

Family-School Partnerships in Special Education: Challenges, Resources, and
Innovations during Virtual Learning

By

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To my son.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Abstract	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction to the Problem	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Statement of Purpose	4
Terminology	5
Overview of the Dissertation	6
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	8
Family School Partnerships in Special Education	8
<i>Definition of Family School Partnership</i>	8
<i>Parent Participation Legislation</i>	10
<i>Impact and Effectiveness</i>	11
<i>Challenges</i>	14
<i>Communication</i>	14
<i>Professional Competence</i>	18
<i>Respect</i>	19
<i>Commitment</i>	21
<i>Equity</i>	21
<i>Advocacy</i>	24
<i>Trust</i>	25
<i>Teacher Preparation</i>	26
Virtual Partnerships in Special Education Pre-COVID-19	29
<i>Definition and Prevalence</i>	29
<i>Parents' Roles in Virtual Learning</i>	31
<i>Educators' Roles in Virtual Learning</i>	34
Special Education and COVID-19	36
<i>Parents' Experiences</i>	36
<i>Educators, Schools, And Districts</i>	38
Statement of the Problem	39
CHAPTER 3 METHOD	41
<i>Conceptual and Theoretical Framework</i>	42
<i>Research Questions</i>	44
Sample Selection	44
Data Collection	47
<i>Interviews</i>	47
<i>Analytic Memos</i>	48
<i>Document Review and Physical Artifacts</i>	48
Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis	49
Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility	50

Study Limitations	53
Chapter 4 Findings	54
<i>Initial Transition</i>	54
<i>Challenges and Addressing Challenges</i>	60
<i>Technology</i>	63
<i>Engaging Students and Building Relationships</i>	65
<i>Parent as Teacher</i>	71
<i>Moving to a New School and Advocating for Services</i>	76
<i>Resources</i>	78
<i>People as Supports</i>	78
<i>Organizations as Supports</i>	80
<i>Physical Supports</i>	81
<i>Impacts on Partnership</i>	84
<i>Continuum of Involvement</i>	84
<i>Partnerships- Educators' Views</i>	90
<i>Partnerships- Parents' Views</i>	94
<i>Learning and Innovation</i>	96
Chapter 5 Discussion and Implications	102
Limitations and Implications for Future Research	106
Implications for Practice	107
Conclusion	109
References	111
Tables	127
Figures	134
Appendices	
Appendix A: US Department of Education COVID-19 Fact-Sheet	144
Appendix B: NCLD Serving Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis	149
Appendix C: CEEDAR Center Family Guide to At-Home Learning	154
Appendix D: IRB Study Approval (Exemption) Letter	156

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Educator Demographics and Characteristics	127
Table 2: Number of Educator Participants by School District and School District Characteristics	128
Table 3: Parents Demographics and Characteristics	129
Table 4: Provision of And Participation in Virtual Instruction During Covid-19	131
Table 5: Resources Parents and Educators Accessed During Virtual Learning	132

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Sample Memo	134
Figure 2: Sample of Phase One Codes	135
Figure 3: Sample of Phase Two Codes	136
Figure 4: Sample of Pattern Codes	137
Figure 5: Virtual Learning Space at Home	138
Figure 6: Visual Schedule for Learning at Home	139
Figure 7: Resources for Learning at Home	140
Figure 8: Organizational Tool for Learning at Home	141
Figure 9: Checklist for Learning at Home	142

ABSTRACT

Positive impacts of family involvement in supporting improved outcomes for students, including students who are struggling in school and students who have disabilities are well documented. Notwithstanding legislative requirements and the demonstrated positive impacts on student outcomes, numerous challenges negatively impact and often prevent educators and families of students with disabilities from building and sustaining effective partnerships. The global COVID-19 pandemic impacted family-school partnerships in unforeseen ways while educators and families of students with disabilities struggled to support students and implement virtual learning. However, so far little is known about how family-school partnerships in special education have functioned and changed during COVID-19 and virtual learning. This exploratory, qualitative study utilized a phenomenological lens to investigate the lived experiences of 10 parents and 10 educators amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as they partnered to provide virtual learning for students with disabilities. The study explored challenges parents and educators faced and how they overcame the challenges, resources they accessed and how they learned and innovated together. Findings documented how the initial transition to virtual learning was challenging for most parents and educators. Parents struggled to find a balance between being teacher and parent in the home, advocating for new services for their children virtually, and meeting their children's needs. Findings revealed that during COVID-19 and virtual learning: (1) home and school were collapsed in new ways and parents and educators struggled to adapt to a new and challenging reality (2) some relationships between families and educators were built and deepened in these most challenging circumstances, and (3) there were lasting shifts in families' approaches to advocating for and understanding their children's needs and in educators' approaches to working with families. This study adds to the existing body of literature about

family-school partnership in special education during COVID-19 and virtual learning within special education by providing lived experiences of families and educators as well as their learning and innovations. Future research using matched pairs of parents/caregivers and educators could provide more reliable data about shared partnerships.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Problem

Family-school partnership is a critical component of student success. More than five decades of research has found positive impacts of family involvement in supporting improved outcomes for students, including students who are struggling in school and students who have disabilities (Dalun Zhang et al., 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Newman, 2005). When there is effective partnership among families and schools to support student learning, students do better in school, are less likely to dropout, and report liking school more (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Families of students with disabilities are as involved and may be more involved in their children's schools as compared with families of general education students (Newman, 2005). The impact of effective family-school partnerships for students with disabilities has also been documented. When families of students with disabilities are involved in their children's schools, students do better in school and socially as compared with peers whose families are not as involved at school (Newman, 2005).

Within special education, professionals and families must work together to support students as a part of federal legislative requirements under the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) (2004). Parents' rights and professionals' responsibilities are defined as part of this legislation. For example, IDEA (2004) Section 300.322 is called Parent Participation and specifically states the following:

Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP Team meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate, including—

- (1) Notifying parents of the meeting early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend; and
- (2) Scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place” (IDEA, 2004).

Notwithstanding legislative requirements and the positive impacts on student outcomes, numerous challenges negatively impact and often prevent families and educators from building strong partnerships such as lack of adequate professional skills, commitment, respect, trust, effective communication, and equality (Angell, 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Burke, 2012; Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Hess et al., 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2014; Simon, 2006). Moreover, researchers have consistently found parents from historically underserved groups face additional barriers to participation in their children’s special education processes (Harry, 2008; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Challenges are particularly difficult to overcome when families come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds than teachers and school personnel (Hardin et al., 2009; Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005).

Within the context of many preexisting challenges to family-school partnerships in special education, the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted family-school partnerships in unforeseen ways. In March of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the United States began providing virtual instruction. Many parents/caregivers of students with disabilities had to begin facilitating academic instruction for their children at home; the shift literally took school out of the school building and into the home in new and unprecedented ways. Suddenly, parents took on many of the roles teachers had held. Parents/caregivers had to balance work at home or outside of the home, caring for other children, and caring for their households and health with supporting their children’s virtual learning. Educators reached out to and relied on

parents more than ever and had to deliver instruction virtually in students' homes. They often had to provide this virtual education with little or no preparation and few tools and resources at their disposal.

Some researchers have started to explore and document the impacts of COVID-19 on students with disabilities, their education, and their families (Asbury et al., 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Garbe & Ogurlu et al.; 2020; Jeste et al., 2020; Neece & Fenning, 2020). Others have started to document how schools or service providers have continued to provide special education services during COVID-19 (Frederick et al., 2020). Findings indicate parents of students with disabilities were struggling to support their children during virtual learning and they are struggling more as compared with parents of students without disabilities (Becker et al., 2020). Children and parents experienced negative impacts on their mental health (Asbury et al., 2020). Parents reported balancing the significant responsibilities of supporting their children's learning at home while also working and caring for other children (Garbe & Ogurlu et al., 2020; Neece & Fenning, 2020). Moreover, families reported losing access to vital educational and health services (Jeste et al., 2020). Teachers' experiences have also been transformed during COVID-19. They have had to work to meet the diverse needs of learners and rapidly adapt to meeting these needs in new ways (Kaden, 2020) while also dealing with their own experiences and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, so far little is known about how family-school partnerships to support students with disabilities have functioned and changed during COVID-19.

Statement of the Problem

It is vital to document and understand the lived experiences of parents/caregivers and educators as they navigated the challenges to partnering amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic. The seismic shift in the mode and location of teaching and learning delivery may have short term and long-term impacts on the ways parents/caregivers and educators work together, understand their roles, understand one another and work with their children and students. Gaining an in-depth understanding of how parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities have worked together during this unprecedented time has the potential to inform policy and practice about family-school partnership in special education during and long after the global pandemic. Inquiries into how family-school partnerships supported students with disabilities during the pandemic could provide practical resources to help parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities to provide virtual learning more effectively or to try new approaches as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Statement of Purpose

The overall goal of this project, therefore, is to contribute to the limited body of research about how family-school partnerships in special education have functioned and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning. Study findings provide an understanding of the lived experiences of parents/caregivers and educators who have partnered to provide instruction for students with disabilities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope learning from this study can be formulated into presentations or online resources and made available parents/caregivers and educators as soon as possible to assist them in this challenging time. Moreover, this study contributes to the field of knowledge about family-school partnerships in special education by examining partnership from a multi-directional perspective. This study was designed to examine

family-school partnership in special education from the perspectives of both the families (home) as well as educators (school).

Specifically, this study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to explore the following questions: How do parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities experience partnership amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What challenges have parents/caregivers and teachers faced partnering to provide instruction and support students? How have they addressed these challenges?
- What resources have they accessed to provide instruction and support students virtually?
- How has this experience impacted their partnerships?
- What have they learned about partnering to support student learning virtually?

Terminology

Below, I provide definitions for some of the commonly used terms in this study. The definitions detail how these terms were used specifically for this study.

Family-School Partnership: Turnbull et al. (2015) provided a working definition of family-school partnerships in special education as follows:

Partnership refers to a relationship in which families (not just parents) and professionals agree to build upon each other's expertise and resources, as appropriate for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly impact students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals. (p.161)

Historically Underserved (students or families): Historically underserved means “students [or parents] from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced sustained school failure over time” (Artiles et al., 2010, pp. 279-280).

Virtual Education: According to Müller (2010):

Virtual education is instruction in a learning environment where the teacher and the student are separated by time, space or both; and the teacher provides course content via course management applications (e.g., Blackboard), multimedia resources, Internet, video conferencing or other alternatives to traditional face-to-face education. (p.1)

COVID-19 Pandemic (COVID-19): According to the World Health Organization (WHO),

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness (WHO).

On March 11, 2020, the WHO characterized the COVID-19 as a global pandemic. As of January 15, 2021 there were 91,816,019 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation will describe current research about family-school partnerships in special education. Specifically, it will document and explore family-school partnerships during virtual learning for students with disabilities during COVID-19. An understanding of how parents and educators of students with disabilities worked together to support students during this unprecedented time may contribute to understanding of family- school partnerships during and after COVID-19. Chapter 2 details the history and definition of family-school partnership in special education and then presents barriers that have historically prevented effective family-school partnerships, specifically when families are from historically underserved groups. Chapter 2 also examines how special educators have been prepared to build family-school partnerships and provides an overview of research about family-school partnerships and virtual learning for

students with disabilities prior to and during COVID-19. Chapter 3 details the methodology used for this exploratory, qualitative study and how a phenomenological lens informed the study. Chapter 4 presents the study findings. Chapter 5 includes discussion of the findings, limitations, and implications for future policy, practice, and research.

CHAPTER 2

Family Partnerships and Special Education

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background and definitions, an overview of legislation, impact and effectiveness of family-school partnerships in special education. It will also provide an overview of virtual learning in special education prior to and during COVID-19 as well as an overview of studies that have been done to date about families and educators providing virtual education to students with disabilities during COVID-19.

Definition of Family-School Partnership

Within the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) parent involvement is also called parent participation, family involvement, or parent engagement (Strassfeld, 2018). I use the term family-school partnership whenever possible for this study. The purpose of using the term *family* rather than *parent or parents* is to be inclusive of all members of the child's family who could be or are involved in supporting the child at school and at home (e.g., aunts, uncles, foster parents, older siblings). The purpose of using the term partnership in place of involvement whenever possible is to signify the dual nature (home-school and school-home) and the need for collective capacity (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) to make family-school partnerships effective. Family-school partnership is a challenging concept to define and operationalize. Turnbull et al. (2015) provided a working definition of partnership as follows: Partnership refers to a relationship in which families (not just parents) and professionals agree to build upon each other's expertise and resources, as appropriate for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly impact students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals. (p.161).

Joyce Epstein's (1987, 2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, although not specifically focused on relationships with families of students with disabilities, provided a useful framework to conceptualize family-school partnership. It included external as well as internal structures and portrayed partnership as a shared responsibility between families and schools rather than discrete or sequential responsibilities. It is a useful framework, because it provides a way to understand the complexities and ever-changing nature of family-school partnerships coupled with social and historical factors external to the school and family that influence relationships and interactions over time. Epstein's (1987) framework included the child's individual development over time as well as the social and historical time within which the interactions are occurring. For most children, the overlap between family and school is minimal when the child is an infant and increases during preschool and early elementary school, then decreases as the child gets older. Spheres of family and school are pushed together and pulled apart by forces including experiences and philosophy of the family, and experiences and philosophy of the school. Children have the same family but different teachers over time, another factor that shifts the overlap of spheres driving them closer together or farther apart over time. "The "*maximum*" overlap occurs when families and schools operate as true "partners" with frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communications between parents and teachers in a comprehensive program of many types of parent involvement" (Epstein, 1987, p.128). Intra-institutional interactions include those that occur between family and parent at home and school and teacher at the school. These interactions occur separately as parents and family members or teachers and principals (for example) make rules or policies or have their own interpersonal relationships. Interactions also occur as family and school interact with one another at an organizational level (e.g., communications from the school to all parents). The child is located at

the center of all of the interactions because the child's growth, well-being, and learning is assumed to be the reason that the systems and actors interact. The child interacts, influences, and is influenced by their families and parents as well as their schools and teachers. Changes in school or family behaviors or in school practices also influence and are influenced by the child.

Parent Participation Legislation

Parents of children with disabilities have been organizing formally since the 1930's to advocate for their children's rights (Turnbull et al., 2015). In the early 1970's two federal court decisions: *PARC v. Commonwealth* (1971, 72) and *Mills v. D.C. Board of Education* (1972) ruled state and local educational agencies could not discriminate on the basis of disability and all children regardless of disability could learn. There was no longer justification for a state or local agency to exclude any child with a disability from schools (Turnbull et al., 2015). Following soon after, Congress passed the landmark Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L.94-142) making it law that all children with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate education.

The most recent version of this law, the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was passed in 2004. This most current law governing education for students with disabilities requires every student with a disability receive a *free appropriate public education* (FAPE). The law also recognizes and legislates the vital role families play as partners and educators in educating children with disabilities. This law provides specific ways for families to be involved in the special education process. According to IDEA (2004), schools must make every effort to include all parents in critical and vital activities during their child's special education process. "Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Team

meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate...” (IDEA, 2004). As part of this law, parents must give signed consent prior to initial evaluation, re-evaluation, or provision of services to their child. Parents also serve as member (s) of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team for their child, participate in IEP meetings where key decisions are made, and can approve, reject, and dispute decisions about their child’s placement and services. According to Turnbull et al. (2015) this principle of parent participation as a part of the federal legislation changes the role of parents of children with disabilities as passive recipients of professionals’ decisions about their children’s education and placements. In their words it “...challenges parents and educators to cast off that historic role and to become partners in making and carrying out decisions about the students’ education” (Turnbull et al., 2015, p.146).

Impact and Effectiveness

More than five decades of research has found positive impacts of family involvement in supporting improved outcomes for students, including students who are struggling in school and students who have disabilities (Dalun Zhang et al., 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Jeynes, 2007; Newman, 2005). Several studies have attempted to quantify and dissect the precise impact of parent involvement on students’ academic achievement by completing literature reviews and meta-analyses. Findings indicate the relationships between parent involvement and academic outcomes are complex. One issue with quantifying impact is that there has not been a widely accepted theoretical framework for parental involvement (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001). While not focused on parent involvement within special education, a recent literature review of 75 studies revealed mixed results about the positive impact of parental involvement on students’ academic achievement as well as the size of the impact; the relationships varied by student age as well as the specific type

of parent involvement that was examined (Boonk et al., 2018). According to their study, "...the most consistent and positive relations were found for: (a) reading at home, (b) parents holding high expectations/aspirations for their children's academic achievement and schooling, (c) communication between parents and children regarding school, and (d) parental encouragement and support for learning" (Boonk et al., 2018, p. 25). Similarly, Fan and Chen (2001) completed a meta-analysis of quantitative studies that measured the impact of parent involvement on students' academic achievement. They found the area of academic achievement and the dimension or kind of parent involvement were important variables and the relationship between parent involvement and students' academic outcomes should not be generalized across these differences (Fan & Chen, 2001). These analyses suggest considerable complexity in defining and measuring the impact of parent involvement on student outcomes.

Goldman and Burke (2017) completed a systemic literature review and meta-analysis to examine the effectiveness of interventions to increase parent involvement in special education. They identified eight studies with six independent study samples to include in their meta-analysis. All of the interventions were focused on increasing parent engagement in IEP meetings. Results of the analysis overall did not provide evidence of positive effects of the interventions on parent involvement in school for parents of students with disabilities. Studies reported mixed findings about impact of the interventions. Two of the studies did not find impact of the interventions (Blietz, 1988; Jones & Gansle, 2010), two reported mixed results (Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982; Plunge, 1998), and two reported positive impacts of the interventions of parent participation in IEP meetings (Brinckerhoff & Vincent 1986; Hirsch, 2004).

Tools have been developed to understand and even measure the quality of family-school partnerships. For example, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) utilized focus groups with parents to

attempt to identify indicators of professional behavior that were “facilitative” of family-school partnership in special education. They identified six themes as follows: communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect. For each of these themes, they created a definition or description and indicators. Based on this work, Summers et al., (2004) developed a Family-Professional Partnership Scale to assess parents’ perceptions of and satisfaction with family-professional partnerships. This scale has 18-items overall and two 9-item sub scales. The questions ask families to rate items such as whether professionals are: available when they are needed, protect family’s privacy, are people that can families can depend on and trust. These findings are integrated into the principles of family-school partnership in special education developed by Turnbull et al. (2015).

Challenges remain to defining and understanding clearly the impacts of family-school partnerships in special education. For example, there are various definitions and frameworks utilized to understand partnership which makes comparison of interventions and studies difficult. There is a lack of rigorous studies of interventions to increase parent involvement in special education and the majority of the work has been focused on parent participation in the IEP meeting as opposed to taking a wider and more comprehensive view of family-school partnerships (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

Challenges

Parents of children with disabilities face many challenges and stressors that can impact partnership with schools. Resch et al. (2010) examined the challenges and stressors parents of students with disabilities faced as well as the support services needed to deal with those challenges and stressors. Findings indicated lack of access to information, financial barriers, the struggle for inclusion of their children in schools and communities, and family stress were

significant challenges families faced. Similar to the research about the impact of interventions for parent involvement in special education, much of the research about family-school partnership in special education has been focused on the IEP process and IEP meetings. Burke (2012) posited that barriers to family school partnerships align with six principles of family-school partnership (professional skills, commitment, respect, trust, communication, and equality) similar to the principles defined by Turnbull et al. (2015). Below, I discuss some of the challenges and barriers to family-school partnership in special education based on findings from the literature. Challenges and barriers are organized based on the principles of partnership: (a) communication (b) professional competence (c) respect (d) commitment (e) equity (f) advocacy, and (g) trust. Equity was included as a theme in my literature review rather than equality which was the principle originally presented by Turnbull (2015).

Communication

Communication among educators and parents is vital to establishing and maintaining effective partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Fishman and Nickerson (2015) investigated motivational factors and parent involvement in home-based, school-based, and special education involvement. Two findings indicated the importance of communication between home and school but also between parent and child. First, teacher invitations were the only predictor for parent involvement in special education. Second, they found parents were more likely to be involved in their children's education at home and at school when their child specifically requested their involvement (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015). Similar to other areas of partnership, communication between home and school varied depending on children's ages with the most intense communication happening among parents and young children and less frequent communication as well as satisfaction with communication decreasing in higher grades (Spann et

al., 2003). Parents reported having positive experiences collaborating with their children's schools when teachers were available and when there was a designated person they could communicate with at the school when they had questions; it was important that parents could disagree with school staff (Rodriguez et al., 2014). The quality of the communication parents received was also important (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2014). "Effective school communications were those that *occurred regularly, were about the child's progress, and allowed parents a variety of communication methods*" (Rodriguez et al., 2014, p.89). Challenges with communication were particularly salient when parents did not speak English as their primary language or when their cultures differed from the school culture and/or culture of the special education process. Language is a major challenge that can prevent parents' full participation in the special education process. Parents who did not speak English as their primary language experienced major challenges to participation in the special education process (Hardin et al., 2009; Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Lo, 2005, 2008; Salas, 2004; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005). According to IDEA (2004) parents for whom English is not their primary language must be provided with translators during IEP/IFSP meetings and IEP/IFSP documents must be translated into the parent's primary language. However, inaccurate translation services provided by the school/district and shortages of translators and/or bilingual staff to do translation work hindered this process. Translation as a part of the special education process required adequate knowledge of the parent's primary language and/or dialect as well as the specific and technical knowledge and jargon of special education. When translators were secured by the school or district, parents were often dissatisfied with the translation services. For example, Jegatheesan (2009) described experiences of first generation Asian American mothers of children with developmental disabilities and found, of mothers who used interpreters 90%

reported dissatisfaction with the interpretation services. Moreover, the time allotted for IEP meetings was not adequate when simultaneous translation was required. Parents reported that at meetings professionals often shared large amounts of information before stopping to wait for translation and translators summarized rather than translating word for word in order to keep up during the meeting (Lo, 2008).

