



Working with Families in Special Education



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While the state supports your desire to maintain documentation of the meeting and what you learn, please respect our decision to safeguard information and do not attempt to use tools such as these. If you choose to use a tool such as these, the state will block such tools from the meeting.



Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN)

TN-TAN provides school districts, administrators, educators, and families access to free high-quality training, resources, and supports designed to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, ages 3–22. See below for our areas of support and the partners who lead the specific support areas:

- **Assistive Technology:** Assistive Technology Project for Education (ATP)
- **Autism Supports:** TRIAD at Vanderbilt
- **Family Engagement:** The Arc Tennessee
- **Intensive Behavior:** TRIAD at Vanderbilt
- **RTI²-A+B:** Tennessee Tiered Supports Center
- **Secondary Transition:** Transition Tennessee (TransitionTN)

Visit the [TN-TAN website](https://tn-tan.tnedu.gov) for more information (<https://tn-tan.tnedu.gov>).



The Mission of The Arc Tennessee

The Arc Tennessee empowers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families to actively participate in the community throughout their lifetime.



What is the Family Engagement Project

The Family Engagement in Special Education Project is a partnership between The Arc Tennessee and the Tennessee Department of Education as part of the Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN). The project was created to help increase family engagement in special education to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Our goal is to support schools through training or planning opportunities that will help strategize ways to empower families to be more involved in their child's special education journey.



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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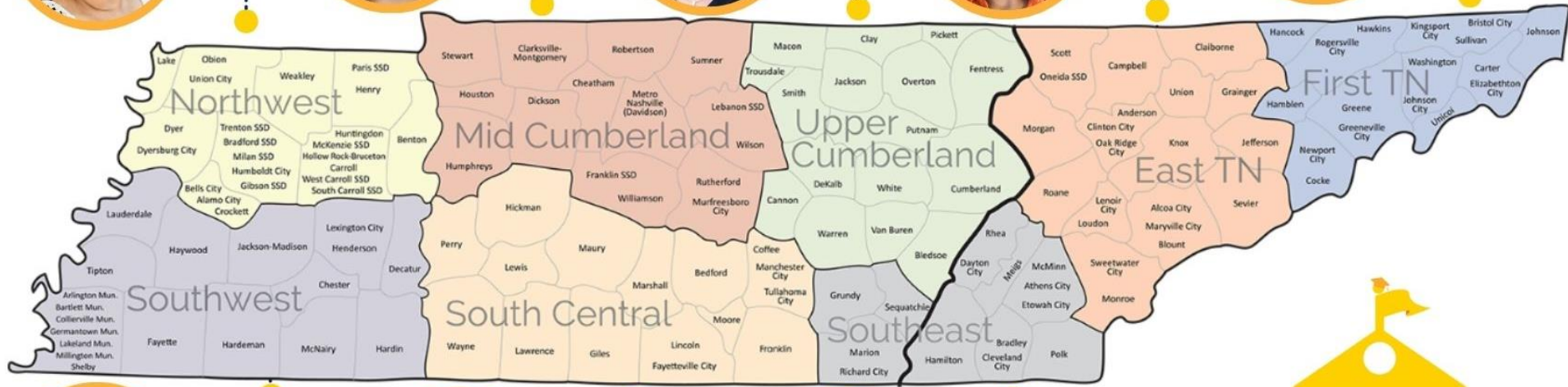
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**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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Objective

Apply strategies to foster positive relationships between families and educators to improve student outcomes.





Please share.

Please share some effective strategies or initiatives you've implemented at your school to enhance family engagement in special education.

Annual Performance Report (APR)

2023

Number of respondent parents who reported schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities	Total number of respondent parents of children with disabilities	FFY 2022 Data	FFY 2023 Target	FFY 2023 Data	Status	Slippage
5,823	6,778	85.66%	90.78%	85.91 %	Did not meet target	No slippage



Annual Performance Report (APR) 22-23

- THIS SLIDE WILL CHANGE BASED ON WHERE IT IS BEING PRESENTED.

What can schools do to support families?



Communicate.

Inform,
include, and
prepare
parents.

Build
Relationships.

Foster
positive
individualized
education
program (IEP)
meetings.

Communication

- Share resources with families.
- Invite families personally to school events.
- Ensure communication is provided to parents in their primary language.
- Collaborate with special education and general education teachers.
- Communicate positively!



Inform, include, and prepare parents.

