents felt had more knowledge in this area.

Additional school communication patterns that respondents outlined they could use more support with included ignoring parents, blaming parents for challenges their child was experiencing, not believing their child's diagnosis, invalidating the family's concerns, and a lack of school responses regarding rights and resolutions. Specifically, respondents referred to a lack of professionalism from school staff, feeling intimidated, patronized, their complaints dismissed without resolution, and fearing retaliation towards themselves or their child if they said anything about this.

Integration

Inclusion: Working Well for Families

These comments described a school environment where children with IEPs were present in classrooms and activities with students without IEPs, and thriving in a school experience customized to their needs and abilities. Respondents described their child reintegrating and succeeding in regular education classrooms with a community of their peers. Regular education teachers were observed to be mindful of potential overstimulation, providing emotional and educational support without making their child feel different, and ensuring complete inclusion in grade level classes for their child. Respondents described a very helpful co-teaching environment, where immediate special education services were provided right in the room, instead of delaying support until a later designated special education time.

Respondents also noted that staff helped to provide optimized ACT testing, meet their child's social needs at meals and recess, and get their child into the community to do a work study. Respondents

explained that these experiences were accomplished through a combined effort of the regular and special education teachers working in tandem and working closely with the family. An impressive sense of school community was outlined, where their child had kind, helpful, and understanding classmates, did not feel out of place, participated in sports, was well liked, had excellent grades, and was included in all school activities, which made their child feel empowered and excited for school.

Peer Relationships: Families Need Support

These comments described social elements such as bullying, mentoring, and peer interactions that respondents need more support with. Respondents requested that the school look for ways to help students without IEPs meaningfully engage with students with IEPs to build peer relationships, such as a peer mentoring program. A more respectful school culture was cited as important, as well as more peer sensitivity training related to classmates with IEPs. Bullying from students without IEPs was noted as an ongoing problem requiring better prevention and prompt intervention from staff, as well as issues with social exclusion and isolation. Respondents described their child getting in trouble after being picked on by classmates, their child being physically assaulted and the bullies not getting disciplined enough, concerns their child had become a target for bullying because of previous behavioral issues, and their school's policy that a formal complaint needed to be written to the school district's office in order for bullying incidents to be addressed.

Positive Staff Experiences: Working Well for Families

These comments described supportive staff interactions with the respondent's family, beneficial relationships between staff and children, and staff efforts to help children learn and grow. Respondents described approachable, talented, invested, compassionate, and committed staff going the extra mile for their children. Interactions with staff were characterized as encouraging and collaborative, making respondents feel like they were a valued participant, an equal partner, well informed, and in the driver's seat for their child's education. Respondents observed a deep level of care for their child among staff, trusted that staff had their child's best interest at heart, felt like staff were a part of their family, and were impressed that staff maintained a warm attitude toward their child even on challenging days. Sensitive, non-judgmental emotional support for the family was also listed by respondents as very valuable. Respondents expressed gratitude for the patient, trusting, and comfortable relationship staff

built with their child, respecting their child's dignity and helping their child feel as though someone cared about them and their needs.

Respondents noted that a wide range of staff were striving to support and engage their child, from the receptionists to the principal to the custodian, and that staff took the time to get to know their child well. Respondents described the ways school staff worked hard to grant everything their child needed, making the school and playground more physically accessible, providing accommodations, and going out of their way to create activities geared specifically to their child. Respondents expressed gratitude that staff maintained high expectations within their child's capabilities, and challenged their child to meet goals. Making learning activities enjoyable and fun for their child was mentioned by respondents, as well as staff acting as strong advocates for their child. Respondents appreciated that staff were striving to help their child prepare for a life beyond school, to realize their full potential as successful adults.

Knowledge of Impairment Areas and Associated Disability-Related Needs: Families Need Support

These comments described a gap in knowledge about specific impairment areas and the need for training in best educational and developmental practices that help children with these impairment areas. Respondents expressed a need for professional development for teachers to better understand each student's impairment area and learning style, and the need for teachers to have a compassionate and informed context for their child's behavior. Specific issues mentioned included the lack of structure for teaching children who are twice-exceptional, teachers not being trained to recognize autism, schools not being equipped to teach children with ADHD, more resources for children with dyslexia, understanding that children with mental health issues can't just be expected to push through and get their work done, and more trauma informed care for teachers in all classrooms. Respondents also outlined experiences of staff requesting the family's help to do a lesson plan for the child because the staff did not know what to do.

