

Focus group survey of parents of children with disabilities who are members of school improvement teams in Florida, U.S.A.

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Summary of the study

Eleven (11) focus groups were held throughout Florida, U.S.A. with members of School Improvement Teams or Advisory Councils who are parents of children with disabilities. Thirteen (13) school districts were represented with a total of thirty-three (33) parents participating. Forty-eight percent (48%) of the participants were members of the School Improvement Team in a school where their child is enrolled in Exceptional Student Education. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the parents were members of a School Improvement Team for an Exceptional Education Center School (non-inclusive). The parents who participated in the focus groups were almost equally divided with regard to whether they felt like an empowered member of the School Improvement Team. Those who felt that they were an empowered member of the Team (53%) attributed their equal status to either their own personal qualities or the commitment of the leadership of the school to collaboration. Fifty-one percent (51%) stated that no important decisions had been made by their School Improvement Teams. There was a wide range of decisions made by the School Improvement Teams, ranging from editing of the School Improvement Plan to policy decisions. The participants reported that little emphasis is placed on decisions that effect children with disabilities in the School Improvement Teams. Those parents who reported that they were empowered members of the School Improvement

Team and that the Team had made important decisions were very positive, committed, and enthusiastic about their School Improvement Team.

The leadership of the School Improvement Team and the commitment of the members was the key element identified throughout the survey.

Training and information was seen as an important need of the School Improvement Team members.

The participants expressed a strong commitment to their own children's education and stated their desire for an improved educational system. Their vision for improved schools included: smaller teacher student ratios, more teacher training, increase parental involvement, more technology, and additional funding.

Purpose and objectives of the study

Focus group and written survey items were asked to determine answers to the following questions:

- Are School Improvement Teams dealing with issues related to disabilities?
- Are they an empowered member of the team?
- Are decisions made that directly effect children with disabilities?

Selection of participants

The Office of School Improvement and the Bureau of Education Exceptional Students and Community Support, Florida Department of Education provided a list of potential participants. The Department of Education obtained participant

names by contacting School District School Improvement Contacts, Exceptional Education Directors and the Family Network on Disabilities of Florida. All potential participants were contacted by letter and paid a stipend to participate in the study.

Focus group survey

A guided focus group discussion was held to obtain the perceptions and opinions of the participants on school improvement issues. Participants were interviewed in small groups of individuals (7-15) for 2 to 2 ½ hours. The sessions were audio taped and transcribed to facilitate analysis. The researcher conducted each focus group. A moderator guide of questions was developed for use in the focus groups.

Written survey

A written survey was used in addition to the focus group approach. This helped ensure that the study took complete advantage of the participant's input. The written survey also provided written data for comparison with focus group data. The survey instrument consisted of twenty-four items and was based on a review of the literature, the outline used in the focus groups, and the Blueprint 2000 Survey instruments used by the State of Florida Office of the Auditor General. Respondents were asked to rate their relative agreement with statements on a scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Respondents were also given the option of marking, I don't know (5). All focus group participants returned the written survey.

Limitations of the study

The study included a small sample of parents who serve on School Improvement Teams. Twenty-four percent (24%) of the participants were members of School Improvement Teams in schools other than where their child who is enrolled in Exceptional Student Education attends. These participants were on the School Improvement Team as either a teacher representative or as the parent of a sibling without a disability. Thirteen school districts were represented in the study. As a result, these findings should be considered exploratory. While the small sample does limit the study, it does identify some consistent themes in the parent's perceptions of School Improvement Teams.

The focus groups sessions were evaluated and summarized in order to identify major category trends and patterns. An index of frequently held opinions about the details of each category was compiled. This method tends to emphasize the majority view and therefore may overlook important information that is evident when the minority opinions are compiled. An important conclusion from an analysis of the minority opinions in this study is that those parents who reported that they were empowered members of the School Improvement Team and that the Team had made important decisions were very positive, committed, and enthusiastic about their School Improvement Team.