



Keys to Success in the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) Parent-School Partnership

School Partners

When individuals or groups join together to work toward a common goal, a partnership is formed. Successfully reaching a common goal requires mutual cooperation and a sharing of responsibilities. Though the applications differ, the principles used to satisfy personal and business partnerships are much the same.

In this important venture, the common goal is the effective education of children with disabilities in your school district. Years of research show that the more families are involved in their child's education, the more successful the child will be in school and in life.

The success of a common goal depends on the strength of the relationship between those working together to achieve it. A productive parent-school partnership will pay big dividends for its primary beneficiaries—your school district's children.

Partnership Essentials

Good Communication

- Be a good listener. Give your full and complete attention. Try not to interrupt. Don't begin formulating your response while the other person is still talking.
- When you are upset or confused, ask questions instead of making accusations. Resist making snap judgments based on what is possibly limited information. Ask school staff to explain things using language you understand.
- Remember that your tone of voice, facial expression, and body language often speak louder than your words
- Label opinions as opinions. If someone states an opinion as fact, ask for the data (factual information) that supports it.
- Use "we" language as much as possible. The education of children is a team effort. "You" language can cause the person being addressed to feel defensive rather than cooperative.

Honesty, Accountability, and Trust

- Give and expect complete and accurate information
- Keep your commitments. If you can't make a meeting, call ahead of time.
- Keep information confidential. When school staff trusts you with information, honor that trust by using the information appropriately.
- Complete trust is developed over time. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Respect

- Treat others with the same level of consideration and respect you desire and expect from them
- As a member and partner in the school community, respect the variety of needs and concerns among students and staff members
- Let people know when they are doing a good job

Second Chances and Fresh Starts

- When mistakes are made, try to resolve them quickly and completely; then wipe the slate clean and move forward. The goal is to direct the energy and effort in this partnership toward the effective education of children in your school district.
- Try to approach each new school year as an opportunity for a fresh start for everyone, regardless of past issues or conflicts

Partnership Challenges

Different Expectations, Perspectives, and Opinions

- The very differences that make a partnership challenging can give it strength. Children and their needs are complex and benefit from being looked at and addressed in more than one way.
- Partnerships are based on what each party brings to the table. In the parent-school partnership, you as the parent are the expert on parenting a child with a disability. Each school staff partner has their own particular area of expertise and experience. Each side of the partnership can learn from the other about how to better meet the developmental and educational needs of children with disabilities.

Roles and Responsibilities

- While parents have more knowledge about their child, they can be at a disadvantage when it comes to knowledge about education in general, and special education in particular. It's important for parents to understand their rights and responsibilities and how the system works. Ask for and read the school district and/or local school parent handbook. A free handbook on rights and responsibilities for parents of children with disabilities, *Parents Can Be the Key*, is available from PACER Center. PACER offers many other parent-friendly materials and resources.
- Difficulties in partnerships can often be traced to a misunderstanding about what each partner's role is and who is responsible for which tasks. Ask questions to identify the school staff partners who have the authority to make decisions about various issues.

Conflict

- Make it your aim to disagree without being disagreeable. Separate the person from the problem.
- Focus more on identifying possible remedies or solutions than dissecting the problem itself
- When there is a disagreement about how to approach an area of concern, be willing to consider something new. When handled well and resolved correctly, respectful conflict and further discussion can lead to positive outcomes for children.

While working in partnership may be challenging, it can also be rewarding. Partners can gain new perspectives and learn new skills. Through mutual cooperation and sharing responsibilities, the parent-school partnership can accomplish its ultimate goal of enabling all children with disabilities to succeed in learning and in life.