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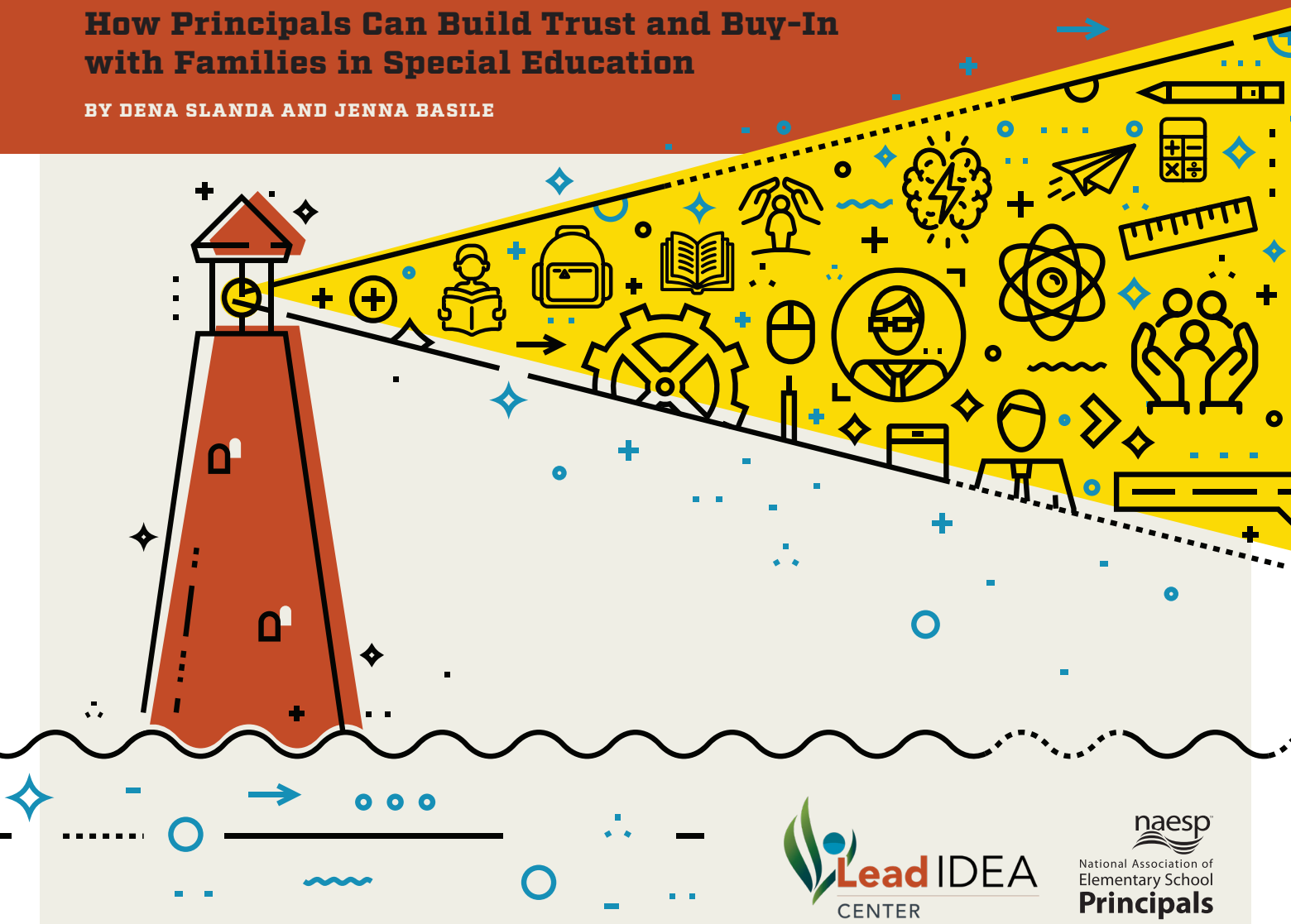
Beyond Compliance:

How Principals Can Build Trust and Buy-In with Families in Special Education

BY DENA SLANDA AND JENNA BASILE



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LEADING LESSONS

Beyond Compliance:

How Principals Can Build Trust and Buy-In with Families in Special Education

BY DENA SLANDA AND JENNA BASILE

One of the most important challenges—and opportunities—for school leaders is helping families become active, informed partners in their child's learning. What does meaningful family engagement look like in practice, and how can principals and staff work together to ensure families are supported and empowered throughout the special education process?

This guide is designed to help school leaders and staff reflect on current practices and identify effective, sustainable strategies that build trust and buy-in among families of students with disabilities – tailored to the unique needs of their school community.

Principals and school staff can work together to ensure students with disabilities and their families feel supported and valued. Their actions throughout the special education process can significantly influence how families engage and how services are delivered. When families are meaningfully involved, there is greater consistency across school/home environments, and students benefit. Below are ways principals and staff can foster meaningful partnerships and support student success at each stage of the special education process to ensure they receive a free appropriate public education.

