Advocating for students with learning and behavior challenges: Insights from teachers who are also parents

Keri Haley[a] and David Allsopp[b]

[a]University of West Florida, Department of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership, 11000 University Parkway 85/189, Pensacola, FL 32583; [b]University of South Florida, Department of Teaching and Learning, 4202 East Fowler Ave. EDU 105, Tampa, FL 33620

ABSTRACT

Parents and educators are expected under IDEIA to work together on educational decision-making for students with disabilities. While collegial relationships in this process are intended, partnerships are not always formed because both parties can struggle to understand each other's perspective. Parents may hold their view, while educators may have another. What happens when parents are also educators? Can stronger partnerships be forged when parent-educators exist in both roles? This paper presents the cases of three parent-educators and their struggles in advocating for their own children with disabilities. From those experiences we provide parents and educators lessons to carry forward as well as resources for improving parent–school relationships in special education.

Of the many guiding principles found within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004; P.L. 108–446), perhaps one of the most significant is the participation right of parents in the education of their children with disabilities. The law confirms that parents are to be active members and afforded a voice in planning an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The expectation is that parents and schools will work collaboratively to develop meaningful services that maximize a child's educational potential. Yet, the sentiment of parents is that they are left out of the process despite their efforts to advocate (National Council on Disability, 1995). Parents report feeling at a disadvantage when meeting with school-based IEP team members. Uncomfortable with their understanding of special education jargon and school district protocols, parents often feel pressured to allow the educational experts to make the decisions, while they only provide consent (Harry, 1992; Rock, 2000). Conversely educators report challenges in obtaining parental participation (Staples & Diliberto, 2010) and open-mindedness in the child's educational planning (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). School personnel suggest parents should become proactive and educate themselves on the IEP process and special education law (Fish, 2008). Meanwhile parents propose that educators take a balanced yet proactive approach on how the educational needs of their children can be met, rather than a primarily deficit-focused perspective (Leiter & Krauss, 2004).

Can improved collaboration come from listening to those who see both sides?

For the most part, the literature reports the perspectives of teachers and families separately. Studies have tended to focus on what can be learned from families so as to improve advocacy efforts, including family–school collaboration or what can be learned from teachers. Recommendations for improvement tend to come from either the perspectives of families or the perspectives of teachers. Oftentimes, the result is that either families or teachers are doing something "right" or "wrong" and what each should do, instead of what they both can do, to improve student outcomes. Only when through listening to all stakeholders, families and educators alike, will progress occur. But what about considering the stories of those who represent both voices: parents of children with disabilities who are themselves educators and thus have a deeper understanding of the educational system, its processes, and the challenges that schools confront when serving students with learning and behavioral difficulties? Is it possible that the experiences of a unique group of individuals, who have experienced both sides, can provide lessons that will help the field move beyond the typical identifiable recommendations for supporting students with disabilities?

This present paper employs the results from a study conducted by the first author (Haley, 2014) on the insights of parents of students with disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities, pervasive developmental disorder, and disruptive behavior disorder). Their experiences situate the challenges that occur in advocating on behalf of students with learning and behavioral challenges. It is not within the scope of this current paper to describe in detail the previous research; however, the parents participating in the earlier study also happened to be educators in the same districts where their children were receiving special education services. The current study will first briefly describe the cases of the three parent-educators so as to

provide context for the lessons that emerged from their experiences. Their stories may provide school personnel with alternate ideas to consider when addressing the needs of students with varying learning and behavior-related challenges. Further, the current study will offer a resource guide for both parents and educators that is intended to help both groups to better understand how to meet the needs of students with learning and behavioral challenges.

Voices of parents of students with disabilities who are also teachers

The experiences of the current study's parent-educators are being captured here. The narratives are related to the parent-educator's experiences advocating for their respective children who have associated learning and behavioral difficulties. The narratives are presented as a means to contextualize the insights offered (discussed in the following section of the paper) that we believe are valuable to those who are in positions of advocacy for students with associated learning and behavioral difficulties. The participating parent-educators encountered both positive and negative experiences in their attempts to advocate for their own children with disabilities in the same districts where they taught.

