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Parent Participation in State Monitoring

by Eileen Ahearn

Since its enactment in 1975, the federal special education law, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has made each state responsible for the compliance of all their local education agencies (LEAs) and other public agencies that provide special education for students with disabilities. The 2004 reauthorization of the law (P.L. 108-446) added a new section (§616) on monitoring and enforcement (subsequently more clearly described in the IDEA regulations [34 CFR §300.600]). Section 300.149 of the regulations requires that a state have in effect policies and procedures “to ensure that it complies with the monitoring and enforcement requirements in §300.600.”

On-site verification visits constitute one monitoring strategy used by states to comply with the IDEA requirements to monitor LEAs. Historically, the composition of on-site visiting teams has varied among states—some used only state educational agency (SEA) staff, some included local education agency (LEA) peers, parents or other community members and some contracted with private vendors for this component of their monitoring programs. To examine current practice in using parents on monitoring teams, Project Forum staff surveyed state directors of special education and analyzed the information provided by those who responded. Project Forum completed this task as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

BACKGROUND

There is only a limited amount of information available about state practices in monitoring LEAs.¹ Available data include Project Forum documents prepared in conjunction with the Federal Resource Center and the Regional Resource Centers,² information available on the

¹ All data discussed in this document were gathered for Project Forum documents on the monitoring of programs under Part B of IDEA (programs for children ages 3-21). Only one Forum document covers Part C monitoring—it is listed in the References.

² All of Project Forum’s past work in the area of monitoring has involved membership on, and coordination with, the Monitoring Workgroup managed by the staff of the Regional and Federal Resource Centers. Project Forum

website of the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) and some training materials used in states to provide information about monitoring practices and team composition. Specific materials used for this background review are included in the reference list at the end of this document.

Both OSEP and SEAs have revised their monitoring processes frequently over the years. SEA procedures have closely replicated the federal approach and both have almost always included an on-site visit to the entity being monitored. On-site verification visits are generally scheduled on a cyclical basis—usually between three and six years. They typically include a public meeting, parent interviews, document reviews, program observations, teacher and administrator interviews and an exit meeting with the unit’s administrators to discuss the team’s findings. In addition to state employees, SEAs have used a variety of other individuals as monitoring team members including parents, LEA or intermediate district peers (i.e., special education directors or teachers from other districts), university professors, researchers, other community members and individuals hired by contract to participate in the monitoring process.

Project Forum has addressed the topic of monitoring team membership in four previous documents (in 1992, 1995, 1997, [2002^a](#) and [2002^b](#))³. A review of the data from these survey studies reveals that the composition of state monitoring teams has varied among states and has changed frequently within states. The data in those documents were collected by the Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) as part of their technical assistance funded by OSEP to assist states with the implementation of IDEA. Survey results were part of discussions at the national monitoring conferences held in those years.

Other information on the topic of parents as members of monitoring teams include state resources such as publications and power point presentations listed in the references at the end of this document.

METHODOLOGY

In April 2007, Project Forum surveyed states to gather targeted information about the current composition of their on-site monitoring teams. (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.) States were given the opportunity to reply through Zoomerang,[®] an online survey program, or by downloading a copy of the survey and returning their responses by email or fax. All responses not originally submitted through Zoomerang were entered into that program to assist in the analysis.

A total of 37 out of 50 states responded to this survey. Two reminders were sent to non-responding states in May before the survey period closed on June 6, 2007. The responses were

acknowledges with sincere appreciation the invaluable assistance received from workgroup members in Project Forum’s documenting of monitoring conferences and surveys of monitoring practices.

³ Find related Project Forum documents at www.projectforum.org.

analyzed with the assistance of the data compilation that is part of the Zoomerang[®] web survey program. Findings were compared with the results of the four previous surveys.⁴

SURVEY FINDINGS

Non-State Employees on Teams

Twenty-five of the 37 states responding to this survey indicated that they include non-state employees as members of their onsite teams when monitoring LEAs. Aside from parent members, the 25 states mentioned individuals from the following categories as the affiliations represented by their non-SEA team members:

- special education administrators (12)
- special education teachers/specialists (10)
- general education staff (8)
- principals/central office administrators (8)
- retired professionals (5)
- contracted individuals/agencies (5)
- university representatives (2)
- intermediate agency staff (2)
- trained peer monitors (1)

See Table 1 for a comparison of the use of non-SEA employees over the past ten years.

