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Ven, Vamos a platicar (Come, Let's Talk)

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### **Abstract**

Latino youth with disabilities in Santa Cruz County who were in Special Education are not successfully transitioning into independent adults. The capstone *Ven vamos a platicar* (Come and Let's Talk) is a project through the Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities, which is an advisory committee appointed by the County Board of Supervisors on issues impacting persons with disabilities. *Ven vamos a platicar* is a set of one-on-one conversations with Spanish speaking monolingual parents of children with disabilities to identify potential community leaders and participants in an educational and action based support group. The purpose of this project is to listen to parents who have children with disabilities to understand their experiences and challenges in getting their children the support needed to become socially and academically successful. The expected outcome of the project is to have twelve one-on-one conversations with Hispanic parents. One of the most important results was that Hispanic parents with children in Special Education feel powerless in their capacity to make decisions, and seek assistance from educators. Those parents do not utilize services that their children are entitled to receive. These issues become more evident as those parents go through a series of stressful experiences involving the learning of a new language and its customs, as well as adjusting to a new educational system. Therefore, the recommendations to the commission are: in January 2018 there should be a meeting with the parents to share the findings of the conversations, and introduce them to the commissioners and explain their role in the community.

**Keywords:** *Hispanic parent, monolingual, Special Education*

## **I. Agency**

According to the County of Santa Cruz (2017), the Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities is “a pro-active advisory board that serves to insure equal access for persons with disabilities in our County.” Thus, the commission's mission “influences public policy by advising and working with the Board of Supervisors and the County on issues impacting persons with disabilities and their families” (County of Santa Cruz, 2017). Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities was established to review existing County policies that affect people with disabilities and has five Districts. Each District has two members (commissioner) that were appointed by its County Supervisor to “serve a four year term” (County of Santa Cruz, 2017). The agency’s main purpose is to stay motivated to optimize the functional potential of those who live in Santa Cruz County.

Volunteering is important in the Public Services. With this in mind, the Santa Cruz County Commission on Disabilities is a very strong group of volunteers that the community can use to go further in resolving issues and to achieve a solution. The commission encourages the community to take action through education, integration, and collaboration to remove the obstacles for people with disabilities. After all, the agency needs public participation and public decision making to remedy violations of political rights, and to identify any barriers that affect the ability to exercise the right to live with dignity and with a productive life.

### **Communities Served**

People with disabilities are the primary population reviewed by the Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities and this focus is effectuated by making recommendations to the Board of Supervisors. Santa Cruz has a total population of 271,804 people and 20% of the 2015 assessment participants stated that a family member with a disability was part of their household. (“Applied Survey Research”, 2015). According to Disability Population Statistics for Santa

Cruz, 55,370 individuals live in Santa Cruz County (2007). The ethnicity throughout Santa Cruz County is primarily 58.1% White and 33.2% Hispanic/Latino (ASR & UWSCC, 2015).

Additionally, there seems to be a White majority, 56.1% of student enrollment is of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity (ASR & UWSCC, 2015).

Disability Population Statistics in Santa Cruz County (2007) reports that the age distribution for population with disability is 11.6% for those aged 5-20 years old, and 18.26% are 21-64 years of age. Out of languages spoken at home, English holds 76.1% and 23.8% speaks another language. Spanish is the second highest language spoken at home. For demographic distribution, unincorporated parts of the County are estimated to be 46% of male and 53.5% female, 86.4% White and 20.5% Hispanic. Unincorporated parts of Santa Cruz include: Bonny Dune, Brookdale, Davenport, Happy Valley, La Selva Beach, Loma Prieta, Mount Hermon, Olympia, The Summit, and Swanton (Localwiki, n.d.). People with a disability employed from 2005-2007 were only 36.6% and only 11.6% work at home (Data USA, 2016).

