

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 the goal requires mutual cooperation and a sharing of responsibilities. While carried out in different ways, the principles used to satisfy personal and business partnerships are much the same.

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

In the parent-school partnership, there is little opportunity for choice in the selection of partners. Partners can, however, choose to think and act in ways that will promote a positive partnership. 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 upset or confused, rather than making statements of accusations, ask questions. Resist making snap judgments based on what is possibly limited information. Ask school staff to explain things using words you understand.
- Remember that our tone of voice, facial expression, and body language often speak louder than our words.
- Label opinions as opinions. If someone states an opinion as fact, rather than

arguing, ask for the data (factual information) to support 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 confidential 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 of other 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 successful education of children in your school district.
- Try to approach each new school year as an opportunity for a fresh start for all involved, regardless of past issues or conflicts.

SEAC Web site:

www.mnseacinfo.org

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Partnership Challenges

Different Expectations, Perspectives, and Opinions

- It's been said of the marriage partnership, that if both people are the same, then one of them isn't necessary! The very differences that make a partnership so challenging, may also be the strength of the relationship. Children and their needs are complex and benefit from being looked at and addressed in more than one way.
- Partnerships are established based upon what each person 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 his or her own particular area of educational expertise and experience. Each can learn from the other how to better meet the developmental and educational needs of the children with disabilities.

Roles and Responsibilities

- While parents have more knowledge about their child, they are often at a disadvantage when it comes to knowledge about the educational system 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, as well as 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 various tasks. Ask questions to learn which staff persons 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.
- Rather than focusing all the energy and discussion on defining and dissecting the problem, focus on possible remedies or solutions.
- When there is a disagreement on how to approach an area of concern, be willing to consider something new. When handled well and resolved correctly, conflict may ultimately lead to positive outcomes for children.

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