



## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

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### Understanding Special Education Mediation

By Wendy Overturf

[The Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training, and Support \(WI FACETS\)](#) has Help Desk Specialists who can provide free one-to-one special education support to families of children with disabilities. We are available via phone (1-877-374-0511) to help with questions you may have about your child's special education rights and processes, your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP), and [the options you have to resolve a disagreement](#) you may have with your child's school.

When parents have disagreements with the school district about their child's IEP services, WI FACETS staff let them know that FREE special education mediation is available through the [Wisconsin Special Education Mediation System \(WSEMS\)](#). WSEMS is a separate entity from WI FACETS. WSEMS operates under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which encourages alternative dispute resolution options. Wisconsin was one of the early states to implement mediation through state funding and partnerships with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. By using mediation, parents can access the support of a neutral mediator who helps support collaboration in an effort to resolve disputes. The process can often help develop and maintain positive relationships between schools and families.

#### What is Special Education Mediation?

- Mediation is a voluntary and confidential process. This means that both the district and the parents need to agree to the process, and either can withdraw at any time during the process. It also means that anything that is discussed in mediation cannot be used as evidence in a due process hearing or civil lawsuit.
- It is designed to help parents and school staff resolve disputes with the support of a neutral third-party mediator.
- The mediator does not take sides or make decisions but instead helps both parties communicate and work toward a mutually acceptable agreement. The focus is on shared problem-solving on behalf of the child.
- The Wisconsin Special Education Mediation System is funded through a grant from the WI Dept. of Public Instruction and offers mediation and facilitation services at no cost to families and school districts.
- Mediation can address a wide range of disputes, including:
  - Identification, evaluation, and eligibility issues
  - IEP development and placement decisions
  - Related services or supports

- Disciplinary actions related to special education students
- If an agreement is reached, it is written down and signed by the parents and the school district. The agreement is enforceable in state and federal courts.

### What are the Benefits of Mediation for Families?

- It is often faster and less adversarial than filing for a [due process hearing](#).
- Mediation focuses on collaboration and problem-solving rather than winning or losing.
- The process can help preserve the ongoing parent–school relationship.
- It may strengthen trust and partnership between families and educators.

If you want more information or have questions about mediation, contact WI FACETS (1-877-374-0511.) In addition to answering your questions, we can offer guidance on how to prepare for mediation. Often, our Intensive Support Specialist can attend (virtually) mediation with you as a support.

### Additional Resources

[IDEA Special Education Mediation-A Guide for Parents of Children & Youth \(Ages 3-21\)](#)

[What is Wisconsin Special Education Mediation System and How to Use It \(Recorded Webinar\)](#)

## HOME LEARNING



### [Winter Holidays Throughout the World](#)

No matter which winter holiday your family celebrates, this is a magical season of creating family memories and special activities. It's easy to get so consumed by our own family's holidays and traditions that we forget to embrace the opportunities to learn about other winter traditions and holidays. Please enjoy this website which has a brief description of many different holidays.



### Thank you Notes

Help your child make and decorate thank you cards. You could send these cards via the post office, but they also could be sent via email or text. You could then include digital photos as well. Below are some sample prompts.



- How did you feel when you received your gift?
- How did you feel when you opened your gift?
- How will you play with or use your new gift?
- With whom will you share the gift?
- Where will you use your gift?

### [Backyard Bird Feeders](#)

Winter is the perfect time to feed your local backyard birds and observe them. There are so many great ways to make simple bird feeders with kids. The website has three simple bird feeders you can make from household items. Set these feeders up in your yard where you can easily observe the birds from a window and let your kids watch the fun



## Read Together Every Day

- Set aside 10–15 minutes daily for reading.
- Let your child choose books they enjoy.
- Talk about the story: “What do you think will happen next?” or “How does this character feel?”

### Winter Read-Alouds

Here are several short winter read-alouds paired with sample comprehension questions you can use with kids.

#### [The Snowy Day](#)

A classic about a boy exploring his snowy neighborhood.

Questions:

- What were Peter’s favorite things to do in the snow?
- How did Peter feel when the snowball melted in his pocket?
- What happened the next day?

#### [Snowmen at Night](#)

A playful book imagining what snowmen do when people are asleep.

Questions:

- What are some things the snowmen did at night?
- How do we know this is make-believe?
- What do you think YOUR snowman would do if it came alive?

