Capstone Seminar Project

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Engaging Families and Students to Create a Meaningful

Individualized Education Plan

Established research questions grounded in personal inquiry and/or review of literature (what are your questions)

What are the effective components of a meaningful IEP ?

Designed components which explore or address the research questions of the project (how does your project work to answer your question?)

Successful IEPs do exist. Research and experience show that it is possible to create an

IEP that is effective and meaningful; one that is collaborative and meets the student’s vision and

needs. The intention for my Capstone project is to capitalize on these working plans by sharing

knowledge with families, parent advisory committees and people who work as Educational

Advocates.

By engaging in dialogue to discuss effective IEPs the hope is to learn from; replicate

when feasible and to cultivate a more collaborative process in developing future IEPs that

embody a strengths based approach. This tier largely will be addressed by having quarterly

meetings with Educational Advocates within our agency. There are 50-60 IEPs that our Case

Managers, Community Health Worker and Educational Advocate assist families with on a yearly

basis. For our team to engage in dialogue that focuses on IEPs that have been effective and

meaningful for families is important, as it will cultivate a keen understanding that these can and

do occur. By openly discussing the effective components: communication, collaboration,

engagement and empowerment we can learn how these components can have an impact in the

IEP planning process.

When these components are discussed it helps to keep them at the forefront creating

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an understanding of how a strategy worked. We can learn from each other when involved in an

IEP whether it be prepping the family, being present in a meeting or supporting the family thru

an IEP meeting or processing the meeting afterwards. School districts are very different and

there are many dynamics in implementing an IEP as there are often times many stakeholders. By

engaging and collaborating regularly in team meetings to discuss effective strategies in IEP

planning we ourselves then embody and mirror the meaningful components of an effective IEP.

A second tier would be to reach out to Parent advisory groups to promote dialogue on

their experiences with IEPs, sharing these stories help other families to hear from someone who

is familiar with the struggles of understanding an IEP and how to navigate the complex layers.

A third tier is a Resource packet to be given to families which focuses on IEP facts,

immediate resources within the school system, outside agencies that provide Educational

Advocacy, fact sheets and resources they can explore such as Federation for Children with

Special Needs, etc. This can be a resource for families as well as other professionals in the

community working with IEPs.

Designed components which align with major themes and/or gaps in the field of the inquiry (how does your project connect to the field?)

This project is very valuable in the field of Education by connecting to a broad range of

families, students, educators and advocates. The project helps to align effective working

components of a meaningful IEP in an effort to refresh how we engage with families to create a

student driven IEP. A gap in the field could be the lack of understanding on a family’s part to

grasp the complexities of an IEP and their rights. Other potential gaps in the field could be: when

educators do not allow time to engage a family prior to the IEP, or do not collaborate with

family/student regularly to build a trusting relationship, or by using language that focuses on

deficits, rather a student’s strengths and potential to thrive.

By educating and supporting families we strengthen their understanding of the process

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which can be empowering. By sharing experiences with peers in Education Advocacy we keep

dialogue open to consider what has worked, look at ways to modify or re shape areas such as

communication or collaboration by sharing successful tips.

Sharing some of the findings from the Literature Review would foster a greater

awareness of effective strategies found in various studies. I think this discussion could offer a

whole other layer of knowledge for best practices as all of the components are reviewed and

reinforced by this research.

Links to applicable practices in an educational or learning setting (how does learner or teacher engage with this topic?)

When the family and student are aware of these effective working components they will

know it is reasonable to have the expectation they should be involved in a meaningful way to

help develop the IEP. There are many resources that help to identify ways to incorporate

components such as communication and engagement including videos on the school district

websites.

Teachers can refresh on the value of utilizing some of the effective strategies in creating a

meaningful IEP. When their student is engaged and pursuing “their” vision, actualizing the goals

becomes a reality. Teachers need support from the school to spend that time engaging with

families prior to IEP meetings, getting them prepped for the actual meeting and then follow up.

This approach fosters communication, engagement, collaboration and empowerment- the themes

of a meaningful IEP.

As noted above by engaging in dialogue with peers regularly in team meetings to discuss

effective strategies in IEP planning we embody and mirror the meaningful components of an

effective IEP. An invaluable exchange of information can occur thru this collaborative process.

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We, as advocates can also share these working components with Community Based Day

Programs and Transitional Employment Services which are an integral part of the IEP for a

student in their transitional years of 16-22.

Relevance to current educational contexts and settings (why is this important now?)

IEPs are not going away, they are mandated. I’m hopeful this project will have a ripple

effect that infuses life and choice into the planning process and IEP; that offers a student a way

to be engaged, that offers Families and Educators a “refresh” button and to zap some life and

value into IEPs.

*Suggested resources for Individualized Education Plans:*

*Tap into resources within the school system, local community and beyond*

***List of local school districts: There is a host of information regarding Special Education Services on these district websites from explanations to resources and educational videos:***

**Central Berkshire Regional School District**: <http://www.cbrsd.org>

**Southern Berkshire Regional School district**: <https://sbrsd.org>

**Northern Berkshire Regional School District**: <https://www.northadams-ma.gov/government/boards_and_commissions/northern_berkshire_regional_school_district/index.php>

**Pittsfield School system**: <http://www.pittsfield.net>

***Community Resources: Information and Advocacy within Berkshire County***

**Berkshire County Arc**: 395 South Street Pittsfield MA 01201 (413) 499-4241; Educational Advocacy (413) 464-7262 <https://bcarc.org>

**United Cerebral Palsy** 208 West St, Pittsfield, MA 01201 [(413) 442-1562](https://www.google.com/search?q=united+cerebral+palsy+pittsfield+ma&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS803US803&ei=AmmZYJvgGOWl5NoP5s2W0AQ&oq=united+cerebral+palsy+of+pittsfield&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAEYADIGCAAQFhAeMgYIABAWEB46BwgAEEcQsAM6BwgAELADEEM6EwguEMcBEKMCELADEMgDEEMQkwI6EAguEMcBEK8BELADEMgDEEM6EAguEMcBEKMCELADEMgDEEM6CwguEMcBEK8BEJMCOggILhDHARCjAjoCCAA6BAgAEEM6CAguEMcBEK8BOgkIABDJAxAWEB5KBQg4EgExULExWNpPYLBcaAFwAngAgAHXAYgB8AqSAQYxMS4zLjGYAQCgAQGqAQdnd3Mtd2l6yAEPwAEB&sclient=gws-wiz): Educational Advocacy <https://ucpwma.org/assistive-technology-at>

***Websites for vast treasure chest of resources within Massachusetts:***

**Federation for Children with Special Needs**: Offers information, support, and assistance to families and professionals who support children with disabilities. <https://fcsn.org>  See fact sheets



[The Arc of Massachusetts - The Arc](https://thearc.org/chapter/the-arc-of-massachusetts/): offers information and advocacy to help families navigate the special education system and gain a better understanding of rights to special education services. **Tel:** (781) 891-6270 **Email:** [arcmass@arcmass.org](mailto:%20arcmass@arcmass.org)

A sampling of one of their resources: [The Arc@School's Advocacy Curriculum](https://thearcatschool.org/advocacy-curriculum/?utm_source=cc&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=curriculum)

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