Ruby

Ruby, a former journalist now general education teacher at an elementary school, turned to education as a second career in order to advocate for her son Chuck. At the age of three Chuck was diagnosed with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He struggled with adaptive behaviors, sensory regulation, social interactions, expressive and receptive language, intellectual functioning, and fine motor skills. His need for both social-emotional and academic growth meant he required support beyond his typically developing peers. Thus Ruby changed her life plans and became an educator, hoping to ensure Chuck's path through the public school system would result in the best outcome for him.

Ruby quickly found that she needed to know more to better advocate. She needed to know and understand the disability that confronted Chuck as well as the underlying needs and the appropriate accommodations that best addressed those needs. She also needed to know how the school system operated. So she started as a paraprofessional in Chuck's elementary school and eventually became a teacher. As a result, Ruby knew enough to bring in an advocate, quote research regarding least restrictive environment for children with autism, and advocate for Chuck to be placed in general education settings with support from a paraprofessional. But what she knew at times caused conflict in her parent–school relationship, particularly in middle and high school, when she realized she knew more about Chuck's needs and disability than did those in charge of his education.

Chuck's early years in an academic setting began in pre-kindergarten, a setting that Ruby described as therapeutic and designed to meet his needs. His transition to a K–12 setting came with positive interactions with the school, as well as difficult ones, not unlike the experiences of thousands of other parents of children with disabilities who encounter strained relationships in special education. There were moments when Ruby and school personnel did not always see eye-to-eye on Chuck's least restrictive environment and there were also times when she moved Chuck to private and charter school settings to better address his needs. Ruby spoke highly of her right to exercise her option of school choice at a private elementary school that Chuck attended for some time.

Gaining an understanding of Chuck's needs by school personnel was of utmost importance to Ruby. She believed Chuck received what he needed when services were provided by educators who understood, listened to her as a parent, and advocated for Chuck as much as she. Whether in a private or public school, Ruby found teachers and administrators alike who were willing to understand Chuck and how to best accommodate his academic and behavioral needs. Despite various positive experiences, Ruby also experienced many instances where breakdowns in parent–school relationships occurred, particularly when she felt Chuck's IEP was not being followed.

Chuck's experiences in middle and high school were challenging for Ruby, particularly her perception that Chuck's teachers believed that because students with disabilities are older they should no longer require the intensive supports provided in previous years. Chuck still continued to struggle with social relationships, organizational skills, fine motor skills, and attention and academic-related skills, and experienced difficulties with the secondary setting sensory overloads. Ruby believed that Chuck's ongoing needs were not as proactively addressed during his middle and high school years as they had been by Chuck's elementary school teachers.

Chuck's introduction to high school was particularly challenging, in part because Ruby felt that Chuck was not receiving many of his IEP accommodations and that teachers did not seem to understand the reasons the various accommodations were required. Chuck's ninth-grade IEP had an extensive list of 16 classroom accommodations. Accommodations such as more time for completing assignments, assistance with note-taking, shortened assignments, teacher-provided notes/outline/study guide, cueing and prompting, visual cues/schedule, and writing on tests rather than bubbling in answers on an answer sheet to name a few.

Most troubling for Ruby was that as an educator she knew how to accommodate students with disabilities. She understood why students who struggle academically and behaviorally need specific supports to help them be successful. What she did not understand was why it was difficult for other educators to recognize in Chuck the same need.

Judith

Judith, much like Ruby, left behind a position in another field and joined the school system as a paraprofessional so she could pursue advocating for her son Barry. A freshman

in high school at the time of the study, Barry struggled with academics from the moment he entered public school. Regardless, Barry was continually promoted from grade to grade despite his reading and writing difficulties. Judith said she asked for help when he was in second grade and even asked for an evaluation, but was turned away by school personnel during the *wait–to–fail* era.

