

# Increased Communication with Parents of Special Needs Children and its Effect on Special Needs Children's GPA



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## **Keywords:**

*Parental Involvement, Special Education, Student Achievement, E-Mail*

**Abstract:** *Junior High School is often a very difficult transition period for both student and parents. Students are trying to become more independent and the school is no longer in close proximity to the neighborhood making contact between teachers and parents more difficult. This research was designed to investigate the relationship between weekly communications with parents of students with specific learning disabilities academic achievement. The participants were 18 seventh grade students and their parents. The participants were divided into a control and an experimental group. The control group's parents were not contacted at all during the nine week period. The experimental group's parents were contacted through e-mail and the telephone on a weekly basis to discuss current classroom assignments, student's progress, and academic/behavioral achievement. Participants' GPA's were tracked for a nine week period. Parents of the special needs children in this study indicated that they felt increasing communication between home and school allowed the parents to better monitor and motivate their child in his/her school work.*

## **Table of Contents**

Increased Communication with Parents of Special Needs Children and its Effect on Special Needs Children's GPA.....	1
Rationale .....	2
Context.....	3
Literature Review.....	3
Procedure .....	6
Findings and Discussion .....	7
Implications for Practice .....	9
References.....	10
Appendix A.....	12

# Rationale

Communicating with parents is a major part of a teacher's job description. Building a strong bond between home and school is one of National Middle School Association's 14 characteristics for successful middle schools (Reilly, 2008). Former President Bush, in *America 2000*, mentioned that American parents are an important component of their children's academic future success (Shirvani, 2007). When interviewing possible candidates, many school districts inquire about the importance the candidate puts on communicating with students' parents. Having consistent, effective communication between parents and teachers can benefit a child in regards to their education. However, both teachers and parents can have reservations about routinely communicating. Parent-teacher conferences can be filled with anxiety for both parents and teachers due to lack of previous communication. In my own experience, I have often heard parents in these conferences say, "I was not made aware that my child was struggling." In addition, teachers may say constant parent-teacher communication is just not practical due to lack of time, little help or responsiveness from parent. In response to the importance of communication and current lack of it, my building principal has required teachers to contact the parent of any student receiving below a 70% in a class.

Being a highly qualified intervention specialist, I communicate often with both teachers and parents. I have the opportunity to observe in many of the general educator's classroom and often participate in their lessons. I assist in monitoring student's achievement, remediation, and I set individual goals for all special needs students. As an intervention specialist, I have many outlined roles. I am a liaison between students with special needs, their parents, and the teacher. Comer (2005) suggests that an important component of the parent team is a staff liaison; the liaison helps parents by using an agenda during meetings, promoting input from all members involved in the child's education, considering any negative consequences to a child's education, setting priorities in the child's individual education, assisting in making decisions, and interacting constructively with other staff members involved in the child's education. I am also a resource and an advocate for children with learning differences; I assist the teachers and parents in making decisions to best meet the needs of the individual student. It is important that I make sure each student is learning based on their individual curriculum and that all student progress is communicated with parents. I have found that parents of students with special needs are often lacking communication with teachers. Increasing communication with parents of special needs could assist students in achieving academic success.

During the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters of the 2008-2009 school year, I communicated with parents only under absolute need. I would arrange conferences when requested by the parent or teacher. All contact with parents was a direct result of a student not meeting a 70% for their academic classes or when their behavior was impeding their education. As the year progressed, I wondered if being proactive with parents of special needs students in communicating educational outcomes would increase student academic achievements. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether increased communication with parents of special needs students would positively affect GPA.

