

Families as Partners

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)

Recommendations 2019–2020

Meaningful family and community engagement are essential to the success of all students. For many students, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse students, both the family and community play critical roles in helping the student overcome opportunity gaps caused by institutionalized barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the importance of families in educating their children and in communities in providing basic resources and support. There is a need to intentionally shift toward a culture in which families and schools are working as equal partners to support students. While there are efforts to strengthen parent participation in the education of students with disabilities, culturally responsive family and community engagement should be woven into *all* facets of education and recognized as an integral component of student success. This is particularly true for black, indigenous, and students of color who are marginalized by institutionalized barriers that require robust and ongoing family and community engagement.

The first step to family engagement is the ability of families and school staff to have meaningful conversations. One in seven Washington state residents are immigrants or refugees who, with their children, contribute valuable perspectives and opportunities for cultural learning within our schools. Further, state and federal law mandate language access for limited English proficient families and families with communication disabilities, including deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, blind and visually impaired families. Robust and reliable language access procedures are necessary.

The SEAC recommends legislation, policies and procedures that promote:

- Robust and reliable language access that includes interpretation of all conversations with school staff and translation of IEPs and all vital documents. These communications are not limited to those related to special education but must be built into Tier 1 supports within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.
- Family and Community Liaisons within each school district that help families navigate the Special Education system. To reach our most marginalized families, these liaisons should be bilingual and bicultural.
- Dedicated Family and Community Liaison within OSPI who is placed outside of the Special Education Department. This Liaison can build strong relationships with community-based organizations supporting students with disabilities to efficiently and reliably communicate information to families experiencing the most systemic barriers. Strategic placement of the Liaison will enable organic collaboration across departments and shift the mindset toward thinking of students with disabilities as general education students first. This Liaison can also strengthen communications with the Equal Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee to de-silo our work and focus on the opportunity gaps experienced by students of color.

Moving forward, we must strengthen family-school partnerships to support culturally responsive approaches that center the experiences of students with disabilities and their families, particularly black, indigenous, Students of Color and groups who have traditionally been denied a voice in decision making.