



# Issue Brief

## Concord Lakes Community Forum

was held on February 9, 2010 at the Merrimack Valley High School cafeteria in Penacook, NH in collaboration with the Merrimack Valley School District and Special Education Directors to further understand "Parent Involvement in Special Education."

We posed a **pre-assessment question** to participants before the forum:

What would the outcomes of parent involvement in special education look like?



**NH Connections** is a project of Parent Information Center and funded by the NH Department of Education - Bureau of Special Education to provide technical assistance, workshops, and resources to schools/school districts to enhance strategies to support parent involvement in the Special Education process.

## What would the outcomes of parent involvement in special education look like?

Here is a sample of the responses:

- ◆ A collaborative effort between home/school, where the parent also feels empowered and truly part of the process. Parents would be treated as equals and be involved in every step. Parents frequently communicating with school staff (not just at IEP time).
- ◆ Improved communication with all parties-open and honest with no surprises on either side of the table. A team where all participants feel comfortable communicating. All input would be taken seriously and not shot down.
- ◆ If more parents would become involved with special education they would understand the process and help their child succeed with their future.
- ◆ Parents looked upon and used as experts of their child. Not seen as "helicopter" parents when sharing information.
- ◆ Educators would be the educational expert and parents would be the "customer."
- ◆ School staff offering parent education programs on supporting their kid's education and parents attending.
- ◆ Administrators/special education staff would be aware and sensitive to the needs/questions frequently asked by parents.
- ◆ Children's school needs would be identified. The students would benefit with greater communication between home and school. The school could better serve the needs of the individual's strengths and weakness. It would be a win/win situation.
- ◆ A collaborative effort to make the system work for the children by all team members (teachers, parents, related services) to provide an individual education that meets the child's needs in all areas of their day, not always just during school hours making the school more successful. I would expect parents and professionals would collaborate in keeping the student at the center of planning, as well as the execution of those plans.

**Forum participants included 33 attendees:** 10 educators, 14 parents, 3 parent/paraeducators, 2 parent/educator, 2 community service providers, 3 NHC staff.

**SAUs represented:** 2, 8, 46, 53, 72, 73, and 80.

**School districts represented:** Penacook, Boscawen, Salisbury, Andover, Loudon, Inter-Lakes, Shaker Regional, Concord, Pembroke, Gilford, Alton, and Holderness.

**A world café style forum** was chosen to facilitate the discussion around three guided questions:

**Question one:**

What would your vision of parent involvement in special education look like?

**Question two:**

What parent involvement happens in our schools today?

**Question three:**

What challenges prevent us from improving parent involvement in special education?



**Conversations were held to address each question** with each participant having the opportunity to speak. Notes of the discussions were taken by the table moderators.

**Participants reviewed the comments from each question and then voted** on a top priority under each question.

**The results of the voting** are what the participants see as the priorities for proposed action items.

## What would your vision of parent involvement in special education look like?

- ◆ Meet parents throughout the year to develop a relationship instead of just (IEP) meetings; offer classes/informal meetings to come together and have a discussion.
- ◆ Parents as equal partners; empower parents to lessen conflict.
- ◆ Allow the team to openly communicate without censorship, gather and disseminate information to all team members (including parents); set up specific expectations ahead of time so all come prepared to discuss the issue.
- ◆ Communication that is open, honest and respectful resulting in people who are comfortable asking what they want.
- ◆ Break down the barriers; approach situations in a non-confrontational way, give and receive positive feedback, and ask for help instead of demanding it.
- ◆ Parents invited to visit and see what a student's day is like and include a way to meet staff for the following year; parents have more input in teacher selection for the upcoming year - know their child's history and motivators.
- ◆ Show parents scope of educational experience K-12 in Special Education (not just year to year); educate parents to what test scores really mean along with the terminology; educate staff instead of asking for individual programs.
- ◆ Parent Advisory Committee (group or council) on Special Education/ Special Education PTA/Support Group at every school with regular meetings and child care provided with a liaison to attend other school meetings and report back.
- ◆ Mentors, parent networks- communicate through newsletter with tips, family resource centers or list of where to find information and resources; schools offer parent to parent connections to develop support system.
- ◆ Know that there are differences between home and school. "It doesn't happen at school/we see this all the time at home."
- ◆ Creative ways to hold meeting considering that time is often an obstacle -phone conferencing, teleconferencing, and webinars.
- ◆ Monthly newsletter for parents to cover various topics: tools that schools use; raise disability awareness/education; disseminate information about events.
- ◆ Need a standard practice for how to communicate (for parents and educators), and people know where to find it; need one contact person/ case manager as contact for Special Education students as they are in the loop.
- ◆ Belief in true inclusion from top down - general education teachers capable and wanting to educate all students and fostering inclusion.
- ◆ Include students in conferences more often to develop self-advocacy skills and training in Special Education process.

## Priorities of Concord Lakes

### From question one:

- Parent advisory group on special education.
- Educate parents on the meaning of test scores.
- Parent/teacher taking workshops together.
- Celebrate successes.