# Context

Reynoldsburg is a small suburb of Columbus, Ohio, located on the eastern border of Franklin County, with an ever changing population. According to the National Center for Educational statistics, Reynoldsburg City School District is currently listed as an urban fringe with an enrollment of 6,800 students. Waggoner Road Junior High School is one of the eleven schools located within the district. Waggoner Road JHS serves just over 600 seventh and eighth grade students. It has a high percentage of ethnic minorities (41%); economic statistics are not currently available due to its being a new school for the Reynoldsburg school district. Waggoner Road JHS opened in the fall of 2006 and did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals for the 2007-2008 school year. A major area of focus for Waggoner Road JHS to meet AYP has been the special education population. This population has fallen below the state outlined minimum for seventh and eighth grade in reading, math, science, and social studies. If AYP is not met, sanctions will be put in place by the Ohio Department of Education and the status will be moved from effective to continuous improvement.

The students in this study are 18 seventh graders (10 girls and 8 boys) with various learning disabilities at Waggoner Road JHS. The students in the study are serviced in a variety of degrees of containment: 3 are in a self-contained language arts classroom, and 8 in a self-contained math classroom and the rest are included in the general education curriculum for the core academic classes. I meet with content area teachers daily to provide remediation for the special education students attending the general education classroom.

# Literature Review

Much evidence supports that parental involvement positively affects student achievement (Comer, 2005; Halsey, 2005; Hong & Ho, 2005; Knollmann & Wild, 2007; Mo & Kusum, 2008; Park, 2008). Research indicates that building a relationship between parents and students will benefit a students' education (Park, 2006). Knollmann and Wild (2007) found that students enjoy doing homework with parental assistance more than doing it alone, while they discovered that for many students, parental involvement is an important motivator for homework completion. Students' emotional state towards homework is not only influenced by the mere presence of parental involvement, but also by the quality of that involvement (Knollmann & Wild, 2007). Parent participation in school improves the academic achievement of students (Comer, 2005). However, despite current research on benefits of parent involvement, there is a lack of research examining the relationship of parental involvement and special needs children.

The term parent participation has several definitions in the educational community. Parental involvement defined as "parent's aspirations for their children and their communication with their children about school activities" affects the student's current learning and builds a foundation for future success (Hong & Ho, 2005, p. 32). According to Park (2006), parental involvement is multidimensional. He states that parental involvement is comprised of both

home-based activities such as discussions of school, parenting style, and the monitoring of a child's behavior. He also states that a parent must also be involved within the school by attending parent-teacher conferences and meetings or school events. Unfortunately, many parents do not understand what their role is in their child's education and seek specific guidance from the child's school (Halsey, 2005).

Teachers attempt to involve parents in many ways. In the article "Parental Involvement in Junior High Schools," Halsey (2005) states that parental contact can be made institutional or individual. Institutional contact is contact that is made to the whole student body for interactions that include open house, parent teacher conferences, newsletters, and calendars. Individual contact is made between teacher and parent and involves a particular child. According to Halsey (2005), individual contact ensures a relationship between teacher and parent. Individual parent involvement can be categorized into three levels: level one, in which parents provide general support to the student by attending conferences and monitoring their homework; level two, whereby parents serve as volunteers providing support for daily school affairs; and level three, when parents participate in school decision making by serving on a school organized committee (Comer, 2005)

Teachers and parents need to continue to try and make the effort to communicate when total parental involvement is not possible, so that education is not negatively impacted. For discussions between parents and students to affect the child's education, parents need detailed knowledge of school processes and effective learning methods, and they must be able to use that knowledge in discussion with their children (Park, 2008). Parent-child communication, especially about schooling, is a significant predictor of achievement, often stronger than any other parental involvement variable, such as a child's friends or extracurricular activities (Park, 2008).



Parent-child discussions significantly reduced the likelihood of dropping out of high school...

As a student continues through school, studies have found that parental involvement decreases. Despite the decline, research shows that parents want to continue to be involved in their child's education; teachers, however, do not always perceive a parent's willingness to be involved (Halsey, 2005). Parents of middle school students are only half as likely as the parents of elementary school students to attend parent teacher conferences and less than half of parents of middle school students are actively engaged in school programs and activities (Mo & Kusum, 2008). It is suggested that the reason that some parents are less involved during children's middle school level is because the school is no longer close to the child's neighborhood. Parents no longer have the opportunity to discuss with teachers about student's progress, behavior, or overall academic success or shortcomings (Mo & Kusum, 2008).