Similar challenges were reported pertaining to written documents. For example, Lo (2005) found Chinese-speaking parents of students with disabilities were unaware they had the right to have documents translated into their primary language and found the majority of the time IEPs were written in English only. Larios and Zetlin (2012) and Lo (2005) found school staff were more receptive and accommodating and listened more to parents who spoke English as their primary language and Salas (2004) reported that Mexican American women who did not speak English did not feel valued by school staff. Hernandez et al. (2008) conducted a survey of parents of students with disabilities in the Los Angeles Unified School District between 2005 and 2006 and reported some overlapping findings about Latino parents' translation needs; however, their findings point to some important complexities. When comparing the experiences of English speakers with those of non-English speakers in the IEP process, they found it was vital to recognize the diversity not only between but also within each group. For example, in their study, English speakers' participation was initially reported in aggregate and compared with non-English speakers' participation but English speakers were comprised of African American parents and White parents who had very different experiences. Hernandez cautioned against generalizations about groups of parents without fine grained understandings. "It may well be that within a group categorized as Other, the vast range of languages and ethnicities are likely to produce very different parental responses and perspectives" (Hernandez et al., 2008, p.88).

In addition to the challenges experienced by parents who did not speak English as their primary language, previous studies found culture was a major challenge to parents' participation in the special education process (Hardin et al., 2009; Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005). Jegatheesan (2009) and Su-Je Cho and Gannotti (2005) discussed Asian and Korean parents' negative experiences with the special education process, for example, the tension they experienced between what the study reported were their own cultural norms and the need for or expectation of their parental advocacy in the special education process. Disability labels or categories carried culturally embedded meanings that created confusion and disagreement in the special education process (Lo, 2005). Jegatheesan (2009) found Asian American mothers who were recent immigrants were concerned about asking for help and were embarrassed to request more help or services from professionals.

Cultural challenges occurred not only for parents who were immigrants or did not speak English as their primary language but also for parents from non-dominant cultures within the United States. For example, Sheehey (2006) found that while the idea of collaborative and participatory decision making in the IEP process matched with Hawaiian cultural values and norms of parents, their actual experiences with the IEP process were not participatory or collaborative. In contrast to the intent of the special education law, parents experienced individualism and maintenance of power with little input from parents as the core tenants of the IEP process in practice (Sheehey, 2006). Moreover, although parents considered participation and decision making in a broad sense (e.g., participating in their child's education at home and at school, talking with teachers, learning about special education, advocating for their child) school professionals and IDEA considered the IEP meeting and the IEP document as the main arena for parent participation as well as the main mode of decision making (Sheehey, 2006). Overall,

cultural misunderstandings between parents and professionals and lack of understanding on the part of professionals of parents' realities and cultural belief systems created considerable anxiety for parents who had to learn a new way to operate within the special education process.

Professional Competence

Parents of students with disabilities want educators to have specific professional knowledge about their child's disability. Parents also want professionals to know their child's individual needs and to treat their child as an individual (Burke, 2012; Angell, 2009). It is vital that professionals admit to families if they do not know something or need to learn more about a specific topic and then access resources to find information and answers as opposed to pretending they have knowledge they do not have (Burke, 2012; Turnbull et al., 2015). Parents from historically underserved groups have found specific challenges with professionals' views of their children. Studies have documented professionals' negative views and low expectations of children's abilities and potential progress. Parents' experiences of professionals' negative views adversely impacted their participation in the special education process (Angelov & Anderson, 2013; Harry et al., 2005; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lalvani, 2012; Lea, 2006; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005). Parents' experiences of negative views of their children alienated them from the very system and professionals with whom they were expected to collaborate. Parents often felt the school professionals did not know their child the way the parents knew their child and school professionals were not inclusive of parents' views and experiences. One mother explains "...nobody knows my baby like I know my baby...I don't think they like him up in that school" (Angelov & Anderson, 2013, p.10). Parents felt when they went to IEP meetings they heard about all of the things their children did wrong or did not or

could not do and they rarely heard anything good or hopeful about their children (Jegatheesan, 2009; Salas, 2004).

Respect

Family-School partnerships in special education can only be effective when parents feel they are respected within and beyond the IEP process. Simon (2006) surveyed teachers and parents about their perceptions of the IEP process. Overall, teachers reported more positive views of the IEP process as compared with parents and this difference held true across educational levels (early childhood, elementary, and secondary). Blue-Banning et al. (2004) reported respect meant understanding and valuing the child as an individual and it also meant treating parents politely. For example, addressing parents by their last name or asking permission to use their first name, being on time for meetings, and noticing parents' contributions and actions on behalf of their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents from historically underserved backgrounds experienced significant discrimination and often felt disrespected during the special education process. (Angelov & Anderson, 2013; Harry et al., 2005; Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Lea, 2006; Lo, 2005, 2008; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006) identified discrimination and disrespect as major challenges that impacted parents' participation. Experiences of discrimination and disrespect occurred for parents from historically underserved groups from a variety of races/ethnicities and who spoke English as their primary language, second language, as well as those who did not speak English at all. Parents reported experiencing discrimination and disrespect that they felt were connected to their race, class, age (adolescent mothers), primary language, immigrant status, and level of education. Discrimination and disrespect often seemed to be based on a combination of factors and were frequently coupled with and informed by a pervasive deficit perspective of parents and families and a lack of knowledge about family

strengths and resources. Harry et al. (2005) found school personnel (including African American school personnel) applied stereotypes to African American parents as incompetent, neglectful, and/or dysfunctional without having any experiences with the individuals or knowledge of the family. Researchers in this study documented multiple strengths when they observed families' actual realities, beliefs, desires, and supports for their children that stood in stark contrast to school professionals' beliefs about the families (Harry et al., 2005). Similarly, Lea (2006) found providers of early intervention services held pre-conceived ideas and judgments about adolescent mothers and did not really know them. Studies also found school personnel (even unintentionally) were more comfortable with parents who were more like themselves (e.g., not adolescent mothers, English speaking, from similar class backgrounds) (Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Lea, 2006; Lo, 2005). Overall, findings were that parents from historically underserved groups felt misunderstood, silenced, powerless, ashamed and anxious, most profoundly at the actual IEP/IFSP meetings. Completely contrary to the intent of IDEA (2004), school staff often followed and fulfilled the bureaucratic process to the letter but in the end were often only seeking a parent's signature on the dotted line after IEP/IFSP goals and services had been pre-determined as opposed to looking for parents' genuine opinions, collaboration, and knowledge (Sheehey, 2006).

Commitment

In addition to fulfilling their professional commitments, teachers must go above and beyond to make families feel like they are being treated as individuals rather than as a case (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Burke, 2012). Parents want to feel like professionals value the relationship with the child as well as with the parent and that they understand the workings of the

entire family (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). This commitment could include actions such as being available for meetings outside of regular school hours, or remembering a child's birthday (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, Burke, 2012). Overall, parents wanted to feel like professionals genuinely cared about their children and their families.

Equity

Parents view equity as requiring specific actions on the part of professionals. For example, this means acknowledging their points of view, validating their importance, and supporting parents to have the necessary information to take part in decision making processes for their children (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Equity can be a major issue in the IEP process where parents may have a much more negative experience of the process as compared with teachers (Simon, 2006). Specifically for families from historically underserved groups, there was often a lack of resources or planning and contradictions between the requirements of IDEA for parent involvement on the one hand and the reality at the school or district level on the other (Hardin et al., 2009; Lalvani, 2012; Lo, 2005, 2008; Salas, 2004). This included such things as scheduling meetings at mutually convenient times for parents, teachers, and other professionals, securing childcare during meetings, communicating with teachers (who may not have phones in their classrooms), and even finding the room where the meetings were taking place once parents had arrived at school. Parents who often worked at multiple jobs or were paid hourly reported that when they took time off for meetings, they did not get paid for those hours. Speaking specifically about attending meetings one father said, "I think only families with a stable financial background would have time to attend meetings. But for immigrants, they need to work and have no time for these [meetings]" (Lo, 2005, p.90). Lo (2008) documented the experience of one mother who was late for her child's IEP meeting because there was no one to meet her

and direct her to the room where the meeting was taking place. In this same study, parents reported professionals often arrived late or left early from meetings and they experienced this as disrespectful (Lo, 2008).

The use of or lack of access to various kinds of resources was either a significant challenge that impeded parents' participation in the special education process or a factor that helped some parents to participate more effectively and advocate for their children as compared with parents who did not have access to capital. Parents from historically underserved groups experienced challenges that were a result of their lack of access to a variety of and specific kinds of resources or knowledge. Professionals' use of jargon and technical language was a major factor that prevented parents' participation in the special education process (Hardin et al., 2009; Harry et al., 2005; Lo, 2005; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006). A related finding was that not being able to read and understand key documents during the special education process or prepare before meetings impeded parents' participation. Even when parents were fluent or proficient in English, they struggled with comprehension of important documents.

Moreover, parents who did not have access to financial resources faced additional challenges to participation in the special education process. Relating to challenges with language and translation as discussed above, mothers who had the financial means hired professional translators who were much more qualified than the translators the school district provided free of charge (Lo, 2005). Lalvani (2012) and Angelov and Anderson (2013) explored parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and impacts on placement or other decision-making processes. Lalvani (2012) specifically studied the differences in outcomes of special education placement meetings for parents from different socio-economic groups and found parents from high SES groups as compared to parents from low SES groups navigated the special education process

more effectively and parents from high SES groups were more effective in securing placements in less restrictive settings for their children. Further, Lalvani (2012) found parents from low SES groups were not even aware of the option of inclusive environments for their children and only parents from the high SES group advocated for more inclusive placements for their children. Similarly, in a survey of parents of students with disabilities in the Los Angeles School District, (Hernandez et al., 2008) found the lowest income parents experienced the most “distance from or difficulties with the special education system” (p.88).

Parents’ connections to additional resources including people with power and/or information were critical supports for their participation in the special education process. Parents reported they lacked necessary and vital information about the special education process and laws, their rights, their options (e.g., less restrictive placements) and/or their child’s disability (Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Lea, 2006; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006). Parents reported that ultimately providers were considered the expert and parents’ input in the context of meetings was not actually valued. Moreover, when parents’ opinions were in opposition to those of providers, the providers’ opinions would most often trump those of parents (Lea, 2006). Parent’s access to resources such as computers and the internet to conduct research about their rights and their child’s disability (Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005), joining parent or family support groups or taking classes as well as having time to attend meetings and do additional reading, attend or help out at school, and prepare or study at home about special education or the child’s disability helped parents overcome challenges to participation (Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Sheehey, 2006). Parent’s social networks and connections were also valuable (Harry et al., 2005). For example, one mother who was struggling to navigate her child’s special education process was able to activate her network to access a powerful

connection: her mother in-law who worked for the state and helped her advocate for her child (Harry et al., 2005). On the other hand, another parent in the same study was left completely on her own to navigate the special education process without access to powerful or knowledgeable social connections (Harry et al., 2005).

Advocacy

Teachers of students with disabilities often find themselves caught between advocates and parents who focus on the needs of the individual child and pressures of the school or district to comply with federal laws and guidelines while educating many children and working with many families (Hess et al., 2006). These differences can lead to disagreements, injustices, children's needs not being met and, in some cases, the need for advocates and due process or litigation. One of the effects of effective family-school partnership in special education is a reduced use of procedural safeguards (Burke, 2012). Parents from historically underserved groups faced significant challenges when advocating for resources both within and connected to the special education process (Hernandez et al., 2008; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lalvani, 2012; Lea, 2006; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005). Parents advocated for resources, decisions, or placements for their child and were stalled, denied, or diverted by bureaucratic processes or told there was a lack of resources to fulfill their requests. For example, Lo (2008) found Chinese parents requested services for their children in 7 out of 12 meetings and all of the requests were denied. Similarly, in Su-Je Cho and Gannotti's (2005) study, Korean mothers complained about bureaucracy. Across studies, parents often had to make multiple requests and employ other techniques such as refusing to sign the IEP, hiring an advocate, or using due process to have their requests honored. Some parents had more access to or utilized these kinds of advocacy resources while others did not. Hernandez et al. (2008) found Latino

parents were the least likely to have participated in due process hearings and parents from the low SES group were "...more likely to report that it took *a great deal of effort* to secure services for their children (p.88). What is more, some parents were more likely to leverage their knowledge of the law and exercise their rights to advocate for their children than others.

Hernandez et al. (2008) found that while African American and White parents reported similar rates of disagreement with the school system, African American parents were less likely than White parents to participate in informal dispute resolution and were less aware of federal laws about special education.

Trust

A major factor in parents' trust of schools was that they wanted to feel schools were providing services for their children as they had been agreed upon in the IEP (Rodriguez et al., 2014). While some parents reported their involvement at school was a result of schools actively seeking their participation, other parents reported becoming involved because the school did not make an effort to involve them (Rodriguez et al., 2014). Angell et al. (2009) investigated trust in the family-professional relationship by interviewing mothers of children with a variety of disabilities. They found family factors, teacher factors, and school factors all influenced trust among education professionals and students' families and the establishment and maintenance of trust was a complex process (Angell et al., 2009). Blue-Banning et al. (2004) reported parents used trust in three different ways to mean (a) reliability: professionals would do what they said they were going to do, (b) safety: they could leave their child with the professional and the child would be physically and emotionally safe, and (c) discretion: professionals would keep personal and confidential information safe.

In summary, the main principles of family-school partnerships in special education (a) communication (b) professional competence (c) respect (d) commitment (e) equity (f) advocacy, and (g) trust can help explain the barriers to success. Many barriers to effective family-school have endured over decades and regardless of clear legislative guidelines since the passage of EHA in 1975 (Harry, 2008; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). For parents from historically underserved backgrounds, challenges also endured over the course of their children's lives. Notwithstanding a wide array of groups (e.g., adolescent mothers, recent immigrants, African American mothers) locations (e.g., urban, rural, suburban), children's disabilities, and children's ages, similar main findings about challenges and barriers to participation were identified.

Teacher Preparation

The majority of educators believe that partnerships with students' families are important; however, they are for the most part unprepared to form these partnerships and rely on parents to figure out how to become involved (Epstein, 2005). Patte (2011) conducted a questionnaire with 200 pre-service educators and found that while pre-service educators recognized the importance of establishing family-school partnerships and the potential positive outcomes of these relationships, their knowledge about how to form partnerships was limited. Pre-service educators offered strategies that were "...general, vague, and traditional in nature (Patte, 2011) and more than 40% of participants who were in their junior and senior years of study reported that they had not had any course content specifically focused on family-school partnerships. Lasater (2016) conducted a study of students, teachers, and parents who were engaged in conflict about their perceptions of students' abilities. Findings indicated that teachers were not adequately prepared to build partnerships or to effectively deal with conflicts with families.

Regardless, the failure of training programs to adequately prepare teachers to develop partnerships suggests that teachers enter the workforce without the knowledge and skills necessary to work with families, and participant responses further suggest that school districts are doing little to fill this void (Lasater, 2016, p.253).

Evans (2013) conducted a review of 33 existing studies about the impacts of efforts to prepare educators to engage families and communities. The majority of studies reviewed focused on either early childhood education or special education. All of the studies reviewed except for one (Rucker, 2004) found a positive impact of reported efforts to address family engagement practices with pre-service teachers. Some studies have examined the impact on pre-service special education teachers when one course or major components of an existing course are focused on working with families (Collier et al., 2015; Fults & Harry, 2012; Lam, 2005; Mulholland & Blecker, 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray et al., 2008). These studies also found that specifically focused preparation, especially when it includes parents of students with disabilities as facilitators or partners in teaching and learning, have an impact of future teachers' classroom interactions and practices, confidence about building partnerships, attitudes towards partnering with families, and understanding of parents' experiences.

Other studies have examined the impacts of entire early childhood special education preparation programs that integrate family centered practice throughout their design (Mandell & Murray, 2005; Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2002). Similarly, these studies also found positive impacts on student satisfaction and self-perceived capacity to implement family centered practices.

Hansuvadha (2009) examined beginning early childhood special education teachers' challenges in implementing family centered practice and found several significant challenges including: (a) under preparation, (b) attitudinal barriers, (c) workload issues, and (d) language and cultural

differences. Further explaining, “teacher education programs should create specific and meaningful opportunities for students to observe and interact with real families” (Hansuvadha, 2009, p. 357). Latunde and Louque (2012) examined pre-service special education teachers’ practice as it related to partnering with families and found a complete lack of activities that demonstrated shared decision-making, reciprocal teaching and learning, and collaboration. One-way teacher-to-parent communication dominated teachers’ work with families. One reason why there are so many challenges specifically among educators and families of students with disabilities when families come from historically underserved groups is because working across these boundaries requires educators to engage in ongoing self-reflection and to build relationships often with people who have vastly different backgrounds and experiences. Rossetti et al. (2017) provided a useful overview of effective ways for educators to develop collaborative partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families of students with disabilities. They created concrete support for educators to develop a plan of action for collaborative partnerships. Their approach is framed by three guiding questions for educators to engage in self-reflection as follows “(1) How culturally responsive am I? (2) Who is this family, and (3) Have we developed a collaborative partnership” (Rossetti et al., 2017, p.331). For each of these questions they provide a purpose and examples of what this self-reflection can look like for educators.

Pre-service preparation for working with families is clearly important; however, according to Epstein (2005), effective pre-service preparation alone is insufficient. Based on a study of schools, colleges and departments of education and a variety of studies of schools and school districts that were working to develop family and community involvement programs, Epstein (2005) suggested that there is a chain of professional development events that include

pre-service teacher education, inservice education, and ongoing technical assistance and that some links in this chain are either weak or missing. She provided the example of a missing link in the chain as follows: “For example, SCDE leaders conceded that most prospective teachers and administrators were not prepared in their undergraduate or graduate courses to conduct effective partnerships in practice” (Epstein, 2005, p.134).

In summary, challenges and gaps persist in providing effective preparation for pre-service educators to form effective partnerships with families including families of students with disabilities and families from historically underserved groups. Specific preparation focused on working with families can help prepare special educators to be more effective at building and sustaining partnerships. This preparation is most effective when parents of children with disabilities are facilitators or partners in the educational process.

Virtual Family-School Partnership in Special Education Pre-COVID-19

Definition and Prevalence

During COVID-19, educators and families of students with disabilities across the country and around the world who were enrolled in traditional brick and mortar schools were suddenly required to transition to fully virtual learning. While this emergency situation during a global pandemic has been truly unique and unplanned, it is useful to examine literature about online learning for students with disabilities and their families prior to COVID-19.

Virtual learning is learning that takes place fully online and students access instruction and materials via a computer. Greer et al. (2014a) defined fully online or virtual learning. “Online learning is often referred to as fully online, virtual learning, cyber learning, or e-learning. For our purposes, we will refer to fully online learning as virtual learning” (p.79). This is learning where the student stays away from the physical school and interacts with content at

home through the use of a computer and is contrasted with blended learning where part of the learning may occur online or away from a physical school but learning also occurs at school.

According to Müller (2010):

Virtual education is instruction in a learning environment where the teacher and the student are separated by time, space or both; and the teacher provides course content via course management applications, multimedia resources, Internet, video conferencing or other alternatives to traditional face-to-face education. (p.1)

The most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics reported there were approximately 1.8 million enrollments in any kind of technology-based distance education courses and more than half of public-school districts nation-wide enrolled distance education students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In the 2017-18 school year, approximately 21 percent of public schools and 13 percent of private schools offered any courses entirely virtually (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). However, the number of students enrolled in completely virtual learning prior to COVID-19 was much smaller with approximately 212,000 students enrolled in the 2017-18 school year (NCES, 2018). While exact numbers are not available and estimates may drastically underreport participation of students with disabilities in virtual learning, it is estimated 6% of students in online or blended learning courses also receive special education services (Watson et al., 2011). Many fully online schools are run by for-profit educational management organizations (EMOS); however, a number of different entities operated virtual schools for K-12 students prior to COVID-19 including: regional agencies or consortia of educational organizations, state education agencies, universities, local public-school districts and other local education agencies, and charter schools (Rhim & Kowal, 2008).

Parents' Roles in Virtual Learning

Prior to COVID-19, some parents chose fully virtual learning for students with disabilities because they felt it would meet their children's needs; however, those parents were prepared to play a very active role in facilitating their children's learning at home (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). The parent role in virtual learning for K-12 students is so significant and crucial that parents are often called "learning coaches" or LC's. Even when parents sign up for virtual education as a choice, teachers still need additional tools and approaches to effectively partner with parents for their children's success (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). Coy (2104) explains how teachers rely on Learning Coaches for many things which would not be required of them in a face-to-face setting. For example, LCs support students' daily learning activities, create an effective work environment for students, and help students with effective time management. Research in the area of parents' roles in supporting online learning supports this notion that parents are required to play a major role with varied responsibilities for their children's virtual learning. Similarly, Greer et al. (2014a) explains one of the common misunderstandings about virtual learning is that students will be engaged online without needing additional support from someone at home. In reality, and specifically for elementary school students and students with disabilities, parents or another adult may need to be present and providing support constantly while students engage in virtual learning. Moreover, parents are expected to modify content and delivery to meet their children's specific learning needs and/or to discuss necessary modifications so teachers can make changes to meet their children's needs (Greer et al., 2014a). Further, Greer et al. (2014a) explained the highly involved role parents play in virtual learning, especially for students with disabilities is a common mis-perception about virtual learning.

Several studies have explored parental roles in virtual learning in more depth. Burdette and Greer (2014) surveyed parents of students who had a child with a disability enrolled in an online setting about their (parental) roles, instruction and assessment, communication and support from the school, and challenges. Reported parental roles differed considerably between parents of K-8 students and high school students. More than a quarter (27%) of parents overall reported spending more than three hours per day helping their child with schoolwork. However, this represented 50% of K-8 parents, and only 15% of parents whose students were in high school. Most parents reported their roles included the following: helping their child with learning content, behavioral skills, and organizing work time.

Ortiz et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study of parent work to support students with disabilities in online learning. Following previous findings, parents reported playing major and varied roles in supporting their children's virtual learning. Parents reported that they assumed four major roles: educator (teacher, teacher's aide/assistant, consultant), medical aide, reward manager, and executive function director. Almost every parent in this study described serving as their child's primary teacher. They described being responsible for maintaining "instructional momentum." Advance preparation for learning including modifying the curriculum to fit with their child's interests. Some parents felt overwhelmed or resentful of this role. Other parents saw their role as a teacher's assistant or aide. In this role, they saw themselves as a means to advancing their child's learning within the provided curriculum but not as the lead teacher. In the consultant role, teachers relied on parents for information about their child. Either teachers asked parents, or parents suggested adjustments in the form of advocacy. Parents had questions about how to manage schedules with their children and find positive ways to get their children to sit down and work. For some children who

struggled with a major medical condition along with their disability, parents selected an online school so they could monitor their child's health at home and those parents played a major role in caring for their children's medical needs as "medical aides." Parents also reported serving as "reward managers" and supporting their children by finding creative ways to keep them engaged in instruction including mutually agreed upon rewards and reinforcements. Finally, parents played the role of "executive function director." In this role, they helped their children organize their work and supported on-task behavior.

