

Beyond the Plan: Strengthening Individualized Supports Through Practice, Partnership, and Systems

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Dear Readership,

We are especially pleased to present **Volume 21, Issue 3** of the *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*, a **special issue** focused on **strengthening IEP and IFSP implementation within state and local systems**.

This issue represents an important milestone for us as Co-Editors-in-Chief. Although we have now shepherded several issues of JAASEP through publication, this is the first collection that we have curated from beginning to end. The manuscripts published in our earlier issues, as well as those that will appear in the final issue of 2026, were accepted prior to our assuming editorial leadership. This special issue is therefore our first opportunity to see a collection emerge through the full editorial process we are working to build for JAASEP: from identifying an important conversation for the field, to inviting scholarship into that conversation, through peer review and revision, and ultimately to the collection presented here. That distinction matters to us because we have ambitious goals for the journal.

JAASEP has long occupied an important space between research and the realities of special education practice. As we move the journal into its next chapter, our goal is to build upon that foundation by continuing to strengthen its scholarly rigor, reach, and impact while preserving its commitment to work that matters to practitioners, families, researchers, and systems. The journal is now indexed, articles receive Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs), and we have begun the longer process through which the journal's citation impact will become

visible. It may take up to three years before we have a meaningful picture of that impact, but the work of building it is happening now.

Central to that work are the scholars who choose JAASEP as a home for their scholarship. We want the journal to be a place where established scholars in special education bring consequential work and where new and innovative scholars find an audience for ideas that challenge, extend, and strengthen the field. The expertise represented by the authors in this special issue reflects the kind of scholarly community we hope to continue building: one that brings together research, policy, practice, systems knowledge, and lived expertise in service of improving educational opportunities for children and individuals with disabilities.

Why Individualized Planning, and Why Now?

When we developed the call for this special issue, we began with a deceptively simple question: **What happens after the plan is written?**

IEPs and IFSPs are among the most important mechanisms through which IDEA's promise of individualized education is realized. They are intended to ensure that services, supports, goals, and educational opportunities respond to the strengths, needs, priorities, and contexts of individual children and students. Yet a compliant plan does not, on its own, produce an individualized or equitable educational experience.

Implementation occurs within systems where access to qualified personnel, inclusive environments, specialized services, and meaningful participation in decision-making is

not distributed equally. Race, disability, language, culture, geography, and family resources can shape whose expertise is valued, how needs are interpreted, which options are presented, and ultimately what appears in an IEP or IFSP and what is actually implemented.

This is why the distinction between procedural compliance and implementation quality matters. Timelines, documentation, procedural safeguards, and required components are essential protections under IDEA, but they cannot be our only measures of success. We must also ask: Was the plan meaningfully individualized? Did the child, student, and family have genuine influence in its development? Were the services and supports actually accessible and implemented? Did the process expand access, participation, progress, inclusion, and belonging? These questions are not beyond the work of IEPs and IFSPs. They are central to whether individualized planning is fulfilling its purpose.

From Individualized Planning to Implementation: The Special Issue Articles

The five manuscripts in this issue approach this challenge from different points in the special education system and across the lifespan. Together, they illustrate that implementation quality is shaped not only by what is written into an IEP or IFSP, but by the knowledge, relationships, practices, and systems surrounding it.

Carattini-Mays and Morgan begin with how professionals understand and interpret children's development and behavior. Their examination of developmental and behavioral continuums raises important questions about the judgments educators bring to assessment, intervention, and individualized planning, particularly when interpretations of behavior may be shaped by professional experience, culture, context, and assumptions about development.

Sexton and the late Frances A. Davis move individualized planning into everyday interactions through the H-U-G-S framework. Their work considers how IFSP and IEP priorities related to communication, regulation, participation, and social-emotional development can be supported within the routines and relationships where children actually spend their time. In doing so, they highlight an important implementation challenge: a well-developed goal or outcome is only meaningful when adults have practical ways to support it across contexts.