Parent-child communication, especially about schooling, is a significant predictor of achievement...

Children becoming older and transitioning to middle school or junior high school is not the only factor that influences parental involvement. Parental support or involvement is often related to a family's socioeconomic status. Parental involvement has been identified as having a greater impact of student achievement than socioeconomic status (Tobolka, 2006). Research suggests that parental involvement could produce

greater benefits for students of higher socioeconomic status than for lower socioeconomic status students (Park, 2008; Prins & Toso, 2008). Parents of students of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to participate in educational activities within and outside of the home, as compared with higher socioeconomic status parents (Park, 2008). When Park compared students of diverse economic backgrounds, he found when students have the same amount of parental involvement from different economic status there is a greater benefit to students of a higher socioeconomic status. According to Park (2008), parents with a college education may convey the importance of education more effectively than parents who have less education. He states that highly educated parents have better communication skills and styles to relay the importance of education. Parent-child discussions significantly reduced the likelihood of dropping out of high school for higher socioeconomic students, while students of a lower socioeconomic did not have the same benefit (Park, 2008). Poor and working class parents tend to have an independent relationship with schools, viewing family and schools as separate. Unfortunately, parents of middle to lower socioeconomic families feel responsible for nurturing children's moral, physical, social and emotional development, while the parents of the middle to lower socioeconomic families feel professionals are best equipped to develop a child's academic abilities (Prins & Toso, 2008). Parents of lower socioeconomic status students are often less involved in schools because they feel they have been excluded by the school system and society. Conversely, middle class families have an interdependent relationship with schools as their daily routines and organized activities are centered on school, as they often socialize with other school families (Prins & Toso, 2008).

Parents can be involved at home with their children by reading with them, helping with homework, discussing school events; parents can stay involved at school by attending functions or volunteering at the school buildings ("Meeting the Challenge," 2005). Research has implied that communicating with parents on a regular basis will increase students' academic achievement (Comer, 2005; Halsey, 2005; Hisin, 2005; Park, 2008; Prins & Toso, 2008; Reilly, 2008; Tobolka, 2006 ).

Technology may allow the relationship between parents and teachers to continue to grow even as a child progresses through school. According to the research, building a relationship with parents and working as partners will help ensure students success (Park, 2008; Prin & Tolso, 2008). There has been a shift in education to use more technology and parents need to become educated on that educational shift (Reilly, 2008). Using technology, such as e-mail, to communicate from school to home can be a positive and rewarding experience (Tobolka, 2006). E-mail provides opportunities for teachers and parents to communicate more effectively. E-mail messages can be sent simultaneously to students in the entire class, saving teachers and the

school district time and money that it would take from individually addressing letters and envelopes (Halsey, 2005). Email messages allow the school to provide parents an opportunity to become more involved through invitations without specific guidance of an upcoming activity. Parents are able to use e-mail to stay informed about students' educational experience and as a source of one-on-one correspondence (Tobolka, 2006). According to Tobolka (2006) and Halsey (2005), e-mail facilitates communication with parents.

Increasing communication with parents through the use of technology can be difficult due to the digital divide. The "digital divide" refers to the gap between households, businesses, and geographical areas based on the socioeconomic status and their opportunity to access information through different technological communication systems (Koss, 2001). Technology has the potential to help teachers and administrators overcome economic inequalities in a school system but it can also amplify the inequalities for a child at home (Park, Shinha & Chong, 2007). A variety of programs have been developed to try and close the digital divide. Most schools, community centers, and libraries have access and training to digital information technologies (Finn, Kerman & LeCornec, 2005). Discounts ranging from 20% to 90% are available to applicants who are deemed economically disadvantaged based on qualifying for the federal school lunch program (Park, Shinha & Chong, 2007). As the digital divide begins to reduce, teachers can use technology as another form of parent-teacher communication.