In turn, Judith sought a private evaluation that concluded what she had suspected; Barry had a learning disability with weaknesses in reading, long-term retrieval, processing speed, and cognitive fluency, as well as elevated levels of anxiety. He also had an IQ of 113. With intensive supports provided in his remaining elementary school years, Barry closed the gap in his reading performance on statewide standardized assessments, yet lost those gains when he entered middle school. It was also in middle school when Judith said the breakdowns in parent–school collaboration began. The apparent lack of teacher understanding regarding Barry's needs, affecting both the delivery of services and provision of classroom accommodations, were among the causal factors contributing to the parent–school collaboration breakdown.

Of particular importance to Judith was ensuring that Barry received proper special education services inside the classroom. She was cognizant that because he was the quiet student he would not typically advocate for his own needs. Barry did not speak much as a youth. His anxiety-related behavior carried over to the classroom where his needs went unnoticed in large secondary-level settings and Judith worried that Barry was getting lost within the increasing daily academic demands. Even though he was quiet and well behaved, she wanted teachers to take notice and not allow him to be overlooked in large classroom settings, particularly when his anxiety limited his willingness to self-advocate for his own social-emotional and educational needs.

Judith's most positive collaborative experiences emerged when educators used their initiative to go above and beyond to recognize Barry's needs. Understanding Barry's elevated levels of anxiety and his typical responses to social stressors, it was a middle school teacher who noticed his internalizing reaction to being picked on. She picked up the phone, called Judith, and stayed with Barry while he sat on the floor crying until his mother arrived. Hence, Judith yearned for more educators who took such caring and proactive approaches, because based on past experiences she knew it was the approach with which Barry demonstrated the most success.

Kate

Kate's journey into education began much like Ruby's and Judith's. She too changed careers, becoming an educator, teaching children with emotional/behavior disorders (EBD) and hoping her time spent in the classroom would help her advocate for better outcomes for her son Eric. Eric was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder, disruptive behavior disorder, developmental disorder (language and phonological), and difficulties with speech. His first IEP at the age of four provided services to address his academic,

social-emotional, and communication needs in a prekindergarten therapeutic setting. Kate and Eric's experiences with family–school relationships spanned two different states between prekindergarten and fifth grade. Eric was initially served under the eligibility of Developmental Delays and Speech and Language Impairment and received early intervention services through IDEA Part C. His family moved to another state upon his entry to kindergarten and he was placed in a general education classroom with special education support for academics. Over the course of his elementary school years he began to lose his academic and language services as his eligibilities were removed. What remained, according to his mother and documentation within his IEPs, were behaviors such as tantrums, presenting as oppositional, and being physically aggressive toward other students.

Kate agonized over the concept of labeling as opposed to needs-based decision-making. Eric's academic and behavioral assistance was diminishing, but the idea of eligibility under either autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or EBD was not acceptable to Kate. As a teacher in EBD, she feared the long-term implications such labels could have on his future. Also compounding the problem, Kate was unfamiliar with the special education processes through which began the dismissals of Eric's eligibilities. At the time, she was new to education and had only been working as a paraprofessional for a few months before the meeting where other areas of eligibility were never investigated. Instead she asked for a 504 Plan as a means to get Eric the classroom supports he needed, but that 504 Plan never materialized despite assurances by school personnel that a plan would be developed and implemented.

Kate was fully aware of Eric's behaviors and attempted to help his teachers appreciate and understand why he reacted the way he did, but found her advocacy efforts challenging. Instead, she provided coaching for his teachers, hoping they would learn how to better advocate and accommodate Eric's behavioral needs. Despite the parental support she offered, Kate found it no easy task to help teachers understand Eric's sensory aversion to the feeling of sitting on the carpet or to take a more proactive approach in avoiding his behavioral outbursts. Occasionally Kate found her behavioral knowledge through a special education lens to be intimidating to general education teachers. So she changed her tactics in approaching parent–school collaboration, deliberately sounding uniformed but inquisitive, asking questions rather than always providing teachers with the answers. Even so, as a teacher Kate appreciated the expectation from others that Eric should conform at school if he was going to adapt in society as an adult. To assist with his social-emotional development, she taught Eric strategies to deescalate when he was frustrated and hoped fellow educators would seek the same.