#### [Bear Snores On](#)

A rhyming story of a bear hibernating while friends gather in his cave.

Questions:

- Why didn’t Bear wake up at first?
- How did the other animals feel about being in Bear’s cave?
- What happened when Bear finally woke up?

## [Songs and Rhymes](#)

Counting songs and rhymes have great educational value for children. They’re not only fun, but there are also important developmental benefits tied to them:

### Early Math Skills

- Counting rhymes like “One, Two, Buckle My Shoe” introduce numbers in a natural, playful way.
- They help children understand sequence, order, and patterns – foundations of early math skills.
- Repetition reinforces number recognition and one-to-one correspondence (matching numbers with objects).

### Language and Literacy Development

- Rhymes strengthen phonemic awareness—the ability to hear and play with sounds in words.
- Rhythm and rhyme patterns make it easier for children to remember new vocabulary.
- Singing songs enhances listening skills, comprehension, and expressive language.

### Memory and Cognitive Growth

- The repetitive, predictable nature of rhymes supports memory recall.
- Learning and reciting them builds concentration and sequencing skills.

#### [Check out this Winter Word Search](#)

Word searches are often seen as just “fun puzzles,” but they do provide value for literacy and learning.

- Helps children recognize letter patterns and spelling of words.
- Reinforces sight words, vocabulary, and high-frequency words.

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## UPCOMING STATE EVENTS

### [Training for Home Language Interpreters: Supporting Families through the Special Education Process](#)

For those seeking training for home language interpreters for families at IEP meetings, DPI has partnered with WI FACETS, LEAs, and other organizations to develop a one-day training for home language interpreters who interpret for families at IEP meetings. Language interpretation training is a requirement to meet the provisions outlined in DPI’s [Providing Language Assistance to Parents guidance document](#). The training provides

increased awareness of state and federal regulations related to the educational rights of students who receive special education through an IEP and who may also be English Learners. The training also provides increased knowledge and resources related to legal responsibilities and ethical considerations for translation and interpretation of special education terms and concepts.

Each training date covers the same content areas detailed in the description above. It is not necessary to register for more than one date. For virtual trainings, due to the high-level of interaction among participants, registration is limited to the first 30 registrants. There is no fee for virtual trainings, but you must register.

**In-person trainings:**

December 15, 2025 - [New London High School - Registration Information](#)

January 7, 2026 – Escuela Verde, Milwaukee - contact WI FACETS for information, 414.374.4645

March 12, 2026 – **CESA 6** - Check the [WI FACETS website](#) for registration information – coming soon

March 13, 2026 – [CESA 1 - Registration Information](#)

**Virtual trainings:**

February 6, 2026 (8am-2pm) – [Registration Information](#)

February 20, 2026 (8am-2pm) – [Registration Information](#)

**24th Annual WI Transition Conference**

**Dates:** February 12-13, 2026

**Location:** Kalahari Resort, WI Dells, WI

The conference will have two knowledgeable and humorous keynote speaker presentations. Spend all Thursday morning with the extremely informative and funny, Pam Schuller and all Friday morning with the hilarious "Shut Up Sisters", Patricia Terrasi and Gina Gallagher. Both keynotes bring a wealth of knowledge, from different perspectives, regarding the challenges faced in the world of special education. In addition, there are over 20 breakout sessions to choose from, relevant exhibitors, and networking time.

**2026 Promoting Early Childhood Conference (PEC)-Save the Dates**

**Dates:** March 4-6, 2026

PEC is an early childhood collaborative event sponsored by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in partnership with the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP).

Location and details for attending and/or presenting at this in person early childhood collaborative event are not yet determined.

**2026 Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin and the Autism Society of South Central Wisconsin Annual Conference-Save the Dates**

**Dates:** April 23-25, 2026

**Location:** Kalahari Convention Center, Wisconsin Dells, WI

The purpose of the annual conference is to provide a wide range of information to those within the autism community. The goal is to provide relevant information for attendees at all levels, including those who are new to autism and those who have years of experience.

**Circles of Life Conference-Save the Dates**

**Dates:** May 14-15, 2026

**Location:** Holiday Inn Stevens Point Convention Center, Stevens Point, WI

Circles of Life is Wisconsin's annual conference for families who have children with disabilities and the professionals who support them.