While there is an abundance of research on increasing communication from home and school and its effects on students of different socioeconomic status, there is no research that outlines the effects of increasing parental involvement of children with learning disabilities. Teachers have been challenged to increase communication with parents of all learners. The focus of this study is increasing communication with parents of children who have learning disabilities and exploring the effect of that communication on their fourth quarter grade point averages.

## Procedure

My case load consists of 19 students all who have a specific learning disability and receive special education services. I divided the class into a control group and experimental group by assigning each student a number, based on alphabetical order. The numbers were then placed in a "hat" and randomly drawn by a colleague. The study consists of an experimental group containing 8 students, 4 boys and 4 girls. The control group is represented by 10 students, 6 girls and 4 boys. The parents of the experimental group were then contacted about the research study through a permission form explaining the action research being conducted. One of my students is not included in the research study due to a daily check sheet and behavior plan. The student's parents are already contacted on a daily basis as outlined in his behavior plan. One student who was randomly selected for the experimental group did not want to participate in the action research; therefore, he became a member of the control group.

Communication with parents was done on a weekly basis for the experimental group. Parents were contacted through e-mail by 5:00 p.m. on Monday with a detailed outline of the week's agenda in each of the core academic classes along with any assignments attached. A follow-up phone call was made on Tuesday to make sure that there were no questions or concerns

regarding the e-mails. During those phone calls, parents often asked questions about missing work, student behavior, and upcoming activities. If, through the Tuesday phone call, contact was not made, a second phone call was made on Thursday.

Communication by email and phone was logged in a communication notebook. The notebook contains detailed descriptions of individual communication with parents. Emails were printed and organized in chronological order along with all attachments. Extensive notes were kept about each phone call including: the time and date, with whom I spoke, the information that was communicated with that person, and when I will be calling again.

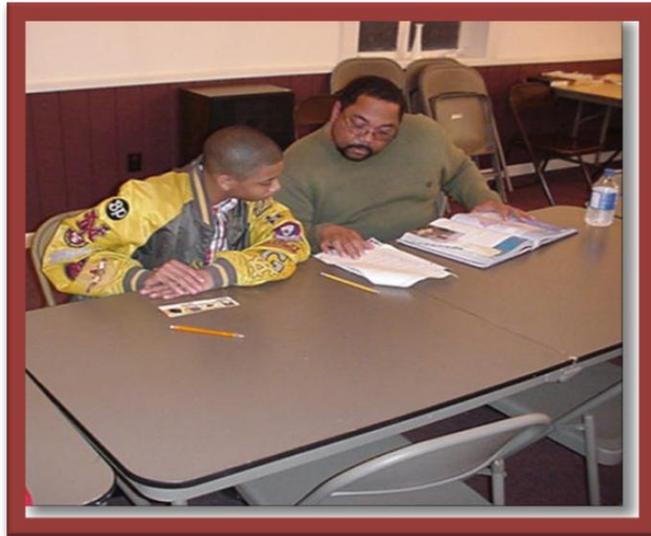
At the end of the research study parents completed a survey ([Appendix A](#)) about the increased communication and how they were able to be active participants in their student's education. All of the participants completed the survey except for one set of parents whose child had been suspended for the remainder of the school year. Parents indicated in the surveys that they felt they were better prepared to assist their students in their academics. Parents were positive about the increased communication and indicated that the communication assisted in building a relationship between home and school.

Parents were very receptive in making sure that their child completed their assignments and were not missing work. Through these communications, I discovered that parents provide helpful insight as to what is happening in a student's personal life that may affect school work as well as helpful suggestions about student's learning. Many parents commented about the advantages of receiving students' assignments through email. Parents appreciated the helpfulness of assignments being available via e-mail because it gave parents the ability to help their children make up missed work to keep them from falling behind in their academics. As stated by one of the seventh grade parents, "My child would fail if it was not for the constant updates on assignments. I appreciate everything that you have done for him."