Running Bear, Pham, and Martinez examine implementation at a critical transition point between IDEA Part C and Part B. Grounded in the New Mexico context and *Yazzie/Martinez*, their framework expands our understanding of successful transition beyond procedural timelines to include continuity, family participation, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, Tribal sovereignty, interagency responsibility, and equity-focused accountability.

Ayala, Boquet, and Mooney extend the conversation to secondary transition, where meaningful student and family participation becomes particularly consequential. Their examination of collaboration before, during, and between IEP meetings reminds us that attendance is not synonymous with participation and that transition-focused planning is strongest when students' and families' knowledge, priorities, and expectations meaningfully shape goals, services, supports, and opportunities for adult life.

Finally, Grove, Lawton, and Hunter move outward to the systems and infrastructure necessary to support implementation. Ohio PROMISE demonstrates one statewide effort to strengthen the capacity of early care and education environments through provider preparation, program supports, consultation and coaching, financial mechanisms, and stakeholder involvement. Their contribution asks us to consider what happens when responsibility for inclusion is placed not only on an individual child, family, or educator, but on the systems expected to support them.

Taken together, these articles move from interpretation and interaction to collaboration, transition, and systems capacity. Across very different contexts, they share an important premise: individualization is not contained within the IEP or IFSP. It is realized through what children, students, families, practitioners, programs, and systems are able to do with it. This may be the central story of the issue. IDEA provides essential procedural protections, and strong IEP and IFSP implementation depends on them. But compliance establishes a floor, not the full measure of quality. The manuscripts in this collection repeatedly direct our attention to what happens beyond the required components of the process. If professionals interpret a child's behavior without sufficient attention to context, that affects individualization. If families or students are present but their knowledge does not meaningfully shape decision-making, that affects individualization. If an IFSP-to-IEP transition occurs on time

but results in fragmented or culturally unresponsive services, that affects individualization. And if an IEP identifies an inclusive setting or support that the surrounding system does not have the capacity to provide, that affects individualization too. In this way, implementation is both an individual and a systems responsibility. Strengthening it requires attention not only to the quality of plans, but to the conditions necessary for those plans to result in access, participation, progress, inclusion, and belonging.

Looking Ahead

This first fully curated issue marks an important point in our editorial leadership of JAASEP. We are committed to continuing to strengthen the journal's scholarly rigor and relevance while maintaining its longstanding connection to the work of special education professionals. We are especially motivated by the growing community of scholars contributing to JAASEP. Their expertise represented in this special issue reflects what we hope to continue building: a journal that attracts established scholars with deep expertise in the field while also creating space for emerging scholars and innovative work that brings new questions, perspectives, and approaches to special education.

JAASEP is entering an important period of growth. The journal is now indexed and articles receive DOIs,

increasing the visibility and discoverability of work published in JAASEP. Since citation patterns develop over time, it may take up to three years before we have a meaningful indication of the journal's impact factor. In the meantime, we are committed to the quality of the scholarship we publish, and the authors and reviewers who contribute to it, as central to growing the journal's reach, rigor, and impact.

We continue to invite submissions that examine the realities of special education across roles and contexts, particularly work that connects research to practice and critically engages questions of access and educational opportunity. Future authors can review the journal's aims, scope, submission requirements, and submission portal, please visit <https://www.aasep.org/about/submissions>. We are also expanding our pool of peer reviewers. As the journal grows, the quality of the review process remains central to its direction. We welcome researchers, practitioners, and advanced doctoral students with expertise in special education and related fields to join us in this work. Please send an email to editor@aasep.org if you are interested.

Thank you for your continued engagement with the journal.