Use Principal Reyes' Experience to Guide Your Own

Throughout this guide, you will follow the fictional story of Principal Reyes as she navigates real-world challenges in special education. You will be able to reflect as a team on experiences within your building, identify barriers, and develop a personalized action plan with clear, practical steps to strengthen family partnerships and improve outcomes for students with disabilities at your school.

Family Engagement During the Pre-Referral and Eligibility Process

By enhancing both staff and personal knowledge of requirements of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), principals can lay the foundation for ensuring families are meaningfully engaged before a child qualifies for special education.

To implement IDEA with clarity and integrity for students in the pre-referral and eligibility process, Principal Reyes implemented the following action steps:

- Deepened her own IDEA expertise as the district representative on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team;
- Enhanced staff understanding of IDEA by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all IEP team members; and
- Facilitated IEP team collaboration though structured common planning time.

Reflection questions:

1. What factors might prevent families from feeling empowered to participate in the pre-referral and eligibility process?

Consider these barriers:

- Unfamiliarity with IDEA (leadership, staff, and families)
- Inconsistent implementation of school- and class-wide supports for students who are struggling, including those with academic, behavioral, or functional needs
- Limited resources or professional learning for families and staff

Your reflection:

A Closer Look: During the Pre-Referral and Eligibility Process

Principal Reyes has been working to make families active partners in the special education process. However, during a recent staff meeting, she was surprised to hear several team members express frustration, sharing they felt unprepared to collaborate with families of students with disabilities, or those at risk, particularly when families seemed hesitant or resistant to discuss their child's needs. This feedback revealed a deeper issue: The team lacked the tools and confidence to engage families effectively.

2. Considering the barriers identified to the left, what strategies can I implement to strengthen staff understanding of IDEA and ensure families feel informed, respected, and meaningfully included in the pre-referral and eligibility process?

Your reflection:

Family Engagement During The IEP Development Process

Principals play a key role in ensuring families are actively involved, informed, and respected once their child is found eligible for special education services.

To foster families' meaningful engagement as students' IEPs are developed, Principal Reyes implemented the following actionable steps:

- Provided information to families well in advance of the initial annual IEP meeting
- Actively involved all IEP team members in decision-making
- Encouraged ongoing communication with families in-between annual IEP meetings, including fulfilling parents' requests for meetings and reviews at any time

Reflection questions:

1. As IEPs are developed in our school, what factors might limit families' abilities to fully participate and share their perspective as equal members of the team?

A Closer Look: During IEP Development

Principal Reyes has noticed that IEP meetings often feel procedural rather than collaborative. In many cases, parent input is not gathered beforehand, and by the time families arrive, services and aids have been pre-determined by the case manager. During the meeting, school staff, including the principal, typically review the document quickly and then ask parents to sign, leaving little room for meaningful discussion or shared decision-making.

Consider these barriers:

- Whether families receive student information, data, or relevant documents in advance, and if this limits their ability to prepare
- The use of technical jargon or overly complex language
- Cultural or language differences
- Whether meetings feel rushed, leaving little time for collaboration or shared decision-making

Your reflection:

2. Considering the barriers described above, what strategies can IEP teams use as IEPs are developed to build partnerships with families and ensure they are actively involved in shaping decisions about their child's program?

Your reflection:

Family Engagement During the IEP Implementation Process

It is essential that principals establish systems to monitor student progress and maintain ongoing communication with families to ensure continued support as each student's IEP is implemented and services are provided.

Principal Reyes carried out the following action steps to sustain ongoing support after an individual student's IEP is developed:

- Made herself visible and approachable through trust building
- Gathered and acted on family input
- Offered systems of support

Reflection questions:

1. What barriers might prevent families at our school from staying engaged as students' IEPs are implemented?

Consider these barriers:

- Inconsistent or incomplete follow-through on agreed upon services or accommodations
- Limited or unclear communication or data regarding student progress
- Unaddressed concerns raised during the IEP meeting, resulting in unresolved conflict
- Lack of trust between families and school staff

Your reflection:

A Closer Look: During IEP Implementation

Principal Reyes realized that after the IEP meeting, communication with families tapered off, with few updates being shared about student progress or how supports were being used. Families who had been optimistic about their child receiving special education services soon began to feel disconnected and uncertain about whether their child's needs were truly being met.

2. In reviewing the barriers listed to the left, how do we ensure families are informed, supported, and meaningfully engaged as partners while students' IEPs are implemented and progress monitoring data is collected?

