



*WHEREAS, full participation of parents is crucial to the education of children, and*

*WHEREAS, this participation requires open communication and understanding between parents and school principals, and*

*WHEREAS, the added complexity of special education makes understanding more difficult,*

*THEREFORE, the executive board of the Fairfax County Council of PTAs recommends that the School Board adopt and the Superintendent implement the following strategies for facilitating interactions between principals and parents:*

### ***NO PARENT LEFT BEHIND—***

#### **Proposal for Enhancing Communication between Principals and Parents of Students with Disabilities**

Studies have identified leadership as a key variable in relation to the success of special education services. Critical success factors for principals include:

- *Knowledge* of current literature, research and best practices
- *Ability to communicate* a sense of purpose and vision and what must be done to achieve this vision
- *Leadership* that values programs and services that are child-centered and instructionally effective
- *Morale*, built and maintained through conflict management interventions, communication, coordination and negotiation
- *Sensitivity* to the power structure and politics of the system
- *Technical knowledge and expertise* to influence the approval of proposals and ideas which benefit special education students

— L.C. Burrello and D.J. Zadnick, *Critical Success Factors of Special Education Administrators*

This proposal for principals recognizes the importance of these competencies specifically with regard to the parents of special education students: the knowledge of best practices, the ability to communicate, the demonstration of leadership, the maintenance of morale, and the sensitivity to building effective relationships.

#### **1. Enable principals to better understand the perspective of parents of special education students through information sharing.**

- Develop increased sensitivity to the need for improved communication among principals and parents of students who receive special education services through conveying the experiences of such parents in an informational format. This is already occurring through the issue of a **quarterly newsletter for principals** by the Fairfax County Council of PTA (FCCPTA) Special Education Committee.

- Ensure the regular attendance and reporting back to principals by their association's liaison to the **Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities (ACSD)**. Such a liaison currently exists but is not active. A functional liaison would enable direct contact with the parents of special education students, an opportunity for principals to hear concerns and develop a regular dialogue between parents and principals.
- Ensure the selection and regular attendance of a principal liaison to the **Fairfax County Council of PTAs (FCCPTA) Special Education Committee**. Such a liaison does not currently exist, but would build continue to build upon the dialogue established between parents and principals in the ACSD.

**2. Ensure principals encourage their PTAs to recruit a parent volunteer to serve as the *PTA Special Education Representative*, as recommended by the FCCPTA.**

PTA Special Education Representatives help promote inclusion of parents of children with special needs in typical parent school activities even as the schools promote inclusion of their children in general education classrooms. Having a point of contact within the school for parents of students in special education offers them a point of contact who understands their concerns as someone who has "been there, done that." When dissatisfaction is expressed among parents, a PTA Special Education Representative can help the principal defuse frustration by offering a recognized avenue of communication. These PTA reps can easily convey concerns to principals in an organized and measured fashion. *However, the success of a PTA Special Education Representative is only possible when the position is supported by the local principal and that parent is encouraged to foster greater communication among other special education parents.*

**3. Ensure that principals uniformly promote activities pertaining to disability awareness with the help of the *PTA Special Education Representative*.**

- Establish and foster regular lines of communication between the PTA Special Education Representative and each school's special and general education teachers.
- Enable the PTA Special Education Representative to present a parent perspective at the school's trainings and staff meetings.
- Work with the PTA Special Education Representative to incorporate more disability related activities through regular school events, such as rallies, assemblies, etc.
- Partner with the FCPS Office of Special Education to present special education information to parents at regular parent events, such as PTA meetings and "Back to School Nights", which present opportunities for communication with a large numbers of parents.

**4. Ensure principals are familiar with the concept of "principled negotiation" (or negotiation on the merits) with regard to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).**

"Principled negotiation" is at the heart of what was intended to happen within the IEP meeting. Fair negotiation in IEP discussions guarantees improved understanding and effective communication between principals and parents. The goal must be to have principals and parents come to always see

themselves as working side by side, attacking the problem, not each other. Principled negotiation can be boiled down to four basic elements:

- (1) Separate people from the problem;
- (2) Focus on interests, not positions;
- (3) Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do; and
- (4) Insist that the result be based on some objective standard.

Principled negotiation recognizes that the dynamics of the IEP team environment will make or break the IEP process and is the only way to ensure the child is effectively served. Retraining principals according to these standards would guide them away from the positional bargaining that commonly exists in the IEP process and toward a method of focusing on basic interests, mutually satisfying options, and fair standards that lead to satisfactory outcomes for all involved. Parents cannot be relied upon uniformly to achieve these objectives; principals must take the lead.

**To this end, make the following key books on principled negotiation required reading for every principal:**

[Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving](#) by Roger Fisher and William Ury. Based on research from the Harvard Negotiation Project, [Getting to Yes](#) teaches how to negotiate "win-win" solutions to disputes. [Getting to Yes](#) provides concise, step-by-step, strategies that will help develop fair agreements in all kinds of conflict.

[Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation](#) by William Ury. While [Getting to Yes](#) describes the foundations of principled negotiation, [Getting Past No](#) focuses on what to do when negotiation breaks down.

**5. Ensure that principals are evaluated on tangible achievements with regard to parents of special education students, to include:**

- Level of parent satisfaction with the IEP process in their school
- Level of parent satisfaction with the skill and training on special education issues of their school's staff
- Level of parent satisfaction in creating a "disability friendly" environment in all cross sections of their school
- Level of parent satisfaction with achieving consistency in aligning their school's special education program with other successful schools in Fairfax County
- Level of achievement in locating a PTA Special Education Representative among the parents of special education students within their school