TABLE 1 Team Composition Data from 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001

Non-SEA Team Membership	Total Number of States Using Non-SEA Members on Their Monitoring Teams				
	1992	1995	1997	2001	2007
Parents of Students with Disabilities	9	5	5	14	16
Other Non-SEA Employees	29	31	31	32	25

Parents as Team Members

State Inclusion of Parents as Team Members

Sixteen of the 37 responding states indicated that they currently include parents as members of their onsite monitoring teams. There has been a slow, but steady, increase in the total number of states using parents as team members since 1997—the number of states following this practice has more than tripled over the past 10 years. The current number of states may have

⁴ The four prior Project Forum documents included data from all 50 states while the data collected for this document included only 37 responding states. This discrepancy presents a limitation to the comparisons between data from the prior years and that collected in 2007.

been even larger if the survey had included responses from all 50 states. The data are contained in Table 1.

Motivating Factors for Using Parents as Team Members

In states where parents are members of monitoring teams, respondents were asked to describe the motivating factors behind the state’s decision. The following responses are representative of the 16 responding states that include parents on teams:

- Parents are members of IEP teams at the local level and have a lot to offer at the state level that often provides a different perspective.
- Having parents on the team improves the process, adds credibility, helps us reach out to families and provide a venue for public dissemination of information.
- Parents decrease the excessive workload of our SEA staff.
- Parents of children with disabilities are generally more open and responsive when conversing with another individual who has a child with a disability.
- We value the input and view of parents and consider them our partners in this process.
- Parent team members facilitate new understandings of parents and school personnel about each other’s strengths, contributions and challenges in educating children with disabilities.
- It is our goal to include parents in all work groups and special education activities.
- Issues and problems may be proactively identified and handled as they are uncovered through teaming.
- Our purpose is to improve results for students by increasing parent involvement.

Roles Parents Play on Monitoring Teams

Respondents were given seven choices (plus “other”) for the item that asked what role parent team members play. The item asked for an indication of all roles that applied and the total number of choices for each item were as follows:

Table 2: Roles of Parents on Monitoring Teams

Parent Role on the Monitoring Team	Number of Responses
Serve in an advisory capacity only	0
Facilitate onsite parent meetings	11
Interview individual parents as part of site visits	7
Participate in student file reviews	9
Participate in classroom observations	9
Provide input via team discussions	12
Provide written input	5
Other: Members of our statewide stakeholder group	3
Facilitate team meetings	1
Participate as a full team member	9
Provide input on and help to conduct parent surveys and focus groups	3

How Parents Are Recruited to Serve on Monitoring Teams

In response to the question about how they recruit parents to be members of monitoring teams, states listed the following:

- through parent organizations (14)
- through LEAs/intermediate districts (7)
- at parent meetings (3)

Georgia uses a “Focused Monitoring Application Form” to recruit and select parent members of monitoring teams.⁵ It lists qualifications, job requirements, a job description, payment and reimbursement information, the selection process that will be used and additional information.

Orientation and Training Provided to Parent Team Members

Respondents were provided four options for the item that asked them to describe the training/orientation they provide for parent team members. The responses were as follows:

- provide separate trainings for parents (6)
- include parents in training for the team as a whole(15)
- include information about special education law (11)
- include training in team participation skills and parents’ roles (8)

As to the length of training for parent members, the responses were as follows:

- one day (7)
- half a day (4)
- two days (3)
- two hours (1)
- as needed with updating and coaching as needed (1)

How Parent Team Members are Supported

Responses on how parent members are supported were as follows:

- travel expenses reimbursed (14)
- a stipend is provided (13)
- child care costs are reimbursed (2)
- none (2)

⁵ A copy of this form is available at http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/ci_exceptional.aspx?PageReq=CIEXCGCIMP and in Appendix B.

One of the respondents who indicated that parents are not supported by the state added that most are already compensated by their organizations. In most cases, the stipend paid is a flat amount (\$150 and \$250 per day were mentioned), but in two cases the respondents noted that an hourly rate is paid.

