Supporting Decision Making and Advocacy

Overview

School-Home-Community partnerships that are committed to shared decision making lead to a high level of parent involvement. Empowering families to help solve problems, discuss fiscal priorities and develop policies that are more child/parent friendly sends a powerful message about collaboration, equity and access.

This module provides information and ideas on:

- the role of parent organizations, advisory councils, parent advocacy groups and networks;
- building networks for families;
- keeping parents informed about critical issues; and
- participating and supporting the election process for governance.

Research Link

Decision Making and Advocacy with families is evident when educators "Prepare parents to actively participate in school decision making and develop their leadership skills in governance and advocacy." (Epstein, 2002).

The research of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence emphasizes that parents must be equal partners in education (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, Raimondo, 2004) and set high expectations for effective school leaders who embrace parents as equal partners in the ways listed:

- Sharing Power by opening up the decision making process so that all families have a voice;
- Communicating Expectations by being clear about teacher expectations for parents and parent expectations for teachers;
- Opening Doors by being available to meet with families and for them to observe classrooms;
- Offering and Participating in Training with Parents on standards, curriculum, assessment and school performance;
- Answering the Hard Questions by sharing the school’s improvement plan with families and community members;
- Recognizing and Working with Parent-Led Organizations by involving a variety of groups, not just the “official” school parent group; and
- Giving Parents Information About How the School System Works by sharing data and school improvement plans.

“Juntos podemos hacer lo que uno solo piensa.”

“A team can accomplish more than only one member.”

-Spanish Dicho
Teaching Practices to Support Decision Making and Advocacy

- Share school and district annual reports of school performance and program information with families at open meetings to review current progress. Create safe opportunities for families to provide input for future goals of the school and/or district.

- Encourage and facilitate parent participation in PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils or committees for parent leadership and participation.

- Inform families about the elected boards and circumstances that could impact school policy and reform.

- Provide training for teachers/staff and parents on how to be collaborative partners and share decision making in areas such as policy, curriculum, budget, school reform, safety and personnel issues.

- Treat parent concerns, suggestions and ideas with respect and demonstrate genuine interest in developing solutions. Follow up with families in a timely manner.

New Mexico Teacher Competencies

The New Mexico 3-Tiered Licensure System provides the framework for documenting teacher qualifications. In collaboration with the principal or designated administrator, New Mexico Teachers are required to develop and maintain Professional Development Plans (PDPs) based on nine teacher competencies and accompanying differentiated indicators for their respective level of licensure (Level I, II or III).

This module, Supporting Decision Making and Advocacy, addresses New Mexico Teacher Competencies 2, 7 and 9. The competencies and relevant differentiated indicators for Master Teacher – Level III are listed below. For more information and a complete listing of competencies and differentiated indicators visit www.teachnm.org.

**Competency 2:** The teacher appropriately utilizes a variety of teaching methods and resources for each area taught.

  Relevant Master Teacher – Level III Differentiated Indicators:
  
  E. Engages with colleagues and parents to collaboratively design and implement necessary modifications and adaptations in instruction and curriculum so that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment.

**Competency 7:** The teacher recognizes student diversity and creates an atmosphere conducive to the promotion of positive student involvement and self-concept.

  Relevant Master Teacher – Level III Differentiated Indicators:
  
  H. Engages students in setting high standards for performance.

**Competency 9:** The teacher works productively with colleagues, parents and community members.

  Relevant Master Teacher - Level III Differentiated Indicators:
  
  E. Works collaboratively and creatively with colleagues, parents and community members regarding educational matters.
# Teacher Self-Assessment Rubric

