

OSEP Expectations for Engaging Families in Discretionary Grants
May 2020

Purpose:

The purpose of this document is to clarify the Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP) expectations for its grantees as they [engage](#) families of children and youth with disabilities ([families](#)) in project planning, implementation, and evaluation.

OSEP envisions relevant, sustained, and [equitable](#) engagement of family members informing the planning, implementation, and evaluation of all its discretionary grants. OSEP expects grants to actively plan and implement strategies that recruit and support families to be engaged with the grants in order to improve the quality, relevance, and usefulness of grants' products and services¹ and thereby improve outcomes for children with disabilities and their families.

Expectations:

To the maximum extent possible, OSEP expects grantees to ensure equity within project services and products by implementing the following practices to more effectively engage families in project planning, implementation, and evaluation:

- Review of organizational policies, procedures, and culture to ensure that the project welcomes and values families' experience and expertise;
- Strategies to engage families in planning, implementing, and evaluating products and services;
- Incorporation of a diversity of family perspectives in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of products and services;
- Recruitment of family members who bring a diversity of perspectives to serve on advisory committees, including family members who, during the project period, could be impacted by the project or be recipients of its services;
- Provision of training, technical assistance, and coaching to [build the capacity](#) of family members to participate fully in planning, implementing, and evaluating the project;
- Provision of training, technical assistance, and coaching to build the capacity of all project staff to engage families equitably;
- Provision of financial resources such as honoraria and stipends for childcare and travel², to support family members' active participation in the project planning, implementation, and evaluation; and
- Recruitment of family members for positions on projects, including using non-traditional recruitment and networking strategies.

¹ Inclusive of the full range of products and services across all OSEP program areas, such as technical assistance products, syllabi, and coaching for example.

² See Uniform Guidance, §200.456 and §200.474

Rationale:

All OSEP discretionary grant applications must meet the statutory requirement that “Applicants and grant recipients funded under this notice must involve individuals with disabilities or parents of individuals with disabilities ages birth through 26 in planning, implementing, and evaluating the projects. (See Section 682(a)(1)(A) of IDEA).”

While grantees state that they will meet this general requirement when applying, sometimes the reality is that families are not authentically involved. For example, engagement practices may take the form of having family members fill out one-time satisfaction surveys or serve as a token presence on advisory boards that meet infrequently. Projects also have challenges engaging a wide diversity of families and ensuring equity in how families participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating the projects. Some projects use project staff to meet the requirement to involve families, regardless of the extent to which the experiences of the project staff are representative of the experiences of the grant target audiences.

Since not all notices require financial support for engaging families, project budgets vary in the extent to which they include financial support to family advisors or devote resources to increase the capacity of family members through training or coaching to engage in planning, implementing, and evaluating a project.

Assumptions:

The following assumptions about engaging families in discretionary grants underlie OSEP’s expectations:

- Incorporating family perspectives and experiences into project operations benefits the project and its audiences.
- Effectively engaging families requires projects to clearly plan for how they will engage families, build trusting and respectful partnerships, and identify the expected outcomes of the collaboration.
- Effective engagement strategies incorporate current research.
- Effective capacity building strategies are based on the most current research on adult learning principles and coaching.
- Families need a continuum of support in order to effectively engage with projects, including culturally competent and trauma-informed supports.
- Engaging families requires commitment to carrying out intensive, ongoing work building and maintaining partnerships.
- Effective family-staff partnerships can increase the project’s efficiency and effectiveness.

Definitions:

OSEP defines the following terms to provide discretionary projects with a common language in implementing the requirements for engaging families in project planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Capacity Building – Activities that build and enhance the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of project staff and families to engage in effective partnerships that support project planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Engagement – Forming partnerships between project staff and families by coalescing around issues, ensuring relevant participation, and doing the work together³.

Equity – Ensuring that all family members that engage in project planning, implementation, and evaluation receive the support, training, and coaching they need to carry out their roles effectively.

Families – Includes but is not limited to children, youth, and parents as identified in IDEA⁴, adult siblings, grandparents, extended family members, and non-related adults that act in the role of a family member.

³ Leading by Convening, <https://ncsi.wested.org/resources/leading-by-convening/>

⁴ In section 602(23) of IDEA, the term “parent” includes natural, adoptive, and foster parents, guardians, and individuals acting in the role of “parent.”