Benefits of Using Parents as Members of Monitoring Teams

Responses to the survey item about the benefits of including parents on monitoring teams were strongly worded and enthusiastic. One respondent wrote, “We have had tremendous success using parents as part of our monitoring teams.” The specific comments clustered into the following areas:

- Parents provide valuable perspectives, knowledge, insight and expertise to the work of the team as a whole and to other individual team members.
- ‘Parent to parent’ conversations allow states to gather data they might not otherwise be able to get, such as input from parents whose experiences with special education have not been positive.
- Parents expand the understanding of other team members by representing the parent point of view more fully.
- Parents provide input into the work of the team, especially direction for team leaders, in a way that SEA employees alone might not be able to do.
- Parent participation in the team process acknowledges the vital role that parents play in their child’s education.
- Parents can better represent the ‘consumer’ view that is important for teams to consider.
- Having parents on the team encourages other parents to more fully trust the system and participate in the evaluation activities.

Challenges in Using Parents as Members of Monitoring Teams

Respondents described a number of problems posed by having parents on monitoring teams. They are summarized as follows:

- Confidentiality was mentioned by five respondents as a specific concern, although those who cited it added comments, such as suggesting that careful selection procedures, training or avoidance of assigning record review to parent members are strategies to handle this challenge.
- Often parents have only limited knowledge of special education law and policy.
- There is a need to help parents keep focused on the work of the team and not involved in specific parents’ problems or addressing their own personal agendas.
- Recruiting parents who have the time, interest and ability to commit to the team process is difficult.
- It is a challenge to provide adequate training to allow the parent to be a comfortable and effective member of a monitoring team.

- Managing the logistics of parent participation as a team member is complex and increasingly time consuming for SEA staff.

One state respondent commented that the role of parents is more appropriately carried out by having them hold focus groups and distribute parent surveys rather than actually having them act in what is a regulatory role as a team member.

Reasons for Not Using or Discontinuing the Use of Parents on Teams

The total number of states that used parents on monitoring teams has changed over the years, but the total number does not represent the same states in subsequent years as some states have dropped the practice and others started it. The 21 states that responded in the negative to the question about current use of parents as team members were asked two targeted follow-up questions about their prior use of parents on teams and why that practice is no longer followed. A total of five states indicated they had used parents in the past, but only two gave specific reasons why they no longer use parents as members of their teams. One responded that there were concerns about confidentiality and the parents' knowledge of the law and, in a similar vein, the other explained that input from their monitoring coordinators and the parents indicated that more extensive training needed to be provided.

As to the role parents played when they were on teams in the past, one respondent stated that parents were regular members of the monitoring team and one respondent did not give any details. Two states indicated that parents had been used in the team process mainly to conduct parent forums and one indicated that they included a parent in their three focused monitoring pilot sites in the past year to help in the development of a future parent role on their monitoring teams.

One respondent who said their SEA does not use parents as members of the monitoring team said they are planning to include parents in the future. Two other respondents noted that parents are involved in the monitoring process in various other ways, such as in the LEA's self assessment process and assisting in parent forums to provide input to the visiting team.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There have been many changes in the way monitoring has been conducted in the approximately 30 years it has been part of special education programs. This document has focused on issues related to one aspect of that work—the inclusion of parents as members of monitoring teams. The results of the survey conducted for this analysis confirm that states see both benefits and challenges in this practice. Yet, the number of states including parents as team members has increased steadily over the past 10 years, perhaps reflecting the growing emphasis on involving parents more actively in special education programs. For example, revised federal regulations include expanded requirements for publicizing information about the achievement of all students including students with disabilities and have increased emphasis on soliciting public comment on state plans and priorities.

However, as noted by many of the respondents to the survey, adding parents to monitoring teams is not a simple process. An article by Larry Fuller (2004) of the New Mexico Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)⁶ is one example of how this practice could be implemented. The article details a four-year experience of that PTI's role in assisting the SEA to recruit, train and carry out ongoing assessment of the practice of having parent members on monitoring teams.

One state also commented about expanding the role of students in the pilot of their new monitoring approach: high school students interviewed middle school students and middle school students interviewed elementary students in that model. It is clear that states are seeking new ways to involve families of students with disabilities in special education programs and this trend will most likely support a continued, and perhaps expanded, role for families in the monitoring process.

⁶ Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) are federally funded organizations that provide training and assistance to the families of children with disabilities. Every state has at least one PTI and those with large populations may have more.

