

Perspectives and Experiences With Special Education: Findings From Parent, Caregiver, and Young Adult Focus Groups

Executive Summary

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The PROGRESS Center provides information, resources, tools, and technical assistance services to support local educators in developing and implementing high-quality educational programs that enable children with disabilities to make progress and meet challenging goals.



Executive Summary

In 2021, the [PROGRESS Center](#), the [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#), and the [SPAN Parent Advocacy Network](#) administered surveys and conducted focus groups with parents and caregivers of students and with young adults who received special education services and supports for an identified disability within the past 5 years. The team investigated parent and young adult perspectives about developing and implementing their individualized education programs (IEPs), the extent to which having an IEP contributed to high school and post-high school success, and to what extent the quality of services supported educational goals.

The survey and focus groups concentrated on the IEP process, including how schools developed, monitored, and implemented IEPs. The following key findings emerged. Findings may be used to inform educational stakeholders supporting students with disabilities.

Parent and Caregiver Survey Findings

Eight parent and caregiver survey questions addressed parent and caregivers' perspectives in developing and implementing IEPs, the extent to which having an IEP contributed to high school and post-high school success, and to what extent the quality of services supported educational goals. The team conducted focus groups with 35 parents, representing 16 states and whom had students receiving services under 9 disability categories. The findings and supporting quotes in the subsequent section are all from parents and/or caregivers with children who were engaged in the special education process in their school.

- Less than half of parents and caregivers surveyed thought their child had been successful in school (i.e., 48% agreed or strongly agreed). Some parents defined success as their child making **academic progress toward goals**, and other parents defined success as the school and education system at large recognizing the strength of their child while holding **high expectations** for them.

“Special Education isn’t meant to be a lifelong sentence. It is support services to build and improve skill deficits. Students should exit special education; special education is too focused on being compliant for procedures versus providing FAPE [free appropriate public education].”

- Less than half (43%) of parents and caregivers found the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports their child received facilitated school success. Further, some parents noted **the support their child received did not match the child’s disability and/or academic needs** and that many accommodations were provided based on what was available and not what was developmentally appropriate.

“I would agree that the school does not understand his disability and does not have appropriate methodologies to meet his needs.”



- The majority (78%) of parents and caregivers reported their child felt **included in their education**. Yet despite responding positively to the survey for this question, several parents indicated their child often felt excluded from the academic portion of school. Some parents shared their child felt singled out or different because of their disability.

“The classroom isn’t differentiated—he feels singled out receiving support in his room and having to go to the ‘LC’ for study hall time.”

“I would say if they are sport/activity based, he feels included. If it requires any academic knowledge, he would shy away and choose not to participate.”

“I also feel that the school does a good job at providing all students lots of opportunities to explore areas of interest and get involved in projects, clubs, activities from a social perspective.”

- While some noted mixed experiences, the majority (63%) of parents and caregivers felt **included in the school community** (e.g., parent teacher association events, back-to-school night).

“I have felt my schools did a good job with parent engagement. I led our special education parent advisory committee for years, served a term on the school board, and participated on various stakeholder committees. These were roles focused on input and decision-making. The school also did a good job in providing more social activities.”

- The majority (63%) of parents and caregivers felt **meaningfully involved** in the development of their child’s IEP, describing opportunities to ask questions and offer suggestions as the IEP team discussed goals, supports, and student needs. However, some parents noted difficulty getting accurate information about special education, placement decisions, and their student's progress.

“I received test scores twice per year as per the testing requirements, each quarter for the IEP report card, and then monthly with attached data charts to support info in the written narrative.”

“We never were informed what an IEP was. [My child] was removed from advanced classes because they came up with excuses for him not to be allowed in the advanced classes.”

“I was consulted in goal-writing, but they were challenging discussions. I often felt I was educating team members about evidence-based practices and expectations in the area of reading.”