Use this rubric to help evaluate yours and the school’s efforts to support decision making and advocacy with families. Think about where you see yourself and the school in the process and strategies used on how to support decision making and advocacy by marking the box that most clearly matches what you and the school are doing now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENT</th>
<th>BEGINNING</th>
<th>DEVELOPING</th>
<th>PROFICIENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for active parent organizations (PTA, PTO, PAC, other committees).</td>
<td>I am aware of parent organizations but have limited involvement with them.</td>
<td>I am aware of some of the ways parent organizations help schools make decisions.</td>
<td>I actively inform and recruit parents to serve on committees and school/parent organizations by using the following strategies:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I view parent organizations as a way to get extra supplies and materials for the classroom.</td>
<td>I encourage parents to participate in PTA, PTO and other committees that respond to issues of interest to families.</td>
<td>___ I collaborate with families and encourage them to become actively involved in decision making at the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>___ I participate as an active member on school committees.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>___ I participate in training for staff and parents in how to be collaborative partners and share decision making in areas such as policy, curriculum, budget, school reform and safety issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.</td>
<td>I have limited awareness of the importance of parent advocacy groups.</td>
<td>I am aware of some of the ways parent advocacy groups can help with school improvements.</td>
<td>I actively inform and recruit parents to form independent advocacy groups that address school improvements and school reform issues by using the following strategies:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I only work with other teachers to address improvements and school reform.</td>
<td>I solicit families to gather input and recommendations for school improvements.</td>
<td>___ I provide parents with information about school policies, practices and both student and school performance data.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>___ I reach out to include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socio-economic and other groups to participate in school decision making activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELEMENT</td>
<td>BEGINNING</td>
<td>DEVELOPING</td>
<td>PROFICIENT</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Support for district-level councils and committees for family and community involvement. | I am unaware of why district-level councils and committees for family and community involvement are important. I consider only those committees with educators to be important. | I am aware of some of the reasons councils and community members need to be involved. I gather information and encourage parents to become active members on district-level committees. | I advocate for family and community members to be participants in committees and councils by engaging in the following activities: 

- I am actively engaged and participate in district-level committees. 
- I encourage active parent participation in the decisions that affect students such as student placement, course selection setting academic goals and participation in individualized education programs. |

| Information is provided on school or local elections for school representatives. | I provide information informally to a few select parents. I provide parents who are involved at the school site with information regarding elected school board officials. | I send correspondence home with students about local elections for school representatives. I ensure that all parents receive information about school board candidates by sending information home with the students and other communication means. | I provide information regarding school board elections by engaging in the following activities: 

- I send information home with students asking for parents' signatures notifying that information was read. 
- I serve as an advocate, encouraging parents to vote in school board and policy elections. 
- I make sure critical information about school issues is disseminated. |

| Support for networks to link all families with parent representatives is provided. | I am aware of parent networks, but do not see a supporting role for the teacher. I don't feel responsible for getting information out to families about parent network activities. | I am aware of parent networks and have informally discussed this as a way for parents to receive mentoring and information about key issues. I provide information to some families where academic and behavior issues are a concern. | I am informed about various networks and link families with parent representatives by using the following strategies: 

- I provide information to parents at conferences, open house events, and through school-home correspondence. 
- I treat parent concerns with respect and demonstrate interest in developing solutions. 
- I promote parent participation on school, district, state and national committees that focus on education issues. |
**Teacher Reflection**

**What will I do to ensure that parents are partners in the decisions that affect their children?**

Reflect on your current practices in each of the elements highlighted. Develop a plan for improvement which includes support needed, how strategies will be implemented and how you will know if each element has been accomplished (Evidence of Mastery). Use the resources provided in this module to support your efforts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision Making and Advocacy Elements</th>
<th>Plans for Improvement</th>
<th>Evidence of Mastery</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I and/or the school support active parent organizations for parent leadership and participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I and/or the school support independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I and/or the school support district-level councils and committees for family and community involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I and/or the school provide information on school or local elections for school representatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I and/or the school support networks to link all families with parent representatives.</td>
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# Resource 1

## Worth a Click

**14 Choices for Meaningful Student Involvement in School Decision Making**
[http://www.soundout.org/article.105.html](http://www.soundout.org/article.105.html)

This site includes ideas for getting students involved in school decision making activities.

**Advocacy for Academically Talented Students**
[http://www.cmu.edu/cmites/advocacy.html](http://www.cmu.edu/cmites/advocacy.html)

This site provides an important resource for parents and teachers of academically gifted students.

**Constructing School Partnerships with Families and Community Groups**
[http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm)

This site is a resource from the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) on strengthening home/school partnerships.

**Public Agenda**
[www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)

This site addresses a variety of educational issues from multiple perspectives, as well as resources for facilitating issue-based discussions in your community.

**Public Conversation Project**
[www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org)

Anyone interested in engaging in dialogue about the issues confronting our communities and schools should use this web site for resources to help define the questions, keep conversations on track and engage the community.

