

Improving Educational Experiences and Outcomes for Students with Disabilities Report on Family Town Hall Meetings: May 2019

Between March 19 and May 16, the Ohio Department of Education held 13 Family Town Hall Meetings for the purpose of gaining insights from families of students with disabilities that are currently, or were previously, being educated in Ohio's public school system. Specifically, the Ohio Department of Education sought feedback from families regarding their positive and negative experiences during their time in school.

The opportunity to participate was advertised using all communication outlets available, including the Ohio Department of Education website, subscription mailing lists and social media, as well as organizations known for their work with students and families, including the Ohio Center on Autism and Low Incidence, Disability Rights Ohio and Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities. These 13 Family Town Hall Meetings occurred in seven different Ohio counties, including Montgomery, Franklin, Hancock, Scioto, Summit, Cuyahoga, and Butler counties. Two additional meetings were held in a virtual space to accommodate those interested in attending a Family Town Hall Meeting who were not able to attend the physical meetings in their counties. Across the state, the Department hosted 33 facilitated groups during the 13 meetings.

Family Town Hall Meeting Questions

During each 90-minute Family Town Hall Meeting, families were asked the following:

- 1. Tell us one thing that is going well for your child at school. Parents who have graduates: Tell us one thing that went well for your child while at school.*
- 2. What is the most valuable/important part of your experience in your child's education so far? Parents who have graduates: What was the most valuable/important part of your child's education experience?*
- 3. As a parent, how were you involved in the education decisions made for your child? Were you a valued member of your child's IEP team? Was your input considered by the IEP team? Were you treated well/listened to/respected as the adult in your child's life?*
- 4. How well did the school system communicate and share information with you?
Did the school communicate evaluation results in a way that helped you understand them?
Did you feel comfortable asking questions? Did you understand the educational plan that was developed for your child?*
- 5. If you could change anything about your child's educational experience, what would it be?*
- 6. What is your biggest concern about the way you and your child are experiencing school now or for the future?*
- 7. Are there other concerns or comments about your or your child's experience that you would like for us to know?*
- 8. For parents of students who left the public school system: What impacted your (or your child's) decision to leave public school?*

Participant Demographics

More than 150 individuals participated in the Family Town Hall Meetings. Demographic information was collected on a voluntary basis and is summarized for 140 of the 154 participants for county of education, relationship to child, age of child and participant, and experiences with nonpublic school options.

County of Education. Participants represented students who are currently attending, or previously attended, public schools in 40 of the 88 counties (45 percent) in Ohio.

Relationship to Child. Most participants were parents of students with disabilities (79 percent). In addition to parents, participants self-identified as grandparents (6 percent), foster parents or guardians (2 percent), other relatives (1 percent), or appointed parent surrogates (1 percent). The remaining individuals identified themselves as having relationships with students other than those listed.

Age of Children and Participants. Overall, participants discussed the educational experiences of 184 students with disabilities. The average age of these students was 15 years old, with the youngest student being 3 years old and the oldest student being 41 years old. The participants themselves ranged in age from 25 to 56 years old. Of the 128 participants who shared their ages, 7 percent were between the ages of 25 and 35; 27 percent were between the ages of 36 and 45; 45 percent were between the ages of 46 and 55; and 21 percent were 56 years of age or older.

Nonpublic School Experiences. We asked Family Town Hall Meeting participants if their children had dropped out of school, attend private school, are homeschooled, or had been asked to leave public school at any time during their educational careers. Of those responding:

- Five students (4.6 percent) dropped out of public schools before graduating;
- Twenty-nine students (25.4 percent) are either homeschooled or were removed from public schools to attend nonpublic options; and
- Most students (82.8 percent) currently are attending, or graduated from, public schools.

Of the 23 students (17.2 percent) who were asked to leave their public schools (as reported by the Family Town Hall Meeting participants), eight students (34.9 percent) were directly asked to leave, nine students (39.1 percent) were suspended, one student (4.3 percent) was expelled and five students (21.7 percent) experienced another form of being asked to leave their public schools.

What We Learned

The following pages highlight the most common themes that resulted from participant responses. Example quotes that appear in this section are quotes from the notes taken by the facilitator and are not necessarily in participants' own words.

Question 1: *Tell us one thing that is going well for your child at school.*

Question 2: *What is the most valuable/important part of your experience in your child's education so far?*

Thirty of all 33 (91 percent) facilitated groups mentioned the presence of qualified and supportive staff as a particular strength for their children's educational experiences. Specifically, this was noted as a strength in response to Question 1 in 100 percent of the meetings that took place in Franklin, Cuyahoga, Butler and Scioto counties. Similarly, 100 percent of the meetings conducted in Butler and Scioto counties noted the presence of Qualified and Supportive Staff in response to Question 2.

"Daughter was adamant about going to the home school; fully included in all academic classes; she had supplemental services and with general education teachers; IEP worked well for us; always had a good team—worked well together—working together to explore the options—struggled together; relationships were the key."