- Less than 34% of respondents shared they **regularly received data** about their child’s progress toward IEP goals. Many parents indicated a lack of utility and confusion about what the data communicated about their child’s progress. Some parents found that, after they advocated for more communication, the progress report communication improved.



“Progress monitoring was lacking, and it was often anecdotal or observational.”

“COVID has slammed the school doors shut [on us], even for IEP meetings.”

- **Less than 29%** of parents and caregivers thought their child received a **high-quality transition plan**.

“[It] doesn’t seem like the success of students with disabilities is a priority [in my district]. Parents here in my district are often pressured to designate ‘non-diploma’ track and transition plans for students with IEPs. [Transition plans] look totally different than typical learners.”

- Parents and caregivers who reported the educational programming met their child’s needs also recommended **early identification and interventions**, disability knowledge, evidenced-based practices, and parent and caregiver advocacy.

“Early intervention is key.”

“Overall, in regard to special education services, teachers and administrators need more training and knowledge on disabilities, assessment, intervention and special education law in general.”

“It would be helpful if teachers were trained in things like dyslexia.”

Young Adult Survey Findings

In addition to our conversation with parents and caregivers, the team spoke with 21 young adults, representing 16 states. These students all received special education services across a range of 10 disability categories. The findings and supporting quotes in the subsequent section are all from young adults with children who were engaged in the special education process in their school.

Seven young adult survey questions addressed young adult perspectives in developing and implementing IEPs, the extent to which having an IEP contributed to high school and post-high school success, and to what extent the quality of services supported educational goals.

- While the majority of young adults (67%) expressed that their teachers, principals, and other staff had **high expectations** for their educational programming, some young adults noted a mixed response of high and low expectations.

“I would say teachers and school had frustratingly both high and low expectations of me in different contexts.”



- The majority of young adults (81%) indicated their teachers helped them **reach their educational goals**, however some indicated they questioned their educators buy-in and/or interest in understanding their unique goals.

"[My goals] were written in my IEP, but I think they could have taken an interest in what my goals were."

- Fifty-five percent of young adults thought the IEP team **considered student input** when developing students' IEPs. Just under half of young adults (45%) disagreed, stating IEP members considered their parents' input but often **excluded students from the IEP development**.

"My mom was my spokesperson, but I attended my IEP meetings starting in late middle school. The dialogue we had about my IEP was less what do you really want and more of is this acceptable, and we negotiated."

"[The school team] always talks to the parents, not to us. Ask me too. Ask the students."

- Most young adults (88%) believed that having an IEP and the supports provided through the IEP were important to their success in school.

"Extra time was really the most important for me (I always used all of my extra time), and distraction-reduced environment to test in. Not having to use a scantron was helpful, as well as being allowed to walk out and take a break when I needed to."

- The majority of young adults (85%) felt included in their general and special education classrooms. Students who disagreed shared they were often pulled out during lunch, recess, and electives to receive specialized support. These students, separated from their general education peers, thought **the IEP was punitive**.

"There was a special ed teacher in addition to the main teacher in the general classroom who gave me extra support while not making me feel completely separated from my friends and classmates."

"In 4th grade, I was told I couldn't play at recess until I passed my multiplication facts, and I still don't have them all down."



“When I was in elementary school, I felt less included because I was pulled out for Resource Room and would miss much of what was happening. It got better as I was more mainstreamed, but I was still excluded from things such as AP [Advanced Placement] classes and discouraged from participating in some other activities. I felt fairly included because I had accommodations solely in general education classrooms. However, I was less available for extracurricular activities and lunch breaks in elementary school because I had to work longer on my assignments, homework, and relearning class material due to my slow processing speed and my auditory integration deficit.”

- Students want to be included in the development and implementation decisions of their IEPs.

“[The school team] didn’t understand my multiple disabilities, so how could they develop and IEP for my disabilities? It’s like giving a pair of glasses to a blind person.”

- Other young adult responses:

“[We need to] help train teachers to find and help those with problems.”

