

Shaping the Home-to-School Connection

in Special Education



TEACHTOWN®



A Message to Special Educators

We all know the truth: the moment a student with a disability walks through our doors, their success hinges not just on their IEP, but on the partnership we build with their family.

When a strong home-to-school connection is built, [student achievement increases](#) and conflicting priorities or expectations decrease because all players involved are referencing the same playbook. Facilitating clear communication and building trust with your students' families is a key part of your work as a special educator. Of course, compliance is always top of mind, but strengthening your bond with students' families also helps to transform them into powerful allies working with you toward the same goal: *academic and personal success*.

This eBook offers a comprehensive overview of the crucial partnership between families and educators, highlighting common challenges and best practices for creating a seamless, supportive home-to-school connection.

Building Trust Beyond the Annual Meeting

The first step in any relationship is communication, but in special education, it can often feel like you're starting in a defensive position. Families can be stressed, skeptical, and overwhelmed by educational AND legal jargon that extends beyond their expertise. *You can change that narrative.*

On the flipside, some families have extensive experience with education, special education, medical, legal, and other backgrounds and as a result, bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the table.

Active listening and clear, open communication helps ensure that special educators meet all families where they're at in a respectful way.



ESTABLISHING A PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION PLAN *WITH FAMILIES*

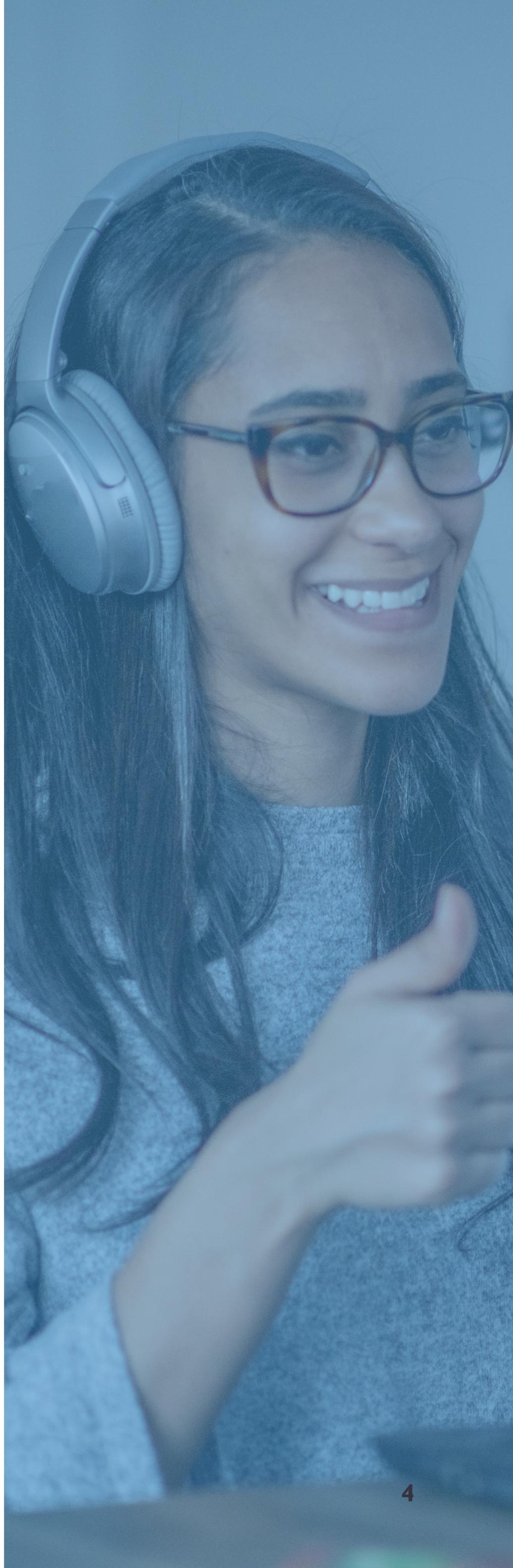
Don't wait for an annual meeting or a crisis to pick up the phone. Imagine the shift in a parent's mindset when the first call they receive isn't about a missing assignment or a behavioral incident, but a genuine piece of positive news.

Encourage your staff to adopt a "Good News Initiative."

Challenge them to be proactive and make one positive contact with a different family each week. It's a simple call:

"I just wanted to tell you that Shannon nailed that new math concept today. She was so proud of herself."*

These feel-good moments build a bank of goodwill that's priceless when a difficult conversation needs to happen later.