Parents who chose virtual learning for their children with disabilities were often aware of the workload and increased role they are signing up for and may have chosen it as a way to have more input in their children's education, or because they were dissatisfied with the way their child was receiving services in an (in-person) placement. Smith et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study of parents' perceptions of what happens to their elementary and middle school children's special education services when they transfer to online schools. Parents reported their level of involvement was much greater in IEP development with online schools. Many parents left brick and mortar schools because they felt their children were not getting what they needed, IEPs were not being honored, and/or their input was not considered. "Parents, then often made most of the decisions about instruction and applied accommodations and modifications as they saw fit, just as regular classroom teachers or school professionals do in traditional settings" (Smith et al., 2017, p.10). One study participant explained feeling that even though she lacked formal education as a teacher, she knew her child best and she wanted to be able to make modifications that would work specifically for her child. "There are good teachers out there, don't get me wrong. But I don't think any teacher is going to know your child more than you if you care" (Smith et al., 2017, p.12). Parents often moved their children out of

traditional schools because they felt their involvement had to be too great to try to get their child appropriate services and, paradoxically, parents reported being very satisfied with online schools even though their role in instructional provision was dramatically increased. In a separate study of parents of students with disabilities who were enrolled in fully online K-12 schools, Smith et al. (2016) reported how parents of elementary age students with disabilities were required to play a major role in fully virtual learning and perceived their role as both a parent and a teacher. This time commitment was at least equal to that of a part-time job, and they reported not being able to hold a full-time or even a part-time job outside their home while their child was enrolled in virtual education. Parents reported how fully online education required more communication between parent and teacher than was required of a traditional in-person school. Parents shared how they had relationships with their children's teachers in fully online instruction and barriers between parents and teachers were addressed or reduced. Parents reported teachers in fully online schools were more accessible and used a wide array of ways to communicate with parents.

In summary, parents of children with disabilities, especially those of elementary school students, who chose fully online learning played a major, time intensive, and varied role in supporting their children's learning at home. Their roles included communicating and partnering with teachers, while also often serving as their children's primary teacher.

Educators' Roles in Virtual Learning

Prior to COVID-19, educators who were delivering virtual instruction to students with disabilities and working with their families faced challenges. Rice and Carter (2015) examined how teachers, special education case managers, and single/multi-school special education administrators worked to provide accommodations and other supports to students with disabilities in online courses. They found special education laws and policies were not intended

for virtual learning, so educators were often trying to use the approaches and strategies that they had developed in traditional schooling and apply them to virtual learning with students with disabilities. They found communicating laws and policies with parents was challenging. Teachers were required to maintain regular communication with parents and many phone calls occurred between teachers and parents specifically focusing on making sure students completed their work and assessments and understood lesson requirements. Greer (2014b) conducted a survey of educators to learn about their knowledge and competencies in teaching students with and without disabilities in an online learning environment. Findings indicated very few practitioners surveyed (3%) felt they had sufficient knowledge about how to teach students with disabilities in online learning environments. Moreover, practitioners were not confident that online learning would play an important role in the education of students with disabilities, specifically those with significant/severe disabilities. These findings suggest practitioners may not be prepared to deliver instruction to students with disabilities broadly and also may not have confidence in the potential of virtual learning to adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities.

In summary, participation in virtual learning was expanding nationwide including for students with disabilities prior to COVID-19. Some parents of students with disabilities chose virtual learning for their child. These parents were intensely involved in virtual learning, especially when their children were young. Educators had little preparation for delivering virtual education for students with disabilities prior to COVID-19.

Special Education and COVID-19

Researchers have begun to document some of the impacts and experiences of families of students with disabilities and educators during COVID-19 and virtual learning. I will summarize research that has been done to date in this area as a context for the present study.

Parents' Experiences

Some researchers have started to explore and document the impacts of COVID-19 on students with disabilities, their education, and their families (Asbury et al., 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Garbe & Ogurlu et al., 2020; Jeste et al., 2020; Neece & Fenning, 2020). Others have started to document how schools or service providers have continued to provide special education services during COVID-19 (e.g., Frederick et al., 2020).

Garbe and Ogurlu et al. (2020) explored parents' experiences and struggles during remote learning. Although not focused on parents of students with disabilities, parents in this study specifically described struggles to meet disability-related or gifted and talented needs of their children during school closure. Parents also reported feeling overwhelmed, struggling to meet the needs of multiple children, their employer's needs, and finding personal balance amidst COVID-19. Asbury et al. (2020) studied the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of parents and children in the UK. A large proportion of families reported that COVID-19 affected their mental health and this often led to an increase in anxiety and fear. Other reported impacts included: worry, loss, moods, emotions and behavior, knowing what is going on and overwhelmed. A substantial minority of families reported minimal or positive impact of COVID-19 on their mental health.

Becker et al. (2020) examined remote learning during COVID-19 for adolescents with and without ADHD. Adolescents with ADHD and their parents experienced more difficulties as

compared with adolescents without ADHD. Parents of adolescents with ADHD with an IEP or 504 plan were especially likely to have trouble providing support during remote learning. They reported finding the "...importance of building parent confidence in managing remote learning, promoting adolescent routines, and reducing negative affect as ways for mitigating difficulties with remote learning for adolescents, particularly those with ADHD" (p.8).

The impacts of COVID-19 on families and individuals with disabilities occurred in many different domains of health, education, and well-being. Jeste et al. (2020) found that for both national and international families of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, many educational and health services were ended as a result of COVID-19. This study was completed shortly after stay-at-home restrictions were put into place. Almost two thirds of families reported their child lost access to at least one therapy or education service. More than one third of reported lost access to a healthcare provider, and slightly more than half (56%) reported that their child received some continued services through tele-education. Neece and Fenning (2020) found that for ethnically, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse families with young children (3-5 years old) who had intellectual and developmental disabilities, their most significant challenge was being home and unable to leave the house during the pandemic. Parents also reported being at home and balancing work and caring for other young children without the support of childcare as challenges. Further, parents reported financial concerns and challenges related to their children's developmental services decreasing or stopping. One group of parents reported their children's behavior challenges had been the greatest challenge. Of the few benefits reported, the most common one was having more time together as a family. Putri et al. (2020) conducted an exploratory case study interviewing teachers and parents in Indonesia who were engaged in providing virtual education for elementary school students during COVID-

19. They found distance learning was especially difficult for learners with “special needs” (p.4813).

Educators, Schools, and Districts

Teachers’ experiences in fully virtual environments have also been transformed during COVID-19. They have been required to meet the diverse needs to learners and rapidly adapt to meeting these needs in new ways. Kaden (2020) conducted a single case study of school closure related changes to the professional life of one secondary school teacher in rural Alaska. Findings indicated an increased and changed workload for teachers and that virtual education needs to be carefully and specifically designed to meet the unique needs of individual learners. Findings from this study also suggested the move to fully virtual learning could serve as a first step in design of a more effective hybrid model of education. However, the study cautioned that the potential merits of online learning should not be seen as a quick fix for current educational problems.

Other research has focused more on accounts of how one school district or one program has operated during COVID-19. Schools, programs, and school districts have taken varying approaches to serving students with disabilities during COVID-19. Some successes and innovations have been reported. Mahaffey and Kinard (2020) reported experiences of promoting home-school connection during COVID-19 in one small rural K-12 district in Texas. They documented how a second-grade team successfully used two familiar technologies and how a focus on these familiar technologies and provision of daily content based on students’ most basic needs allowed for a strong home-school connection. Frederick et al. (2020) described how one nonpublic agency program continued to provide behavior support for 25 students in grades 1-10 virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sider (2020) reported how school principals in

Ontario, Canada were working to deliver services to students with special education needs during COVID-19. For example, meeting with support staff and teachers to create specific action plans to meet the needs of individual students, driving to students' homes to deliver devices for internet access or assistive technologies, and finding ways to support students who are medically fragile or have significant behavioral needs (Sider, 2020). Tremmel et al. (2020) provided an account of how Commerce Independent School District, a rural school district in Texas, was educating students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures they took included creating logs to document communication among educators and caregivers. Initially, communication was about assessing needs and it evolved to providing updates, resources, and answering questions. As soon as education moved from packets mailed home to home-based virtual learning, special education teachers began to address IEP goals with one-on-one and small group instruction. The district also worked with a variety of community partners to provide food for families and the school. Food distribution became an important hub for the community and facilitated connections among the school and other community-based organizations to meet families' needs (Tremmel et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Family-school partnerships in special education, while proven effective in improving outcomes for students, and included in past and recent special education legislation, are situated in a lengthy and challenging historical context (Turnbull et al., 2015). A myriad of challenges and barriers often prevents families and educators from working effectively together to support student success. These challenges are exacerbated when families come from historically underserved groups and face challenges such as a lack of resources, time, and discrimination when interfacing with professionals about their children's' education (Harry, 2008; Wolfe &

Durán, 2013). While challenging, professionals utilizing effective practices for building partnerships with families and adequate pre-service education in working with families can help families and professionals to build effective partnerships (Murray & Mandell 2005; Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2002; Turnbull et al., 2015). Some families had already made the decision to provide virtual education for their children with disabilities prior to COVID-19. Learning from these families indicated that parents play a very significant and vital role in providing education to children in this scenario (Ortiz et al., 2017).

The onset of COVID-19, however, required families and professionals work together in new ways to provide virtual learning for children with disabilities. Currently, the field does not have any empirical evidence about how families of children with disabilities and professionals who served them navigated their partnership when they were required to transition to virtual learning during COVID-19. This study seeks to document their experiences and learning during this unprecedented time.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This study was an exploratory, qualitative study that examined family-school partnership using a phenomenological lens (Englander, 2012; Kvale, 1983, 1994; Moustakas, 1994) and came from a constructivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Within the constructivist framework, participants' perceptions and meaning-making are the focus (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The constructivist perspective focuses on individuals as active agents who gather knowledge about their worlds through experience (Crotty, 1998). In this study, the participants were viewed as experts and their experiences and perspectives were considered of utmost importance. The phenomenological approach was chosen because the goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of parents/and caregivers and educators. "The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p.13). The study examined experiences of parents/caregivers and educators as they worked together through this unique and incredibly challenging time. Following the focus on the lived experiences in a phenomenological approach, this study relied on reports and artifacts from parents/caregivers and educators about their experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), "Evidence from phenomenological research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences" (p.84). It was an exploratory study because virtual education for students with disabilities began during March of 2020 and for many students and families it continued as this study was taking place. As a result, the findings from the study are part of a very small body of literature about this particular time period. No studies were located that specifically focused on family-school partnerships in special education during

COVID-19. As such, this study can be considered a first step in sketching the area of inquiry and an important tool to further additional studies in this area.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework used to understand family-school partnership for the purposes of this study was the seven principles of partnership created by Turnbull et al. (2015). The seven principles include: communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, advocacy, and trust. The principles are depicted as parts of a mobile, working together to achieve partnership. For each of these principles, Turnbull et al. (2015) described specific actions that can be taken to maximize the effectiveness of partnership among families and schools. Below, I briefly summarize the meanings of each principle as they provide a helpful framework for understanding family-school partnership among educators and families of students with disabilities.

(1) *Communication* needs to be high quality (positive, clear, and respectful) and of an appropriate quantity, meaning we have to be cognizant of using others' time in an efficient way. Professionals should be friendly as opposed to overly businesslike and should practice "empathetic listening" (Covey, 1990, as cited Turnbull et al. 2015). Communication should also be clear and jargon free, direct and honest even when there are disagreements or there is bad news and even when professionals have to admit they do not know the answers. It is important that ample and useful information be provided as a part of communication with families, especially when a child is first identified as having a disability. Communication is especially important when a child's disability makes it such that he or she cannot communicate what happens during their school day.

(2) *Professional competence* means educators have "...the knowledge and skills to individualize instruction to meet their child's special educational needs and to provide appropriate supports and services" (Turnbull et al. 2015, p.166). This also means educators have the appropriate preparation and education, they continue to learn and that they set high expectations for students.

(3) *Respect* means professionals: honor cultural diversity, affirm strengths of the child and family, and treat students and families with dignity. This means treating families as decision makers.

(4) *Commitment* means the professionals consider their commitment to the child and family to go beyond their professional obligations. One part of this is being available for contacts and discussion outside of regular school hours. It also means professionals demonstrate genuine care for children and families, showing they have interest in children and their families as people rather than as part of their job.

(5) *Equality* means families and professionals feel they have equal power to impact a student's education. It means professionals actively share their power and work to create "horizontal relationships."

(6) *Advocacy* means preventing problems and trying to solve on your own. It also means being ready to and taking action when children's needs and rights are not met or honored. It also means forming partnerships with others to advocate on behalf of students and families.

(7) *Trust* means "...having confidence in someone else's reliability, word, and action to care for and not harm the entrusted person" (Turnbull et al., 2015, p.180). This trust can be built when professionals do such things as: maintaining student and family confidentiality, keeping their word and being reliable, and demonstrating sound judgement. According to Turnbull et al.

(2015) trust is the foundational principle of partnership and holds all of the other parts together. This definition together with the seven principles will be utilized as a working definition of family-school partnership for the purposes of this study.

Following a phenomenological approach, data analysis was conducted inductively. Therefore, the seven principles of partnership were not used as a way to code or organize the data a priori. Instead, the principles of partnership were utilized to (a) inform design of the study and the formation of the research question (b) organize and understand previous findings in the literature about family-school partnership in special education (c) shape the interview protocol, and (d) to understand and situate findings after analysis was complete and to engage in discussion of family-school partnership as a concept.

Research Questions

This study explored the following questions: How do parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities experience partnership amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What challenges have parents/caregivers and teachers faced partnering to provide instruction and support students? How have they addressed these challenges?
- What resources have they accessed to provide instruction and support students virtually?
- How has this experience impacted their partnerships?
- What have they learned about partnering to support student learning virtually?

Sample Selection

To ensure the study sample included individuals who could speak to family-school partnerships for students with disabilities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, participants had to meet a series of inclusion criteria. Participants in this study were either parents/caregivers or educators of students with disabilities in grades PreK-12 who had received special education

services through virtual education during COVID-19. Recruitment was not limited to a specific geographic area. Following IRB approval, potential participants were recruited by e-mail through several methods. First, a variety of lists were used to e-mail the study announcement asking for volunteers to participate in the study. Examples of lists that were used include: parent list-serve at a local university and lists of parents/caregivers available through local non-profit organizations. Additionally, contacts were made through people I knew personally or professionally. Snowball sampling was used as well. Each study announcement that was sent asked recipients to pass along the study announcement to others they knew who might be interested in participating in the study. I then individually followed up with each interested participant by e-mail. If the individual met the inclusion criteria for the study, then I scheduled a virtual (phone) interview with them at a time that was convenient. Participants were provided with one \$100 gift card as compensation for their participation in the study. In total, there were 20 participants in the study. This included 10 educators and 10 parents (no caregivers who were not parents volunteered for the study).

Educator participants were 80% female and 20% male. Educator participants were teaching in two states. Nine educators were from Wisconsin and one was from South Carolina. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics about the school districts that educators worked in was examined and reported in detail in Table 1. Overall, between 2% and 10% of students were receiving special education services. Parents in the participating school districts had a median annual income between \$51,000 and \$88,000. Between 15% and 47% of families had Food Stamps/SNAP benefits and between 68% and 86% of families had broadband internet access. The school district that had the greatest number of educator participants (n=5) was also the most economically disadvantaged among the districts represented in this study. In that

district, 10% of students were receiving special education services, 60% of the students were White, 13% Black, 20% Hispanic/Latino, 5% were two or more races and 1% were Asian. Nearly half (47%) of families had Food Stamps/SNAP benefits and nearly one third (32%) of families did not have broadband internet access. In this same school district, 26% of families spoke languages other than English only at home. The other school districts had either two or one educator participant. The demographic profiles of these school districts are reported in detail in Table 2.

All educator participants reported their primary language was English. Eight educators were White, one was Native American and one was African American. They had been teaching for an average of 14 years; the newest educator had been teaching for three years and the most experienced with 30 years in education. Nine out of 10 educators had Master's degrees and all but one special education teacher had a current license in teaching special education. The one teacher who was not currently licensed in special education was working on a Master's program in teaching special education and working on a provisional teaching license while completing school. Eight out of 10 teachers were special educators with one educator included who was an elementary school counselor and one speech language pathologist. Educators worked predominately at the elementary level (50%). Two educators worked at the middle school level, one worked at middle and high school level and two worked at the high school/transition levels. Almost all educators (90%) reported working with families who spoke a different primary language or were not from the same racial group as the educator. Only one parent reported working with teachers across these differences.

Parent participants were majority female with two male participants and all reported their primary language was English. Seven of the parent participants were located in Wisconsin, and

one parent participant was located in each of the following locations: Pennsylvania, California, and Canada. Nine of the parents were White and one was Asian. Nine out of 10 parents were married. Six of the parents had a college education or higher. The majority of parents (60%) were working full-time at the time of the interview and only three were full-time parents. The 10 parents shared experiences about their work with educators of 11 children (one parent shared experiences about each of her two children). The average age of children was 7.5 years old and children's ages ranged from four years (4K) old to 14 years old (freshman in high school). Parents reported their children had a range of disabilities with ADHD being the most common disability (n= 4) followed by ASD (n=3). One of the 10 children was attending a private preschool at the time of the interview but was receiving special education services for speech from the public school district. One child had a disability label of ADHD but was not receiving services for special education and did not have an IEP at the time of the interview. More details about parent participants are included in Table 3.

Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by telephone with each parent and educator and were approximately 60-90 minutes in length. Following the description in Kvale (1983) interviews were semi-structured and the purpose of the interviews was to "...gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (p.174). Interviews with parents and with educators were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were focused on understanding experiences of educators and families. Questions were used as a guide and were focused around the larger areas of the research

questions (challenges, resources, impact, and learning). Some examples of questions and follow up prompts about the impacts parent participants experienced on their work with their children's teachers. How would you describe your overall experiences of working with your child's teacher (s) to deliver instruction at home? Follow up prompts were: reflecting on your work with your child's teacher (s) prior to COVID-19, how would you say your relationships changed during COVID-19? How did delivering instruction at home change your perceptions or understandings of the experiences your child had at school?

Analytic Memos

During data collection, I wrote analytic memos to record my ongoing thoughts about the information gathered, connections to readings, and ideas as well as the process of interviews, personal reactions and questions to consider for the future (Maxwell, 2013). Records associated with the interviews and analytic memos were all included in data analysis. Refer to Figure 1 for an example of a memo I created about one interview.

Document Review and Physical Artifacts

Document review included two kinds of physical artifacts. First, participants were asked to share documents that told the story of their family-school partnerships to support their children/students during COVID-19. They were also asked to share resources that helped them to provide virtual learning in partnership with families/educators during COVID-19. Participants shared examples of items such as: communications, websites they accessed, newsletters and PowerPoints they shared with families, and teaching tools they used or created. All documents were de-identified prior to being stored by the researcher. Second, document review was completed of several publications about COVID-19 and virtual learning for students with disabilities including (a) United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Office of

Special Education and Rehabilitative Services supplemental fact sheet: addressing the risk of COVID-19 in preschool, elementary, and secondary schools while serving children with disabilities (b) CEEDAR (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform) Center Family Guide to At-Home Learning, and (c) The National Center for Learning Disabilities Serving Students With Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis: Spotlight on Policy & Practice. These documents were publicly available and are included in the appendix.

Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data analysis was iterative and ongoing and began as soon as I began collecting data. Transcripts of interviews with parents and educators, artifacts provided by parents and educators (e.g., teacher letters home or tools used for virtual learning), and analytic memos were uploaded into MAXQDA analysis software for analysis. Using this software, I coded data in two phases (First Cycle and Second Cycle) (Saldaña, 2015). The purpose of the First Cycle of data coding was to “initially summarize segments of data” (Miles et al., 2014, p.86). For First Cycle coding, I took an inductive approach to analysis, what Yin (2018) describes as “working your data from the ground up” (p.169). I assigned codes to data chunks by using descriptive, In Vivo, emotion, and values coding (Miles et al., 2014). I read interview transcripts and analytic memos, and I examined physical artifacts, coding chunks of text and images from each of these sources. At the end of First Cycle coding, I began to create a code list which included brief definitions of codes I found (Miles et al., 2014). See Figure 2 for a sample of codes from the First Cycle of coding.