**Study Circles**

The resources on this site can help communities and schools start discussions regarding race, education and achievement and diversity. A special section focusing on youth issues offers information on organizing study circles as well as information on training our youth to become facilitators.

**Tools for School Improvement Planning**
[www.annenberginstitute.org/tools](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/tools)

This site has everything one might need to collect, analyze and interpret the data necessary for successful advocacy efforts.
Family Decision Making and Advocacy in Schools

Openness and trust are key to establishing successful family involvement programs. Use the following practices that reflect on family decision making and advocacy in schools to think about actions you could take to improve involvement.

Providing Knowledge/Training

1. Some ways in which I treat parent’s concerns and demonstrate genuine interest in developing solutions are: ________________________________

2. Some ways in which I include parents on all decision making and advisory committees and offer understandable, accessible and well publicized ways to influence decisions, raise concerns, appeal decisions and resolve problems are: ________________________________________________________________

3. Some ways in which I offer training for parents on parenting, group problem solving, team building, conflict resolution, time management and shared decision making are: ________________________________________________________________

Sharing Information

1. Some ways in which I use parents’ native language to provide them with the current information on school policies, practices and student school performance data are: ________________________________________________________________

2. Some ways in which I promote communication and provide up-to-date information on current issues by establishing interactive computer systems that electronically link school sites with the district office are: ________________________________________________________________

3. Some ways in which I publish results of surveys that assess educators’ or community members’ satisfaction with the site-based management team’s work are: ________________________________________________________________

Taking Action

1. Some ways in which I encourage active parent participation in the decisions that affect students, such as student placement, course selection and individualized education plans are: ________________________________________________________________

2. Some ways in which I promote parent participation on school, district, state and national issues are: ________________________________________________________________
Resource 3

Plan for Involving Families in Decision Making and Advocacy

Use the ideas on the following page to frame a plan to involve families in decision making and advocacy on behalf of their children.

List four benefits of involving parents in decision making and advocacy.

1.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

2.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

3.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

4.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

Identify four areas in which you can involve parents in decision making and advocacy for their children or the community.

1.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

2.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

3.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

4.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

Name four guidelines to follow which will involve parents in decision making and advocacy.

1.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

2.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

3.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

4.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

List resources that would support parent decision making about an issue that is relevant to them and to you.

1.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

2.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

3.) ____________________________________________________________________________________

4.) ____________________________________________________________________________________
Strategies for Teaming with Parents

Areas for Parental Decision Making and Advocacy for a Student
Parents should be involved in decisions that are made regarding whether a student:

- Needs more help than what is provided for in general education
- Is retained in a grade
- Attends public school
- Participates in extracurricular activities
- Enters an alternative school program
- Participates in a field trip or other activity away from school

Common Areas for Parental Decision Making and Advocacy for the School and its Programs
Parents should also be invited to serve on decision making committees such as:

- Site-based school advocacy management council
- Parent advisory committee for a program such as Head Start, a reading program, the bilingual program or the school library
- PTA/PTO or another parent organization
- Classroom committee
- Task force organized around an issue
- Search committee for a principal or program leader
- Planning committee for the school or one of its programs

Strategies That Promote Team Building with Families:

- Highly motivated individuals share a common interest.
- Ownership and responsibility for tasks are shared.
- Problems are solved effectively.
- Team members increase communication.
- Major areas of concern and community needs are identified.
- Resources to achieve goals are identified.

The Process for Building a Parent Committee:

- Establish a goal, identified by a needs assessment or a response to a request for funding. The committee should be made up of diverse stakeholders, including families and community members.
- Be ready to explain the criteria for membership and practice inclusiveness.
- Seek members from different technical, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and strike a balance between families, staff and representatives from the community.
- When the committee convenes, begin the meeting with icebreakers to help members become more comfortable. Ask the following questions: What are the specific goals and objectives of the team? Are results expected? Is the goal to stimulate discussion and dialogue?
- Establish a time frame to identify goals and make recommendations, as well as, a plan to implement those recommendations.
- Encourage members to agree on meeting rules. When disagreement takes place, see that ideas, not members, are the focus. Stress the values of openness, trust and mutual respect.
- Have a committee member record meeting minutes.
- Make decisions by consensus.
Resource 4

