

# Preface

I have tremendous admiration for teachers. Teaching, whether in general education or special education, is a complex, time-consuming, and difficult job. Teaching has become even more challenging in recent years, as teachers are expected to respond to more complicated laws, changing standards, stricter regulations, and even large-scale societal problems, the unfortunate results of which students may bring with them from home to school.

Yes, teachers face many challenges and have many demands made upon them. First and foremost they are charged with providing effective, evidence-based instruction and with motivating their students to succeed and achieve their highest potential. Teachers are also responsible for helping their students develop positive self-esteem and appropriate socialization skills so that they can function as productive members of society. Given the increasing financial and personal pressures faced by many families, the diversity of the American student population, and often-shrinking education budgets, successfully completing all of these tasks is a tall order.

In addition, teachers juggle a host of time-consuming noninstructional tasks, such as playground duty, fundraising, and supervising study halls, which keep their schools running but their professional plates full to overflowing and their time at a premium.

Additional demands are placed on special educators. Current issues—such as Highly Qualified Teacher status, IDEA 2004 requirements, inclusion, collaboration with general education teachers and related service personnel, alternate assessment, academic versus functional curriculum, assistive technology, managing with and without teacher aides, and new mandates such as Response to Intervention—must be properly addressed.

One important task shared by all teachers is establishing strong communication links with parents and promoting parent involvement in their children's education. Research has shown that parent/family involvement has many positive effects on student performance, so teachers need to make their efforts to get parents involved a high priority. Parents of students with special needs are a valuable but too often untapped resource, and these parents can provide effective home instruction as well as serve as strong allies of teachers who could certainly use additional assistance.

But getting parents of students with special needs actively involved in their children's education is a responsibility that may seem overwhelming to teachers, especially in the hectic early stages of their careers when there are so many new and pressing demands being made on their time.

That's where this book comes in. It provides teachers, whether new or experienced, with a variety of teacher-friendly strategies for establishing good communication and initiating and maintaining productive ongoing parent involvement

throughout the school year. General education teachers, especially those who have students with disabilities in their classrooms, will find these strategies useful not only with the parents of students with special needs but with the parents of their typically developing students as well.

I am convinced that all teachers can use a variety of simple but effective strategies for communicating with and involving parents provided they have clear and reasonable mandates and useful models, and they realize that they can construct a comprehensive long-range parent involvement action plan but implement it a few strategies at a time. A gradual implementation process is a good way to make a positive parent-teacher collaboration happen.

But while most practitioners, authors, and researchers would agree that parent involvement is a good thing, many books on the subject merely list parent involvement ideas that teachers must then figure out how to implement. In contrast, this book gives detailed and easy-to-follow directions for creating 25 parent communication and involvement strategies. Each chapter section describes a practical strategy, provides a rationale for its use, offers step-by-step directions for its implementation, and includes sample materials that can be immediately adapted to each teacher's situation. For quick reference, also included are strategy review checklists that briefly list the key steps to implementation. The sample materials for each strategy are varied as to age and grade level of students, type and severity of their disabilities, and instructional situation (e.g., full or partial inclusion, self-contained class, coteaching arrangement, or resource room). By personalizing the samples used in this book, teachers can create their own materials, or they can simply use the samples as resource ideas and then follow the instructions to create a document from scratch.

Additional chapter sections in the book present a collection of tips, guidelines, and suggestions for conducting conferences, making phone calls, sending e-mail, and using voice messaging.

The book is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to and rationale for parent involvement.

Chapter 2 presents some beginning-of-the-year activities.

Chapters 3 through 5 explain and illustrate group and personalized written communication strategies involving both the classroom and home environments.

Chapter 6 focuses on telephone communication.

Chapter 7 includes strategies for in-person meetings with parents.

Chapter 8 provides suggestions for facilitating and encouraging home learning activities that parents can do with their children.

Chapter 9 addresses a variety of challenges to parent involvement and some possible solutions.

Chapter 10 shows how to organize materials into a parent-involvement portfolio so that you can use, reuse, and adapt these materials in the future. Teachers can also use this portfolio to document their efforts in parent-teacher collaboration, to use as evidence for professional development, and to share with colleagues whom they may be mentoring. Finally, this chapter explains how to develop a parent-involvement action plan.

You will notice that many of the strategies in this book could be considered "low tech," that is, they do not require that teachers have cutting-edge technology skills to accomplish them. Rather they are all strategies that most teachers could use with their present skills and resources. That is not to say that "high-tech" strategies, such as creating teacher Web sites, are not useful, but high-tech strategies are much more complex and could easily be the topic of an entire book. In addition, I believe that

teachers can achieve the same goals of parent involvement through less involved, less expensive, and less time-consuming means.

I also want to explain that I have used the term *parent* in this book in an inclusive fashion and intend for it to refer to any adult who is a primary caregiver for a child—including mothers, fathers, grandparents, stepparents, foster parents, and so on, and the full range of family profiles.

Writing this book was an enjoyable task. I interviewed a diverse group of special education teachers, all with at least 5 years of experience and a few with more than 25. These educators teach Grades K–12, in suburban and urban settings, work with students with a wide range of type and severity of disability, and teach in a variety of configurations. They shared with me some wonderful suggestions for promoting parent involvement in general and for conducting successful parent-teacher conferences in particular. These special educators are quoted throughout the text, and their useful materials appear as figures in many chapters.

I also interviewed a number of parents of children with disabilities to solicit their opinions and ideas. I am always impressed with how parents are so often able to respond to challenges and difficult situations with intelligence, creativity, energy, and grace and are able to give generously of their time despite many competing demands. The wise words of these parents (whose names have been changed to preserve confidentiality) influenced many of the ideas and strategies in this book as well.

In addition, I perused a large array of laws, standards, guidelines, and research relating to parent involvement and took the next step of operationalizing these mandates and recommendations into concrete strategies. I'm a practical, hands-on person and welcomed the challenge of translating theory into practice and trying to convert a critical but daunting task for teachers into a doable one.

I have tremendous admiration for teachers, and I hope that this book will help make one part of their responsibilities—facilitating meaningful involvement for parents of students with disabilities—more successful and a lot easier to achieve.