For the Second Cycle of coding, I worked with the First Cycle Codes rather than working with the raw data (Saldaña, 2015). “Pattern coding as a Second Cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles et al., 2014, p.86). Refer to Figure 3 for a sample of Second Cycle coding. For pattern coding, I

utilized categories or themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and theoretical constructs as summarizers depending on what kinds of summarizers were appropriate to the data (Miles et al., 2014). At several points during Second Cycle coding, I created a map of pattern codes and created an analytic memo of the most promising codes (Miles et al., 2014). For example, Learning and Innovation became an overarching code with the following codes under it: Parents (March to the end of the year better, COVID-19 changing advocacy approach, learning about my child during COVID-19 virtual education); teachers (Increased understanding of students and families, teacher professional development, teacher increased collaboration among staff); Both: (advice and learning/positives from COVID-19, opportunities for innovation/advice). Refer to Figure 4 for a sample of a map of pattern codes. Throughout this process, I completed jottings and analytic memos. Jottings were utilized to record my own reflections and commentary as I conducted analysis. Analytic memos were utilized as a record of my ongoing thinking about analysis and synthesis of data including relationships to theory (Miles et al., 2014). After the Second Cycle of coding was complete, I searched for overarching themes that could encompass several categories, thus further combining categories into the most salient findings. After the Second Cycle of coding was complete, I transitioned to what Saldaña (2015) calls “post-coding” and “pre-writing” (p.247) as I began to write my findings. Findings were structured thematically based on findings from the lived experiences of parents/caregivers and educators.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness was a concept established within the field of naturalistic inquiry by Lincoln & Guba (1985) as a set of practices or measures that can help assure reliability or validity within a constructivist framework. Lincoln & Guba (1985) provided four main criteria

for trustworthiness for establishing these techniques as follows: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For each of these criteria some techniques for establishing them are provided. To address credibility, I used three techniques. First, I engaged in checking for disconfirming evidence by explicitly looking for and documenting any data that did not follow the patterns of other participants. During this process, I sought to verify that I did not overlook anything that did not align with my findings. Second, I included “member checking” (Stake, 1995, p.115) as a part of the study. Specifically, I completed member checking by asking parents and educators to review (if they wished) the transcripts of their interviews. Overall, eight of 20 participants reviewed their interview transcripts and four participants provided feedback or corrections. Third, I completed data source triangulation and investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1984, as cited in Stake, 1995). I completed data source triangulation by using multiple sources of evidence (interviews, physical artifacts, policy documents). I completed investigator triangulation by conferring with another researcher to examine issues or instances that arose as contradictory or difficult to resolve. To address transferability, I utilized thick, detailed description including parents/caregivers’ and educators’ voices whenever possible. To address dependability, I completed dependability audits with another researcher to examine my process of inquiry (how the data were collected, kept, analyzed, and the accuracy of the data). Finally, to address confirmability, I conducted a confirmability audit with another researcher. This researcher examined my final product including findings, interpretations, and recommendations supported by data (Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

When employing qualitative methods, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is an integral part of the data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002); hence I also engaged in researcher reflexivity (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Throughout the process of data collection and

analysis, I was aware of my own positionality. First and foremost, as mother of a young child, I have been living the stresses and hardships of parenting in the midst of a global pandemic. Although not engaging in virtual schooling for my child, I strongly believe my own experiences as a working parent still provided me with understanding and empathy for the multiple roles parents were playing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, my other experiences: working with pre-service special education teachers, leading community organizations, and serving as a special education teacher in a large urban school where most of the families spoke Spanish as their primary language, provided me with some insight into the experiences educators and families shared. My past experiences informed identification of the study topic, formulation of the research questions, and the decision to approach the question from a both a parent and educator perspective. These roles also informed my data analysis and interpretation of the data.

Finally, my past experiences have shaped a number of beliefs I hold about the topic of this study. I believe partnerships among parents and educators in special education can create powerful supports for children to thrive. Parents and educators advocating together can create powerful changes for individual children, for policy, and in the law. Parents and educators aligning work at home and at school can support children to achieve and thrive. I believe parents always know their children best and they should be honored, listened to, and engaged in every way possible. I believe no matter the circumstances or barriers every parent always wants the best for their child. From my experiences, these partnerships can be more challenging to form when families come from historically underserved groups or they do not speak the dominant language. Educators need a particular kind of preparation, tools, and approaches to work with families and form effective partnerships across these differences; however, these partnerships can be even more important and vital for students' success.

Study Limitations

Although a variety of techniques were employed to promote credibility and trustworthiness, there are still some limitations to this study. First, parents and educators who were interviewed for this study were not matched pairs and there were some important differences in the characteristics among parents and educators. All but one teacher reported working across differences of race and language. Only one parent reported working with educators across any differences of race and language. Educators reported working with families who were struggling with food and housing insecurity and working non-standard schedules. Parents did not report any challenges with food and housing insecurity and were either employed outside the home working virtually or were working as full-time parents while a spouse worked full-time outside the home or virtually. In a subsequent study, it would be helpful to gather information from matched pairs of parents and educators in order to examine the same partnerships from multiple perspectives. Second, educator participants taught at a variety of levels (grades) and parents had children who were a range of ages and had different levels of need and different disabilities. It may be useful to expand this study by including participants with more similar characteristics in order to understand how these variables impact partnerships among parents and educators. Third, interviews were conducted virtually due to COVID-19. This means observations about participants' physical reactions and signals during interviews were not observed and it means it was much more difficult to build trust with participants without meeting them in person.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The goal of this study was to understand how parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities have experienced partnership during the COVID-19 pandemic through a phenomenological lens. Specifically, how they experienced and addressed challenges while providing instruction for students with disabilities, what resources they accessed and how they learned and innovated together in this challenging time. To answer these questions, a variety of qualitative data were collected and coded for themes to address each part of the overall research question. In this chapter, findings are reported thematically based on findings from the lived experiences of parents/caregivers and educators. Themes are organized according to the components of the research questions.

Initial Transition

In mid-March of 2020, school districts across the country and around the world began announcing they would close as cities enacted stay-at-home orders to try to stem the spread of COVID-19. Parents had varied experiences of this initial transition time that included abrupt and unexpected school closures, pauses in instruction and supports for their children, and challenges of balancing care and academic support for multiple children at home.

Cathy, mother of a five-year-old who had a significant speech delay, explained her experience of the initial transition. She described an abrupt school closure in March and then not receiving any online resources until June. She procured her own resources to support her son's learning: "I spent probably 50 bucks on this big workbook that had worksheets. Because he seemed to like those. So we did a lot of that. I signed up for some website." Kate described how the transition was for her nine-year-old daughter who has PTSD, ADHD, and fetal alcohol

syndrome. According to her, the transition went well once it started after a two- or three-week period of time when there was no instruction at all. During this time, they created a schedule for her daughter at home that included academic learning time. When school re-started virtually, they informed the school of the schedule that worked for her daughter and the school worked with them to accommodate her schedule. She described her experience of the transition with her daughter:

I felt like the transition went well once it actually started, but that period of time where there wasn't really much communication about how things were going to go, were pretty tough because I'm sure there are a lot of other parents who didn't put their kids into a routine and then going to, like getting into school again was hard (Kate, Parent).

For parents with multiple children at home, this time was particularly challenging as they tried to juggle numerous virtual learning tasks for different children and care for younger children at the same time. Cathy, a parent participant, described how she struggled to meet her son's needs while also caring for a new baby at home who was born two weeks prior to the school closures and a 2-year-old. When she could get the baby and the 2-year-old to nap at the same time, she could work with her older son on some of the learning activities she had procured. Similarly, Samantha, a parent participant, of another five-year old explained how she juggled caring for multiple children during this time while trying to support her daughter's learning needs. She had one child home from college, a new baby, and felt like her daughter was not getting the support she needed. She explained: "I feel like, in general, the kids with special needs through this, especially in the beginning of COVID, were just left behind. It was a -- it was a hard transition for her" (Samantha, Parent). Erin, an elementary special education teacher, recounted hearing similar experiences from parents struggling to juggle their responsibilities and have their children

learning from home. Most of the families she worked with were living at the poverty level and had one cell phone for the family so this made communication with school difficult. Most of the parents she worked with were “shift workers” so they had little flexibility with their schedules. She described how at first, parents were afraid and angry as COVID-19 caused them to have to completely re-organize their lives as they tried to find someone to care for their children and support them to do their schoolwork. Erin explained:

Because the expectation was that kids were going to work from home. So, it wasn't just grandma babysits, but now grandma's got to learn how to do math, because at the time in March we did not have a plan for teachers to virtually work with the students (Erin, Educator).

Alexandra and Sally, both parent participants, explained how this initial transition time worked well for them and their children. Alexandra shared how this transition was for her teenage son who has an Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD). His stress level went down, he was happier, and the simple way the work was presented worked for him. She explained:

It was -- they had it so easy. He didn't have to navigate around and click from one page to another. He went to -- he literally went to one page, and they would send him the links for the day, and he just had to, yeah, click (Alexandra, Parent).

Alexandra recounted how the initial transition time was seamless and worked so well for her son that his behavior and his mood improved. She attributed this in part to how the relationships she and her son had with the teachers during the spring were built over years and allowed them to tailor virtual learning to meet his specific needs. She described changes she observed in her son

and how, for them, this initial transition actually had a positive impact on her son's behavior and mood:

I have noticed at home that he's -- I have not seen as much depression or aggression or anxiety. He's seemed a lot happier. He's had a better appetite. Yeah, he's been more engaging with his family here. So, things have been better at home (Alexandra, Parent).

Similarly, Sally, a parent of a fourth grader who has ASD and ADHD, shared how the initial transition went well for her and her son. Each family got a Chromebook from the school district along with workbooks and books from school. His teachers compiled a to-do list that outlined what he had to do each day so he could easily check off tasks as he completed them. There was a weekly meeting with his class online and apart from that, communication occurred by e-mail between Sally and her son's teacher. She explained that once in a while his special education teacher would contact them to check in. This situation worked well for them:

And that was pretty much how it initially started, and my son actually did awesome with that. I think it was because he had a list. He knew exactly what he needed to do to be "set free" from school for the day. So he did it, and he was done, and we had minimal problems that way (Sally, Parent).

Like parents, educators had varied experiences and approaches to this initial transition time as they tried to figure out the best ways to get virtual learning up and running, send work home to students and families, and conduct effective outreach to students and families while meeting their district's requirements. The Department of Education provided guidance that addressed the challenges of the national emergency including clarifying how federal disability law did not

preclude provision of virtual education to students with disabilities. Guidance provided in March, 2020 stated the following:

School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students.

Schools and educators were charged with figuring out how to provide virtual education for all students, including those with disabilities during COVID-19. Callie, an elementary special education teacher, remembered the difficulty of the initial period of virtual learning and meeting the requirements of the district while trying to begin meeting the academic needs of students.

It was very, very difficult and we just had -- they kept on telling us to show the students grace, show the students grace, and I definitely agree with that. I also had to tell my supervisor, the district office, that the same grace we showed the students that then grace needs to be shown to the teachers because we're having a hard time, too (Callie, Educator).

Sarah, a high school special education teacher, recalled how her students and their families had struggles with access to technology during this initial phase: "Our students struggled tremendously because either they didn't have their iPad, it wasn't working, wasn't charged, or they didn't have access to Wi-Fi" (Sarah, Educator). Lilly, a middle and high school special education teacher, reported that while her students did not have issues with access to technology, some of them just went out of contact completely. She described these students "dropping off the radar" during the initial transition and how she found a way to reach out to some of them and

support them to re-connect. Some of them were students she would have never expected to lose contact with.

When I finally could get them to do something, I would just sit on my phone or on the Google meet with them for an hour and a half, and they would just sit there and work.

They didn't need my help. They just wanted someone to sit there so they would do their work. (Lilly, Educator).

Eva, an elementary special education teacher, described a system she created for students to work on packets she mailed to their homes during this initial transition time. They would take pictures of the complete work on their parents' phones, and send it to her. She described physically mailing prizes to students when they completed an entire packet: "And then I did it where when they completed a packet and they sent me on a snapshot or something I always sent them some sort of prize in the mail or something" (Eva, Educator). Four educators took it upon themselves to immediately begin outreach to families to check in and find out if their basic needs were being met. William, a middle school special education teacher, explained how after two weeks of very little contact with students and families during the initial transition time, he took it upon himself to reach out to families to see how they were doing.

I started reaching out to families, but it was more just is everyone safe. Or do you have food? Do you have housing? Just making sure everyone was okay. We weren't talking about school, though (William, Educator).

Anne, a middle school special education teacher, also began outreach to families as soon as she could. She recounted reaching out to families just to maintain contact and meet with them virtually to find out how they and their children were doing. Parents were receptive to this and

according to her, this outreach helped her partnerships with parents. She explains how her outreach “really solidified some parent partnerships that will probably last even though I don't have their kids anymore” (Anne, Educator). Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, described how even during the initial quiet time she was thinking about the challenges she knew her families were dealing with. Like Anne and William, she took it upon herself to start outreach to her students’ families. “So, while we had three weeks where the schools didn't contact families, I still did. I took food to some families' houses and just dropped it on the porch, trying to keep, you know, the safe space, and still assigned work and called families regularly (Lisa, Educator).

All of the parents’ children and all of the educators in this study engaged in virtual learning of some kind during the initial transition period. Table 4 details which families and educators returned to any kind of in-person learning after this initial transition time. In summary, this initial transition time was challenging and shocking for parents and teachers alike. There were many unknowns, resources were scarce for many families and teachers, and parents faced many stresses and responsibilities as educators and caretakers at home. For several teachers, this time became a critical moment in their outreach and ability to continue their relationships with families.

Challenges and Addressing Challenges

Families and educators faced many challenges as they worked to provide education virtually for their children. These challenges, as well as ways families and educators worked together to try to overcome challenges they faced, will be discussed in this section. Many of the challenges that parents and educators reported were challenges that parents and educators of students without disabilities were also facing during COVID-19 and virtual learning. However,

for parents and educators of students with disabilities, these challenges were significantly amplified. Samantha, mother of a five-year old who has phonological disorder, global developmental delay, borderline cognitive impairment and ADHD explained:

It's just very different teaching a child with special needs versus a child who is typical. And I think a lot of people who don't have children with special needs will never understand that. And a lot of them just don't sympathize with it because they don't understand it (Samantha, Parent).

Patricia, whose 4-year-old has ASD, shared how challenges were amplified for them. She explained: “I think the big takeaway in this I think is part of what you're investigating in this study is that virtual learning is hard for any kid, but it's really hard for kids like mine...” (Patricia, Parent). Patricia felt that her son had been making considerable progress in school prior to COVID-19 and virtual learning but that what they could do at home to support his learning was not doing enough to sustain that progress. She explained: “...There are lots of really great things that my husband and I can work with him at home. A lot of those things don't move the needle on the types of challenges that kids with an ASD diagnosis have” (Patricia, Parent). Overall, Patricia worried about the short-term and long-term impacts of her son's loss of learning.

Anne, a middle school special education teacher shared about how the students she worked with who had significant behavior challenges were often the students who would not even log on to virtual learning. Her district would allow some students who had disabilities to come into school in person and she described trying to determine whether the students with behavior needs who were not logging in to virtual learning should be brought back to school. She explained her dilemma:

Those kids that I would support for behavior, are the ones that I can't get to class. They won't even log in. So now I'm facing that question, "Is this a disability related need, enough that I do need to bring them in, in person?" Because if we can justify that, we can bring them in, in person, for services (Anne, Educator).

Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, shared some of the strategies she developed to support one of her students to engage in virtual learning. The student has a learning disability and a processing disorder. She explained that for this student, who lived with his father who also has a disability, learning new things was a challenge and working with technology was a significant challenge for him and for his father. She described strategies such as: letting the student chew gum. Ultimately, she had to significantly modify what was being asked of him and of his father by reducing the amount of time he was being asked to engage in virtual instruction.

With his i-Ready instruction, let him do 15 minutes of work. And if he completes the 15 minutes, then he gets to play a game. So, really, the classes are 90-minute blocks. We've shortened them to 15 minutes to make it more doable not only for the student, but for dad as well (Lisa, Educator).

Overall, challenges were significantly amplified for parents and educators of students with disabilities during COVID-19 and virtual learning. Five sub-themes were identified under the theme of challenges and addressing challenges. Sub-themes included: challenges with technology, engaging students and building relationships with families virtually, parents serving as teachers, moving to a new school/city, and advocating for different services during COVID-19.

Technology

Parents reported struggles with supporting their children to access the correct materials online or to use the resources that were provided in prescribed ways. For example, Alexandra, a parent of a secondary student with EBD, described issues with helping her son to complete assignments and turn them in to the right place. She also described her son's challenges navigating all of the online assignments and links that he was sent. She shared one particular time when he was not sent the link to attend his advisory group and then did not attend. She explained that his needs were not being met: "He needs a visual aid. He needs a sheet saying -- with the links so he knows exactly where to click and what time to be there" (Alexandra, Parent). Kate, explained her daughter's challenges with virtual learning and how she felt teachers could do more to utilize technology for effective teaching for example, changing their screen so they would be able to see all of their students on the screen at once and students would know their teacher could see them or disabling access to YouTube. She explained:

I get the value of showing them different things, but like there's so many other different types of technology that they could utilize to do that so the kids don't get down that rabbit hole that have ADHD or distracted, or frankly any kids because I'm sure that other children that don't have ADHD are also going down that same rabbit hole, right? (Kate, Parent).

Similarly, Erin, an elementary special education teacher, described how parents had to monitor their children closely once the transition to virtual learning on the computer happened to make sure they stayed engaged and didn't go on You Tube. She identified the increased role parents had to take to support their students. "And so, it really caused the parents to step up and it caused the caregivers to step up" (Erin, Educator).

All of the educators who were interviewed gave accounts of challenges with technology in their work with students and families during COVID-19 and virtual learning. During the initial transition, rural districts struggled with internet access and distributing hotspots to families.

Justin, an elementary school counselor from a rural district, explained their issues with internet access. “The biggest challenge was definitely broadband access, and that's still a challenge for us as students have to leave for a number of days until they get a negative COVID test if they have any symptoms” (Justin, Educator). Educators also shared accounts of parents struggling to access online resources and navigate virtual learning with their children. Educators worked closely with parents over the phone, online, and through pictures to try to overcome these challenges with technology. Anne, a middle school special education teacher described helping parents to find their way in this new virtual setting. “And when they come to me, I will then help them navigate through this virtual world and send them to the right place and the right teacher” (Anne, Educator). William, also a middle school special education teacher explained how he had become a technology support resource for his students’ families. He shared how he spent time delivering Chromebooks to students’ homes and helping set up hotspots and troubleshoot internet problems. He estimated 50% of the questions he was getting from parents were about Zoom and technology. He explained how he felt comfortable assisting with these issues but this wasn’t the case for other educators:

I feel comfortable with tech stuff, but I know my coworkers are, they just like, they're ready to cry some days when like things aren't working because they just, they don't get it. They're not tech minded, so I'm happy to help when I can help (William, Educator).

Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, shared a story about a particular student and his father who both struggled so much with technology that it eroded her confidence. “I'm less

confident that the online instruction is going well just because they're so frustrated with the links and they cannot -- they're really struggling still to get him into classes" (Lisa, Educator).

Engaging Students and Building Relationships

Another common challenge educators shared was how to work with students and families to support students who were not engaged in virtual learning or were not completing their work. Educators explained how some students would just disappear or never show up for virtual learning. Callie, an elementary special education teacher who has been teaching for 21 years, explained how she was very embedded in the community and knowledgeable of her students and their families. Moreover, she accessed her own experiences as a parent to work with her students' families and to really empathize with and understand their situations. She shared a story about how she re-engaged a fifth grader who has ASD and a learning disability in virtual learning. She had been with this student since third grade and knew his family well. She worked across language differences with his mom to help make sure he started to do his work. She explained how she worked with his mom but also how she really understands the parents' challenges as a mom herself who is working with her own sons during virtual learning. Callie shared:

So then when he realized that mom and I are talking, and mom, and we're doing all in Spanish, mom is so upset and apologizing to me. And I'm trying to tell her, "It's not your fault. He knows what he's supposed to do. Please don't be upset." Because again, I was having the same issues with my two sons at home because they're actually him and my son (Callie, Educator).

Educators explained that one challenge they faced was how to build relationships with students and families who were new to them. When educators had new students who started in fall of 2020, they often did not have relationships with the families prior to COVID-19. William, a middle school special education teacher, explained two ways he dealt with this challenge. First, he reached out to the students' prior case managers or principals. This was something he did routinely even prior to COVID-19, but especially when he could not meet the families face to face in the same way, this information proved even more valuable. He explained:

And so I would, you know, if I can't connect with the student in the beginning of the year, I would always reach out to either the case manager or the previous school's social worker. I'll call the principal if I have to, just to find out anything about the family, so and that usually works because there's always someone at the school who knows the student well ... (William, Educator).

Second, William completed a lengthy phone call with each family. He introduced himself, asked them questions about their child's IEP, and then importantly, he asked them whether their immediate needs such as housing and food were being met. Further, he explained:

And then I also ask everyone about housing and food and stuff like that to make sure that that's not an issue, and usually by the end of that conversation, they're willing to give me that information. So then I'll immediately start connecting them with resources or, you know, getting the resources myself so that we can like start the school year off well, and then, you know, I learn more about the student (William, Educator).

Educators had empathy for parents' struggles and scarifies as they worked to build relationships with families during COVID-19. Educators talked about seeing parents making

specific efforts to support their children's learning at home whether that was creating specific learning spaces and daily schedules, getting support from other family members or community organizations, checking that assignments were complete and following up if they are not complete. Figure 5 is an example of a classroom that Mallory, parent of a five-year-old who has ASD, created for learning at home. The space was dedicated to virtual learning and had resources that made it look and feel like a physical classroom (alphabet letters on the wall, a calendar, a small white-board and space to sit and complete work). Educators also saw parents making enormous sacrifices with their time and attention to support their students' learning at home. William again explained:

Parents are relying on community members, family members to do that kind of stuff, you know, reaching out into their networks in order to make sure that their students are doing what they need to do during the school day if they can't be there. I mean, parents are making huge sacrifices for, with their jobs (William, Educator).

Anne, another middle school special education teacher, felt similarly to William when she shared her understanding of the parents' situation:

A lot of our parents work double shift, night shift, lots of weird hours. It is not Monday through Friday. It might be Tuesday this week, Thursday next week. You know, it is not consistent. They do not have consistency in their lives like we do. And we have to be mindful of that (Anne, Educator).

However, Anne went on to explain how she heard some other teachers blaming parents for their children not logging in or for not doing enough to support their children's learning at home.

Justin, an elementary school counselor, explained how virtual learning at home revealed serious

inequities among students and families. His understanding exemplified empathy he had for parents and families during this time and how he understood their diverse situations and access to resources. He shared his understanding of how some families could build amazing home learning spaces for their children while others had no choice but to have their children babysitting other children. “And in other cases, the oldest child was at home being the babysitter and being the tutor for the younger child's school. So, that was, it was really an inequitable experience” (Justin, Educator).

Similarly, parents reported understanding the considerable challenges teachers were facing and often tempered their frustration with their children’s needs not being met with recognition of how hard teachers were working amidst such a challenging situation. They reported teachers going out of their way to take actions like delivering books to children’s homes. Dylan, parent of a second grader who has Down Syndrome and also an educator himself, explained his understanding of teachers’ situations and the necessity of adjusting to a new normal:

And I kind of wish that people would recognize -- like if we would just recognize or understand that we're living in a pandemic and we adjusted our life in a way that was more appropriate to living in a pandemic versus trying to live our life the old way during a pandemic, this pandemic may end sooner. And then we actually make it back to our old way of life a lot faster. And I think that's the same with the virtual education (Dylan, Parent).