### From question two:

- Parent to parent outreach (we want more of it).
- Special committees to include parents.
- Evening seminars for parents.

### From question three:

- Time constraints and childcare.
- Parents not knowing the special education process.
- "Us" versus "Them" mentality.

**During the spring of 2010, the Regional Support Network (RSN) will create action plans to address the above priorities.**



### Next Regional Support Network

**(RSN) meetings** will be held again in collaboration with Merrimack Valley School District at the Merrimack Valley High School, 106 Village Street, Penacook, NH

**March 2, 2010 (6 - 8:00 pm)**

**April 8, 2010 (6 - 8:00 pm)**

**May 13, 2010 (6 - 8:00 pm)**

## What parent involvement happens in our schools today?

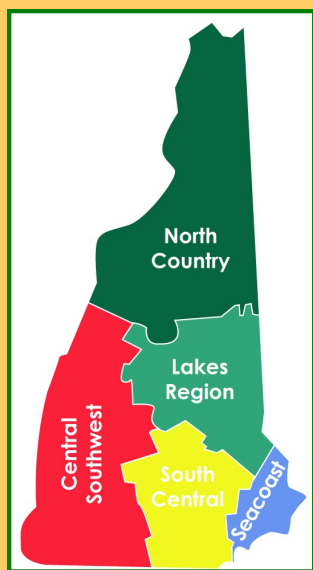
- ◆ Volunteering in classrooms, coordinator for grade level- to do clerical work and keep lists of volunteers, classroom moms, to provide child care
- ◆ Organize events or activities - open house, father-daughter dance, grade level school sleepover, back to school BBQ, foster grand- parents, art and talent shows, and school concerts.
- ◆ Workshops/ information night - career nights, multicultural nights, parenting programs, and family nights - math or reading activities.
- ◆ Pre-literacy event with information packets for children entering kindergarten.
- ◆ Chaperones - field trips, school dances, sports, extracurricular activities
- ◆ Parent Teacher Organizations, Parent Teacher Associations, Parent Teacher Groups
- ◆ Parent to parent network - whereby the school keeps a list of parents willing to share contact information if another parent asks for help or support.
- ◆ Library volunteer - finding materials for students, guest readers, presentations/activities
- ◆ IEP meetings
- ◆ Parent Teacher conferences
- ◆ Parent support group where parents of children who have transitioned into kindergarten and above return to Pre-K to help mentor parents.
- ◆ Parents on special committees- new school building committee, Title 1 parent meetings, accreditation committee, and hiring a new superintendent.
- ◆ Parents and students have the ability to check grades and homework online produced by teacher
- ◆ teacher's classroom newsletter or web page.
- ◆ Daily journals and monitoring homework.
- ◆ Phone calls
- ◆ Drug and alcohol seminars
- ◆ Anger management group
- ◆ Seminars
- ◆ Provide/Contribute to events

## Where do we go from here

now that we understand the priorities of the partners of the proposed action items in the Concord Lakes Region?

Meet on March 2, April 8, and May 13, 2010.

During the meetings, we will develop Action Plans at the level that you are comfortable with. Develop Regional, SAU, District Level, or School Level Action Plans.



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## What challenges prevent us from improving parent involvement in Special Education?

- ◆ Building trust between parents and educators can be difficult. At times the “us versus them” mentality gets in the way.
- ◆ Parents have limited knowledge of the Special Education process and/or their rights and may not know what to ask for; parents feel intimidated by not having knowledge of process this can lead to misconceptions about the process, intimidating for both sides.
- ◆ Unequal distribution of services.
- ◆ Time constraints, parents working/need to spend time with their children, too tired at the end of the day, work schedules, and children’s sports schedules. Educators have multiple responsibilities and other commitments.
- ◆ Some parents not interested, think it’s the school’s responsibility.
- ◆ Parents expect the school to be the expert. Sometimes parents do not want to deal with what happens at school.
- ◆ Some parents struggling to come to terms with their child’s disability.
- ◆ Parents need to feel comfortable, teachers need to be supportive and sensitive.
- ◆ Parent pressures for teacher accountability.
- ◆ Teachers have lots of responsibilities.
- ◆ Lack of funding in school and community to support parents needs to enable them to become involved.
- ◆ Schools fear parents’ request because they cannot fulfill some requests.
- ◆ Last minute knowledge or not sharing of all the information for teacher or parent which prevents them from fully participating and making informed decisions. Not kept up-to-date.
- ◆ Finding most efficient way to communicate with different teachers.
- ◆ Parents input is not valued.
- ◆ Past negative experience with staff or previous school can taint future involvement
- ◆ Educators may have negative perceptions of parents based on previous personal experiences.
- ◆ Educators have difficulty speaking a language a parent can understand.
- ◆ Educators attend too many meetings and spend too much time in them.
- ◆ Parents do not come to IEP meetings.
- ◆ Parents not sending back IEP suggestions to Special Education teacher.
- ◆ Split and/or divorced parents living in different towns with different educational views.

**Come join us to make a difference!!**