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## FOR YOUR INFORMATION

[24 Ways to Make the Holidays Kid-Friendly](#)

December is often filled with holiday celebrations and family gatherings. But all that excitement and the break from routines may overwhelm some children, including those who have sensory challenges, ADHD, anxiety, or autism.

## ONLINE RESOURCES: Communication



### [Center for Parent Information and Resources \(CPIR\)](#)

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) strongly supports the parents' right to be involved in the special education their child receives. As IDEA states: "Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home." This website provides many resources for parents so that they can be active participants in the IEP process.

### [Wisconsin Statewide Parent-Educator Initiative \(WSPEI\)](#)

WSPEI is all about partnerships. Its goal is to help families and school districts find or create the resources that will help them build positive working relationships that lead to shared decision-making and better outcomes for students. Be sure to check out the [Student Snapshot](#) and [Family Profile](#) documents. Both documents will help the school team learn more about the student and their family.

### [CADRE's Steps to Success: Communication with Your Child's School](#)

CADRE is the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education. The linked website highlights some specific communication skills that can help parents be most successful in developing and maintaining a strong partnership with their child's school.

### [Working Together Series \(From CADRE\)](#)

The Working Together Series includes five interactive self-directed courses. These courses provide families and educators with several strategies for working together and working through conflict.

### [Andrew F. Talking Points \(Worksheet for Parents\)](#)

The Supreme Court's [Andrew F. decision](#) (2017) redefined the meaning of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. In short, the Supreme Court ruled that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) must give students with disabilities more than a de minimis, or minimal, educational benefit. Parents may want to use these talking points at an IEP meeting to identify their concerns and to find ways to talk about them using Andrew F. language.

### [Communicating with ELL Families: 10 Strategies for Schools](#)

There are many ways that educators and administrators can connect with families of English language Learners (ELLs) and keep that communication strong. This communication can be challenging to figure out, but in many cases, it can make a tremendous difference in students' learning. This website offers some tips for schools, many of which are based on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### [Key Questions to Ask at Your Child's School](#)

Parents have a key role in their child's education and parents can help bridge their child's transition from home to school and give them the best chance at success in learning and in life. This tool provides parents with a set of questions to ask and important issues to consider when approaching their child's teachers, principals, and counselors about their development. Available in both English and Spanish.

## [Building Parent-Teacher Relationships](#)

Effective communication is essential for building school-family partnerships. It is the foundation for all other forms of family involvement in education. This website provides strategies that have been effective in improving parent-teacher communications.

## **Keeping Your Communications and Records Organized**

Check out this "[Communication Log](#)" as one way to keep written documentation of your communications with the school. If you use a binder to keep track of all the documents related to your child, the [IEP Binder](#) is a way to keep track of important dates related to the IEP process as well as communication with the school.

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# RESEARCH

## [The Role of Parents during the Middle School Years: Strategies for Teachers to Support Middle School Family Engagement](#)

Bachman, Hadley F., et al. "The Role of Parents during the Middle School Years: Strategies for Teachers to Support Middle School Family Engagement." *School Community Journal* 31.1 (2021): 109-126.

### [Read Full Article](#)

Family engagement in middle school is essential to ensure optimal learning. Middle-level educators play a key role in helping parents understand how their roles are changing in supporting their teens' academic success. These strategies, backed by clear communication and strong school-parent partnerships, can boost middle school students' success and build trust between educators and parents.

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# CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEWSLETTER

Upcoming Newsletter Topics:

**January: Transition**

**February: Intellectual Disabilities**

**March: Early Childhood**

To submit contributions of articles, events, or resources you may use the [Word document](#). Send submissions to [Wendy Overturf](#). If you are unable to access the form, you may send the information in an email.

Material appropriate for the monthly newsletter include web links to family involvement/parent leadership resources, advertisements for statewide trainings for parents, youth or parent/educator audiences, information about statewide parent agencies, recent research pertaining to family engagement, and family engagement success articles.

This monthly update is provided by Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training & Support (WI FACETS) to share statewide information regarding parent leadership and family involvement. If you would like to receive this monthly update or if you would like to have your name removed from the distribution list, please email [WI FACETS](#).

The WI FACETS Family Engagement E-Newsletter can be found online: [www.servingongroups.org/newsletter](http://www.servingongroups.org/newsletter)



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