Mallory, mother of a five-year-old who has ASD, shared how she understood the position her child’s Kindergarten teacher was in even though virtual learning was not working well for her five-year-old. Mallory shared:

I think that she's just doing the best she can. I don't think that she's trying to torture anybody, by doing four-hour sessions, but that's what she has to do because they're technically in a full day kindergarten program (Mallory, Parent).

Mallory's empathy for the teacher's position, however, was part of the reason Mallory did not feel comfortable sharing her son's needs with his teacher. In this situation, Mallory's understanding of her son's teacher came at the expense of appropriate instruction for her child.

Educators were asked specifically about working with families across boundaries of race and/or language and how COVID-19 and virtual learning impacted these relationships specifically. Nine of 10 educators shared that they were working with families who had dominant languages other than English and/or did not identify as the same race as the educator participant. Several educators shared that their relationships with families of color or who did not speak English as their primary language improved during virtual education. Anne, a middle school special education teacher, shared how the relationships she had with parents who did not speak English as their primary language improved during COVID-19. She described realizing the "double challenge" families face when they do not speak English as their primary language:

They might have the assets. They might have the resources, or the technology they need. But, my god! It's all in English. And they don't know - they don't know. But I - so they're really relying on me heavily to help them navigate through the Google Classroom, how to get to the assignment (Anne, Educator).

Anne contrasted this to working with families of color by describing she was having a difficult time engaging these families virtually, whereas forming relationships with students in-person had

not been a challenge for her. She described seeing students infrequently in virtual lessons and how her outreach had not resulted in increased engagement in online learning:

Well, I'll shoot them a text or give them a phone call. And they're like - and they're always thankful that I call and reach out and ask how I can help. But I - it's just - there's not follow through. I don't know if it's the work schedules, or what. I'm not sure what the hang up is (Anne, Educator).

Eva, an Elementary Special Education Teacher, described how her work with the Spanish teacher in the dual language program had increased to support outreach to parents. For Eva, she related more challenges working with families whose primary language was not English. During COVID-19 she increased collaboration with the dual language teacher to conduct outreach with families. She explained this increased collaboration and how she worked with the dual language teachers to support students and conduct outreach to parents:

Obviously, the Spanish part of the dual language program can, you know, whip out the understanding to a parent in three seconds while I'm, you know, butchering it the whole time (Eva, Educator).

Callie also shared her approach to working with families who did not speak English as their primary language and how she developed relationships with entire families over years:

I don't use those acronyms when I talk to parents. I try to be very relatable to them and let them know that not only am I there for their student, I'm also there for them. And I still have contact with a lot of my parents and my students who are no longer in my classroom (Callie, Educator).

In summary, empathy for the other's situation was one thing that helped educators and families build relationships. Educators struggled with engagement in virtual learning, and educators worked across differences in language and race with some educators finding their relationships improved over these differences during virtual learning.

Parent as Teacher

Parents reported that they took on many of the roles of teacher while supporting their children's learning at home. The CEEDAR (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform) Center, an organization based at the University of Florida, provided a family guide for at-home learning which included instructions for how parents could model new skills for their children, provide clear directions, and support their children while they were completing academic tasks. It also included tips for how to help children stay on task, how to provide specific feedback, and create goals with children. This type of support for at home learning demonstrates how parents were often taking on the role of teacher in the home.

Samantha, mother of a five-year old who has phonological disorder, global developmental delay, borderline cognitive impairment and ADHD shared some supports she used at home to support her daughter. For example, she shared that when school stopped during COVID-19 they utilized resources to support learning at home such as: scholastic learning, Khan Academy, speech resources sent to them by their private therapist, books to help teach basic skills, and a visual schedule. Refer to Figure 6 for an example of the visual schedule Samantha was using with her daughter and Figure 7 for examples of home learning resources Samantha and her daughter used together. Parents were taking on this role as teacher and doing everything they could to support their children's learning at home, and it was often challenging for them.

Some parents felt it was negatively impacting their relationships with their children. Mallory explained this frustration:

I don't hit my kids. I don't -- but I find myself so internally frustrated that I'm like, I just want to scream, sit down, but I would never, but I'm just like, how hard is it? Sit down. No, you cannot go play Legos. No, you cannot go see what (your sibling) is doing. No, and I just feel like I have to be the no bird. I'm constantly just saying no, no, no, no, no, over and over and over again that I feel like he's like, gosh, she's so mean lately (Mallory, Parent).

Parents reported challenges with the lack of rigor of the material their children were being given, and either their child was ahead of the class, or the amount of work their child was being given and the way it was being given was overwhelming. Again, Mallory explained:

And another problem is that he's so advanced. He knows all of his numbers. He knows all of his ABCs. He can write them all. He can say them all. He can count backwards. He can do his ABCs. Like he knows uppercase. He knows lowercase. And so when they're working on this stuff, he's so bored because he is done within five minutes (Mallory, Parent).

Mallory tried different approaches to working with her son when he was ahead of the lesson like giving him breaks to run around. She did not, however, feel comfortable reaching out to his teacher to ask for accommodations or different work. Parents also reported extreme difficulty having their children sit and attend to a screen for the allotted amount of time. This became an issue especially in the fall when students were expected to engage in hours of synchronous learning each day. Especially for young children and children with disabilities that impacted their

attention such as ADHD, this was very challenging and often created tension at home between parent and child. Parents had to walk a fine line between pushing their children to stay engaged in virtual lessons and keeping the peace in their house and in their relationships with their child. Kate explained, “So, that's a big one and another one is finding that balance between making sure she's on task and not driving everyone in the house insane.” William, a middle school special education teacher, shared his view of what parents were going through as they were asked to do so much more at home to support their children’s learning.

All the parents understand that, they get that this, their role has changed, their role as parents has expanded to include education right now in ways that none of us could have imagined. And I also, at the same time that I'm saying that, it's also there's zero resources. Parents have no capacity to do this, I have very limited capacity to support them in the ways that they need to really help their students (William, Educator).

Parents supporting virtual learning meant parents had to spend more time actively supporting their children’s learning, often resulting in parents being able to work less at their jobs. Parents also had to support children (even older children) during virtual learning whenever there were technical problems. Kelly, mother of a sixth grader who has ADHD, explained, “Yeah. Yeah. The need to really put my duties on the back burner I would say. I've been working less as a result.” Kate expressed frustration with the lack of action about dealing with specific issues her daughter, who has ADHD, faced with the way material was being presented virtually. For Kate’s daughter, there were multiple temptations to access to other things online (e.g., YouTube) rather than engage in the virtual lesson. She shared these concerns with the school but was not offered any options or solutions. Kate stated, “It's just everyone acknowledging that

virtual learning is tough, but I don't know like, depending on how long this goes on, I don't know how long that argument that virtual learning is tough can be used, you know?"

Alexandra, mother of a high school student, shared her experiences with trying to keep her son on task and help him with assignments when the amount of work, time on task, and presentation of the work for him was not working at all. He did not have a good visual schedule for what he needed to do for virtual learning so he and his mom were consistently confused and frustrated. The expectations of him were also markedly different and increased as compared with his last year of middle school when virtual learning went well for him.

So, some days, it's just not happening, you know? So, having some flexibility that way with him. And just trying to be encouraging. Like, "Yes, I understand this [is] frustrating. Yes, I know you did this assignment." Like, you know, "Let's email the teacher and ask her if she can unlock it so we can resubmit it a different way," you know? So, some of that -- those sorts of things (Alexandra, Parent).

Alexandra reached out to her son's school and case manager multiple times and only at the time of her interview for this study felt changes were finally moving forward to meet her son's needs. In essence, Alexandra's relationship with her son's teachers and school suffered because of the challenges virtual learning brought. This was in stark contrast to how she described her son's experience in the spring when he was learning virtually but was at the middle school level.

Alexandra and her son had strong relationships with his teachers and school at the middle school and his needs were being met. Similarly, Sally whose 4th grade son has ASD and ADHD, was working on her own to meet her son's needs even though she had reached out to her son's school to try to get additional support. She explained:

Just figuring out what supports he needs on my own, and figuring out-- with (Child's Name), because he is high-functioning, it's very hard to tell if there is-- something's not being taught to him the right way that he is not comprehending. Or if he's literally not comprehending, like not intelligent enough. That's very hard for me (Sally, Parent).

When asked if her outreach to her son's school to help work through these questions was successful, she said that it was not. Dylan, whose young daughter has Down Syndrome, was working not only with his daughter's teachers but also with two respite providers to support his daughter's virtual learning. Figure 8 provides an example of tools they used at home to support his daughter's learning. This tool helped his daughter to keep track of what she needed to do every day as a part of her schedule and what she had accomplished. It also helped her to select options for her breaks. In their situation, Dylan's daughter often used these tools and had support from respite providers in their home. They were the only family with this kind of additional support at home. Early on during the shut-down, his daughter's new teachers worked to create an individual, modified schedule for her. However, even this was not working to meet her needs. At the time of the interview, Dylan was considering if it would be a better option to work with the respite providers to just provide her with one-on-one tutoring to meet her IEP goals. He explained how virtual education was just not working for his daughter:

But, it almost seems from -- that the virtual education is the teachers are trying their best, but because of the, I guess the format, you know, where my daughter's receiving it from - through a computer that it's just not impacting her (Dylan, Parent).

Many parents felt virtual learning in the way it was designed just did not and would not work for their children. Parents found specific things that helped their children engage somewhat

better like, an alternative schedule as described by Dylan. Several parents found very clear daily and weekly to-do lists with the exact links and assignments their children needed to complete were helpful. Kate found what worked for her daughter was someone sitting next to her like a Special Education Assistant and supporting her to engage in virtual learning. Mallory found more movement breaks worked for her Kindergartener and wished the needs of her young child were considered more in the design of virtual learning. In the end, these parents' situations epitomized the sub-theme of "parent as teacher." They had to step into the role of teacher in designing instruction, schedules, and materials that would work at home for their children. Parents found some specific things that worked for their children, and in some cases shared these things with educators or the school. In many cases, however, parents worked on their own to try to find ways to help their children engage in virtual learning and found their children's needs and disabilities were not considered in the design of virtual learning. Only Dylan described a situation where a completely alternative schedule was developed to meet a child's needs.

Moving to a New School and Advocating for Services

Parents found virtual education and working with their child's teachers particularly challenging when their child started a new school or moved to a new district during the pandemic. The majority of parents (n=6) reported their child started a new school or moved to a new school district during the pandemic. Another two parents reported starting new special education services or starting a new school right before schools closed (3 weeks prior). As a result of being virtual, in this scenario, parents and students did not have a chance to meet their new teachers. They did not have the same kind of connection with the new school staff. Some of the ways parents dealt with these challenges was through advocacy. They had to advocate for their children to receive services at the new school without being able to meet with anyone in

person. This seemed to be a particular challenge when children moved from Pre-K to Kindergarten or from middle school to high school. Alexandra explained how challenging virtual learning had been with her son as he transitioned to high school in the fall. She described frequent “meltdowns” her son would have and their ongoing struggles to turn in the correct assignments in the correct way. She explained the fall was so different “because it’s a new school. Those established relationships where we work really well with each other are not there. So, I think that’s a big part of it.”

Samantha had particular challenges advocating for her daughter to receive appropriate services over the summer prior to her entering Kindergarten. She felt that until the school professionals saw her daughter in person, they did not believe she needed the level of support she actually needed. This was because they based their supports only on her daughter’s previous IEP which was done during 4K. As a result, she had to begin in-person Kindergarten without the necessary supports in place. Samantha described dealing with these challenges by advocating through constant e-mailing, calling, scheduling and then attending appointments, documenting everything, and bringing an advocate. Samantha described these challenges in her own words:

Getting people to listen and to -- once they saw her, they realized, okay, she does need a lot of help. But it was, like, until then, they just looked at her old IEP and thought she was just a kid who needs speech therapy and didn't even have any desire to look at the paperwork until then. So my greatest challenge was just getting someone to listen and acknowledge and do something (Samantha, Parent).

In summary, some of the significant challenges parents and teachers faced during virtual learning were: navigating the initial transition time, technological glitches and access, building relationships virtually (especially when students or families were new to one another), and

parents playing the role of teacher at home. Some of the ways parents and teachers navigated these challenges were through increased outreach, having empathy and understanding for one another's positions and challenges, and increased advocacy. Parents, in particular, also had to attempt to find balance among a myriad of competing demands including supporting children's engagement in virtual learning, working full-time jobs, caring for other children, and maintaining positive parent-child relationships.

Resources

Parents and educators accessed a variety of resources to support children's learning during COVID-19 (refer to Table 5 for a summary). Resources were categorized into three sub-themes as follows: people, organizations, and physical supports. People as supports were by far the most frequently mentioned resource, mentioned by 19 out of 20 parents and educators.

People as Supports

Three parents reported consulting with and getting support from expert advocates. Examples included a family friend who was also a school psychologist, or a child's teacher from a previous year. Kate explained how it was actually her daughter's special education teacher from the previous year who reached out to them about her son enrolling in virtual learning support at a community center. Kate explained:

I think that she reached out because I had confided in her that my son was doing; it was terrible. It was a horrible experience...So, she was actually the one who reached out. I don't know if they actually reached out to all kids in special ed (Kate, Parent).

Educators also reported administrators, social workers, other teachers, and Home/School Coordinators and translators as key supports for families. Administrators and other

teachers/school staff helped with outreach to families whose children were not engaging in virtual learning, while social workers were key connectors to many services families could access to meet their basic needs such as counseling and medical services. Callie, an elementary special education teacher, described a team approach to reaching out to a family of a child who was not completing work:

Well, the speech teacher had to meet with him, and they met virtually. So he met with her. He met with the gen ed (general education) teacher. He met with me. We had the homeschool coordinator also call mom because he wasn't getting his work done. So she called, too. I don't think the admin made contact because we had gotten him where he didn't get to that point (Callie, Educator).

Similarly, Sarah, a high school special education teacher, explained a team-based approach to working with students and families and how they had a strong support team including student services, assistant principals, and counselors. Other people from the team were also were doing home-visits to families. She explained outreach to students who were not showing up for class:

I know that they are starting to do home visits to get-- to find out what the obstacle is or what the problem is for the student not being in class. At this point, they don't want us to do that kind of thing. In the past, I've never had a problem, but since COVID I'm totally good not doing it. But they have-- I don't want to say they've stepped up because everybody was floundering last spring, but I feel we have a really good team in place (Sarah, Educator).

The majority of parents (n= 7)) reported a lack of family support. Many families lived far away from family that could provide critical support. Steven explained, "I mean, we have plenty of

family support, but not within 1,000 miles.” Mallory echoed this common sentiment of isolation by stating, “No virtual education. That’s all me. Childcare once in a blue moon. My in-laws will watch the kids, but not often.” Only one family was utilizing respite care. For this family, two providers were providing support for online learning for their daughter during the day. For all other families, parents were shouldering the responsibilities for facilitating all aspects of virtual learning at home on their own.

Organizations as Supports

One resource that was mentioned mostly by educators was the use of community centers as supports. In some areas, community centers were offering full-day care for children while they engaged in virtual learning. At the middle school level, special education teacher William, reported seeing a huge change in his students’ level of involvement in virtual learning when they started doing their work at a community center. According to William, having students at the community center made a real impact:

I would say like in terms of impact on their education, like definitely the families who are sending their kids to the community center. I don't know what I would -- I don't know how I would educate their child without those staff, without that community center (William, Educator).

Similarly, Kate shared the positive impact of her son being able to do his virtual learning at a community center. She shared that, while still an imperfect solution for her son, having an adult to facilitate his learning and having in-person interaction made a real difference:

So, he still hasn't been great at all that kind of stuff, but there is an adult there who can help him through some of the activities. But then with synchronous it's a lot better for

him because he's more engaged. He still has difficulties focusing, but he's able to at least interact more, which is helpful for him... (Kate, Parent).

Organizations that served students with disabilities and their families published resources to assist with family partnerships during virtual learning for students with disabilities. For example, the CEEDEAR Center published a Family Guide to At-Home Learning which included ideas for how parents could support student learning at home. The National Center for Learning Disabilities published a brief guidance for schools about working with families of students with disabilities during COVID-19. One of the highlights of their guidance was that parent-teacher communication was vital to meet the needs of students with disabilities during COVID-19.

Physical Supports

Parents and educators shared a variety of physical resources they considered supports for virtual learning. These included such things as free meals for families and specific learning applications educators and parents used to meet the needs of their students and children. Of course, access to working technology (computer and Internet) was vital for virtual learning at home. Technological supports also included phones and tools such as Google Translate. Texting and calling parents was absolutely critical during COVID-19. Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, explained how she reached out and communicated with parents during COVID-19 and virtual learning in a variety of ways. Her communication with most parents occurs daily:

Lots of phone calls, conference FaceTime meetings. I'm really big on Google Meet. So, other than the four families that I'm struggling with, I'm having a really good contact.

And really, I'm talking to each of the parents daily at this point because the students I'm working with are younger and they need support (Lisa, Educator).

Similarly, William, a middle school special education teacher, described how texting was critical to his continued relationships with families. He shared the following about how communication and relationships with parents used to be a relatively small part of a teacher's job and during COVID-19 and virtual learning it is now main part of the job:

I know some of my coworkers who aren't texting parents, and it's going very poorly because they can't get ahold of anyone. This is, this aspect of the job, the communicating with parents may have been like 5% of your stress in person, but this is 90% of your day now. You just really have to be more open to changing your outlook on what your relationship with parents and families is as a teacher because it's completely like reversed now (William, Educator).

Educators reached out to families and families reached out to educators to help with technology issues, find out what assignments were due, get access to resources to meet their basic needs, and problem solve together about students' learning. Many families set up dedicated learning spaces at home for their children to engage in virtual learning. Artifact data corroborated this finding. Mallory shared a photograph of a learning space she set up at home for her Kindergartener (see Figure 5). During the initial transition, parents sought many online resources to supplement whatever learning their child may have been receiving from school. Cathy explained:

A lot of -- there was a lot of apps that the teachers were recommending for reading. So when we got tired of reading the same books at home and stuff, it was -- there was like an

online app thing that you could read, and then each book you read, you got more points
(Cathy, Parent).

One important resource parents shared was useful for their children was a checklist of the child's tasks provided by the school. Alexandra expressed how it was so useful for her son to have all of his assignments in one place in a simple and easy to access format:

It was virtual, but he had to go to only one page, and they had -- every day they would email him where and when to click on the link, and then they would do it over Zoom with him. They had a whiteboard. They would go through the math with him. They would read out loud, you know, all of that (Alexandra, Parent).

Checklists facilitated students taking responsibility for their learning, simplified the process of finding all the things they needed to complete, and helped parents to facilitate learning more effectively at home. See Figure 9 for an example artifact of a checklist Sally shared for her (now) 4th grader. The National Center for Learning Disabilities echoed the importance of this kind of checklist in their guidance for schools and provided an example of a teacher who shared the effectiveness of providing her students' families with one place online to find everything they needed for virtual learning. Educators sent home packets and hard copies of lessons when students could not access them or when this kind of engagement worked better for students. Some educators also reported making recorded lessons available for parents to watch at a time that worked for them. Eva, an elementary special education teacher, described how she provided hard copies of lessons and alternative activities for parents and students and how she helped connect families to various different resources:

I've had expert things for the families to do at home without -- that don't involve maybe the core lesson that the class is working on at the time. I've helped hook families up with some of the things in the area, the free lunches and the free breakfast programs from their schools, getting them set up for delivery to their house so the parents don't have to leave during the lesson to the school to get the meals (Eva, Educator).

In summary, educators and parents accessed many different resources during COVID-19 and virtual learning to support children's education. Some of these resources helped meet basic needs and some resources helped educators and parents facilitate learning together.

Impacts on Partnership

COVID-19 and the impact of virtual learning on educators and families was profound. There was also an impact on the way educators and parents worked together to support student learning. Some of these changes could have lasting impact on work educators and families engage in together.

Continuum of Involvement

Parents and teachers talked about their outreach and partnerships with educators and schools prior to COVID-19 and how this may have changed during the pandemic and virtual learning. Six parents reported intensive involvement at school prior to COVID-19 that continued during the pandemic, although it changed forms. Four parents reported they were not very involved at school prior to COVID-19 and became more involved during virtual learning. In-depth involvement included actions such as: daily updates, calls, in-person visits to the school, and aligning work that was done at school with work that was being done at home. Parents described communicating by phone and e-mail with teachers frequently. Alexandra, whose high

school age son has EBD explained her involvement as daily calls, picking up her son as needed, and monthly meetings with the whole support team:

They were like, "We can call her anytime," you know, "at work or call her to come pick him up," you know? Because there was a time when he was in school that, like, at least once a week I would have to come pick him up. So, pretty involved. And over the course of those years, though, I felt like we really built a pretty trusting relationship (Alexandra, Parent).

Alexandra described a very involved role in her son's education during COVID-19 as well although instead of working so closely with the school, her son was home full-time and she was trying to assist him with his virtual schooling and advocate for him with his new school to get his needs met. She described what it is like during virtual learning:

And it's nearly impossible to try to work full-time and make sure that your child is engaged and doing what they need to do and helping with assignments. And that -- -- as parents, we really need to advocate because most schools are not just going to assume or understand. And it's up to us to really say what we need and what our kids need (Alexandra, Parent).

Similarly, Patricia described extensive work she undertook to support her son who had ASD. She set up a meeting with each of his teachers and therapists to understand how they were approaching things at school to make sure they were aligned with the way things were being done at home. When she felt like she wasn't getting enough information, she requested a weekly summary to keep her informed explaining:

I asked the teacher if I could have a weekly sort of summary about what the positives were, what the tough things were, and she started sending me home a daily recap of things that went well, things that didn't go well, fun facts to share, because we felt like we weren't connected enough to what was going on in a way that we could help reinforce things that went well or help things that didn't go well. And so, that was really helpful (Patricia, Parent).

Patricia and her husband continued an intensive and involved approach to supporting their son during COVID-19. She explained how she worked with him before work and at night when she comes home from work and how she and her husband traded off supporting her son. She recounted:

So, I think we're trying to figure that out. Like I said, we use timers a lot to try to balance our activities and we incentivize him with, you know, getting to play his game on the computer if he participates, but that's sort of a double edge sword, because every time he participates for 15 minutes, he wants a reward, which is longer than 15 minutes of participation. So, I don't know, what else are we doing to mitigate those challenges? I don't know (Patricia, Parent).

