

Special Education Parents Provide School Support and Leadership



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Parents of students with special needs know the importance of having a solid plan in place to support their child for success. All students have varied needs, and students with disabilities need specific supports to help them reach the rigor of the academic standards taught in their classes. Resource teachers work with the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team to develop a plan for supports, then share this plan with general education teachers and other support providers. The goal is to ensure accommodations and supports are regularly in place so all of the students can find success. In inclusive classroom settings, general education and special education teams work together to support these needs. But, as many classroom teachers will tell you, even this amount of support is sometimes not enough.

Parents as Learning Partners

In the years after the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, there were obvious gaps in learning, so much so that in California, IEP team meetings included a new topic of discussion: how to address learning loss. To address this difficult issue, parents are vital participants in the IEP process, but they can further engage with the school community beyond attending an IEP meeting. It was not just students with special needs who suffered during the pandemic. Across the board, students returned to school with gaps in social, emotional, and academic development. These gaps will take years to close and they are leaving many schools and educators stressed and worried about meeting the needs of all the children in their classes.

Parents as Classroom Volunteers

Fortunately, parents are a largely untapped resource in most schools. Schools and parents need to work together to identify ways for parents to engage in classrooms with all students. Having an extra adult regularly helps teachers manage the vast needs of their students. Parents who are confident academically can volunteer as room parents who work with kids on reading, math, or supplementary academic practice. In the 21st century, this could be as simple as monitoring students who are using computers or iPads in the classroom to ensure they don't stray from their lesson while the teacher work with another small group. Or, parents may be able to sit with a student or group of students who may regularly disrupt the class. Often, just the presence

of an adult or a nearby, watchful eye is enough to keep students on task.

Parents as Academic Learners

Obviously, not all parents have the ability to come to the classroom to support. For these parents, evening sessions about how to work with their children at home are key. Parents can attend a math night to learn about strategies for supporting number sense and mathematical reasoning at home, or come to a literacy night to learn more about what expectations they should have for reading at home. Alignment between home and school are critically important for student development, especially for those students who experienced learning loss after the pandemic. There is simply not enough time for students to catch up during school, but if the school and parents collaborate to push daily learning and growth at home and at school, we can make up for those gaps in development.

Parents Support Their Children's Academic Successes

Research is clear that when parents are involved at the school and stress the importance of education, students do better. However, merely attending school workshops or showing up to Back to School Night are not enough. While these too are important activities, we need a higher level of intentionality from parents and schools to address the current needs of our students. When we work together with common goal and purpose, we will see great things from our kids and our communities!