What we can learn from these parent-educators

As parent-educators hoping to advocate for children with disabilities, none of the three mothers could have predicted

the difficulties they would experience when they elected to leave their previous careers in favor of the field that educated their sons. In many instances as parents, they found themselves embroiled in counterproductive relationships with educators concerning their child's social-emotional and learning-related needs. Common throughout the stories of Ruby and Chuck, Judith and Barry, and Kate and Eric was a shared desire for school personnel to understand what the three individual boys required in order to be successful in an academic environment; why Chuck continued to require particular classroom accommodations well into his secondary school years, why Barry required teacher support even though his behaviors provided no obvious signs he was struggling, and why Eric required an educational plan that addressed his behavioral needs rather than applying a special education label to his name. The recounted experiences of three parent-educators, presented as part of the current study, can serve as learning opportunities for others who teach students with learning and behavior-related difficulties. The chronicled story of each parent-educator points to three important areas of awareness and understanding upon which parents and educators can find common ground to collaboratively advocate for the needs of students with associated learning and behavioral difficulties: (a) understanding why students with social-emotional difficulties may need continued support and accommodations beyond elementary school, (b) understanding why addressing unnoticeable internalizing behaviors is critical, and (c) understanding why needs-based decision-making should receive attention as opposed to services based on an eligibility category.

Ruby: The older they are, the less they need? Accommodating students as they age

A key theme within Ruby's experience was her frustration with the lack of supports provided to Chuck as he entered middle and high school and the differences in perspective between Ruby and Chuck's teachers about whether Chuck should be expected to engage in age-appropriate social-emotional and independent functioning skills without the type of supports he was provided in elementary school. An important lesson we can learn from Ruby is that a reduction in classroom accommodations as students get older is not necessarily a given. As a parent of a child with a disability, Ruby understood that certain aspects of Chuck's disability would impact him forever. She knew he would always struggle with understanding academic content, that his fine motor and social skills would take longer to develop than other students his age, and that he would have difficulty expressing himself. She knew he needed continued educational support to improve those deficits, but she believed teachers in middle and high school carried the expectation that Chuck should have outgrown his needs, regardless of age. Parents and educators can differ in regard to their views on the services needed to provide a meaningful free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. For example, parents of students with ASD have been found to be so displeased with the services their children receive

that nearly half of them have reported wanting to move their child to another school (Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger, & Alkin, 1999), just as Ruby moved Chuck in more than one instance. Elementary settings also differ from secondary settings. Parents may want students to continue to receive the same type of services when their child leaves elementary school, while educators want them to move toward becoming independent adults. Such divergent viewpoints can lead to strained relationships.

While the long-term goal is to teach independence, IEP teams must make decisions using data. Parents may ask for a particular service or support, but data must exist to corroborate the need. If a student continues to need a specific accommodation, such as extended time on assignments, an organizational system, or answers bubbled in on a test sheet, then data must exist to support the need. In Chuck's case, a teacher planning note indicated he was continuing to struggle in those areas, thereby providing underlying evidence that the accommodations addressing those needs within his IEP were appropriate, despite being in high school. Without data, it is challenging to support reasons why a student might need a particular service.

Once goals are achieved, teachers should carefully determine when it is appropriate to fade out supports. Neither age nor grade level should be a determining factor, but individual need should. Students may need more opportunities for explicit, systematic instruction of social-emotional, functional, and learning-related skills in preparation for independency notwithstanding the fact that a student is in middle or high school. When educators expect that every student with disabilities at the secondary level should have developed the behavioral skills typically expected of students at that level, this can lead to dissonance between the school and families, causing frustration and conflict. In turn, this will likely not lead to the best instructional decisions for students. Utilizing both school-based and family-based data is essential in informing how to best move students forward in developing successful social-emotional, functional, and learning-related skills.

