Feasibility of a Parent IEP/ 504 Plan Toolkit: Empowering Families Navigating the Special Education System

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Background

- Special Education services are often challenging for families to navigate[1].
- Families report being confused and intimidated at Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, and often perceive that their role in the IEP process is limited to listening to goals pre-determined by the school, rather than participating as a true member of the IEP team[1].

Objectives

- This Quality Improvement (QI) project is designed to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of the Special Education Navigator- (IEP)/ 504 Plan Toolkit, created to aid families navigating the special education system.

Aims

- To support parents seeking school-based supports for their child, we created an initial Toolkit with input from a LCSW specializing in special education advocacy.
- To tailor the content of the Toolkit to parent needs, we collected feedback and incorporated suggestions for improvement from parents of students with special education support needs over 2 Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, identified feedback themes and created a revised and improved Toolkit.
- To refine the language used in and the accuracy of the Toolkit's content, feedback was collected and analyzed from providers specializing in supporting families with special education support needs.

Methods

Toolkit Contents:

- Explanations of Special Education Laws and the differences between IEPs and 504 Plans
- An Outline of the steps involved in requesting an IEP assessment and creating an IEP, including a visual IEP Roadmap
- Definitions of common Special Education terms
- Guidance for parents who disagree with school district assessments and/or IEPs
- Template Letters for requesting IEPs & 504 Plans

Table 1. QI Project PDSA Cycle Steps

PDSA Cycle Steps	PDSA Cycle 1 (Nov. 2023 – Feb. 2024)	PDSA Cycle 2 (Mar. – Apr. 2024)
Plan	Developed an initial Toolkit with input from a LCSW specializing in school system navigation and prepared for the first round of Toolkit distribution	Determined distribution & feedback collection plan for 2nd PDSA cycle
Do	Distributed the Toolkit to 4 UCLA families disclosing IEP support needs (3 in the DBP clinic & 1 in the Orthopedic CP clinic)	Distributed the Toolkit to 2 DBP clinic families, 1 Orthopedic CP clinic family, a DBP physician, a psychologist and a special education consultant
Study	Collected and reviewed feedback 4 weeks after Toolkit distribution from 2 of the 3 DBP families (1 was lost to follow-up) and the CP clinic family through semi-structured phone interviews	Collected and reviewed feedback 4 weeks after Toolkit distribution from all 3 recruited families and had meetings with providers to discuss proposed Toolkit edits
Act	Incorporated parent feedback into the second draft of the Toolkit	Incorporated parent and provider feedback into the current Toolkit

Results

Access the Special Education Navigator- IEP / 504 Plan Toolkit here:

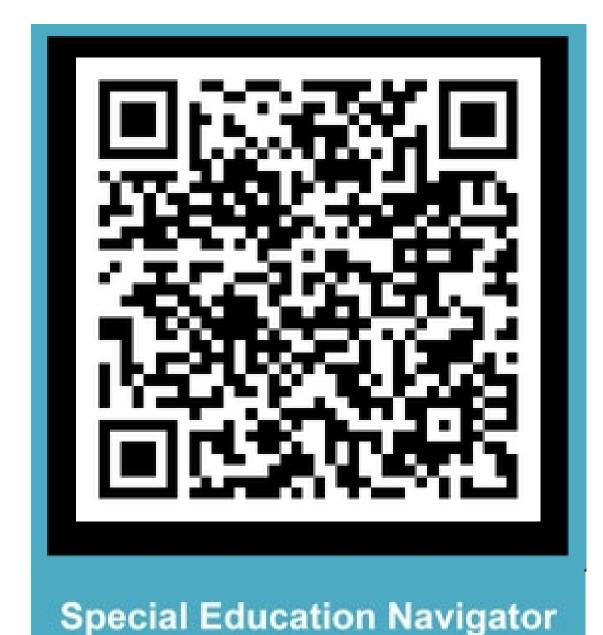Special Education Navigator

Figure 1. Illustrative Parent Feedback Quotes

Parent A: "[People] will use [the Common Special Education Terms included in the Toolkit], and as a parent I don't always necessarily know what [they] mean, so it's helpful to have that broken down into plain English."

Parent B: "Usually, the information available [regarding special education and accommodations] is either too technical or not appropriate, but the information presented here was more digestible, and it helped us come up with a good plan for the coming months."

Parent C: "A lot of the time you're [at IEP meetings] to receive information, I didn't know you could contribute…It's hard as a parent to question [school staff during IEP meetings], but, no, now I know that I'm part of the [IEP] team and my input is just as important."

Figure 2. Feedback Themes & Resulting Toolkit Edits

Feedback Themes
- Parents had the most positive feedback for the Roadmap & Common Terms sections.
- Many parents frequently utilized the Request Letter Templates.
- Parents better understood that they were important contributors to the IEP team after receiving and reviewing the Toolkit.
- Providers endorsed that the Toolkit could be useful in their varied clinical practices.

Toolkit Updates Based on Provider Feedback
- Language used in the Toolkit was refined to more accurately reflect terminology used by the school districts and in special education law.
- Content of the IEP Roadmap and Request Letter Templates was changed to ensure that parents' relevant concerns were addressed during their child's IEP assessment.

Toolkit Updates Based on Provider Feedback
- We expanded the information for how a parent can address disagreements with their child's IEP in the IEP Roadmap.
- Information in the IEP Roadmap was added to the Toolkit to guide parents on how to request amendments to IEPs during the year if new concerns arise.

Conclusions

- Parent and provider feedback was very positive.
- Parents most appreciated the visual IEP Roadmap, the Common Terms section, and the Request Letter Templates.
- Specific suggestions from parents and providers were incorporated into a revised version of the Toolkit, and included refining the language used to accurately reflect terminology used in school settings and Special Education law, and expanding information on how parents can address IEP disagreements with schools.

Next Steps

- Expand the Toolkit's reach to families on DBP waitlists and in General Pediatric settings.
- Increase parent access to the Toolkit by simplifying the language used in the document.
- Translate the Toolkit into Spanish.

Reference: 1. Reiman, J. W., Beck, L., Coppola, T., & Engiles, A. (2010). Parents' Experiences with the IEP Process: Considerations for Improving Practice. *Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education*