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New Hampshire Department of Education, n.d. *Focused monitoring procedures: So what does it look like?* A Power Point presentation with information about the choice and role of parent members of a monitoring team on slides #13 to16. Retrieved August 29, 2007

from

<http://www.ed.state.nh.us/Education/doe/organization/instruction/SpecialEd/documents/WhatdoesFMlooklike-NHDOE.ppt>

Other

National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM): This website contains extensive information about monitoring. See especially presentations made in Connecticut and other states for information about parents as team members. Retrieved August 29, 2007 from <http://www.monitoringcenter.lsuhs.edu/presentations.htm>

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APPENDIX A: Survey Form

**PROJECT FORUM
Survey on Parent Participation in State Monitoring**

State: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone number: _____

1) Do your monitoring teams include any non-state employees (other than parents)?

- No
- Yes

2) If so, please identify the affiliation of the non-state members:

3) Does your state currently include parents as members of the monitoring teams that make onsite visits to districts?

- Yes (**skip to Item #5**)
- No

4) If “No,” have you ever included parents in the past?

- No
- Yes

(If Yes, please comment on when, how and why you do not currently include parents.)

(Skip to Item # 10)

5) What role do parent team members play? (select all that apply)

- advisory only
- participate in onsite visit
- facilitate a parent meeting onsite
- interview individual parents as part of the site visit
- participate in student file reviews
- participate in classroom observations
- provide input to the team by:
 - commenting in discussions only
 - provide written input

6) How do you recruit parents to be monitoring team members?

- through LEAs
- through parent organizations
- other

7) If other, please specify:

8) Please check all the following that apply to the training/orientation you provided for parent team members.

- We provide separate training for parents.
- We include parents in training provided to the team as a whole.
- We include information about special education law and policies.
- We include training in team participation skills and parent's role.

Training lasts for;

- a half day
- one day
- two days
- other (please specify) _____

9) If parents are supported to participate, please indicate all the ways that apply:

- travel expenses are reimbursed
- childcare costs re reimbursed
- a stipend is provided (If so, amount: _____)
- other (please specify: _____)

10) Please explain the motivating factors behind including parents as members of monitoring teams.

11) What are the benefits of using parents as members of monitoring teams?

12) What are the challenges of using parents as members of monitoring teams?

Additional Comments:

Thank you very much!!

APPENDIX B: Parent Member Application

Focused Monitoring Application Form: PARENT MEMBER

Qualifications:

- Be the parent of a child who receives or has received public school special education services in Georgia.
- Have basic knowledge of special education procedures and terminology.
- Have exemplary communication skills.
- Possess a high school diploma or its equivalent. A college degree is preferred.
- Have e-mail access.

Job Requirements:

- Attend two days of training August 21-22, 2007 in McRae, Georgia at Little Ocmulgee State Park (Housing and meals will be provided by the DES).
- Must be able to participate as a Focused Monitoring team member at least once during the school year for an on-site visit of 3-5 days.
- Must be able to travel and stay overnight during the training and on-site visit(s).
- Submit completed application by April 30, 2007.

Job Description:

- Assist in planning and facilitating Focused Monitoring Parent Meeting.
- Review and summarize parent and professional survey information.
- Interview administrators, teachers, parents, and students.
- Review student records with a focus on the priority goal for Focused Monitoring.
- Complete daily summary report and present findings to the team during daily debriefing sessions.

Payment and Reimbursement:

- Parents will be paid \$200.00 per day during the training and on-site visit(s).
- Parents will be reimbursed for mileage and per diem expenses according to state travel regulations. (Reimbursement may take up to 8 weeks.)

Selection Process:

The state will not consider applications from parents who have a potential conflict of interest with the state or a local district due to active paid advocacy or involvement in due process hearings. Following an application review and reference check, selected applicants may be asked to schedule an interview. Applicants will be notified of their selection in July, 2007.

Additional Information:

- Parent team members will not monitor a district where they reside or where their children attend school.

- Parent team members must not be currently employed by a school district as an educator.
- Parent team members must not be employed by any state agency.

**Focused Monitoring Team Application
PARENT MEMBER**

Name:	
Address:	
Home Phone:	Work Phone:
Email:	Cell Phone:
School district where you reside:	
School district where your child(ren) attend(s) school, if different from above:	
Specific skills pertinent to the Focused Monitoring process (i.e., bilingual, specialized workshops attended, etc.)	

Please describe why you should be selected as a Focused Monitoring team member:

References: Submit 2 *letters of reference* with contact information along with your application. One must be from a school district employee.