- Ensure parents are informed and understand the special education process and their procedural safeguards.
- Refer families to Family Engagement.
- Connect families with educational resources and supports.
- Recommend parents of students with disabilities for leadership roles.
- Provide parents with advocacy training.



Parent Input Form

When parents share what they know about their child, it helps teachers and other team members understand how to support the child's learning. Invite parents to fill out this form before the IEP meeting so the team can make the best plan for their child.



Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting: Parent Input Statement



You are an important part of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Your input helps us understand what your child needs to succeed. Please take a few minutes to fill out this form so we can create the best plan for your child.

Student Name: _____

IEP Details: _____

Please share at least 3-5 of your child's current strengths:

Please share at least 3-5 of your child's current interests:

Please share at least 3-5 of your child's current needs:

Build relationships.

- Recognize the child's strengths.
- Identify challenges and needs for supports.
- Ask families about their child's goals and educational concerns.
- Encourage relationships between students with disabilities and general education students.
- Communicate with parents early and often.



Every student is someone's child.

- A parent's first communication about their child's development or possible disability often starts with the school.
- The initial experience with a teacher or school can set the tone for the whole relationship.
- Concerns should be communicated to parents with sensitivity and thoughtfulness(e.g., sharing behavior or academic concerns).
- Conversations should always begin with positives.



Foster positive IEP meetings.

- This meeting is often the main (or only) point of contact with the school for some families.
- This meeting is the first step in shaping the parent-school relationship.





Jordyn Zimmerman

Read the article [A Letter to My IEP Team](https://themighty.com/topic/autism-spectrum-disorder/a-letter-to-my-iep-team1/) (https://themighty.com/topic/autism-spectrum-disorder/a-letter-to-my-iep-team1/).

Talk about **three** things that could have changed the outcome of Jordyn's experience.

Meeting Strategies

What can educators do *during* IEP meetings to ensure success?

- Focus on positive outcomes.
- Establish meeting norms.
- Create an agenda.
- Center on the student.
- Assign a timekeeper.



More Strategies During the IEP Meeting

- Use a “parking lot” for topics to revisit.
- Listen, ask questions, and clarify.
- Take breaks if needed.
- Compromise and consider other ideas and opinions.
- Tie discussions back to student data.



Strategies to Avoid Conflict

- **What can educators do *during* IEP meetings to reduce the likelihood of conflict?**
- Remind parents or guardians of the meeting process and their role.
 - Encourage participation.
 - Inform families that the IEP is a program to be developed as a team.



More Strategies to Avoid Conflict

More reminders for parents:

- Ensure that families understand that the school is obligated to propose a program to meet the needs of their child, but it is not a unilateral decision.
- Emphasize that decisions should be based on data.
- Reassure parents that they are not required to immediately sign consent for implementation of the IEP at the conclusion of the meeting.



Considerations for Evaluation and Eligibility

When reviewing evaluation data:

- Remind families again of the purpose for the evaluations conducted (e.g., eligibility, programming, exiting) and the process and objective of the meeting.
- Provide parents with their own copy of all evaluation reports (ideally, a single integrated report).
- Review the testing objectives and their connection to school performance.
- Offer a visual (e.g., bell curve) of score types and interpretation.
- Reduce jargon when interpreting testing.
- Include the student's strengths and not just deficits.



48-Hour Draft Evaluation Report Rule

- “Chapter 199 of the Public Acts of 2025 requires local education agencies (LEAs) to provide ‘a copy of the student’s evaluation report that is to be used in the determination of the student’s eligibility for special education or in the development of the draft IEP’ to the student’s parent or guardian at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled IEP team meeting.
- Public Chapter 199 took effect immediately upon the Governor’s signature on April 11, 2025.”



48-Hour Draft Rule continued

What is considered an evaluation?

Evaluations may include:

- speech, behavior, psychological, physical, or occupational therapy;
- Social-emotional or prevocational assessments;
- Functional behavior assessments (FBAs);
- Assistive technology (AT) evaluation;



More on the 48-Hour Rule

Evaluations may also include:

- fine and gross motor skills testing;
 - academic or cognitive testing; and
 - hearing and vision screening.
-
- **Important:** If a test or screening is used to help write IEP goals or check progress (e.g., reading, speech, or behavior), parents should get those results **at least 48 hours before** the meeting.

Understand the procedural safeguards.