Decision Making at the School Level

Use this checklist to determine how decisions are made at your school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does our school SHARE POWER?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>SOME-WHAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our school:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opens up the decision making process so that families have a voice;</td>
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<tr>
<td>gives parents a role in selecting administrators, including the principal;</td>
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<tr>
<td>respectfully acknowledges and recognizes all parents - including elected parent leaders, not just parents hand-picked by the school administration; and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>makes an effort to learn about the concerns of different groups of families in the school community and reaches out to diverse families.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Is our school ACCESSIBLE? | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Our school:              |   |
| sets a regular schedule for classroom observations; | |
| gives families full access to the school building; | |
| makes sure that administration and teachers set regular office hours to meet with families; and | |
| holds frequent and open meetings that support parent schedules. | |

| Does our school OFFER CONTINUOUS TRAINING? | | |
|-------------------------------------------|---|
| Our school:                               |   |
| provides workshops to help parents understand the data on school performance; | |
| provides training for teachers and other school staff about how to communicate more effectively with parents and families and includes parents and family members; | |
| provides training for parents on the school’s annual report card every year and how to interpret the results; and | |
| provides information on the school’s test results and report cards and how to analyze them. | |

| Does our school RECOGNIZE AND WORK WITH PARENT-LED ORGANIZATIONS? | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Our school:                                                     |   |
| recognizes a variety of groups, not just the “official” parent advisory group; | |
| provides information and the use of facilities and office supplies and machines such as the copier and fax. | |
| helps arrange for food, activities for younger children and transportation; and | |
| encourages teachers and administrators to speak at meetings. | |

1.) Identify the activities from the list that you agree should be implemented at your school.

2.) How can you demonstrate leadership to model practices which change the attitudes and behaviors to support decision making and advocacy by parents?

Resource 5

Creating an Accepting Environment for ALL Families

Using this tool in small groups with colleagues, discuss one or more of the following suggestions on how to create an accepting classroom and school environment. Then write a plan to implement them in your parental involvement plan.

Valuing Diversity in the Classroom and School:

- Treat all families with respect. Listen carefully to all families. Every family member has the right to be heard.
- Recognize that families have different learning styles. Vary the way you offer information so that all families can participate.
- Provide opportunities for your families to work in diverse groups.
- Don’t ignore conflicts when they surface. Inaction is a sign of approval.
- Be a role model. Give families the chance to see that all of us struggle with issues. Help families develop strategies for dealing with uncomfortable situations.
- Create a classroom environment that is family-friendly, casual, intimate and is reflective of the cultures and languages it serves.
- Welcome both critical and positive feedback from parents utilizing a code of ethics that shows respect and good listening habits while allowing an “agree to disagree” agenda.

What I Can Do to Help Create a Classroom and School that Value Diversity:

1.)
________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________

2.)
________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________

3.)
________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________
Resource 6

Creating a Family Involvement Policy

Use this tool to develop a Family Involvement Policy.

Schools are encouraged to create a Family Involvement Policy which includes a goal statement, a belief statement for the inclusion of families at school, as well as statements which outline the six components of family involvement programs identified by the National PTA's Standards for Parental Involvement Programs. The policy should also include a statement on how the school will provide professional development for teachers and administration.

While creating your school’s Family Involvement Policy, think about how this policy can be incorporated into the district and/or school level Educational Plan for Student Success (EPSS).

Below are some sample statements that could be used to develop a Family Involvement Policy that reflects the school’s efforts in increasing family involvement.

Sample Goal Statement:

______ Name of School ______ understands that engaging parents in the educational process is essential to improved academic success for students. We recognize that a child’s education is a responsibility shared by the school and the family during the entire time a child attends school. Therefore, ______ Name of School ______ shall foster and support active parent involvement so that parents and schools work together as knowledgeable partners in educating children.

Sample Inclusion Statement:

Although parents may be diverse in culture, language and needs, they share the school’s commitment to the educational success of their children. ______ Name of School ______ recognizes its responsibility to eliminate barriers that impede family involvement and to create an environment that is supportive of comprehensive family involvement programs that have been developed in collaboration with parents. Therefore, this policy shall establish programs and practices that reflect the specific needs of students and their families.