Steven, for example, became more involved during COVID-19 supporting his son's virtual speech therapy and also advocating for services to begin during the pandemic. Mallory was very involved supporting her son's education at home prior to the pandemic, for example, by doing behavior therapy with him at home, but she was not very involved with other aspects of his schooling. She explained:

And basically, I would just walk him up to the gate, physically hand him over to a classroom aid or his teacher, whatever. And then they take them away. And then I come pick them back up. (Mallory, Parent).

During COVID-19, she began to see everything that her son was doing and was responsible for supporting him during virtual learning. Similarly, Dylan, a parent, described a more hands-off approach to working with his daughter's school prior to COVID-19. Dylan received daily updates about his daughter's day but did not volunteer in the classroom, for example. Dylan attributed this partially to his role in the school district (he oversaw special education services) and how he did not want to put his daughter's needs ahead of other more pressing needs in the district. He explained:

I would say that we, as educated individuals and parents, had a lot of faith in the school district and in the staff, in the building. We had our two daughters, older daughters went to the same school prior to, and we felt that they received a good education. But we -- and I think partly we were a little bit too hands-off with our older daughters' education, as well as (child's name)'s" (Dylan, Parent).

However, during virtual learning Dylan's role changed as he worked closely with his daughter's teachers and respite providers to make a schedule and learning content that worked for his daughter and support her learning at home.

Educators also reported varied experiences with partnerships and outreach prior to COVID-19. Seven educators reported extensive and in-depth outreach to families prior to COVID-19 that continued during the pandemic. These teachers took actions such as: making frequent home-visits, knowing their students' families well, connecting families with various

resources to help them deal with homelessness, hunger, and other challenges. For example, William, middle school special education teacher, described an intensive kind of outreach and relationship building with families. His description was about work he did with families during COVID-19, but according to him, this is just a continuation of his general approach to working with families. He described going to families' homes to deliver Chromebooks for all of the siblings at home and learning about issues families faced. When he knew families faced a lack of food or housing, he connected them with services and resources and even delivered meals to families' homes. He described using his own money to purchase backpacks and school supplies for all of the siblings in a family. He also provided his personal cellphone number to families so they can call him whenever needed. He explained:

I take that role very seriously as well as being a teacher where, you know, I'm not just managing their paperwork. I'm also like managing their education, so if they don't have food, they can't sit in class and do Zoom or sit through a class in school. If they don't, if they're worried about housing, they can't be present for school when they're facing all this trauma at home, so if I can do things to ameliorate some of that trauma in the ways that I have power to do, I'm going to do that (William, Educator).

Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, had a similar intensive outreach approach. Prior to COVID-19 she made home visits even though they were not required by the school. She explained:

I feel like that really helped my relationship with my students, for them to see me in their home environment, talking to the parents, and understanding that we are working together and this is a real collaboration. That has been far more beneficial than anything else I could immediately put my finger on (Lisa, Educator).

Erin, an elementary special education teacher, described her belief that parents were critical partners all of the time and even more so during COVID-19 when the parent was playing the role that would typically be the role of the teacher or the Special Education Assistant (SEA) at school. She explained, “And so, it's very important in the virtual environment for elementary school kids to have that parental figure there, or guardian to be there with them the whole way” (Erin, Educator).

Three educators were more reserved in their approaches to outreach and relationship building with families. Sarah, a high school special education teacher, was representative of educators whose approach was less intensive. She described sending postcards to parents to recognize when their child had done something good. Sarah also shared about parent involvement in IEP meetings:

It could be anything from the parent actually coming and partaking in the meeting and contributing what their concerns are, what they see, to parents that can't make it but have contact-- that you've been able to be in touch with before the meeting so you know and then you can follow up with, to others that don't even respond (Sarah, Educator).

Lilly, a middle and high school special education teacher, described a similarly reserved approach to outreach:

But most of them, I just met through IEP meetings, when they would come into school -- -- and then I would meet them at the IEP meetings. But there wasn't a lot of contact except through emails and some phone calls (Lilly, Educator).

It is important to note that educators with more intensive approaches were elementary school and middle school teachers and the elementary school counselor, while the educators with more

reserved approaches to working with families taught older students. In summary, both parents and teachers had varied approaches to building partnerships prior to and during COVID-19. The approaches ranged from very involved and doing intensive outreach to more a more reserved approach. There was some evidence that the level of approaches varied for parents based on their children's needs (e.g., age, disability).

Partnerships– Educators Views

Educators reported increased communication with and outreach to support parents and their children during virtual learning. Communication happened at varied times during the day and evening. Educators reported helping families with technological issues, to locate and understand assignments, to logon to computers or programs, and to problem solve. Educators reported how increased communication helped build closer relationships with families. Anne, a speech and language pathologist (SLP), explained:

And so they know exactly who I am, how to get a hold of me if they have any question about anything. And that's pretty powerful for a parent, to know that they have somebody they can rely on, especially in these weird times (Anne, Educator).

Erin, an elementary special education teacher, felt the communication and need for working with parents during virtual learning was so intense that it meant working with each parent and each child as a team:

I'm communicating with parents way more than I would ever communicate with them in a regular school year. But, it also has its challenges, because I -- am currently mentoring another teacher right now. And the challenge that she's seeing, as well as myself is -- I

might have a case load of 13 students, but in reality, I have 26 students -- because the parent is a student as well (Erin, Educator).

William, a middle school special education teacher, shared the bottom line that virtual learning simply cannot work without partnership with parents:

I will say, though, my relationships with parents and families are much stronger than they would probably be in person just because I, we have to communicate. There's no other way for this to work without constant communication, so I will say that is a positive (William, Educator).

William's stance was a common sentiment across educator participants. Partnerships with parents were needed during virtual learning in new and vital ways. In some cases, educators went to extraordinary lengths to reach families to support their engagement and build partnerships notwithstanding serious barriers. For example, Lisa, an elementary special education teacher, shared a story about how she worked with a student's father to overcome challenges with virtual learning. The father was becoming increasingly frustrated with trying to support his child's learning. The child was struggling with the work that was above his level and was not able to pay attention during virtual learning. Lisa let the father know why his child was struggling and that the work was above his level. She helped the father understand which work she assigned was at the student's level and created several strategies to support the student to engage in work virtually. Neither the father nor the child could read, so Lisa had to find other ways to support them even just to logon. Lisa shared about making picture cards for instructions about logging into virtual learning:

With him not being able to read, I had to make picture cards for dad to know what to click on. So, I can't say, you know, "Go to Settings and go to the [app name] app." So, that would just be too much because he -- dad can't read. And since his son also cannot read, it added that extra challenge (Lisa, Educator).

Similarly, Erin, an elementary special education teacher, found a way to communicate with a family so they could sign some necessary paperwork. Of course, she could not see the family in person or visit their home in a traditional way. She could not send the paperwork home to the parents in the child's backpack. Despite these challenges, she described finding a way to reach the family:

I can't get them to bring it. The school district's not going to -- formally tell me -- hey, go get that signature out of their home, but you're not supposed to be around COVID, you know what I mean? They're not going to tell me that, so I've got to buy my own PPE -- suit up -- go to the house, and literally it's hilarious what I have to do, but literally I throw the clipboard --the parent signs it and throws it back (Erin, Educator).

It is important to note that Lisa and Erin were educators who were active in their outreach prior to virtual learning; however, even for them, COVID-19 and virtual learning necessitated new approaches to outreach. The stories of educators finding a way to connect with parents by overcoming challenges and boundaries, as well as the overall report of dramatically increased communication among educators and parents illustrate the kinds of outreach that occurred during virtual learning and COVID-19.

During virtual learning the home and school were collapsed in unprecedented ways. Educators were giving lessons from inside their own homes and parents were opening up their

homes to educators as they turned on cameras into their lives and challenges. This created a new level of vulnerability among some educators and parents, as well as a shared experience of extreme challenges. Eva, an elementary special education teacher, reported her experience that parents felt more comfortable reaching out to her:

We don't have the -- we don't have all the answers either, but I will help in any possible way I can, whether it's teaching them how to log their child into the technology as they're supposed to be doing for math or whatever it is; whereas before it would be well -- you know, I think parents feel more comfortable reaching out saying, "I need help." (Eva, Educator).

Erin noted the change from seeing parents face to face infrequently for IEP meetings and conferences, to seeing them daily on the screen changed her perspectives of her students and their parents and also allowed parents to be more vulnerable with her:

Because if you are in poverty -- and you are doing Zoom with the teacher -- a teacher can see inside your home -- okay? It, everything is laid bare. If you are on the Zoom with your -- child and your other two kiddos are tearing it up in the house -- and before, you always appeared to be that parent that had it all together and you always wanted to look that way, guess what, it's exposed now (Erin, Educator).

Erin felt her job was to make her students' parents feel comfortable with this; like they were on equal ground. She was seeing into their homes, but they were also seeing into her home. Some educators reported a shared feeling with parents that they were all struggling through this together and how this feeling of solidarity made their relationships closer. Some educators reported how the experience of working with parents during virtual learning would impact their

approach to outreach and relationships building with families in the future. Ann, an SLP, shifted from asking why parents are not doing something to asking how she can help:

You know, that has a whole different feel to it. Because you're not judging, you're not anything. "Tell me about your situation, and how can I serve you best?" Like that is definitely something I will carry forward" (Anne, Educator).

Erin, an elementary special education teacher, observed how her increased understanding of families' realities will change her approach to relationship building because she can empathize with families more effectively:

Yes, it will change the way I work with them in the future. It definitely will, because I myself don't come from poverty, so I don't know what it looks like, but I know what it looks like now. And I know what it, I know what it looks like, and I feel to a certain -- extent, because I, you know, I'm pretty good with empathy. And I can see myself in their shoes how I would feel (Erin, Educator).

Partnerships-Parents' Views

Parents' feelings about working with educators during virtual learning were more mixed than educators' feelings. Some parents mentioned ways they worked with educators to meet their children's needs. Examples of this collaboration ranged from requesting check-ins with teachers, using information parents provided about their children's needs to change how they interacted virtually, or creating an alternative schedule. Patricia shared how her son's educators used information she provided when they interacted with him online. She noted specifically how one speech therapist was working with her to meet her son's needs:

Yeah. I mean, the speech therapist and I talked about, you know, having a schedule and having a preferred activity and a non-preferred activity and a reward. You know, we kind of talked about the schedule. She's asked me lots of questions about what motivates him and has tried to sort of tailor that into her lessons (Patricia, Parent).

Although parents did understand the challenges, they expressed frustration their children were not getting what they needed during virtual learning. Kate explained how her satisfaction with her daughter's school in-person did not translate to virtual learning. Moreover, she was frustrated that her daughter's school had not made accommodations for her daughter to do assessments virtually. Kate expressed frustration about her children's experiences with virtual learning:

So, it's kind of disappointing there, and I, you know, I try to be as understanding as possible since nobody expected to be in this situation, but you would hope that they would be focusing a little bit more on the students who are going to be more vulnerable, like the special ed kids and the low socioeconomic kids (Kate, Parent).

Similarly, Mallory shared her frustrations about logging into the first day of Kindergarten for her son and how she did not receive the kind of communication she needed from the teacher; however, she was reluctant to complain or to make extra requests of the teacher. She explained:

I can make it another two weeks of this if we can go back soon-ish. So I definitely don't want to be the complainer, but it's definitely not perfect. So no, I have not said anything because I don't want to be that mom (Mallory, Parent).

Parents shared specific challenges about trying to advocate for services or feeling like their children were not getting the services they needed. This was coupled with a feeling of being disconnected from their children's educators and school throughout this process of advocacy.

Sally explained “becoming more distant from staff members” due to issues that had happened the previous school year and because her son was not receiving the services she believed he needed. Dylan, a parent, shared how he saw his relationships strengthen with his daughter’s educators (teachers and principal) during COVID-19 and virtual learning. He described seeing the educators’ commitment, compassion, and even love for his daughter. He described actions teachers took during COVID-19 such as bringing books from the school library to their house:

And I say those three [educators], and I don't mean to leave out their previous teachers, but they weren't -- they didn't teach her in COVID. So they are truly committed to her and they want her to do well to the point of creating a whole different schedule for her with different -- you know, would -- that relate to her expectations. So I would say my feelings are great respect and gratitude and appreciation, and their communication with us has been -- it has been wonderful (Dylan, Parent).

In summary, parents’ feelings about their partnerships with educators were more mixed as compared with educators’ feelings about their partnerships with parents during virtual learning and COVID-19. While Dylan reported strengthened relationships with his daughter’s teachers, on the whole, parents’ frustrations with the difficulty of virtual learning for their children and for them often outweighed their perceptions of increased educator outreach when it did occur.

Learning and Innovations

Educators reported increased understandings of families’ situation, and increased understandings of students’ needs. First, educators shared they better understood what their students’ home lives were like and how they contributed to inequities. This consisted of educators having a window into students’ lives through Zoom and parents being more willing to

share challenges and ask for help. High school special education teacher, Sarah, explained how she has a new understanding of her students' environments and what they really look like:

Some have had their cameras on and sometimes it looks chaotic. I think it just reminds me that they don't-- it gives you a deeper look into them than you might see in the classroom. They might come to class disorganized and unkempt, but you don't know how bad it is (Sarah, Educator).

Anne, a middle school special education teacher, described how before virtual learning she knew when a student experienced challenges at home but due to COVID-19 this awareness was much more pronounced:

When they turn on that camera, or they unmute themselves, and all of a sudden you're seeing it, and you're hearing it. And it just adds that extra dimension where it just -- I've already had a couple experiences that absolutely like pierced my soul, and not in a good way (Anne, Educator).

Most educators reported having a better understanding of the challenges students and families faced but this was not always the case. Although she did see increased challenges during COVID-19, elementary special education teacher, Lisa, shared she was not surprised by what she saw because she grew up in the same community in which she was teaching:

I grew up in the community that I'm teaching in. I was homeless on the streets in the community that I'm teaching in. So, I have a unique perspective. So, I've kind of seen and experienced that, so I'm not surprised to what I'm seeing and hearing them experience. (Lisa, Educator).

Second, educators and parents shared some increased progress or understanding of students' needs, strengths, and challenges as a result of virtual learning. For some students, virtual learning or parts of virtual learning were working well. This included, for example, some students with significant social emotional needs. Lisa worked with many elementary students who needed support for challenges with behavior. She shared she was able to focus more effectively on academic instruction during virtual learning because she was not pulled away to deal with behavior challenges. This shift in focus helped several students:

So, having that very structured time where they were not losing me at all, they are in an area or place that they feel safe, as far as my knowledge, and totally tuned into my instruction and not having to share me with behaviors has been very helpful (Lisa, Educator).

Parents shared several ways their knowledge about their children's strengths, challenges, and needs increased while engaging with them in virtual learning. Some parents saw their children needed more help and support than they previously thought, while others realized their children were more advanced than they had understood. Cathy realized her five-year-old was not as delayed as she thought and he was learning a lot:

And I was kind of like oh, like he is learning things. He knows all this stuff, and he's remembering stuff that he learned at school that I hadn't even taught him. So just kind of realizing all that. That he's not as delayed as I was worried he was, I guess (Cathy, Parent).

Kate shared opposite experiences learning about her daughter and her son during virtual learning. She explained:

I think I, like for my daughter I feel like she; I've learned more about her capabilities. Like she really is capable. Whereas my son I feel like it's almost the reverse. Like my concerns have heightened for him versus her, and I don't think I would have realized that if we hadn't have seen this at home, you know? Because like I mean you get test scores and stuff like that, and he's never really tested really low, but seeing it myself, I just can't imagine what it's like in a classroom (Kate, Parent).

Other parents observed their children were not always learning in the same way they were being taught. Dylan described how during virtual learning, he realized his daughter is bright but this does not always come out in the right timing or the ways that are expected in a school environment. He explained:

And the virtual school has shown me that the way, like -- even she wasn't successful in the school building and the same approach virtually isn't successful either. And so I think there needs to be different ways to her teach her and to get her to meet the objective, because what happened at school and what's happening virtually both approaches aren't working, there has to be another way (Dylan, Parent).

Parents and educators also suggested changes or ideas that could be implemented to improve virtual learning now and in the future. These ideas included: classes, support and advocacy groups for parents, technology support for parents, smaller student groups online for teaching and learning, frequent phone calls to parents, and increased education for educators to use technology for teaching. Callie, an elementary special education teacher, suggested that a class for parents about how to use specific technology and applications that their children needed for virtual learning:

Maybe a class for the parents. They could come and be like, "This is how you use Google Classroom. This is how you Seesaw because Seesaw is the platform for [inaudible]." And then, Google Classroom is for the bigger people. That would be beneficial to them to actually come in and get a chance to use it (Callie, Educator).

Samantha suggested a parents' group as well, but one focused on support and advocacy with information to help parents with virtual learning. Alexandra suggested smaller virtual work groups in which students could complete assignments, because it was not working for her son to complete his assignments on his own. She explained:

I wish they had more -- like, if the teacher wanted to give the lecture, but then they had like more small groups or something like that. Because just expecting them to do their assignments on their own is not working (Alexandra, Parent).

She also recommended educators and schools limit the number of e-mail communications parents are sent each day. For Alexandra, all of her e-mail from her full-time job along with all of the e-mails from school were just too much to manage. Justin, who worked as an elementary school counselor, had already returned to in-person learning, but he shared that if they were to go back to virtual learning, it would be helpful if all of the teachers at his school engaged in active outreach to families by making phone calls. Justin stressed several times how phone calls were different and more effective than e-mail in relationship building:

Teachers would be calling every single one of their students, special education teachers would be calling everyone on their caseload. And counselors, I would be calling everyone that you know I'm, it's not really a caseload per se, but everyone that I'm in frequent contact with. And even if that means for special education students, if the

regular teachers are on conference calls with the special ed teacher, that could be helpful as well (Justin, Educator).

Kate shared specific concerns about her daughter's challenges with concentrating during virtual learning especially, for example, when she was sent a YouTube link and she could easily navigate to other videos and sites. She suggested providing educators with more support to learn about teaching with technology. She explained:

...I realize that you know we didn't know that this was going to happen, but at least in our school district they have professional development time every Wednesday, and I don't know why they're not focusing on these things that can make the quality of the education better for those kids (Kate, Parent).

Overall, parents and educators reported some new learning and innovations during virtual learning. This consisted of educators enhancing their learning about parents' lives and challenges at home and parents and educators learning new things about students' needs. Parents and educators suggested some changes that could make virtual learning more effective.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the limited body of research about how family-school partnerships in special education have functioned and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning. Study findings provide an understanding of the lived experiences of parents and educators who have partnered to provide instruction for students with disabilities during an unprecedented time. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to explore how parents and educators of students with disabilities experienced partnership amidst the COVID19 pandemic and virtual learning.

In summary, the initial transition to virtual learning was challenging for most parents and educators. Educators struggled to build relationships with families who were new to them or who disengaged from virtual learning. Parents struggled to find a balance between being teacher and parent in the home, advocate for new services for their children virtually, and meet their children's needs. However, parents also reported learning new things about their children's strengths, challenges, and needs as many of them took on the role of educator. Parents and educators accessed a variety of resources including support from other people, organizations, and tools. Some educators continued and expanded outreach and relationship building with families during virtual learning and COVID-19 and reported their relationships with families improved and their approaches to building relationships with families changed.

Findings suggested that during COVID-19 and virtual learning: (1) home and school were collapsed in new ways and parents and educators struggled to adapt to this new and challenging reality (2) some relationships between families and educators were built and deepened in these most challenging circumstances and even forged over differences in language

and race, and (3) there were profound and lasting shifts in families' approaches to advocating for and understanding their children's needs and in educators' approaches to working with families.

Home and school were collapsed in new and unprecedented ways. Although parents and educators struggled to adapt to this new reality, they also learned from the experience. This finding follows Epstein's (1987) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence in one way and expands upon it in another. COVID-19 and virtual learning were profound experiences for parents and families, and in some cases, these shared experiences pushed the spheres of home and school closer thus strengthening the relationship. Physically situating learning in the home collapsed the roles of parent and teacher in unprecedented ways, blurring not only the physical separation between home and school but also the roles of parent and educator.

Findings about the intense challenges parents faced during COVID-19 and the new collapsed home-school environment echoed previous findings about parents' and educators' experiences during COVID-19 and virtual learning as they cared for their children who had disabilities such as: balancing parents' employers' needs, caring for other children/lack of childcare, and finding personal balance (Becker et al., 2020; Garbe & Ogurlu et al., 2020; Neece and Fenning, 2020). This finding also aligned with research about virtual learning prior to COVID-19 and the intense and involved role parents played to support their children during virtual learning, especially with their children who had disabilities (Burdette & Greer, 2014; Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014; Ortiz, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Findings about challenges educators faced of increased workload as well as potential learning from virtual education followed Kaden's (2020) suggestion that the move to fully virtual learning could serve as a first step in design of a more effective hybrid model of education.

The collapse of home and school led to significant challenges for parents and educators; however, partnerships were formed and even deepened during this time and some educators reported fundamental shifts in their approaches to outreach and engagement with families. Educators' reports of increased empathy, understanding of families' realities and challenges, as well as changes to their approaches to partnering with families suggest that implementing virtual learning during COVID-19 functioned as a transformational experience for some educators. This follows findings that specific preparation of pre-service educators to work with families can have an impact on their practice especially when it includes parents of students with disabilities as facilitators or partners in teaching and learning (Collier et al., 2015; Fults & Harry, 2012; Lam, 2005; Mulholland & Blecker, 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray et al., 2008).

Educators reported their approach to working with families shifted during COVID-19 and virtual learning for many reasons. These findings align with two of the principles of partnership as developed by Turnbull et al. (2015): commitment and equality. Educators reached out to families in new ways, for example calling right after schools closed to check on families' welfare and determine their needs, being available to help with technology issues at all hours, finding ways to communicate across language and literacy barriers, or shifting their schedules to meet families' needs. These actions demonstrated what Turnbull et al. (2015) call commitment and demonstrated how their commitment to the student and family extended beyond their professional obligations. Educators' actions showed how much they cared for the child and the whole family. Moreover, the experiences of the pandemic and virtual learning seemed to equalize the family-educator relationship in some ways by physically collapsing home and school but also by creating a traumatic shared experience of change and challenge families and educators experienced together. The positive impact this had on family-educator partnerships

demonstrates equality, another principle of partnership by developing more “horizontal relationships” (Turnbull et al., 2015). This finding also aligns with previous findings that parents of elementary age students with disabilities found barriers between them and their children’s teachers were addressed or reduced during fully online instruction (Smith et al., 2016).