Respondents expressed concerns about situations where their child's teachers and aides were not sufficiently trained to understand their child's specific behavioral needs, that special education staff were incapable of evaluating what a child who does not use verbal communication actually knows, and that staff without a teaching degree were working with children with extreme behaviors. Respondents also described the school starting a behavioral intervention plan for their child, but not completing a functional analysis to determine where the child's behavior was rooted, not specifying the supports to

be used, and the plan being reinforced with negative reinforcement rather than positive consequences. A mentality among staff that children with IEPs were acting out on purpose, rather than seeking to identify a trigger for challenging behaviors, was outlined as a concern as well. Respondents expressed concerns that staff did not understand that their child was trying, and that when their child was struggling to focus, it was not their child's fault, that staff were setting their child up for failure, and that symptoms of their child's disability-related needs were being viewed as bad behavior, including staff doing things that trigger their child and then not following the crisis plan and suspending their child. Respondents expressed concerns that their child's attitude, mental health, and motivation had taken a turn for the worse due to treatment from school staff.

Child Improvement: Working Well for Families

These comments described growth in the child's life such as academic progress, social gains, increased skills, a shift in their orientation to school itself, and positive changes in confidence and attitude. Respondents noted being pleased and impressed with their child's rapid progress and improvements, such as achieving goals, reaching milestones, getting on the right track, overcoming challenges, blossoming, and excelling beyond family members' expectations.

Children behind academically were described as getting ahead in their studies, showing a big impact in their learning abilities, achieving at grade level, earning As and Bs, and gaining competence in reading, writing, and mathematics. Specific gains in speech skills were also mentioned. Respondents described children gaining in self-confidence in their skills and capabilities, and becoming more secure in themselves personally and socially. Changes in their child's positive attitude and outlook on life were also noted. These changes included a shift from children hating and avoiding school, to looking forward to attending school and enjoying learning. Socially, respondents described their child becoming happier and more outgoing, learning to trust others, and enjoying friendships. Respondents also mentioned some improvements in their child's behavior, both in therapeutic and public settings.

Overall developmental growth was also described, such as maturing well and growing emotionally, getting better at knowing when to ask for help, learning to be more self-aware and figure out what options will work best that they can do independently, learning the tools they have within themselves, and challenging themselves to levels they previously didn't know they were capable of. Increased self-advocacy skills were mentioned, of children learning to be more outspoken for their own needs and

becoming strong advocates for themselves. The skills, connection, and dedication of school personnel were cited as responsible for these improvements in their child's life.

Community Programs: Families Need Support

These comments described the community programs, services, and resources that respondents needed more support connecting to. Respondents described wanting more information on community programs and referrals for resources that could help their child build confidence, social skills, and life skills outside of the classroom. Respondents expressed frustration at wanting to get more help for their child but not knowing how, and that they had to research and find community services their child could benefit from on their own. Respondents referred to their school not working well with anyone in the community and not distributing information about their local peer organization. Organizations supporting state artwork or essay competitions, the Special Olympics, and equine-assisted therapy were listed as resources respondents were interested in, as well as services for social support, financial training, and vocational supports. Respondents described significant difficulty finding child care and difficulty finding resources in their rural community. A parent support group of other families with children with IEPs was mentioned as a valuable option to get support and share information.

Transition Needs: Families Need Support

These comments described support needed for transition between schools and grades, as well as transition to life after high school. Respondents expressed concerns about transition, that their child was not being properly prepared with the necessary skills to function independently, and that transition services were completely missing (specifically, a lack of help with finding jobs, access to job information, or college readiness). Respondents also expressed that their child's school should have done a better job establishing expectations the family considered more realistic. Help with transitions from grade school to middle school and middle school to high school was mentioned. Respondents described a lack of social skills classes at school, and a need for information about post-secondary educational options and preparation. Transitioning from school to work was described as an area respondents could use much more assistance with, including when their child should start working, how to find their child a job, and career exploration and job shadowing opportunities. Respondents noted that the school should

share information about the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation or Earn and Learn programs, and provide activities outside of school relevant to their future life as adults.

Recommendations

Due to the variety of experiences families may be having with their schools, these summaries may seem inconsistent (for example, that communication from the school is both working well and is an area where families feel they need more support). Additional analyses with these data could potentially identify schools that seem to be consistently excelling in areas where other schools need to make adjustments. Further research with these schools, such as focus groups with staff and district administrators, could identify best practices to share and scale up across the state.

Testing the survey questions to ensure that they appear on computers and other devices as intended may be useful. A number of responses stated confusion with the questions and gave the impression that the questions were incomplete, so it is possible that the multi-part bullet points may not be working well with some technologies. Clearly explaining how respondents' written feedback may be used and who may see it would also be valuable. Some family members may believe that serious issues they are experiencing will be addressed as a result of describing them in detail on this survey. To help preserve their trust, a few statements could be added to the section of the survey asking for written feedback, perhaps outlining what to do and who to contact if violations of IDEA or other laws are occurring.

Finally, adding optional questions to the next survey about families' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic could help illuminate how school districts chose to navigate the requirements to provide services to students with IEPs during a period of school closure, what learning strategies were and were not effective, and how families coped with the sudden changes.