Judith: If I can't see it, they don't need it? Supporting students with internalizing behaviors

Judith expressed her frustration with Barry's internalizing behavior being overlooked and his learning needs being forgotten. An important lesson to be learned from Judith is that behavior and learning-related difficulties do not always manifest in obvious displays of physical aggression or outbursts and the corresponding need to recognize the importance of addressing the needs of students who engage in internalizing behaviors. About 7% of students with EBD struggle with the hidden effects of internalizing behaviors, such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social withdrawal, selective mutism, and other anxiety-related disorders (Gage, 2013). Barry's psychological report indicated elevated levels of anxiety that manifested in social withdrawal, particularly in classroom environments. Judith explained that the anxiety left Barry fearful of advocating for

his own learning needs. The first author's son was diagnosed with selective mutism and exhibited similar internalizing behaviors and would not speak in class when he did not understand. Even though neither child was served as a student with EBD, both struggled with similar effects and found self-advocacy to be intimidating. As a result, teachers tended to overlook their needs.

In the age of accountability (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] and Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA]), teachers can easily become consumed with the demands of teacher performance and student academic evaluations. Students who are not disruptive can often become "unnoticed" because of not raising any red flags when it comes to evaluations related to how a teacher manages the classroom–learning environment. With respect to students who suffer in silence with internalizing behaviors, teachers can and should pay attention to the unnoticed student in the class, particularly if the student's grades do not indicate proficiency. Students who suffer internalizing behaviors may be socially withdrawn, seem anxious or depressed, do not participate in class discussions, and can be afraid to advocate for themselves, among other indicators. The identified behaviors occur over an extended period of time and may negatively impact academic performance. Hence it is essential that educators notice such indicators before academic decline occurs.

Educators can lessen the impact of internalizing behaviors by first *noticing* one or more of the identified indicators, rather than allowing a student to go unnoticed as Judith complained. Next, teachers should intentionally interact with the student, making a point to speak with him/her each day, to ask them about his/her interests, and to find ways to support and engage the student during classroom activities. Importantly, teachers must take responsibility for finding ways to actively engage in productive learning opportunities with students who have internalizing behaviors. For example, if there are students who routinely do not ask questions in class or do not actively participate in peer-assisted learning activities, one approach teachers should consider using is universal design for learning (UDL). As an instructional approach, teachers using UDL offer the students multiple means of representing the instructional content and multiple means for students to demonstrate assessments. UDL allows teachers to provide opportunities for students to respond to instruction via alternative modes of verbal or nonverbal communication while also allowing for checking the student's instructional content understanding. Simply allowing quiet students to remain quiet may passively permit them to fail.

Kate: Needs-based decision-making, addressing behaviors beyond the label

Kate voiced her concerns about Eric not receiving necessary behavioral interventions unless he had an eligibility granting him access to those supports. Eric's eligibilities and services waned as the elementary school years progressed, even as his behavioral challenges continued. Without special education support for his identified difficulties, Eric struggled in his efforts at maintaining acceptable classroom behavior. Instead Kate, with special education experience, provided supports for the teachers on how to help Eric. IDEA mandates individualized educational planning and placement decisions that are based on student need rather than available resources. Kate expressed her concern that to identify Eric as eligible for ASD or EBD would negatively impact his future in the classroom and beyond. Despite his aversion to the carpet or his difficulty when socially interacting with students while standing in line, Kate wanted Eric to have the variety of social learning opportunities that would better prepare him for adulthood. Accordingly, it was apparent to Kate that Eric would require instruction that would both help to identify and proactively address the antecedents of his behavior, as well as explicitly teaching him the skills to identify and advocate for alternatives to aversive tactile or social situations. In essence, Eric required a needs-based decision-making approach rather than simply assigning him a label that would potentially result in a more restrictive placement environment.

Typically in school settings special education services are generally assigned based on a label. Needs-based decision-making involves meeting the needs of the whole child in the least restrictive environment, rather than assigning the child to an environment based on eligibility. Implementing a needs-based decision-making approach requires that educators think about the needs of students first, rather than the place. Further, for the approach to be successful, general and special educators must work cohesively, be flexible, and think proactively. Whether the student with challenging behavior has an IEP or not, collaboration between the special education teachers and general education teachers can result in planning effective needs-based decisions appropriate for such students. In Eric's case, his behavioral supports disappeared when his eligibilities were removed, regardless of documented difficulties. A needs-based approach, rather than a label-based approach, is more likely to support decisions that are in the best interest of students with challenging behavior.

