

**Training Parents of Students with Disabilities:  
Using Technology to Enhance Civic Engagement**

**Draft Final Report**

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This serves as the draft final report for the Civic Engagement grant we received entitled “Training parents of students with disabilities: Using technology to enhance civic engagement”. Below, we provide a detailed summary of the project activities as well as a summary of the data collected, analysis, and findings.

**Trainings.** We held the training at five different locations: two urban (one in English and one in Spanish), two rural, and one suburban site. At each site, we had varying participation rates proportional to the type of site (e.g., urban versus rural). Thus, we had: 9 people attend at our two rural sites; 7 people for the Spanish-Speaking training; 25 people at our urban, English-Speaking training; and 12 at our suburban site. In total, we trained 53 parents of individuals with disabilities about how to affect legislative change. According to our grant application, we planned on training only 45 individuals so we exceeded the number of people trained.

Each training lasted six hours. The first part of the training reviewed the current regulations associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the process of a reauthorization, and potential changes to IDEA in the upcoming reauthorization. During the first training, we encouraged individuals to identify what they may want changed in the next IDEA reauthorization. In the second part of the training, we discussed legislative advocacy including: involving the media, writing letters, speaking to legislators, and providing testimony at hearings. We used the “hook, line, and sinker” approach to legislative advocacy. At the end of the session, participants had 30 minutes to write their testimonies. They were given a piece of

paper with the subheadings: hook (i.e., an introduction of the person), line (i.e., description of the problem), and sinker (i.e., proposal of a solution to the problem). After writing their testimonies, each individual was videotaped while providing their testimonies.

**Community Partners.** We had four community partners for this project: The Autism Project (TAP), the Family Resource Center on Disabilities (FRCD), Grupo Salto, and Easter Seals of Dupage County. In our grant proposal, we had three partners (i.e., TAP, FRCD, and Grupo Salto). After receiving a flyer about the civic engagement trainings, the parent liason of Easter Seals of Dupage County contacted the PI asking to host a training at their suburban site. Thus, we exceeded the number of community partners for this training.

**Qualitative Data Collection (Focus Groups).** We conducted nine focus groups regarding the barriers to civic engagement. We held one focus group in Spanish; the remaining focus groups were in English. Focus groups were held at our urban ( $n = 5$ ), rural, ( $n = 2$ ), and suburban ( $n = 1$ ) sites. All focus groups have been transcribed and translated (as appropriate). We have almost completed analyzing the data. From the transcripts, several themes are present with respect to special education advocacy. First, parents contacted their legislators for one of two reasons: (1) to create systemic change or (2) to ask for help related to an individual situation for their child with a disability. Parents reported mixed effectiveness with respect to contacting their legislators. Finally, parents reported several barriers in the context of legislative advocacy. Such barriers included: language, intimidation, limited access, and questionable effectiveness. We are in the process of writing the manuscript for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. Also, based upon the focus groups, we are developing a parent-friendly brochure for our community partners to share with families.

**Qualitative Data Collection (Videotaped Testimonials).** We video-recorded the testimony of 40 individuals who attended the trainings. We edited the videos and e-mailed them back to the participants. Within each individualized e-mail, we provided the contact information for the individual's state and federal legislators (based upon their address). In this way, each individual can forward their videotaped testimony to his/her legislator. Also, because of the uniqueness of our sample, we have also qualitatively analyzed the videotaped testimonials. Across all geographic domains and cultural and linguistic backgrounds, parents resoundingly wanted six changes to IDEA: inclusion of applied behavior analysis therapy, full federal funding, limitations about student and staffing ratios, stronger language for transition planning, and more support for the least restrictive environment. Two other suggestions were less common. Urban and suburban parents wanted greater clarification regarding the eligibility criteria for learning disabilities. One suburban parent wanted IDEA to maintain the current paperwork requirements. No differences regarding desired changes were found with respect to the culture or language of the family. We have submitted a manuscript based upon the videotaped testimonials to the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*.

**Quantitative Data Collection.** We conducted 53 pre and post surveys to gauge the effectiveness of the training. All pre/post survey data were input into SPSS and quantitatively analyzed. After attending the training, we found significant ( $p < .05$ ) increases in: parent empowerment, motivation to affect systemic change, special education knowledge, and knowledge about the legislative process. We found moderate to large effect sizes with respect to the magnitude of change in empowerment, motivation, and knowledge. We also conducted the six-month, follow-up civic engagement surveys with 32 of the participants (response rate = 60.4%). From the six month follow-up, each person engaged in one kind of civic engagement

since the training. Currently, we are analyzing the quantitative data to determine the predictors of the level of civic engagement. After the analysis is complete, we will submit this paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

**Anecdotal Reports of Effectiveness.** Since completing all of the trainings, we have received several, unsolicited notes of thanks from the participants. One participant wrote, “I will gladly send my testimony to the legislators. I want to personally thank you for the training you provided me and the work you are doing on behalf of all individuals with disabilities. I have no doubt that your work will have a lasting impact on improving peoples’ lives.” Another participant wrote, “What an emotional experience to watch myself taking baby steps to advocate for my son. In such a short time, I feel I’ve been running on not so easy terrain and yet still manage to keep myself ‘holding it together’. Thanks for everything; I will definitely let you know what my turnout is. Also, keep me in the loop of any other trainings, forums, etc.”. Finally, one rural participant stated, “Thank you for bringing the training to Normal, IL. We both enjoyed it and felt it was a day with time well spent.”

**Students.** We had one, paid graduate student work on this project. Additionally, we had four LEND students help with the project. Two of the LEND students were bilingual. Additionally, two other students reviewed the materials for the project. Thus, seven students helped with the project.

**Products.** We have uploaded all of the video-taped testimonials to the website: <http://ahs.uic.edu/cl/familyclinics/advocacy/>. We have shared the testimonials with our partners; they are in the process of trying to post the videos on their websites as well. We have submitted one qualitative article analyzing the videotaped testimonials. We are also writing two other articles soon to be submitted for publication. In April, we presented our preliminary findings at

The Arc of Illinois statewide conference for disability service professionals, family members, and self-advocates. We also presented the project to an undergraduate class (entitled “Disability in Latino Communities”) at UIC. We have also submitted a proposal to present our findings to the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities conference.