Drs. Boquet and Morris
Co-Editors-in-Chief, JAASEP

Exploring Behavioral Continuums in Early Childhood Special Education Settings

Authors: Michela Carattini-Mays, Joseph Morgan

Abstract: This study investigates early childhood educators ability to distinguish between developmentally appropriate and disruptive behaviors in diverse early education settings. Utilizing a Delphi method with a panel of experts, the research explores concepts of behavioral interpretation, collaborative decision-making, and developmentally informed intervention planning across Wakschlag's developmental domains: Emotional Regulation, Internalization of Rules, Aggression Modulation, and Empathy and Conscience. Findings highlight the persistent challenges interdisciplinary teams may face in identifying nuanced behavioral differences, compounded by cultural and individual variability. The study underscores the need for structured developmental frameworks that support collaborative, developmentally informed decision-making within early childhood and special education settings.

H-U-G-S: A Simple Framework for Social-Emotional Learning During Daily Routines

Authors: Sarah J. Sexton, Frances A. Davis

Abstract: The H-U-G-S Interaction Style is a responsive communication framework designed to strengthen young children's social-emotional learning through predictable, attuned adult-child interactions embedded in everyday routines. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory, H-U-G-S operationalizes the assertion that social-emotional competencies emerge through guided participation in everyday activities and the child's active engagement in culturally grounded relationships. H-U-G-S advances an equity-centered approach that affirms diverse communication styles and reduces barriers to participation. In early intervention and early childhood special education, the framework offers teams a practical way to translate individualized IFSP and IEP priorities related to communication, regulation, participation, and social-emotional development into consistent interactions across everyday routines and settings.

From IFSP to IEP: Promoting Equitable Early Childhood Transitions in New Mexico

Authors: Candi Running Bear, Yen K. Pham, Glenabah Martinez

Abstract: The transition from early intervention services under Part C to preschool special education under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a critical point in the educational experiences of young children with disabilities and their families. In New Mexico, this transition occurs within a complex system shaped by rurality, cultural and linguistic diversity, and Tribal sovereignty. More than a procedural requirement, this critical transition must be part of the state's broader responsibility to provide sufficient and equitable educational opportunities in alignment with the findings of facts and conclusions of the Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico (2018) case. We analyzed New Mexico's early childhood special education context, examined practice gaps related to implementation of equitable early childhood transitions within this context, and proposed a Yazzie/Martinez-informed framework for equitable transitions grounded in statewide responsibility, continuity of services, meaningful family participation, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, respect for Tribal sovereignty, and equity focused accountability.

Increasing Parent and Student Engagement in the Individualized Education Program Process for Secondary Students Transitioning to Adulthood

Authors: Sarah Shell Ayala, Allie Boquet, Paul Mooney

Abstract: Transition planning is a critical component of individualized education programs (IEPs), yet meaningful student and family participation remains inconsistent. This article examines recent research on student and family engagement in secondary transition planning and identifies practical strategies for strengthening collaboration before, during, and between IEP meetings. These practices emphasize intentional preparation, meaningful participation, collaborative decision-making, and ongoing communication. Together, they position student and family collaboration as an ongoing component of IEP implementation and support transition planning that reflects students' strengths, preferences, interests, needs, and postsecondary goals.

Ohio PROMISE: A Statewide System to Prepare Adults for the Needs of Children

Author: Wendy Grove, Kathy Lawton, Troy Hunter

Abstract: Young children with challenging behaviors and disabilities are disproportionately excluded from early care and education settings, a pattern seen across Ohio and throughout the nation. This exclusion impacts workforce participation and limits children's access to the well-documented developmental, social, and educational benefits of high-quality early care and education. Over the past six years, Ohio has implemented a statewide initiative (Ohio PROMISE) designed to reduce exclusion and increase inclusive opportunities for young children with challenging behaviors and disabilities in early care and education environments. Ohio PROMISE is built upon five pillars: provider credentialing, program designation, a statewide center of excellence, an advisory committee, and child care subsidy

supports. Initial implementation data across the Ohio PROMISE pillars are promising and demonstrate broad adoption of inclusive practices and strategies statewide. As Ohio PROMISE continues to evolve, the initiative remains focused on identifying innovative approaches to meet the changing needs of Ohio's children, families, and early childhood workforce.