Question 3: *As a parent, how were you involved in the education decisions made for your child?*

The most common response to this question from participants was that they were involved in the educational decisions made for their children. Specifically, 26 of the 33 (79 percent) facilitated groups had at least one participant discuss their specific involvement in educational decisions.

One important theme that cut across each group is that participants were only able to feel involved once they were familiar with the intricacies of their children's individualized education programs. One participant articulated it this way:

I learned last year, the parent letter in your child's IEP is important. I worked on it all year. It's already a couple of pages. I want the teachers to know my child ahead of time. I want the IEP team to make my child's goals higher when they are too low. I write everything they need to know in a one-pager for each of my child's teachers.

In 22 of the 33 (67 percent) facilitated groups, at least one participant discussed specific steps they needed to take before they could become involved in the educational decisions made for their children. The Family Town Hall Meetings that occurred in Montgomery and Hancock counties had the highest percentages of participants say they needed to advocate to be involved in the educational decisions made for their children. One theme identified across the meetings is that the relationships with school staff, as well as staff follow-through on plans that were made in IEP meetings were critical to their feelings of involvement.

Involvement can only go so far... I participate in after-school activities. I don't feel valued in the IEP decision-making process. Plans were put into place and no follow through. Proper assessments were not in place.

Question 4: *How well did the school system communicate and share information with you?*

The most common response to this question from participants was that they experienced communication difficulties with the school system. This theme emerged in 94 percent of the facilitated groups. For example, many parents described their trouble understanding the information the school system was providing to them.

The Parent's Rights document is negative. It should present a more complete picture. It should convey how to set up the process and how to avoid conflict. The format of the Department's Universal Supports guidance is a better format. It should explain when new processes are put in place, like with transition.

However, not all experiences were about difficulties. The key to participants' satisfaction with their schools was regular communication with their children's teachers, in which the teachers demonstrated their commitment to helping their children succeed at school. For example, one participant offered this:

Email works well. Can happen several times per week. My wife emails back and forth with the teacher on regular basis. Teachers have sought professional development for more information to help my child. Goal is to get her into regular classroom as soon as possible, but teachers have been responsive and have sought more resources.

Question 5: *If you could change anything about your child's educational experience, what would it be?*

When participants were asked this question, the most common response was that they would increase the continuum of options available to their children at their schools. Specifically, students' families primarily were concerned their children are not receiving all the supports they need at school for them to be successful academically. In two-thirds of the facilitated groups, participants described specific services they believe their children need that they are not receiving.

One of the most striking points made by participants was that they felt their children would be more successful in a general education environment, as illustrated by this participant:

The district still puts students with disabilities together in the classroom. They do not incorporate the regular education students. The district does this because it's easier on the teachers. This is not what is best for students.

A second common theme in response to this question was about the availability of resources. Families were concerned that the schools their children attend do not have access to certain resources necessary for their children to be successful. Eighteen of the 33 (55 percent) facilitated groups had at least one participant discuss specific services the participant believes his or her child needs that the school does not have the ability to provide. For example:

Disparity of resources available from county to county is a concern. For example, the developmental disabilities services available in Hamilton County vs. Montgomery County. Parents would like access to information about programs, regardless of perceived need. Parents may not know what their needs are.

Question 6: *What is your biggest concern about the way you and your child are experiencing school now or for the future?*

Participating family members responded that their biggest concern for their children is not receiving the training they need at school to be successful after high school and entering the workforce. Twenty of the 33 (61 percent) facilitated groups had discussions specific to postsecondary transition. One participant stated:

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) needs to be present at transition planning meetings to help with successful post-school outcomes. OOD could bring its expertise in employer/job development while the school could work on skills to succeed in where the student wants to go. Sometimes transition planning doesn't occur early enough to ensure post-school successful placement.

Question 7: *Are there other concerns or comments about your or your child's experience that you would like for us to know?*

When given the opportunity to tell us about their children's experiences, families most commonly shared specific suggestions for district resources and the wish for including their children in general education classrooms. One participant said it this way:

Information about resources that the state provides could be shared with parents and communities in a consumable way that educates families.

Another family member offered this perspective:

Social/emotional needs are really overlooked, especially with anxiety and/or depression. On strategic plan now, which is great, but so often the focus is just on academics.

Question 8: *For parents of students who left the system: What impacted your (or your child's) decision to leave public school?*

Although this was not a large portion of participants, the most common response was about dissatisfaction with the services their children receive at their public schools. Three of the eight (38 percent) facilitated groups that responded to this question had at least one participant discuss this dissatisfaction with his or her child's public school's services.

Conclusion

Hearing family members describe their experiences with their children's educational journeys provided many insights for the plan development process. These key themes identify areas for recommendations that will improve the educational experiences and outcomes of Ohio's students with disabilities in public schools.