Sample Effective Programs Statement:

______ Name of School ______ supports the development, implementation and regular evaluation of a parent involvement program at ______ Name of School ______ that includes parents at all grade levels and in a variety of roles.
Sample Statements Which Include the Six Components of Family Involvement Programs:

- Communication between home and school is regular, two-way and meaningful. [Include statements describing the need for a regular exchange of information with families.]

- Responsible parenting is promoted and supported. [Include statements explaining the value of recognizing parents as a child’s first and most important teacher.]

- Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning. [Include statements describing a commitment to giving parents opportunities to participate in their child’s learning both at home and at school.]

- Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance in volunteering are sought in many ways. [Include statements describing commitment to create a family-friendly environment, survey parents for volunteer interests and abilities and recruit and retain volunteers.]

- Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families. [Include statements describing a commitment to providing opportunities for families to share in decisions about school policy and family involvement program design.]

- Community resources are made available to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning. [Include statements describing a commitment to working with community agencies that provide services to children and families.]

Sample Professional Development Statement:

_____ Name of School _____ is committed to providing professional development for staff and leadership throughout the school year to enhance understanding of effective parent involvement strategies. _____ Name of School _____ also recognizes the importance of administrative leadership in setting expectations and creating a climate conducive to parent participation.

Resource 7

How Parents Can Be Advocates for Their Children

Share these ideas with parents who are interested in finding out more about advocating for their children.

The Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (CCLD) has developed the following tips to help parents advocate for their child. Parents are often the best educational advocates for their children. True advocacy is a positive process, which should build on strengths and challenges of the students. Share this tips sheet with parents that may benefit from the information provided.

Know the rules

All public schools abide by specific laws and regulations, which provide special services for children with learning disabilities who qualify for such services. The criteria for eligibility varies from state to state, but all schools must adhere to a minimum federal standard. To find out the laws in your state and your rights, as a parent, contact your local school district office or the New Mexico Public Education Department.

Get to know the people who make decisions about your child’s education

Connect with educators and administrators in both casual and formal settings. Talk with your child’s teacher on a regular basis. If possible, volunteer in the classroom and help out with school functions. If you have concerns or problems that a teacher cannot or will not address, be willing to follow the chain of command through the school and if necessary, to the district office. Remember that you as a parent have the right to request that the school evaluate your child if you think he or she may have special needs. Be sure that your request is in writing.

Keep records

Parents should maintain an organized file of educational records and assessment information. Take notes during telephone and face-to-face meetings and ask for people’s full names and contact information when communicating by phone or by e-mail. In addition, keeping less formal examples of children’s academic progress, such as homework papers, projects and writing samples, may be useful in establishing patterns and documenting both abilities and challenges.

Gather information

Read books and articles on learning, attend conferences and join a parent support group or affiliate organization in your area. Get comfortable with education acronyms and jargon. Ask professionals lots of questions and don’t be afraid to ask for clarification if their answers are confusing or complicated.
Communicate effectively

Come to meetings prepared and know the specific outcomes you want. Be clear, calm and direct when speaking and put things in writing whenever possible. Listen and take time to think about pertinent information. Consider when documentation or data might help your case and present it in an orderly and readable format. While assertiveness and persistence are crucial, anger and aggressiveness can work against you and can damage important relationships.

Know your child’s strengths and interests and share them with educators

By highlighting a struggling child’s capabilities and talents, you not only help professionals know your child as a whole person, you can also assist in identifying learning accommodations.

Emphasize solutions

While there are no miracle cures or magic bullets for all situations, it’s important to stress the positive and to help identify ways to improve your child’s experience. Once appropriate programs have been identified and agreed upon, make every effort to encourage follow-through.

Focus on the big picture

Simply put, don’t sweat the small stuff. Knowing the specifics of a law may be important on one level, but constantly arguing technicalities can ultimately waste time and inhibit rapport. Try not to take things personally and always consider both sides of the story. Details are important, but don’t let them get in the way of negotiating the best educational experience for your child.

Involve your child in decision making as early as you can

Mastering self-advocacy skills is one of the keys to becoming a successful adult. Resist the natural urge to pave every road for your child and respect and support your child’s need to take informed academic risks.

Access local family advocacy groups

In New Mexico, there are several advocacy groups that work to support family concerns. Contact your local PTA/PTO representative or Parents Reaching Out for more information.

Adapted from Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (2000)
Notes