## Findings and Discussion

Students' GPAs were calculated based on a 4-point scale with mean scores calculated for both the control group and the experimental group. Both groups increased their mean GPA over the course of the school year. A paired T-test was performed on the average GPA for each student for first through third quarter and compared to the fourth quarter. There was no statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ) between the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> average GPA and the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter GPA in either the experimental and control group. The experimental group's average GPA, however, did improve from 2.23 to 2.45 and the control group's average GPA increased from 2.01 to 2.12. The lack of statistical significance could be due to the low number of participants in the sample. There are many factors that could have contributed to the students' increased GPA in both groups. The students' GPAs may have increased due to the time of year the research was conducted; the research was conducted during the final quarter of the year, which was also the shortest quarter. This may affect students' GPAs by not having as many grades in the grade book to affect their overall grade point average. The quarter is significantly shorter due to spring break and two weeks of testing for the Ohio Achievement Test. Students during this quarter also participate in

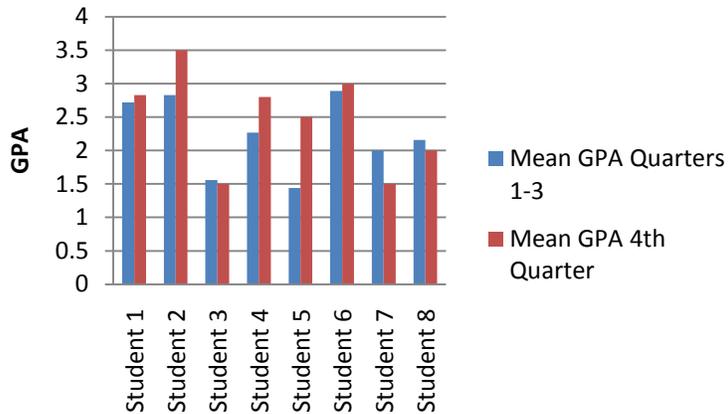
more minimally structured school activities such as field trips, group projects, and alternative assessments. Students may excel at hands-on activities allowing them to increase their grades in academic classes. The students' final year assessments are taken at the end of spring quarter and these assessments cover the least amount of standards for the entire school year. Also, students are required to memorize less content and have more options for review material which may contribute to higher scores. The study being conducted at the end of the year may have been a contributing factor, but there are other variables that may have contributed to the increase in GPA for both groups.



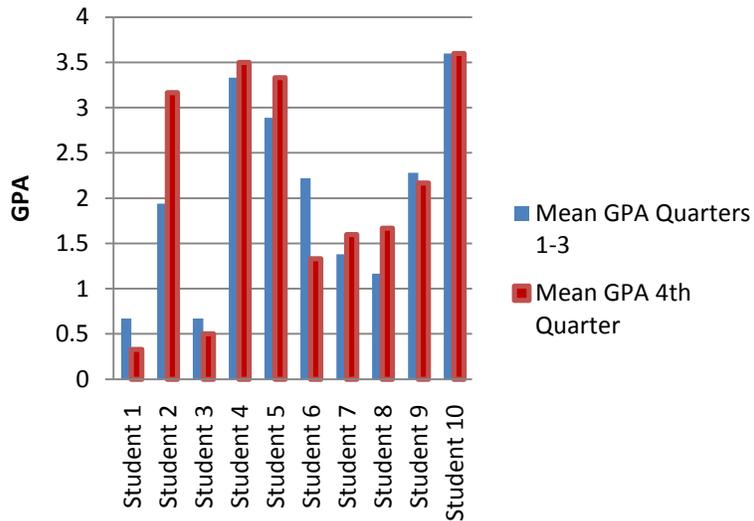
The participants in this study all had individual education plans (IEP). These students worked and monitored their goals throughout the entire school year. Students should make one year's growth through the process of the school year as outlined by the *No Child Left Behind Act*. In both the control and experimental group, students made academic growth throughout the school year and continued to work towards their goals, which may have led to academic success reflected in high GPAs. This growth may have been seen due to students' individual goals being communicated with parents at the beginning of the school year through their IEP's. Parents in both groups knew their child's weaknesses and may have worked with students to develop strengths in these areas. This may have caused students to increase their GPA throughout the school year.