“I think teachers and school systems need to be better trained to identify students with disabilities. Advocating for a diagnosis and accommodations tends to fall on parents and students far too much in K–12 settings.”

Recommendations and Resources

Qualitative data analysis revealed eight overarching recommendations, which address both parent and young adult survey findings and responses.

Recommendation 1: Involve families and students in the IEP process. Parents, caregivers, and young adults want to be more involved in the development and implementation of students’ IEPs. Parents, caregivers, and young adults valued their roles in the IEP process. Districts should ensure meaningful participation of roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders on an IEP team.

- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center Self-Paced Learning Module “The IEP Team: Who’s Who and Other Considerations” (<https://promotingprogress.org/training/iep-team-whos-who-and-other-considerations>)
- RESOURCE: Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training & Support (WI FACETS) User Guide (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/serving-groups-make-decisions-guide-families>)
- RESOURCE: Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) Student-Led IEPs Webinar (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/student-led-ieps>)



Recommendation 2: Intervene early. Parents, caregivers, and young adults noted that early evaluation and early intervention were a key aspect of student success. Young adults noted that early disability identification and intervention were critical components for their success.

- RESOURCE: National Center on Intensive Intervention Website (<https://promotingprogress.org/training/introduction-intensive-intervention>)
- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center “Reviewing and Intensifying Instruction Practice Brief” (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/intensifying-instruction-brief>)

Recommendation 3: Communicate and collaborate often. Parents, caregivers, and young adults want to actively collaborate in the development and implementation of students’ educational programming. Schools and districts should support IEP teams, parents and caregivers, and students with disabilities by communicating often to share information about student progress and promote opportunities for engagement, problem solving, collaboration, and advocacy. School staff should proactively seek input from parents and students to help ensure they are valued, coequal members of the IEP team.

- RESOURCE: Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) “Inclusive Listening: Building Understanding, Supporting Understanding” Webinar (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/inclusive-listening-building-understanding-supporting-collaboration>)
- RESOURCE: CADRE *Engaging Parents in Productive Partnerships* User Guide (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/engaging-parents-productive-partnerships>)
- RESOURCE: National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities *Steps to Success: Communicating with Your Child’s School* User Guide (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/steps-success-communicating-your-childs-school>)

Recommendation 4: Build on strengths. Young adults valued customized and individualized educational programming and accommodations that were tailored to their needs and built on their strengths. Districts should set ambitious expectations for students across general and special education settings.

- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center *IEP Tip Sheet Series* (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-series>)
- RESOURCE: TIES Center *Planning for Instruction both at School and Distance Learning: The 5C Process* User Guide (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/planning-instruction-both-school-and-distance-learning-5c-process>)

Recommendation 5: Match accommodations. Parents, caregivers, and young adults noted the need for appropriate accommodations driven by student data and effectiveness, not just what is available or what schools are willing to provide. Districts should support the development and implementation of

high-quality educational programming by revisiting modification and accommodation supports to ensure they match students' individual support needs.

- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center Webinar: “Strategies for Setting High-Quality Academic Individualized Education Program Goals” (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/webinar-strategies-setting-high-quality-academic-IEP-goals>)
- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center Webinar: “Strategies for Setting Data-Driven Behavioral Individualized Education Program Goals” (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/webinar-strategies-setting-data-driven-behavioral-IEP-goals>)
- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center *IEP Tip Sheet: What are Supplementary Aids & Services* (https://promotingprogress.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/SuppAidsServ_IEP_Tips.pdf)

Recommendation 6: Provide inclusive opportunities. Parents, caregivers, and young adults want inclusive opportunities to engage with peers. Districts should provide individualized and appropriate inclusive educational programming for students with disabilities and include students with disabilities in academic and nonacademic activities.

