

## Summary

**Interview process:** I had a unique experience because my parent also works in my district. She is an elementary school teacher as well so I thought she would have the most knowledge about both sides of the process. It was an informal meeting; we have met before and have a comfortable relationship talking about her son. We briefly met in my classroom after school. The interview was much quicker than I imagined, only ten minutes long. Most questions that I asked were open-ended because I wanted to give her as much room as possible to tell me about her experience.

**Background information:** I interviewed the mother of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade student who is on the Autism Spectrum. He is 12-years-old and brilliant, but I know that she was not happy with his progress last year. He had a phenomenal teacher, so I wanted to see what she thought about his progress this year and how I could help. I learned so much from this interview.

**What did I learn:** I knew that M. had his initial IEP in the third grade, but I didn't realize that this was after years of his mom pushing for him to be diagnosed with autism. She was very upset to report that she knew after 18 months that something was different, but everyone pushed her observations aside as "developmental issues". When she was finally listened to and M. was diagnosed, she could finally get him the help that he does need. I remember having a conversation earlier with her that if you don't leave a note for a substitute that he has resource room hours, they would never know that he is on the spectrum. I can see why she had so much difficulty with people listening to her, but it is heartbreaking that this went on for so long.

The parent described her first IEP process as intimidating. There are a lot of people in the room, but she said that she has learned that she needs to bring advocates and family members. This makes sense to me now because she does bring more people than most. I imagine that it ties back into not being believed for so long. I'm glad that she has the support. She said that she was excited that I was in the process of studying for a master's with a specialization in special education. Before I transferred, I was in the special education college focusing on Autism specifically so we have been talking back and forth all year. Her son is also such a loveable kid that I have had a lot to praise him for. Our personalities really match, and he has blossomed this year. She said she was very happy with his progress this year and how often I talk to her. She did mention that she might like some sort of daily electronic communication, but then seemed to think about it and changed her mind. She said, "no news is good news". She also seemed nervous about being a "helicopter parent" and wanted to give M. the space he needed to grow in school. Whatever she has done this year, he has grown substantially and I hope that this continues!

When I asked about family situations, she originally said there was nothing to report. She did make a quick joke about her mother having Alzheimer's though, so that might be something to keep an ear out for and support M. through a difficult situation. I am also always making a note when a parent is an educator because that makes a difference in how I communicate expectations when they are or are not met by my students.

## Reflection

Three things stood out to me in my interview with M.'s mom. First, I never realized that it took so long for M. to be diagnosed. I can't imagine how frustrating it must be to know that something is

different and to not have anyone listen to you. She suspected that her son had Autism for eight years before anyone believed her. I think it is so important for me now to always include his parents in on any decisions (even more than usual). I also want to make sure that she knows that I support her and I believe her. I imagine it would be very hard to trust the IEP meeting if they refused you and your ideas for so long.

My **action item** I want to do to fix this is to hold a meeting every month solely to get her perspective on how he is doing and how I can support him. I want her to know that I believe her and that she is heard in his education. We always talk about trauma in our students, and that is so important, but we never talk about trauma with our parents. I could see clearly in this interview that this mom has been traumatized by this experience and I want to help shift her view of the IEP process while she is on an upward trajectory.

My second observation of the meeting was that it is hard for her to sit in the IEP's alone. I've always found that the IEP meetings are a little intimidating to parents. There are a lot of school personnel and we certainly outnumber the parents. I don't know what I can do as the general education teacher to fix this, but it's worth bringing this up to the team and seeing what ideas people have. This mom is very good about bringing support, but most just come by themselves.

The **action item** I can do for this is simply to talk to my coworkers and my principals. First, I'll interview other parents to see if they have the same experience. Then, I want to brainstorm on how to take some of that intimidation away. I know this class has talked about having a parking lot for parents to feel comfortable enough to table an idea and come back to it later. Maybe even a small change like this will help lessen the load on the parents. We could also have two options for meetings, all personnel at once or smaller pockets at a time. Of course, we all would need to meet to discuss beforehand but this might help parents to feel more comfortable.

Lastly, I noticed that she didn't want to ask for more communication but that she would really like it. She's trying to give M. more autonomy in class, especially now that he has grown up so much this year. In fact, I'm sure if you asked any parent in my class, they would want to know how their students day was and what they did.

I want to start with M. for now, but I might use this next **action item** for the whole class if this is successful. I want him to write in his planner his high and low for the day. What was his most favorite moment and least favorite moment of that day. Then, when he goes home, I'm going to ask him to share this with his mom. That way, she isn't hovering or asking for more, but she still gets to see a closer look at his day. It also helps M. to learn how to communicate, as he does have IEP goals for social interactions! If this works, I might make this a whole-class assignment. Kids are on their phones so much and I constantly get complaints from parents that they are staring at their phone instead of talking to their parents. This could help!