A needs-based approach can be more easily understood by considering Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) in conjunction with the Response to Intervention process that educators may have a tendency to associate with academics only. Using the RtI model, teachers identify an academic area of concern (e.g., reading, writing, or math), collect data, and based on the data, apply needed interventions. The same holds true for behavior-related challenges. Teachers target, plan, and implement positive behavioral interventions based on need as determined by collected data. According to the identified need, teachers determine and apply resources. Therefore, if a student with behavioral-related challenges is struggling to succeed in a general education classroom, school personnel identify resources within the school community that can be directed to address the student's needs. Doing so is taxing on the school faculty, yet parents such as Kate know it can

Learning and Behavior Related Resources

- Response to Intervention Action Network - www.rtinetwork.org
- Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports - http://www.pbis.org/
- National Association of Special Education Teachers - http://www.pbis.org/
- Academic and behavioral resources and strategies - www.do2learn.com
- Behavior related resources for EBD - www.mslbd.org/resources_teacher.htm
- Autism related resources and social stories - www.educateautism.com
- Strategies, Tips, and other Resources - http://www.schoolbehavior.com/
- National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center - http://www.nsttac.org/content/evidence-based-practices
- Behavior interventions and modifications - http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-intervention-modification

Interventions and Accommodations in the Classroom

- Accommodations for secondary grade levels - http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=247
- Accommodating students with internalizing behaviors - http://www.worrywisekids.org/
- Guided notes and strategies - http://www.studygs.net/teaching/guidednotes.htm
- Organizational skills - http://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/organizational-tools/
- Teaching self-monitoring strategies - https://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/182/over6.html
- Teaching self-advocacy - https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/transition-tool-kit/self-advocacy

Figure 1. Resources for students with learning and behavioral challenges.

be done, because she herself works to address individual student needs inside her own classroom.

Lessons to carry forward

As parent-educators Ruby, Judith, and Kate have experienced both sides of the educational system. They have advocated for their own children as well as students in their respective classrooms. The three parent-educators have experienced the highs and lows of the system. But the collective experiences of the current study provide lessons beyond the typical identifiable recommendations for supporting students with disabilities. Instead, the stories that have been recounted can provide school personnel with alternate ideas to consider when addressing the needs of students with varying behavior and learning-related difficulties. In particular, the three parent-educators found it difficult to acquire or promote educator understanding of the disability-related needs that Chuck, Barry, and Eric presented or that the needs existed and would continue to exist irrespective of the boy's placement, age, and/or grade level. Individuals who experience the struggles of raising a child with a disability are more likely to accommodate students with difficulties (Fiedler, 2000). Ruby, Judith, and Kate have experienced challenges in advocating for the needs of Chuck, Barry, and Eric. As teachers, and as parents of children with disabilities, Ruby, Judith, and Kate use their experiences to ensure appropriate educational support for their own classroom-assigned students based on need. As parent-educators, they want other educators to advocate for the same. They want teachers to understand that neither age nor need should limit access to a meaningful education. When it does, the experiences of the three parent-educator study participants prove that breakdowns in the family–school collaborative process can and do occur. Therefore it is important to learn from the experiences of others so that areas or issues that can allow parent–school collaborative relationships to disintegrate can be identified in order to better advocate for students with learning and emotional difficulties.

Resources to carry forward

To assist educators and parents alike in accessing and identifying valuable resources that can support students with learning and behavioral challenges, a quick reference toolbox (see **Figure 1**) with numerous websites containing research-supported information related to accommodations, including guided notes, organizational systems, and various other resources for students with social-emotional and learning related needs such as internalizing behaviors, is provided. The reference toolbox information can also serve as a useful guide when making needs-based decisions.

Typical classroom accommodations for students in secondary settings are guided notes and organizational systems. Guided notes allow the students to focus on one task, active listening, rather than two tasks, listening and writing. For many students with disabilities, too much information is lost between the transfer of listening to writing. When this

happens, students run the risk of missing pertinent instruction and even worse, disengaging from the lesson and the related learning. Another common accommodation involves the use of organizational systems that are meant to provide structure to academic content, assist with the completion of assignments, and help the student develop and improve time-management skills. Maintaining organization when students are juggling multiple classes within the school day is critical to academic success. Many adults in the workplace use electronic organizational systems, such as cell phones and tablets, to organize events in their daily lives. Educators must be mindful that students, regardless of age or grade, may find such an accommodation equally helpful.