IEP meetings are notorious for acronyms and technical terms: LRE, FAPE, related services, etc. You won't want to just hand a family member a document and expect them to be in the know. Train your staff to act as translators. Whenever an acronym or technical term is used, immediately follow it with an explanation in layman's terms.

Let's use LRE as an example:

*“LRE, or **least restrictive environment**, means that students with disabilities must be taught alongside their typically developing peers as much as possible. A student will only be taught in a different setting if they can't receive the education they need in the general education classroom, even with extra help. This is why your student remains with his general education peers for his electives - art, music, library, etc. - and receives his academic instruction in our self-contained setting.”*



You want to ensure every parent/caregiver leaves a meeting knowing exactly what their child's plan entails, not just what the acronyms stand for.

And finally, offer options! Not every family member can drop everything for an in-person afternoon meeting (as an educator, you know this all too well!). Offer flexible, virtual meeting choices if that enables a caregiver to engage in conversations about their child's education. Reducing the barriers of travel, childcare, and other obligations is a simple way to say, "We truly value your participation."

Teaming Up with Tech

For a caregiver, the most frustrating feeling may not always be the challenge of homework but the unsettling silence - the feeling of being kept in the dark about their child's day-to-day progress. That gap between what happens in the classroom and what details make it home can feel pretty immense.

Technology is about more than just sending emails. It's about inviting families into the classroom in a number of different ways:

➤ Real Time Updates

Tools like Remind or ClassDojo allow you to send a quick photo of a student succeeding on a challenging task or an immediate message about a schedule change. This constant, low-effort contact makes families feel like valued members of the learning team.

➤ Curriculum Transparency

When you integrate technology into classroom instruction - perhaps with a standards-aligned, adapted core curriculum like TeachTown's [enCORE](#) - you can easily share the progress a student is making on the skills being taught.

➤ The 8 PM Lifeline

Consider how accessible your most critical documents are. The paper copy of an IEP often gets filed away, only to be needed at 8 PM when a parent is finally reviewing work. Making a student's current IEP or behavior plan accessible online can be a game-changer. *It's crucial, however, that this access is implemented in a secure and compliant manner to uphold student privacy.*

➤ Digital Office Hours

Video-conferencing platforms like Zoom or Google Meet allow you to host optional office hours. This is a low-pressure way for busy parents to ask general questions or get a quick tutorial on a new learning initiative.

Technology is no longer a luxury, but an everyday, accessible tool that can help to strengthen the home-to-school connection from a necessary formality into an authentic partnership.



SHIFTING FROM COMPLIANCE TO GENUINE TEAMWORK

Preparation & Input

An IEP meeting should never be the first time a parent sees the student's proposed IEP goals. Always be sure to send a draft of the relevant sections, along with the agenda, before the annual meeting. This gives the caregivers time to review the IEP without the pressure of a full team waiting on their feedback.

Be sure to structure the meeting to prioritize parent input. Dedicate a specific, unhurried block of time where the only job of the dedicated IEP team is to listen to the family and take notes. When a parent feels their insights are valued and documented, they move from being an audience member to a dedicated partner.

Equipping the Home Team

Parents often want to help, but they are unsure of how to best support their child's educational goals and need practical tools. Don't just tell them a goal is X, be sure to show them a simple way to reinforce the goal.

Host virtual parent workshops that are hyper-focused on practical application - perhaps "Navigating the Transition Process" or "Three Simple Strategies for De-Escalation at Home." These don't need to be mandatory lectures, but more of an optional opportunity to provide helpful skills for parents to feel supported and be able to use in action at home.

A Special Note to Administrators



As the administrator, you set the tone. Your commitment to building strong home-to-school connections defines the culture of your entire special education department.

You know the importance of leading by example better than anyone. Model that patience and commitment to partnership in every interaction you have. Finally, remember that growth requires honest feedback. Implement an annual, anonymous survey for your special education families. Ask them specific questions: *Did you feel prepared for the IEP meeting? Do you know who to contact with a concern? Do you feel your input is valued?*

Turn those responses into clear, measurable goals for your team's professional development next year.

You just want to build the strongest bridge possible. When you invest in connecting with the families you serve, you're investing directly in the future of your students. And that, in special education, is the greatest story of success we can tell.



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Learn more at TeachTown.com