A copy of the Procedural Safeguards notice must be given to parents only one time a school year, with the following exceptions:

- initial referral or parent request for evaluation,
- receipt of the first state complaint under 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.151 through 300.153 in a school year,
- receipt of the first due process complaint under §§ 300.507 in a school year,
- disciplinary action that constitutes a change of placement, or
- parent request [34 C.F.R. §§ 300.504(a)].



Overview of Procedural Safeguards

Consent

As a parent, you have the right to give or refuse consent for initial evaluations, reevaluations, and special education and related services provided by the school district. You may revoke your consent for special education and related services at any time.



Notice

You have the right to a written notice before the school district proposes or refuses to change your child's eligibility status, disability category, or special education and related services.



Evaluation

You have the right to have a full evaluation of your child's individual educational needs to be administered by trained personnel.



Least Restrictive Environment

Your child has the right to be educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate.





Avoiding problematic responses.

Avoid predetermining and general statements of refusal:

- “We can’t do that.”
- “That’s not allowed.”
- “He or she won’t qualify.”
- “We don’t have staff for that.”
- “We don’t have the funds for that.”

Know the nuts and bolts.

- Be informed about special education timelines.
- Understand the diploma options.
- Understand the alternative assessment.
- Be prepared to support students' postsecondary goals.



Conflict Resolution

Resolving Disagreements



How can educators mitigate potential conflict during a meeting?

- Focus on the student.
- Understand the parent's ultimate goal if a request seems unreasonable.
- Take short breaks if tensions rise.
- Keep a list of items to revisit later to keep the meeting on track.



Family Sources of Conflict

Examples of preventable issues:

- misunderstanding the roles and responsibilities of the IEP team members, including the parent;
- lacking familiarity with the IEP process and documents;
- lacking familiarity with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements;
- encountering unfamiliar terms and acronyms used by schools;
- confusing eligibility criteria (e.g., medical vs. educational);
- excluding the student's voice; and
- making predeterminations.



Unintended Consequences

- Parents may perceive there is a lack of communication.
- Students may feel left out of their meeting.
- Parents may feel unprepared if they do not know what to expect or where to go.
- Parents may feel outnumbered.
- Parents may not be prepared to contribute their concerns and feedback.
- The IEP team may receive incomplete feedback affecting the services and supports a student may receive.



Jordyn Zimmerman Now



Watch the video [Nonspeaking autistic woman embarks on journey to advocate for disability rights](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTECNar9yG4)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTECNar9yG4>).



Scenario 1

You are in your annual IEP meeting with only 10 minutes left of the scheduled time. The team has not addressed one of the main topics you told them about prior to the meeting. They said they would address it at the end of the meeting.

- **How would you handle this situation?**



Scenario 2

In a parent-called IEP meeting, the parent says they are concerned about missing assignments. The student says they did them and returned them to the teacher. The teacher does not have the assignments. The conversation becomes tense.

- **What would you do to create a positive outcome?**



Scenario 3

In the IEP meeting, the case manager is repeatedly using acronyms and terms that the family does not understand. The parents are asked to agree and finalize the IEP. The parents felt rushed and did not understand what was in the IEP.

- **How could this have been prevented?**





Parent Support

Our team offers free support to parents facing challenges with special education services for their students. We are here to answer questions, connect parents with resources, and explain and navigate special education processes.

Reach out to your regional family engagement specialist or [email The Arc Tennessee](mailto:specialeducation@thearc.org) (specialeducation@thearc.org).

Action Plan

Create an action plan outlining the strategies and initiatives you will implement to enhance family engagement within your school or district.



Educator Resources

Follow the QR code to the Family Engagement Wakelet page for links to valuable resources.

[Explore the Working With Families for Educators – Wakelet](https://wakelet.com/wake/24gVPwGHI0RcR6-BdQFCy)

(<https://wakelet.com/wake/24gVPwGHI0RcR6-BdQFCy>).



Questions?



Office Hours for Educators

- Have questions about Family Engagement in Special Education (FESPED) training?
- Want to connect with a specialist to talk about increasing family engagement to improve outcomes for students with disabilities?

Join FESPED's office hours on the first Wednesday of each month from 3 - 4 p.m. CT.

To join the Zoom scan the QR code or use the [Office Hours Zoom link](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87197083693) (<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87197083693>).



Connect with us!



(800) 835-7077



specialeducation@thearctn.org



[Family Engagement Website](https://familyengagementtn.com)

(<https://familyengagementtn.com>)



[Family Engagement Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/fespedtn/)

(<https://www.facebook.com/fespedtn/>)



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