Figure 1 also provides resources for teachers to address student internalizing behaviors in the classroom. Further, **Figure 1** can also serve as a reference teachers can draw upon when teaching students whose classroom behaviors may go unnoticed. For students who quietly struggle with social and emotional challenges, a conscious intentional teacher effort at making a connection can facilitate nonverbal communication and enhance a teacher's opportunity to respond to the student's needs through simple acts, such as establishing a small hand signal as an alert to the teacher that the student does not understand the content or is otherwise struggling.

When considering needs-based decision-making, the resources in the toolbox will also provide guidance (e.g., general disability resources, interventions, and accommodations) on how to best address the needs of students with learning and behavioral challenges. Students need not have an identified learning or behavioral disability to benefit from atypical supports (e.g., taking a break from a classroom test when nervous anxiety leaves him or her paralyzed in fear). However, proactively addressing teacher-identified or suspected needs can result in better student academic performance. Just because a person is short in stature does not mean a specially designed car is required in order to drive; it means that a simple accommodation, such as an adjustable seat, is required. The compiled resources are presented as a simple guide for teachers and parents to facilitate making adjustments that are in the best interest of students with various learning challenges.

Notes on contributors

Keri C. Haley is an assistant professor of special education at the University of West Florida. Her scholarship interests include parent–school relationships in special education, particularly parents who are educators, school–university partnerships, and special education preservice teacher preparation in high incidence disabilities.

David H. Allsopp is the assistant dean for Educator Preparation and Partnerships, David C. Anchin Center Endowed Chair and Director of the David C. Anchin Center, and professor of special education at the University of South Florida. His scholarship revolves around effective instructional practices, with an emphasis on mathematics, for students with high incidence disabilities and other struggling learners. He also engages in research related to how teacher educators can most effectively prepare teachers to address the needs of students with disabilities and other struggling learners.

References

Every Student Succeeds Act of (2015)., Pub. L. No. 114–95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015–2016).

Fiedler, C. R. (2000). *Making a difference: Advocacy competencies for special education professionals*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Fish, W. W. (2008). The IEP meeting: Perceptions of parents of students who receive special education services. *Preventing School Failure*, 53(1), 8–14. doi:10.3200/PSFL.53.1.8-14

Gage, N. (2013). Characteristics of students with emotional disturbance manifesting in internalizing behaviors: A latent class analysis. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 36(4), 127–145. doi:10.1353/etc.2013.0038

Haley, K. C. (2014). The fight within: Experiences of school district employees who advocate for their own children with disabilities inside the districts where they work, a heuristic case study. Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from Scholar Commons.

Harry, B. (1992). Restructuring the participation of African-American parents in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 59, 123–131. doi:10.1177/001440299205900205

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of (2004)., Pub. L. No. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq.

Kasari, C., Freeman, S. F., Bauminger, N., & Alkin, M. C. (1999). Parental perspectives on inclusion: Effects of autism and Down syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 29, 275–305. doi:10.1023/A:1022159302571

Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent–school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21, 240–251. doi:10.1177/074193250002100407

Leiter, V., & Krauss, M. W. (2004). Claims, barriers, and satisfaction: Parents' requests for additional special education services. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 15(3), 135–146. doi:10.1177/10442073040150030201

National Council on Disability. (1995). Improving the implementation of the individuals with disabilities education act: Making schools work for all of America's children. Retrieved from https://ncd.gov/publications/1996_Publications/04261996

No Child Left Behind Act of (2001). P.L. 107–110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).

Rock, M. L. (2000). Parents as equal partners: Balancing the scales in IEP development. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(6), 30–37. doi:10.1177/004005990003200604

Staples, K. E., & Diliberto, J. A. (2010). Guidelines for successful parent involvement: Working with parents of students with disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(6), 58–63. doi:10.1177/004005991004200607