- RESOURCE: TIES Center, *Instructional Practices for Students with the Most Significant Disabilities in Inclusive Settings: A Review of the Literature* (TIES Center Report #104) (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/instructional-practices-students-most-significant-disabilities-inclusive-settings-review>)
- RESOURCE: Council of Chief State School Officers, *Supporting Inclusive Schools for the Success of Each Child: A Guide for States on Principal Leadership* (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/supporting-inclusive-schools-success-each-child-guide-states-principal-leadership>)

Recommendation 7: Support transition needs. Parents, caregivers, and young adults highlighted the lack of transition supports (i.e., postsecondary employment and education and training goals). Districts should build young adult capacity in the areas of student advocacy, self-determination skills, disability rights, and accommodation needs for high school and post–high school transition success.

- RESOURCE: National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), *Transition Planning Tools* Webpage (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/transition-planning-tools>)
- RESOURCE: NTACT, *Top Transition Resources for Administrators* Fact Sheet (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/top-transition-resources-administrators>)
- RESOURCE: IRIS Center, *Secondary Transition: Interagency Collaboration* Online Module (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/secondary-transition-interagency-collaboration>)
- RESOURCE: CADRE, *Your Journey to Self-Determination* Series Online Module (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/your-journey-self-determination-series>)



Recommendation 8: Provide professional learning. Parents, caregivers, and young adults want teachers and support staff to have disability knowledge, evidenced-based practice professional development, and a general understanding of special education law. Districts should refine and expand IEP development and implementation training modules and resources to enhance high-quality educational programming and transition plan needs. In addition, districts should build educational stakeholder capacity to ensure a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities by increasing Individuals with Disabilities Education Act awareness through professional learning opportunities.

- RESOURCE: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Website (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/individuals-disabilities-education-act-website>)
- RESOURCE: PROGRESS Center Online Training Courses (<https://promotingprogress.org/training>)
- RESOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, *Questions and Answers (Q&A) on U.S. Supreme Court Case Decision Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1* (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/Endrew-OSERS-Questions-Answers>)

Other Related Resources

National Center for Learning Disabilities. This website (www.nclld.org) features learning disability research, policy, and advocacy information.

National Center on Intensive Intervention. This module ([Intensive Intervention Course Content: Features of Explicit Instruction](#)) features course content focused on enhancing educators' skills in using explicit instruction.

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative. This website (<https://transitionta.org/>) provides information, tools, and supports to assist multiple stakeholders in delivering effective services and instruction for secondary students and out-of-school youth with disabilities.

PROGRESS Center. This website (www.promotingPROGRESS.org) contains information, resources, tools, and technical assistance services to support local educators and leaders of students in kindergarten through transition age in developing and implementing high-quality educational programs that ensure students with disabilities have access to free appropriate public education, which allows students to make progress and meet challenging goals, consistent with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017).

PROGRESS Center Modules. This webpage ([Learning Modules Library: PROGRESS Center and the National Center on Intensive Intervention \[courses-studentprogress.org\]](#)) includes a collection of self-paced learning modules designed to support professional learning of pre-service educators, in-service educators, and administrators.



PROGRESS Center Newsletter. This webpage (<https://promotingprogress.org/>) provides a link to join the PROGRESS Center mailing list. The monthly newsletter includes information about PROGRESS Center webinars, resources and tools, and self-paced modules.

PROGRESS Center Podcast. This podcast (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources-tools/progress-podcast>) features educators discussing hot topics in education, with a focus on supporting students with disabilities.

PROGRESS Center Tip Sheets. This series (<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-series>) of tip sheets introduces key components of the individualized education program (IEP). The tip sheets include summary briefs on federal regulations, tips for developing and implementing IEPs, and additional resources.

SPAN Parent Advocacy Network. This website (<https://spanadvocacy.org/>) informs families and professionals interested in the healthy development and education of children and youth.

TIES Center. This website (<https://tiescenter.org/>) provides information from the TIES Center, which is the national technical assistance center on inclusive practices and policies.

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