Throughout the study, parental involvement was encouraged, but the type of involvement could not be monitored. Student's parents who were in the experimental group were contacted on a weekly basis by both e-mail and telephone. Contact was not always made on Tuesday. One child's mother worked on Tuesday evenings, so I was not able to speak with her until Thursday. I still would attempt contact on Tuesday and leave a detailed message about the week's activities. The week of May 24, we did not have school on Monday; therefore, the weekly email was not sent on until Tuesday. All phone calls this week were completed on Thursday. I could not assure that parents always read the e-mails and answered the telephone. When contact was not made on Tuesdays, parents were thus not informed about the week's activities and progress until much later into the week. During communications, suggestions were given to parents about where students should be focusing their studies, but it is difficult to say what support they offered the students. Even though parent-teacher communication was increased, that does not mean that parent support with their student was altered at home. Increasing parent-teacher communication does not mean that parents have the skills or resources to provide their students with the support they need to increase their GPA in the seventh grade.

## GPA Comparison Experimental Group



## GPA Comparison ControlGroup



## Implications for Practice

The quantitative results of this case study did not support that increasing communication with parents of students with a specific learning disability increases their GPA. Nevertheless, it is still important for teachers to communicate with parents of all students. The qualitative data I collected via the parent survey showed that the parents appreciated and benefitted from my increased communication. When contact increased, there was less anxiety from the teacher and

parent during communication, as was often expressed during the conversations. Parents stated on the survey that they looked forward to the weekly conversations between themselves and the teacher. One parent stated that they anticipated the phone call to hear positive feedback about their student. Another parent indicated that they wished weekly communication could continue while the student was in the eighth grade also. Parents knew where their child was academically and were well informed about classroom expectations. In my opinion, increasing communication did not show a negative effect on students and can only benefit the parent-teacher relationship. As a teacher I was able to learn a lot about my students by speaking with their parents on a weekly basis. The parents often told me about accomplishments and interests that the students had outside of school allowing the student-teacher relationship to grow. Even though this research study found no significant statistical data to support increasing communication with parents of special needs students, it should not be assumed that with a different class of seventh graders the same results would yield.

I still have many unanswered questions and feel that further research could positively impact the special education community. Would students and parents benefit from a website that posted all assignments and due dates? Would students benefit from an electronic blog, where they could communicate with one another about difficulties they are experiencing on assignments? If teacher-parent communication is increased will student's performance scores on state testing increase? When teacher-parent communication is increased, does a student's effort/motivation increase?

The education of students with special needs is a difficult process, one that takes parental support. In order to successfully educate a student and increase achievement, all members of the student's educational team have to be prepared to participate. In order for a parent to support the education of a child, the parent needs knowledge of the curriculum and needs. Providing parents with that knowledge gives them an opportunity to support their child through the educational process.

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# Appendix A

**Communication Survey  
Otterbein College  
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Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research study and to fill out this survey.

**Directions: Rate each item 1-5 (1-almost never, 2-slightly, 3-about half the time, 4-more often than not, 5-almost always)**

1. Mrs. Cashin and I have had positive and informative conversations about my child's schooling. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I believe that our conversations have been productive and worth the time. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I used Mrs. Cashin's weekly communication to better monitor and motivate my child to do his/her school work. 1 2 3 4 5
4. Through emails and telephone calls the expectations for each of the classes were outlined and understandable. 1 2 3 4 5
5. The phone calls were more helpful than the emails and I looked forward to the conversations. 1 2 3 4 5
6. The emails were more helpful than the phone calls. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I found that the weekly communication benefitted my child and opened up more communication between me and my child. 1 2 3 4 5
8. As a parent, I would benefit from a website that displayed all the week's agendas and assignments. 1 2 3 4 5

I believe that Mrs. Cashin and I have strengthened our relationship through the increased communication.