



National Standards *for* FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

STRENGTHENING FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A Guide for School Administrators



Seven million students receive special education services in

the form of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). That's nearly 14% of all students in the U.S who are identified as having a disability that requires specialized instruction. That doesn't include students who haven't been identified as having a disability or students who have a disability, but don't need special education support.

The updated National Standards for Family-School Partnerships can help meet the needs and desires of students of disabilities. The six standards outline exactly not just why, but also how, school leaders can advocate for students with disabilities. This guide aims to help you use the National Standards to ask the right questions and start meaningful conversations with families of students with disabilities.



WELCOME
ALL FAMILIES

COMMUNICATE
EFFECTIVELY

COLLABORATE
WITH COMMUNITY

SUPPORT
STUDENT
SUCCESS

SHARE
POWER

SPEAK UP
FOR EVERY
CHILD

Looking to explore more resources?
Visit [PTA.org/Standards](https://www.pta.org/standards)

National PTA has also published several policy resources, including a **Position Statement on The Education of Students with Disabilities**, **Resolution on High Expectations for Students with Disabilities**, and a **Position Statement on Safe and Supportive Schools** to support inclusive advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal level.



Welcoming all students into the school community to build a sense of belonging and inclusion first requires an understanding of the barriers families face. Students with disabilities and their families may feel isolated and excluded from school communities.

Asking families explicitly what they need to feel welcome helps avoid the unconscious biases that can come from assuming you know what they need to feel included.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING "TABOO TALKS"
Does the physical space and layout of the school ¹ allow for your family to easily participate in events and activities?	I know our events haven't always been as welcoming or inclusive as they could be. I'm hoping to learn from your insight and suggestions about...
Do you feel comfortable talking to us and other families about your child's disability? If not, can we do something to make that easier for you?	I understand that talking about your child's disability may make it hard to join in like other parents. I want to make sure you have ways to participate that respect that and don't put you on the spot.
Does your family prefer to use "person-first" or "identity-first" language when talking about your child's disability? What does that sound like?	Like many educators, I was taught to use person-first language, but it's important to me to learn from families and students.
Are there resources or go-to organizations you'd recommend for us to learn more about your disability?	I'm sure you have a lot to teach us. It's important we don't put you in the position of having to educate us if you don't want to.
Can you share what you say, or do when other people are visibly curious about your child's disability?	As you know, kids are curious and ask lots of questions. I also want to make sure we're respecting your privacy and wishes about what to share.

¹ Law, M., Petrenchik, T., King, G., & Hurley, P. (2007). Perceived Environmental Barriers to Recreational, Community, and School Participation for Children and Youth With Physical Disabilities. *Archives Of Physical Medicine And Rehabilitation*, 88(12), 1636-1642. doi: 10.1016/j.apmr.2007.07.035



Establishing effective communication with families of students with disabilities may take some additional effort. When families have had previous negative experiences with systems, there can be a level of mistrust that has to be factored into your communications.²

Families of students with disabilities also tend to have multiple contacts and touchpoints with a school, from classroom teachers to case managers, so they may be unsure as to whom they should turn for what type of information.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING "TABOO TALKS"
Does your family prefer to use "person-first" or "identity-first" language when talking about your child's disability? How should we incorporate that into our conversations with you?	Like many educators, I was taught to use person-first language, but it's important to me to learn from families and students.
Is there someone in your family who is a day-to-day contact or a certain person we should talk to about scheduling meetings? Can we work together to create a contact list?	I want to make sure everyone who supports your child has information they need without feeling overloaded. Let's talk about who that is.
Is it easier for you to have a single point of contact for most communication? What has worked well in the past?	I imagine it can be a lot to have to share the same information year after year, so let's make sure you have someone you're comfortable with to connect with regularly.
Are there ways that are easier for you to process information? For instance, does email work better than a phone call?	I want to make information accessible to families the same way I individualize it for students.
If we have questions related to your child's disability, who should we ask?	I want to understand more about your child's disability, but don't want to be insensitive in how or who I ask.

² Angell, M. E., Stoner, J. B., & Shelden, D. L. (2009). Trust in education professionals: Perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 30*(3), 160-176. <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/understanding-concerns-parents-students-disabilities-challenges-and-roles-school-counselors>



When families and schools work together to build a safe and supportive space where all students are held to high expectations it has a big impact on student success.³ Talking to families of students with disabilities about their expectations for their child and letting them know that you believe in their child’s potential is key in supporting that success.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING “TABOO TALKS”
Can you tell me a story about when you’ve felt like someone at school has really believed in your child’s ability to succeed? What makes this experience stand out to you?	I hope to be someone you and your child trust. Let’s talk about what you need for that to happen.
Are there words or phrases that your child associates with people not believing in their abilities?	I apologize for asking about unpleasant memories. I want to make sure I’m being sensitive to your child’s feelings in the future.
Do you have suggestions for how we can better or more authentically represent disability in our school culture?	It’s important to me that your child sees themselves represented as a model for success. I could use your help in understanding how to achieve that.
Can you share some goals you have for your child’s success and well-being in school? What helps your child succeed in the classroom?	Your knowledge of your child’s past success is different from mine, so I’d like to learn more from you.
Can you share some of your child’s strengths so we can use them to create strategies for success?	Kids can do so much more than what I see in the classroom. I want to know what your child does well and enjoys doing.

³ Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban education, 42*(1), 82-110.



Families of students with disabilities are used to advocating for their children. They speak up because students with disabilities may be less inclined to advocate for themselves. They also advocate because educational policies and services for students with disabilities aren't always a prioritized investment.⁴

When you speak up for—and with—families and students you become an additional voice of support, a person families can trust, and someone who sets the standard for speaking up against bias.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING "TABOO TALKS"
What has your experience been like in the past when you've advocated for your child at school?	It's important to me that you know I see advocacy as necessary, even if it's been met with resistance in the past.
Are there any current events we should know about that will affect your child?	I can't control what other people do or say, but I assure you I will speak up against anything that harms your child.
Are there policies in place or language in our school materials we should revisit with an eye to disability?	If we have phrases, images, or policies that could be hurtful to you or your child, I want to make sure to speak up about it.
Are there go-to resources you'd recommend for us to use to learn—and teach—about ableism?	Ableism is something I'm working hard to learn more about so I can change my views and language and to speak up when I hear/see it.
What does it sound like when your child advocates for themselves and how can we help support that?	We teach kids to self-advocate, but we don't always recognize it, so I want to make sure I'm supporting your child in the moment.

⁴ IDEA Full Funding: Why Should Congress Invest in Special Education? - NCLD. (2022). Retrieved 15 September 2022, from <https://ncld.org/news/policy-and-advocacy/idea-full-funding-why-should-congress-invest-in-special-education/>



When students with disabilities have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), shared decision-making is not only encouraged, but also a legal responsibility.⁵ But sharing power with families goes beyond simple compliance. It requires you to be open to new ideas, different perspectives, and realize that you can learn as much from families and students as they can learn from you. This “cultural humility⁶” can bring about stronger policies, practices, programs, and trust.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING “TABOO TALKS”
There may be times when we’d like a sensitivity review of our policies or materials. Would you be willing to give input?	I know you can only speak to your experience, so please know we’ll be asking for other families to provide their thoughts, too.
Are there local parent support or advocacy groups you’d recommend we know about and share with others?	I know support groups aren’t right for everyone, but I want to know what’s out there. I can also share with you the resources I already have.
Do you feel like students with disabilities and their families have opportunities to share their perspective with the community?	I know it can be uncomfortable to share in public, so please let me know if you want to share more privately. It’s important that all of our students are considered in community decisions.
Do you feel your family’s voice is represented and needs considered in the decisions we make?	Let me share more about how decisions are made so you know what we take into account.
Do you feel comfortable raising disability-related concerns with the school community?	I want to create a community in which people don’t feel like their words will be used against them by others.

5 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 34 CFR § 300.322 - Parent participation (2014) <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.322/a>

6 Connor, David & Cavendish, Wendy. (2017). Sharing Power With Parents: Improving Educational Decision Making for Students With Learning Disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*. 41. 073194871769882. 10.1177/0731948717698828.



Collaborating with families of students with disabilities involves strong communication, building trusting relationships, and being willing to learn from and alongside them. But just because a student has a disability doesn't mean they and their family are part of collective "disability community,"⁷ the phrase that often refers to grassroots organizations and people who are united by the experience of being disabled.

Opening up dialogue with and about those organizations is key not only in learning directly from the community what's important, but also in connecting students and families to others who share similar lived experiences. If you're not sure where to start, visit Parent Center Hub at www.parentcenterhub.org to connect with your state's Parent Training and Information Center.

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO ASK	SENTENCE STARTERS FOR DEFUSING "TABOO TALKS"
Does your child identify as part of the disability community?	I know that as a parent you may feel connected to other parents in the disability community. I'm wondering if you can talk about your child's sense of identity.
What organizations do you know and trust have their pulse on what's happening in the disability community?	There are so many organizations out there, and I'm hoping to learn from those with authentic experiences.
Would you like to be connected with groups in the area who can provide mentorship or whose members may have experiences similar to those of your family?	It's OK if you don't want to be connected with others in the community. I just want to make sure you have the information.
Would your family benefit from a school-based group like a Special Education PTA (SEPTA)?	I'm interested in knowing how the school can better support families like yours.
Are there things specific to your child's disability that you need additional support for, such as transportation or lists of service providers?	I don't want to assume you need extra help, but I don't want to assume you don't either.

⁷ Pulrang, A., & Pulrang, A. (2019). What Defines Members Of The "Disability Community?" — Andrew D. Pulrang. Retrieved 21 September 2022, from <https://disabilitythinking.com/disabilitythinking/2019/9/15/cukmbl2x4k5eyvo2jj63lq9unifpwi>



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