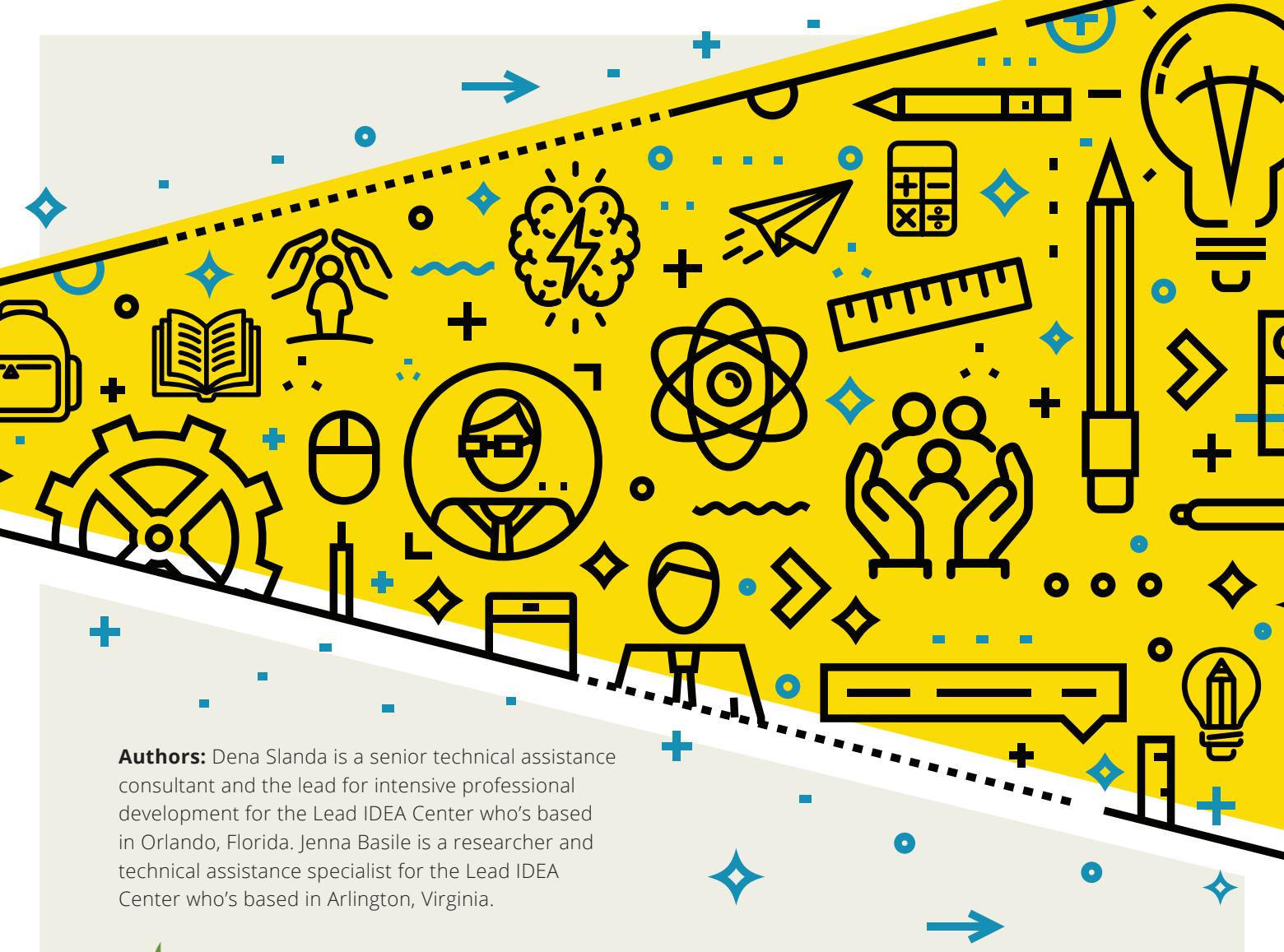
Your reflection:

Action Plan

Review the barriers and strategies you identified above. Choose one barrier that may occur at each of the following stages in the special education process: pre-referral/eligibility, IEP development, and IEP implementation. Then, select one barrier from each stage to explore in depth. Using the strategies aligned with that barrier, create an action plan. For each, develop an action plan that includes: specific steps you will take, resources needed, a timeline for implementation, and measurable outcomes to track progress.

	Barrier	Action
Example	*Limited staff and family knowledge on the special education process*	*Dedicate the first 15 minutes of all scheduled staff meetings to discuss special education topics.*
Pre-Referral and Eligibility		
IEP Development		
IEP Implementation		

Resources	Timeline	Outcome(s)
• *Time and personnel* • *Technology* • *Professional Learning*	*September 2025 to June 2026*	*Strengthened capacity to translate IDEA procedural knowledge to practice that promotes family engagement.*



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Lead IDEA CENTER

About the Lead IDEA Center: Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, the Lead IDEA Center provides knowledge and professional learning services that help leaders fully realize IDEA's opportunity to enhance services and improve outcomes for children with disabilities.

The center provides resources and training to support early intervention and pre-K – 12 school leaders in creating educational opportunities tailored to the individual needs of children eligible for early intervention and special education services, prioritizing effective environments and ensuring adherence to both the letter and spirit of IDEA.

Learn more at **lead-idea.org**.