

**Summary of MPAS Comments to
Michigan Part B State Performance Plan for 2005-2010
Indicator 8: Parent Involvement**

Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, Inc. (MPAS) is Michigan's designated protection and advocacy program, mandated to serve persons with disabilities in the Great Lakes State. MPAS receives over 9,000 requests for help each year; 30-40% relate to problems with special education. MPAS knows about the issues that arise in special education in Michigan and is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the proposed state performance plan for serving students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Here are our comments:

(1) The indicator should link to success in other indicators. The National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) concluded that data show a positive correlation between family involvement in planning and outcomes in early intervention services. Improvements in parent involvement in Part B should also show up as better results in other indicators, such as graduation/dropout, discipline, and least restrictive environment.

In addition, the other indicators in turn should include parent participation activities that lead to improvement in those indicators. Many models include parent participation as a critical component in school improvement plans, and Michigan law requires schools to develop such plans.

Finally, the indicators should link to the closely related performance indicators for parent training and information centers. Those indicators include measures of material quality, relevance, usefulness, and cost efficiency, and also measure parents' promotion of evidence-based practices and knowledge of IDEA rights. Activities should include MDE analysis of its own materials on procedural safeguards, forms, and web-based information. Following the PTI indicators, MDE should take the lead in developing explanatory materials and providing training on meaningful parent participation.

(2) The measures of success appear to be incomplete because MDE administered only parts of the NCSEAM parent involvement survey. MDE administered only the Partnership Efforts and Quality of Service sections (questions 1-50) of the preschool survey, omitting the Impact on Family and Parent Participation sections. MDE administered only the School Efforts section (questions 1-25) of the school-age survey, omitting the Quality of Service, Impact on Family, and Parent Participation sections. In addition to missing important information on quality, impact of services, and parental participation, the partial administration of the surveys raises some questions. Do the service provider self-review (SPSR) questions cover the areas omitted? Can the partial scores be compared to the baseline set in the NCSEAM pilot study? If it is true (as stated in the MDE draft) that answers to single questions do not have meaning, can partial administration of the survey be considered valid?

MDE should either administer the entire survey or explain why not. In doing so, MDE should explain how it intends to measure the impact of parent involvement efforts on parents and, ultimately, on children. Merely measuring schools' efforts to facilitate involvement by itself does not yield useful information without measuring whether or not such efforts lead to any actual improvements in outcomes.

Finally, as a national baseline emerges, the goals may have to change. The current baseline is from a pilot study; one assumes more complete national data will be available over time.

(3) The focused monitoring activities of the continuous improvement monitoring system (CIMS) appear to be based only on the SPSR data. CIMS should be based on all information, including both the SPSR and NCSEAM information. In addition, focused monitoring activities must be

substantially increased and improved. Central to improvement is public disclosure of monitoring information. The CIMS monitoring website has no contact person listed and has not been updated in over a year. The parent involvement data is not reported on the website.

(4) Activities should integrate best practices from general education, including guidelines for parent involvement set forth by the national Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Many of the factors identified by the PTA (parenting skills, partnership, welcoming environment, community collaboration) are echoed in the NCSEAM questionnaire.

Our anecdotal information suggests that many of these factors are not addressed in interactions with parents of children with disabilities. Parents report problems with schools providing short notice of individualized education program team (IEPT) meetings, not scheduling at a mutually convenient time and place, setting time limits on meetings, not providing information in advance, or in feeling overwhelmed by large numbers of school staff attending such meetings. Other parents report problems in visiting school outside of IEPT meetings – problems in gaining access to their child’s classroom and selective enforcement of visitation policies. These problems do not foster a welcoming environment for parents.

Activities to improve parent involvement and community collaboration might include providing child care and food at evening events, activities to encourage early (pre-school age) involvement in school by parents, programs using parent tutors for all children, and linking communities to schools through community access media. In addition, the Harvard Family Research Project (2003) has set forth specific activities to improve parent-teacher relationships – specific teacher training on listening skills, witnessing and recording specific student information, and differentiating by cultural and economic setting. Activities should focus on improving these skills for teachers and administrators in order to facilitate effective parent involvement.

(5) Activities should also use general education research to focus on factors affecting parents’ perception of quality. In a 2004 state survey commissioned by the Michigan Education Association, many parents (25%) form their opinions about the quality of the educational experience of their children from review of grades, report cards, and tests. Homework, work brought home, and attitudes of students also make up significant percentages.

(6) Finally, activities should focus on bridging the gap between parent and teacher perceptions. The same survey asked both teachers and parents similar questions but got different answers. For example:

- Parents reported their children slept an average of 8.8 hours per night, yet 71% of teachers reported their students did not get enough rest.
- Parents (53%) reported helping their children with homework, but teachers disagreed (24%).
- Parents (76%) rated instruction in moral values high, yet 72% of teachers reported that parents do not teach such values.

This gulf between perceptions will hinder efforts to improve parent participation in school and must be bridged before other activities are effective.

Thank you for considering these comments. Please contact Mark McWilliams at (517) 487-1755 or mmcwill@mpas.org if you have questions.