The finding that for some educators the experience of COVID-19 and virtual learning improved their relationships with families even over differences in language or race can be understood by examining ways that some traditional boundaries between home and school were disrupted. First, logistics have been found to be a major barrier to relationships with families from historically underserved groups (Hardin et al., 2009; Lalvani, 2012; Lo, 2005, 2008; Salas, 2004). Perhaps COVID-19 and virtual learning disrupted some of the traditional logistical challenges to partnership by changing traditional schedules, forcing new kinds of flexibility, and transporting all aspects of education outside of the school building and environment. Second, discrimination and disrespect were found as another major barrier to partnerships among educators and families from historically underserved groups (Angelov & Anderson, 2013; Harry et al., 2005; Jegatheesan, 2009; Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Lea, 2006; Lo, 2005, 2008; Salas, 2004; Sheehey, 2006). During COVID-19 and virtual learning, educators reported increased understanding of and empathy for parents’ situations, challenges, and in some cases an increased understanding of the actions they were taking and sacrifices they were making to support their children’s education. Harry et al. (2005) found school personnel applied negative stereotypes of families without having real knowledge of the family. It is possible that a different view into families’ circumstances and lives helped break down some of these stereotypes during virtual learning. Some educators reported the shifts they experienced working with families and the way they developed relationships with families would be changed for the long-term. Although

families' reports about shifts in their partnerships with educators were less positive than those reported by educators, families' approaches to advocating for and understanding their children's needs shifted during COVID-19 and virtual learning. This study focused broadly on family-school partnership in special education beyond the IEP meeting and findings about shifts in parents' advocacy and educators' approaches to working together broaden Goldman and Burke's (2017) findings that the majority of studies of parent involvement in special education focused on the IEP process. Changes reported by parents about their increased advocacy during virtual learning when their children were not doing well or not receiving the services they needed echoed previous findings that parents of students became involved with school either when school did specific outreach or when they felt their children were not making progress or getting the services that were specified in the IEP (Rodriguez & Elbaum, 2014).

Finally, the finding that educators and parents have a continuum of involvement with one another with some who were very involved and others who were more reserved aligned categorizations Lasater (2016) made of parents who were either "demanding" or "disengaged." This finding also echoes previous findings that partnership between educators and parents moves in a progression that includes informing, involving, engaging, and finally learning (Amendt, 2008). For some educators and parents virtual learning and COVID-19 seemed to move them along the continuum of involvement quickly. For example, Dylan shared that his relationships with his daughter's teachers strengthened during COVID-19.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The limitations of this study point to several recommendations for future research. First, parents and educators who were interviewed for this study were not matched pairs and there were some important differences in the characteristics among parents and educators. Therefore,

future research should include parents and educators of the same children to fully understand their views of their partnerships. If partnerships over differences of language and race are central to future study questions, research should include parents and educators who are working across these differences to document differences in their experiences. Second, educator participants taught at a variety of grade levels and parents had children who were a range of ages and had different levels of need due to their disabilities. Future research could expand on this study by employing a case study approach by including participants with similar characteristics to understand how these variables impact partnerships among parents and educators. This study only included one-time, virtual interviews with the study participants. This prevented analysis of non-verbal cues and body language and made building trust with participants more difficult. Future studies should include in-person interviews when possible. Moreover, future studies could take a more triangulated approach by including additional data sources such as observations of partnership events such as home visits and IEP meetings. Finally, future research could focus on what elements of virtual learning could be effective and useful for students, educators, and families. This could include studies of the impacts of teacher preparation or education that include virtual elements or shared experiences with parents, virtual home and neighborhood visits, and virtual instruction for select groups of students with disabilities or individual students for whom this approach worked during COVID-19 and virtual learning.

Implications for Practice

Findings suggest recommendations for future practice. First, teacher preparation programs and teacher educators should consider how to prepare educators who work with parents of students with disabilities to be creative and resourceful in their approaches to outreach. For example, some educators in this study reported home visits, frequent phone calls

and being available by cell phone and text, and working with the whole family (not just the child) were key to developing relationships. In the same way that other educator competencies are considered and monitored on continuum of development, so should family-school partnerships.

Second, findings from this study demonstrated that shared experiences like delivering virtual education during COVID-19 can shift educators' approaches to building and sustaining partnerships. COVID-19 and virtual learning is an extreme example of a shared experience; however, shared experiences among educators and families could be created within educator preparation programs and in-service education for educators that could elicit similar outcomes. Educator preparation programs should consider how they can create shared experiences for educators and parents to engage with one another. This follows previous findings about the power of educator preparation courses about family partnerships that involve parents as facilitators or partners in teaching and learning (Collier et al., 2015; Fults & Harry, 2012; Lam, 2005; Mulholland & Blecker, 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray et al., 2008). Moreover, findings from this study suggested that educators had their understandings and views of families altered by "seeing" into families' lives and homes via virtual learning. This suggests that virtual home or home/neighborhood visits could be an effective way to enhance educator understanding of families' lives and could enhance home-school partnerships.

Finally, this study identified students for whom a specific program of virtual learning was effective and educators who shared that virtual learning assisted them with gaining uninterrupted instructional time with students and enhanced contact and relationships with families. These findings suggest that virtual education is an underutilized tool for supporting student learning and home-school partnerships. For example, there could be situations within the school day

where teachers conduct virtual interventions with a small group of students or individual students for whom virtual learning is effective. This could also provide uninterrupted instructional time for educators who are usually supporting students with behavior challenges. However, caution in continuing or expanding virtual learning for students with disabilities is vital for two reasons. First, the role parents were asked to play in supporting student learning for students with disabilities during COVID-19 and the global pandemic was incredibly challenging and unrealistic. Realistic expectations are needed for how much parent involvement is needed to provide any at home virtual learning for students with disabilities following previous findings that for many young children with disabilities a parent needs to be ever present (Greer et al., 2014a). New kinds of home-based support, tools, and technological support for parents and students are needed in the event that a conversion to virtual learning for students with disabilities occurred again. Second, implications on hard-won legislative victories that guarantee the rights of students with disabilities to a *free appropriate public education* (FAPE) in the *least restrictive environment* (LRE) could be changed and potentially compromised in unforeseen ways as virtual learning becomes more prevalent for students with disabilities. Over the coming decades and if a return to virtual learning occurs for any extended period of time for students with disabilities, legislative requirements that guarantee rights for students with disabilities will need to be updated to include education that occurs in virtual environments.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding legal requirements and evidence of positive impacts, family-school partnerships in special education have remained a challenge with little evidence of effective interventions for improvement (Blietz, 1988; Goldman & Burke, 2017; Jones & Gansle, 2010). During COVID-19, parents and educators had to overcome substantial obstacles and endure

significant hardships as they worked to continue education for students with disabilities. These challenges should never be downplayed or forgotten. Findings from this study indicate parents and educators demonstrated tremendous resilience and resourcefulness during this time. Many families prioritized their children's education above all else and advocated in new ways for their children's well-being. Some educators went above and beyond to reach families and students and to form relationships virtually. Increased empathy and understanding among parents and educators at home and school were collapsed, leading to changes in partnership approaches that could inform future work in this area. Important learning also occurred during this challenging time. There were instances where elements of virtual learning helped to shift educators' approaches to outreach and partnerships building with families, support student learning, and enhance home-school partnerships. Potential new avenues for utilizing virtual tools to support improved educator preparation for family-school partnerships, enhanced communication between home and school, and home-based instruction for individual students or small groups of students with disabilities should be explored in more depth.

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Table 1*Educator Demographics and Characteristics*

Name	Gender	Race	Primary Language	Level of Education	Teaching Position	Level	Years Teaching
Anne	Female	White	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	Middle School	14
Callie	Female	White	English	Graduate	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	21
Erin	Female	African American	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	6
Eva	Female	White	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	23
Jane	Female	White	English	Master's	Speech Language Pathologist	Transition	30
Justin	Male	White	English	Master's	School Counselor	Elementary	5
Lilly	Female	White	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	Middle & High School	21
Lisa	Female	Native American	English	Bachelors	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	6
Sarah	Female	White	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	High School	29
William	Male	White	English	Master's	Special Education Teacher	Middle School	3

Table 2*Number of Educator Participants by School District and School District Characteristics*

School District Name (Number of Educator Participants)	% Receiving Special Education Services	% White	% Black	% Hispanic /Latino	% Asian	% Two or more races	% American Indian/ Alaskan Native	% Speak Languages Other than English at Home	Median Income of Households (annual)	% Food Stamps/ SNAP benefits	% Internet Access
Washington (5)	10	61	13	20	1	5	0	26	70,000	47	68
Adams (2)	6	73	7	8	8	3	0	24	43,000	24	86
Jefferson (1)	2	96	2	1	1	0	0	0	88,000	14	79
Madison (1)	7	91	1	6	0	1	0	19	77,000	15	75
Monroe (1)	5	77	14	6	1	1	1	11	51,000	27	81

Note. School district names are pseudonyms. Information about receipt of special education services and race are for students; information about languages spoken at home, median income of households, Food Stamps/SNAP benefits, and internet access are for families. Median income for households is for parents of children in public school and is rounded to the nearest thousand. Data for school districts is taken from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014-2018).

Table 3*Parents Demographics and Characteristics*

Name	Gender	Race	Primary Language	Level of Education	Employment	Marital Status	Geographic Location	Child Age (Years)/ Grade	Child Disability
Alexandra	Female	Asian	English	Some college	Full time from home	Divorced	Urban	14/9th	Emotional and behavior disorder (EBD)
Cathy	Female	White	English	Bachelor's	Full time parent	Married	Suburban	5/K	Speech delay
Dylan	Male	White	English	Post-Grad – some doctoral work	Full time from home	Married	Urban	8/2 nd	Down Syndrome
Kate	Female	White	English	Post-graduate work	Full time from home	Married	Urban	Two children: (1) 9/4 th (2) 8/2 nd	(1) PTSD, ADHD, fetal alcohol syndrome (2) ADHD, fetal alcohol syndrome; intellectual disability
Kelly	Female	White	English	Master's	Part time outside the home	Married	Urban	11/6 th	ADHD
Mallory	Female	White	English	Bachelor's	Full time parent	Married	Suburban	5/K	ASD
Patricia	Female	White	English	PhD	Full time from home and outside home	Married	Suburban	4/4K	ASD
Sally	Female	White	English	HSED	Full time outside the home	Married	Rural	9/4th	ASD; ADHD

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Parents Demographics and Characteristics

Name	Gender	Race	Primary Language	Level of Education	Employment	Marital Status	Geographic Location	Child Age (Years)/ Grade	Child Disability
Samantha	Female	White	English	Associates	Full time parent	Married	Suburban	5/K	Phonological disorder; global developmental delay; borderline cognitive impairment
Steven	Male	White	English	PhD	Full time from home	Married	Urban	4/4K	Speech articulation

Note. Kelly's son did not have an IEP and was not receiving special education services at the time of the interview. HSED= High school equivalency degree; ADHD= Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ASD= Autistic spectrum disorder; PTSD= Post-traumatic stress disorder

Table 4*Provision of and Participation in Virtual Instruction During COVID-19*

Name	Virtual Spring	Virtual Fall
Educators		
Anne	X	X
Callie	X	Hybrid
Erin	X	X
Eva	X	X
Jane	X	Hybrid
Justin	X	In-person
Lilly	X	Hybrid
Lisa	X	X
Sarah	X	X
William	X	X
Parents		
Alexandra	X	X
Cathy	X	In-person
Dylan	X	X
Kate	X	X- one child attending school at a community center; one child still doing virtual learning
Kelly	X	X
Mallory	X	X
Patricia	X	X- some brief in-person sessions
Sally	X	Open and closed again
Samantha	X	In-person
Steven	X	In-person

Note. Some students who were receiving special education services were allowed to be brought into the building for instruction. Sally's son's school was open and then closed again at the time of her interview.

Table 5*Resources Parents and Educators Accessed During Virtual Learning*

Resource	Example	Participant Example
People		
Expert advocates	Friend who is a school psychologist	Samantha
School administrators, social workers	Administrators helping with outreach to families	Callie
Teachers	Math Teacher supporting son and meeting with her	Kelly
Homeschool Coordinator/Translator	Homeschool Coordinator helping with translation	Callie
Respite Providers	Two providers coming to home	Dylan
Family and Friends (Lack of)	Grandparents, friends supporting students' virtual learning/ Lack of family support	Erin/ Samantha, Steven
Organizations		
Social worker/counselors, doctors and hospitals	Social worker helping to connect to resources	Sarah
Community organizations	Child attending in-person, full-day learning support at a community center	Kate
Support groups	Support group for parents re-started during COVID-19	Kelly
Physical Supports		
Food, clothing, shelter	Free lunches	Lilly

(continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Resources Parents and Educators Accessed During Virtual Learning

Resource	Example	Participant Example
Tools and spaces for learning	Parents making designated spaces for learning at home	Mallory
Communication Log	Communication log with respite providers	Dylan
Apps and websites	i-Ready (website with instruction at students' level based on a diagnostic test)	Erin
Technology- internet access, computers, phones	Ability to print out and access learning materials online	Samantha
Curriculum	Daily checklist	Alexandra
Disability related physical supports	Fidgets, speaking device	Kate/Samantha

Figure 1

Sample Memo

Memo S1 Analysis 02/05/2021

RQ: How do parents/caregivers and educators of students with disabilities experience partnership amidst the COVID19 pandemic?

- What **challenges** have parents/caregivers and teachers faced partnering to provide instruction and support students? How have they addressed these challenges?
 - What **resources** have they accessed to provide instruction and support students virtually?
 - How has this experience **impacted their partnerships**?
 - What have they learned about **partnering to support student learning virtually**?
-
- Interesting alternative viewpoint of a school counselor as compared with a teacher.
 - In S1's school, they are working across language divides with a transient migrant population.
 - At the time of the interview, this school had returned to in-person school except if the family opted into virtual school.
 - Idea of having teachers contact parents regularly if they had to go back to virtual school would make a big difference.
 - Importance of calling instead of e-mailing parents.
 - Idea of March 2020-end of school year as emergency survival time
 - Challenges with Broadband access- level of this surprised him.
 - Equity came up several times- desire to bring students back for in-person instruction as an issue of equity.
 - S1 also started and shared a Facebook Page intended for parents at the school that shared current research, tips and articles about child development, overall health and well-being.
 - S1 shared samples of 2 monthly newsletters he sends to parents where they are offered tips and resources about dealing with COVID-19 stress etc. with their children.

Possible literature connections: access to resources during COVID-19 for historically underserved families similar to access to resources during the IEP process (Larios & Zetlin, 2012; Su-Je Cho & Gannotti, 2005); possible connection to Rice and Carter (2015) about communication with families during virtual learning and tools, laws, and approaches for working with students with disabilities not fitting a virtual learning context.

Figure 2

Sample of Phase One Codes

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Learning about my child during COVID virtual ed (parents)	Parents talking about how they learned new things about how their child learns, his or her experiences in school and/or what he or she needs to be successful in school	12
Seeing teachers' committment/understanding teachers (parents)	Parents sharing their understaning of how difficult things are for teachers and how they see the work and committment teachers are putting forth during COVID	8
Impact of virtual learning on my family (parents)	Parents sharing what it is like for their family to do virtual learning during COVID	6
Imact of virtual learning on my child (parents)	Parents sharing what it is like for their children to do virtual learning during COVID	9
This is just not working/virtual does not work (parents)	Parents expressing frustration and ways that virtual learning is just not working for their children	7
Children's services continue or end during COVID (parents)	Parents sharing which services have continued and which have ended for their children during COVID	6
Services and schedules for indivudual children- (parents)	Parents sharing what a virtual school day looks like for their children	8
Alternative schedule (parents)	Working with teachers to create an alternative schduled for a child that fits his/her needs better	1
Additional resources/outside services prior to COVID (parents)	Parents sharing about any additionl services or resources that they have used during COVID	3
Parent's school involvement prior to COVID (parents)	Parents sharing about how they worked with their children's teachers/school to support the child prior to COVID	13
What works for my child (parents)	Parents sharing specific findings about what works for their children to suppor their learning during COVID	15

Figure 3

Sample of Phase Two Codes

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Physical things as supports		21
Communication Log- Respite Providers		2
Apps and websites		7
Resources- apps and websites		4
Resources- access to internet, electricity		1
Transportation		1
Resource- daily checklist		1
Access to technology		2
Access to technology		1
Resources packets and worksheets		3
Workbooks and worksheets		2
Fidgets and physical resources		1
Curriculum		1
Speaking device		1
Hard copies of lessons		1
Tools and spaces for learning at home (parents)	Parents sharing how they supported their children's learning at home with additional resources, spaces, schedules, etc.	7

Figure 4

Sample of Pattern Coding

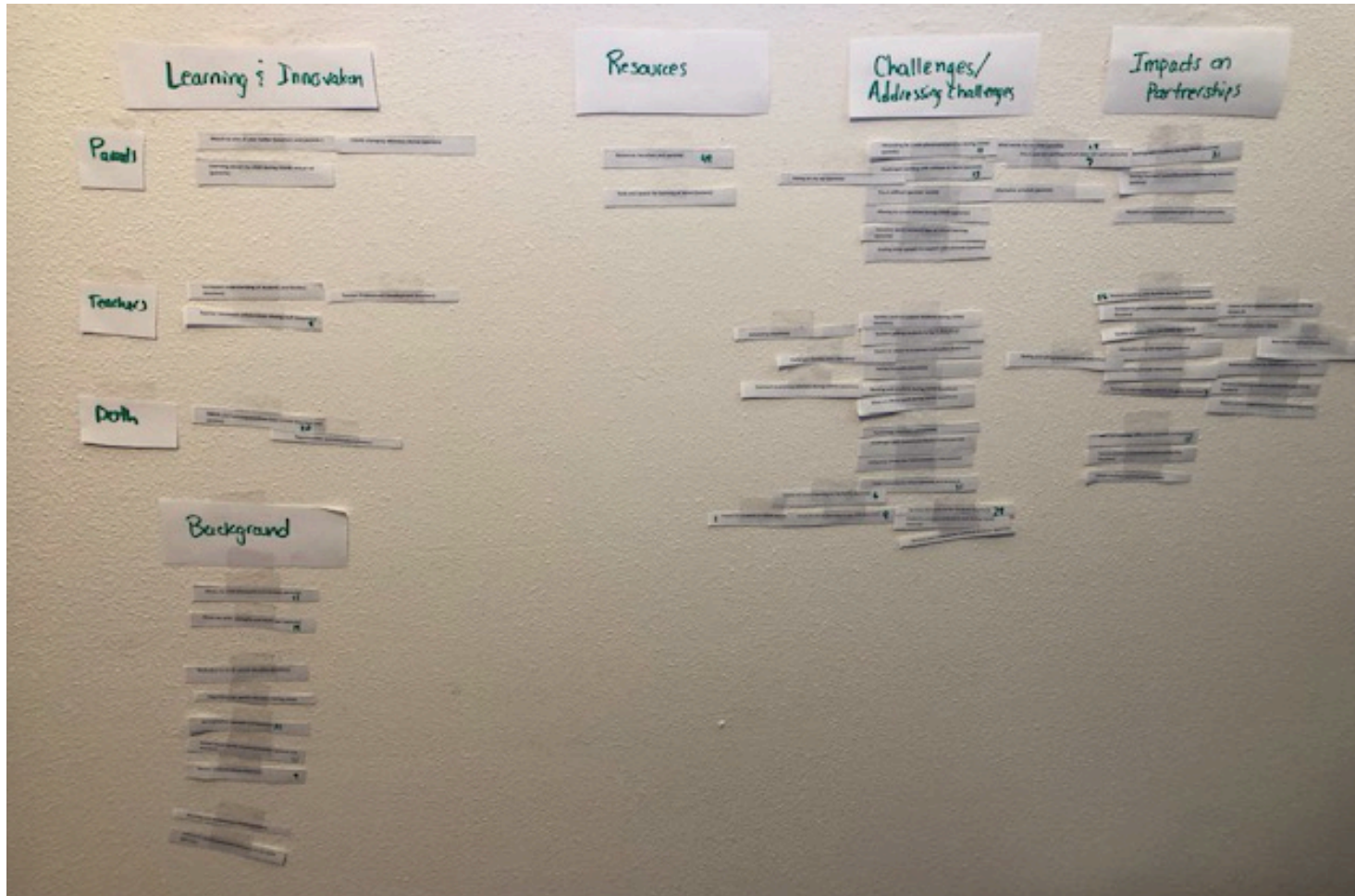


Figure 5

Virtual Learning Space at Home



Figure 6

Visual Schedule for Learning at Home



Figure 7

Resources for Learning at Home



Figure 8

Organization Tool for Learning at Home



Figure 10

Checklist for Learning at Home

3rd Grade Daily Checklist (Days 16-30)

Each day (Monday-Friday), there will be a checklist of items we would like your child to complete. We understand that everyone's schedules are different so that being said, these items can be completed at any time of the day that best suits your schedule. If you have any questions, please let us know!

Day 16 (4/13) Checklist

- Reading:** Complete pages 35-36 in [REDACTED] Reader's Notebook
- Writing:** Go outside, find a tree, pick something from the tree (leaf, bark, etc), draw a picture and describe the item in detail (paragraph).
- Silent Read 30 minutes
- Math:** On Think Central, watch Unit 7 Capacity, Weight, and Mass video
- Social Studies:** Head outside with a piece of paper. With pencil, divide the paper into 4 squares. In each square, draw a small compass in the top left hand corner. Then face each cardinal direction outside (N,S,E,W) and draw/label what you see in each square (label which square is what direction). Email picture of paper to Mrs. [REDACTED]
- Complete any Special classes (Art, Gym, Music) assignments

APPENDICES

Appendix A



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office for Civil Rights
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

March 21, 2020

Supplemental Fact Sheet
Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools
While Serving Children with Disabilities

We recognize that educational institutions are straining to address the challenges of this national emergency. We also know that educators and parents are striving to provide a sense of normalcy while seeking ways to ensure that all students have access to meaningful educational opportunities even under these difficult circumstances. No one wants to have learning coming to a halt across America due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the U.S. Department of Education (Department) does not want to stand in the way of good faith efforts to educate students on-line.

The Department stands ready to offer guidance, technical assistance, and information on any available flexibility, within the confines of the law, to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, continue receiving excellent education during this difficult time. The Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) have previously issued non-regulatory guidance addressing these issues.*

At the outset, OCR and OSERS must address a serious misunderstanding that has recently circulated within the educational community. As school districts nationwide take necessary steps to protect the health and safety of their students, many are moving to virtual or online education (distance instruction). Some educators, however, have been reluctant to provide any distance instruction because they believe that federal disability law presents insurmountable barriers to remote education. This is simply not true. We remind schools they should not opt to close or decline to provide distance instruction, at the expense of students, to address matters pertaining to services for students with disabilities. Rather, school systems must make local decisions that take into consideration the health, safety, and well-being of all their students and staff.

To be clear: ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),[†] Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction.

School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students. In this unique and ever-changing environment, OCR and OSERS recognize that these exceptional circumstances may affect how all educational and related services and supports are provided, and the Department will offer flexibility where possible. However, school districts must remember that the provision of

* See [Fact Sheet: Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students](#) (March 16, 2020); [OCR Short Webinar on Online Education and Website Accessibility Webinar \(Length: 00:07:08\)](#) (March 16, 2020); [Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) (March 12, 2020); [Fact Sheet: Impact of COVID-19 on Assessments and Accountability under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (March 12, 2020); and [Letter to Education Leaders on Preventing and Addressing potential discrimination associated with COVID-19](#)

[†] References to IDEA in this document include both Part B and Part C.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office for Civil Rights
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

FAPE may include, as appropriate, special education and related services provided through distance instruction provided virtually, online, or telephonically.

The Department understands that, during this national emergency, schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner they are typically provided. While some schools might choose to safely, and in accordance with state law, provide certain IEP services to some students in-person, it may be unfeasible or unsafe for some institutions, during current emergency school closures, to provide hands-on physical therapy, occupational therapy, or tactile sign language educational services. Many disability-related modifications and services may be effectively provided online. These may include, for instance, extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing.

It is important to emphasize that federal disability law allows for flexibility in determining how to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The determination of how FAPE is to be provided may need to be different in this time of unprecedented national emergency. As mentioned above, FAPE may be provided consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing special education and related services to students. Where, due to the global pandemic and resulting closures of schools, there has been an inevitable delay in providing services – or even making decisions about how to provide services - IEP teams (as noted in the March 12, 2020 [guidance](#)) must make an individualized determination whether and to what extent compensatory services may be needed when schools resume normal operations.

Finally, although federal law requires distance instruction to be accessible to students with disabilities, it does not mandate specific methodologies. Where technology itself imposes a barrier to access or where educational materials simply are not available in an accessible format, educators may still meet their legal obligations by providing children with disabilities equally effective alternate access to the curriculum or services provided to other students. For example, if a teacher who has a blind student in her class is working from home and cannot distribute a document accessible to that student, she can distribute to the rest of the class an inaccessible document and, if appropriate for the student, read the document over the phone to the blind student or provide the blind student with an audio recording of a reading of the document aloud.

The Department encourages parents, educators, and administrators to collaborate creatively to continue to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Consider practices such as distance instruction, teletherapy and tele-intervention, meetings held on digital platforms, online options for data tracking, and documentation. In addition, there are low-tech strategies that can provide for an exchange of curriculum-based resources, instructional packets, projects, and written assignments.

The Department understands that, during this declared national emergency, there may be additional questions about meeting the requirements of federal civil rights law; where we can offer flexibility, we will. OSERS has provided the attached list with information on those IDEA timeframes that may be extended.

OSERS' technical assistance centers are ready to address your questions regarding the IDEA and best practices and alternate models for providing special education and related services, including through distance instruction. For questions pertaining to Part C of IDEA, states should contact the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office for Civil Rights
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

(ECTA) at ectacenter.org. For Part B of IDEA, states should contact the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) at ncsi.wested.org.

If you have questions for OCR, want additional information or technical assistance, or believe that a school is violating federal civil rights law, you may reach out through email at OCRWebAccessTA@ed.gov, call your regional office (<https://ocrcas.ed.gov/contact-ocr>), or visit the website of the Department of Education's OCR at www.ed.gov/ocr. You may contact OCR at (800) 421-3481 (TDD: 800-877-8339), at ocr@ed.gov, or contact OCR's Outreach, Prevention, Education and Non-discrimination (OPEN) Center at OPEN@ed.gov. You may also fill out a complaint form online at www.ed.gov/ocr/complaintintro.html.

Additional information specific to the COVID-19 pandemic may be found online at <https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus>.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office for Civil Rights
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

IDEA Timelines

As a general principle, during this unprecedented national emergency, public agencies are encouraged to work with parents to reach mutually agreeable extensions of time, as appropriate.

Part B of IDEA

State Complaints

Absent agreement by the parties, a state may be able to extend the 60-day timeline for complaint resolution if exceptional circumstances exist with respect to a particular complaint. 34 C.F.R. § 300.152(b)(1). Although the Department has previously advised that unavailability of staff is not an exceptional circumstance that would warrant an extension of the 60-day complaint resolution timeline, the COVID-19 pandemic could be deemed an exceptional circumstance if a large number of SEA staff are unavailable or absent for an extended period of time.

Due Process Hearings

When a parent files a due process complaint, the LEA must convene a resolution meeting within 15 days of receiving notice of the parent's complaint, unless the parties agree in writing to waive the meeting or to use mediation. 34 C.F.R. § 300.510(a). While the IDEA specifically mentions circumstances in which the 30-day resolution period can be adjusted in 34 C.F.R. § 300.510(c), it does not prevent the parties from mutually agreeing to extend the timeline because of unavoidable delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, although a hearing decision must be issued and mailed to the parties 45 days after the expiration of the 30-day resolution period or an adjusted resolution period, a hearing officer may grant a specific extension of time at the request of either party to the hearing. 34 C.F.R. § 300.515(a) and (c).

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

If a child has been found eligible to receive services under the IDEA, the IEP Team must meet and develop an initial IEP within 30 days of a determination that the child needs special education and related services. 34 C.F.R. § 300.323(c)(1).

IEPs also must be reviewed annually. 34 C.F.R. §300.324(b)(1). However, parents and an IEP Team may agree to conduct IEP meetings through alternate means, including videoconferencing or conference telephone calls. 34 C.F.R. §300.328. Again, we encourage school teams and parents to work collaboratively and creatively to meet IEP timeline requirements.

Most importantly, in making changes to a child's IEP after the annual IEP Team meeting, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parent of a child with a disability and the public agency may agree to not convene an IEP Team meeting for the purposes of making those changes, and instead develop a written document to amend or modify the child's current IEP. 34 C.F.R. §300.324(a)(4)(i).

Initial Eligibility Determination

An initial evaluation must be conducted within 60 days of receiving parental consent under IDEA, or within the state-established timeline within which the evaluation must be conducted. 34 C.F.R. § 300.301(c). Once the evaluation is



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office for Civil Rights
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

completed, IDEA does not contain an explicit timeline for making the eligibility determination but does require that the IEP be developed in accordance with 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.320-300.324 (34 C.F.R. § 300.306(c)(2)).

Reevaluations

A reevaluation of each child with a disability must be conducted at least every three years, unless the parents and the public agency agree that a reevaluation is unnecessary 34 C.F.R. § 300.303(b)(2). However, when appropriate, any reevaluation may be conducted through a review of existing evaluation data, and this review may occur without a meeting and without obtaining parental consent, unless it is determined that additional assessments are needed. 34 C.F.R. §300.305(a).

Part C of IDEA

State Complaints

Under 303.433(b)(1)(i), the lead agency’s state Complaint procedures permit an extension of the 60 day timeline for a written decision if “exceptional circumstances exist with respect to a particular complaint” or the parent or organization and the agency or early intervention services (EIS) provider agree to extend the time for engaging in mediation.

Due Process Hearings

A state may choose to adopt Part B procedures for Due Process resolution under 34 C.F.R. §§303.440 – 303.449 or Part C procedures under 34 C.F.R. §§303.435 – 303.438. Conditions for extending the applicable timelines are similar under both sets of procedures.

Under 34 C.F.R. §303.447(c), the hearing or review officer may grant specific extensions of the Due Process timeline at the request of either party. Under 34 C.F.R. §303.447(d), each hearing and each review involving oral argument must be conducted at a time and place that is reasonably convenient to the parents and child involved.

Section 303.437 (a) and (c) provides similar language regarding scheduling a hearing at a time and place convenient to the parents and hearing officers granting extensions at the request of either party.

Initial eligibility/Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)

Under 34 C.F.R. §303.310, the initial evaluation and assessments of child and family, as well as the initial IFSP meeting, must be completed within 45 days of the lead agency receiving the referral. However, under 34 C.F.R. §303.310(a), the 45-day timeline does not apply if the family is unavailable due to “exceptional family circumstances that are documented” in the child’s early intervention (EI) records.

The Department has previously provided guidance to states indicating that weather or natural disasters may constitute “exceptional family circumstances.” The COVID-19 pandemic could be considered an “exceptional family circumstance.”

Serving Students With Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis: Spotlight on Policy & Practice



Part 2: Family-School Collaboration

The outbreak of COVID-19 launched the United States into a public health crisis, impacting families, schools, and communities in unprecedented ways. During this uncertain time, under entirely new and definitely *not* ideal conditions, we have to address students' many needs, including nutrition, physical and mental health, internet access, and the accessibility of online learning options. To get through this, we'll have to be creative and innovative. We'll need to work together and help each other.

NCLD is committed to addressing these issues and sharing what we learn about serving students with disabilities—even while we're learning it. When states began shutting down schools, one question emerged immediately: How will schools provide individualized services to students with disabilities? It's clear that districts continue to have an obligation to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. And educators need to ensure that *all* students are learning. There's already a dramatic gap in achievement and outcomes between students with disabilities and those without disabilities. This gap is even wider for students of color with disabilities. If educators wait until the world returns to normal to provide an education to students with disabilities, these students will fall even further behind. And educators will struggle to help them make up for this lost time. Working together, families, schools, and communities must be flexible. They must communicate effectively and continue to educate all students to the best of their ability.

As a start, NCLD has compiled common questions, emerging best practices, and examples of how educators, schools, districts, and states can and should move forward during this challenging time *without* stepping back from IDEA or civil rights. This document is the first in a series that will highlight good ideas, creative thinking, and concrete examples of how families, schools, and communities are continuing to serve students with disabilities. The issues we explore include:

1. Effective communication and collaboration between educators
2. Innovation in instructional practices and provision of related services
3. Planning ahead to provide students with compensatory services
4. Strong school-parent communication and partnership
5. Effective use of funding to support the most vulnerable learners

Part 2:

Family–School Collaboration

During this uncertain time, family-school collaboration is more essential than ever. Families and educators are dealing with new challenges and stressors. Everyone’s situation will be different. Meaningful and clear communication and collaboration between parents and schools can go a long way toward solving problems. Innovation while school buildings are closed will help us all avoid disagreements upon their reopening.

FAQs

1. How can a school or district ensure that parents of students with disabilities are included in decisions about their child’s education?

Answer:

Parent-teacher communication is critical to ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities are met during the COVID-19 crisis. Now more than ever, consistent and clear communication is essential. IDEA already requires parents to be involved in the planning and implementation of a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). How that is conducted is largely left up to schools—there’s a lot of flexibility given under the law.

Schools can use various types of electronic communication to meet their obligations, including videoconferences, phone calls, and emails. Many schools are already using virtual options to maintain the partnership between parents and teachers during school closures. It’s important to think of ways that educators can support parents through consultation, where parents can ask questions about how to support their children during distance learning and virtual learning. Providing parents with multiple options for this communication, such as videoconferences, phone calls, or message board posts in the appropriate language, will help address parents’ needs.

What This Might Look Like in Practice

“Every course has a link to the online work. Families and students have one place to find everything. There was clear communication about the plan for week one; student and teacher expectations were stated. Laptop, book, and related material pick-up times were made available two different days. Each special educator reached out to every one of their students with information about how to reach the educator and when. Educators follow up with students and parents each week to ensure students had the information they needed and could access their work. A note went home from the special education coordinator to every family with information about what to expect, how to access free internet if needed, and more.”

– Colleen Meaney, Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, Devens, MA

“One teacher is providing recorded Foundations lessons for new readers or students with dyslexia that are short and engaging. It was so nice to see her teacher’s face, too, and it was easy for me as a parent to understand how to support my learner.”

– Sarah Barnes, High Tech High, San Diego

What This Might Look Like in Policy

Here’s an example of how the Connecticut Department of Education urged districts to communicate proactively with families of students with disabilities:

“Acknowledge in your communications to all parents that either you have a plan for providing equitable access and special education and related services or are developing such a plan. **Develop a protocol to communicate proactively with parents and guardians regarding their child’s IEP services during a closure taking into consideration the parents’ preferred method of communication.** This should be done on an individual basis and school districts should not rely on communications to the entire district to provide this information. As soon as possible, notify parents or guardians of students with disabilities of your individualized plan for that student to access continued educational opportunities. Include the input of parents or guardians and the student, as appropriate, when discussing the plan. Allowing parents to provide feedback provides parents, and ultimately, students, a voice in the process, rather than simply notifying them of the result. **This communication should be ongoing throughout the implementation of the plan so that the educators delivering and/or overseeing the services can make adjustments to the plan when appropriate.**”¹

2. Can parents file a due process complaint for failure to meet FAPE?

Answer:

A parent's right to due process remains intact during this time. However, IDEA offers a great deal of flexibility for parents and schools to mutually agree to waive specific requirements or timelines, particularly around evaluations, IEP development, and more. It's essential for schools to clearly and consistently communicate with parents and articulate which services can be provided and how. If services cannot be provided adequately in an online setting, the school should document this unmet need and share with parents its plans for providing compensatory services. Schools should strive to provide appropriate services as soon as feasible under the circumstances. This collaboration and mutual understanding can decrease the likelihood of due process complaints.



What This Might Look Like in Policy

Example 1: In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, the New York State Department of Education issued guidance stating:

"... in an emergency situation where the acts of nature prevent a school district from meeting its IDEA requirements, the State will not issue findings of noncompliance to a school district because of its failure to meet these requirements when it is evident that they are the direct result of the State disaster emergency. **It is expected that school districts will use such flexibility only to the extent and for the duration as absolutely necessary** and consistent with the conditions they are facing to bring normalcy back to the education programs for their students with disabilities."²

Example 2: The Minnesota Department of Education reminded districts that they can work with parents to mutually extend the due process timeline:

"When a parent files a due process complaint, the local education agency (LEA) must convene a resolution meeting within 15 days of receiving notice of the parent's complaint, unless the parties agree in writing to waive the meeting or to use mediation. **While the IDEA specifically mentions circumstances in which the 30-day resolution period can be adjusted, it does not prevent the parties from mutually agreeing to extend the timeline because of unavoidable delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Additionally, although a hearing decision must be issued and mailed to the parties 45 days after the expiration of the 30-day resolution period or an adjusted resolution period, a hearing officer may grant a specific extension of time at the request of either party to the hearing."³

Endnotes

- 1 Available at: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Digest/2019-20/March-24-2020-LEA-Memorandum-BSE-COVID-19.pdf?la=en>
- 2 Available at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/HurricaneSandy-specialed.pdf>
- 3 Available at <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/spedcovid19/MDE032087>



For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email: policy@nclld.org.
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Family Guide to At-Home Learning



OVERVIEW | This guide has practical strategies that work for helping children of all ages who may be struggling with an at-home learning task. Families may find these strategies useful when helping their children complete various reading, math, and/or behavioral tasks at home.

TIPS FOR USING THIS GUIDE | To use this guide, think about your child(ren) and which strategies may help them learn or practice a new task. Keep this guide close by as you help your child(ren) with their learning at home, and explore more resources at the links provided. You also can access this guide, and more examples/tips, on your Amazon Alexa device by saying **"Alexa, enable Home Learning."**




Model

- Before your child practices a new skill, it is helpful to first show him or her how you would do it. Then, you can do it together before letting your child do it alone ("I show you," "we do it together," then "you do it alone").
- You also can show your child how **you** think about solving a word problem or how **you** ask yourself questions when you are reading.
- When helping your child solve a problem or answer a question, it can be helpful to break the task down into smaller steps ("first...next...").
- Children love examples. Try using examples (the right way to do something) and nonexamples (the wrong way to do something) to help show the difference.



Learn More

- [Explicit Instruction: What You Need to Know](#)
- [Self-Regulated Strategy Development \(SRSD\): Using Learning Strategies to Enhance Student Learning](#)
- [Examples/tips](#) for how to use sample [reading](#) and [math](#) lessons at home
- [Modeling video](#)




Clear Directions

- Some children become overwhelmed easily by a lot of verbal or written information at once; giving easy, clear directions (one step at a time) may help your child focus on what he or she needs to do.
- Using a calm, quiet tone of voice may help prevent a struggle in following directions.
- Consider asking your child to repeat your directions in his or her own words, or make eye contact with you as you speak.
- Pointing or using visual clues may help your child understand what you are asking him or her to do.
- Praise your child when he or she has followed directions successfully.



Learn More

- [10 Tips to Help Your Child Follow Directions](#)
- [Why Some Kids Have Trouble Following Directions](#)
- [Getting My Child to Listen \(Without Yelling\)](#)
- [Clear directions video](#)



Support

- Show your child you care about his or her learning—talk about the learning task before your child begins working.
- Children often feel supported when you stay close by while they are completing tasks.
- Breaking up work (math problems, reading chapters or paragraphs) into small parts may help your child feel more confident about taking on a learning task.
- Children love having choices—let them pick what they want to work on first, last, and so on.
- Watch your child complete a task, and praise correct answers—he or she will love the reinforcement!
- If your child is struggling, provide him or her with a clue to the answer, or provide half the answer and have him or her complete the rest.



Learn More

- [How to Help Your Child Break Up a Writing Assignment Into Chunks](#)
- [9 Steps for Breaking Down Assignments](#)
- [How Can I Support My Child in Reading?](#)
- Giving support: [Video #1](#) and [Video #2](#)

For more information on high-leverage practices, visit <https://highleveragepractices.org/>.



Family Guide to At-Home Learning



Staying On Task

- Interaction helps learning come alive for children. You can use household items, such as blocks, chalk, or highlighters, to make learning tasks more fun.
- When reading a book, ask your child questions about the story, such as "what do you think will happen next?" or "what is the problem in the story?"
- Establishing schedules and using timers may help your child understand when a learning task begins and ends.
- Some children need frequent breaks from learning. When these breaks are predictable, children will be less likely to request a break and more likely to stay on task.
- As much as possible, limit distractions from siblings, TV, and phones.



Learn More

- [Understanding Your Child's Trouble With Focus](#)
- [Download: Picture Schedules and Learning Agreements for Your Child](#)
- [Brain Breaks: What You Need to Know](#)
- Staying on task: [Video #1](#) and [Video #2](#)



Specific Feedback

- Children benefit from being told what they are doing right or wrong in the moment.
- Specific feedback is focused on what children are doing ("I like how you sounded out that word...") instead of their abilities ("You're so smart!").
- Feedback can be verbal (praise), nonverbal (thumbs up), or written (marking off correct answers with a fun-colored marker).
- You can minimize how often your child practices a skill incorrectly by correcting him or her right away, rather than waiting until he or she has finished the task.
- Children benefit when they are provided an example of the right way to do something.
- Praise your child when you see him or her working hard and/or improving.
- Tip: 5 praises for every 1 critique.



Learn More

- [How to Look For Patterns In Your Child](#)
- [How to Give Praise That Builds Your Child's Self-Esteem](#)
- Ask Alexa to "[Enable Effective Feedback](#)"
- [Specific feedback video](#)



Goal Setting

- Children feel proud of themselves when they work hard to meet a goal.
- You can create goals with your child by asking him or her what he/she wants to learn or improve at, and why.
- Show your child you have high expectations for his or her learning. You can do this by encouraging your child to try new things that may feel hard.
- Having ongoing conversations about your child's goals throughout the week will show him or her that you see the goal as important.
- You can build your child's self-esteem if you praise or reward his or her effort even when a goal is not met.
- If your child meets a goal, ask what led to his or her success.
- Celebrate as a family when goals are met!



Learn More

- [Motivating Children to Do Their Homework: Parent's Guide](#)
- [Download: Your Child's Accomplishments Box Starter Kit](#)
- [7 Ideas for Using Rewards and Consequences](#)
- [Goal setting video](#)

For more information on high-leverage practices, visit <https://highleveragepractices.org/>.

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Appendix D



Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB

8/4/2020

Submission ID number: [2020-0291](#)
Title: Virtual Home-School Partnerships in Special Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Principal Investigator: Melinda Leko
Point-of-contact: Rebekka Olsen
IRB Staff Reviewer: Laura Conger

The ED/SBS IRB conducted a review of the above referenced initial application. The study was determined to meet the criteria for exempt human subjects in accordance with the following category(ies) as defined under 45 CFR 46:

Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews [NOTE: If children are involved in the research it can only be determined to be exempt under this category if the research is limited to educational tests or observation of public behavior, the investigator(s) cannot participate in the activities being observed, and the identities of the subjects either cannot be readily ascertained or the disclosure of the subjects' responses would not put them at risk.]

This study underwent limited IRB review to ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality.

You have identified the following financial sources to support the research activities in this IRB application:

None.

If this information is incorrect, please submit a change to modify your application as appropriate.

To access the materials the IRB reviewed and accepted as part of the exemption determination, please log in to your ARROW account and view the documents tab in the submission's workspace.

Although the human subjects research described in the ARROW application referenced above was determined to meet the federal criteria for exemption and thus does not require continuing review, please be aware of your responsibilities related to the conduct of the research and when additional IRB review is required. Prior to starting research activities, please review the

Investigator Responsibilities for Exempt Human Subjects Research guidance (https://kb.wisc.edu/images/group99/shared/BSIR_Exempt.pdf) which includes a description of the types of changes that must be submitted to ensure the research continues to comply with the conditions of the exemption and/or category(ies) of exemption.

If you have general questions, please contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB at 608-263-2320. For questions related to this submission, contact the assigned staff reviewer.