## **II. Problem definition**

Latino youth with disabilities in Santa Cruz County who were in special education are not successfully transitioning into independent adults. U.S. Department of Education (2007) explained that students who are eligible for Special Education are entitled to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For this reason, a federal law titled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) demands that public schools create an IEP for every student getting Special Education services. Students may be eligible for an IEP from age three through high school or a maximum age of 22. The IEP is a legal document that entails specific educational goals and addresses unique learning issues, and the school must follow everything that the IEP states on behalf of the student. As a result, every IEP will look different (Santa Cruz

County Office of Education, n.d.). The Special Education enrollment California State Report 2015-2016 acknowledges that the majority of students are Hispanic (California Department of Education, n.d.).

Meanwhile, any student in Special Education is eligible to have the associated services such as audiology services, counseling services, early identification and assessment, medical services, occupational therapy, orientation and mobility services, parent counseling and training, physical therapy, psychological services, recreation, rehabilitation counseling services, school health services, social work services in schools, speech-language pathology services, and transportation (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

### **Causes/contributing factors**

Research by Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) supports that numerous issues affect the educational triumph of students and “parental involvement is not easy to promote.” Due to confusion and lack of knowledge about their role, few parents look forward to attending IEP meetings. Job responsibilities and time prevent them from having the ability to join these meetings, especially when the parents have younger children and there is not free daycare. To enumerate another cause that prevents the student success is that the parents “[feel] powerless and intimidated by the school system often creates situations in which cultural differences are evident and sometimes conflict” (Larocque et al., 2011).

The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2002) emphasizes that approximately 40% of the students registered in the school system in 2000 were Latino and Latino immigrants. Ryan et al., (2010) states that Latino students frequently present less academic success than their peers. The same researchers indicate “that low-income parents

believe their role is to support teachers rather than to initiate activities or intervene in their children's education more directly" (Ryan et al., 2010).

In fact, immigration status and immigrant family "is a complex social structure that often consists of mixed-status family members" (Olivos, 2009). Therefore, immigration contributed to the feeling of going unnoticed and never participating in their children's school issues. This cause prevents the parents from going to talk to the teachers and filling out documents with their personal information. This is a real obstacle that is difficult to control. School staff and special education teams need to talk with those families about how attending school meetings does not have anything to do with immigration status and that the school will not put them at risk. The adults from Latino families relate the teacher with a government employee and as a threat to their immigration status (Olivos, 2009).

Notably, the first IEP for any family may be overwhelming and the school team may spend a long time educating the parents about their child. In the event that IEP meeting information is complex, the family may find it difficult to follow what the educators are explaining.

### **Consequences**

Langdon (2009) remarks, "lack of adequate schooling opportunities in rural and even urban areas have prevented many of those adults and/or their children from receiving special education services" and the worst scenario is that the student will need to repeat a grade more than a few times. Parents who just moved to the United States and do not speak English do not have enough information about the school system, or how to navigate and advocate for their child. Those parents also do not comprehend their IEP parent's rights. However, schools believe

that providing the information in Spanish to the parents is enough, but the parents need additional explanation to understand their rights (Conroy, 2012).

Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott (2009) point out that "children of Latino families comprise the fastest growing population in the United States". Dilemmas connected to inequality have concerned special education teachers for more than thirty years. The diversity changes in demographics bring new and different challenges for teachers in special education, educators need to prepare to adjust accommodations for cultural differences (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011).

Latino students who receive Special Education services for the first time need their parents' participation to ensure their learning and development. Nevertheless, those children are limited because their parents are not familiar with IEP meetings and timelines, cannot make any requests in writing related to their services, and cannot follow what is appropriate for their child (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, & Roach-Scott 2009). In Trainor (2010) study, "parent advocacy occurred across groups based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and disability category". Parents advocate using their intuition. However, Trainor (2010) interprets that "intuitive advocacy, is not always a powerful approach". White students get superior scores on achievement tests compared with Latino, Black, and American Indian students. Meanwhile, Hispanic students face an inferior quality of education when their teachers do not have training or knowledge related to different cultures and population diversity (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011).

Aceves (2014) strongly argues that children in special education classrooms stay for years and they have less education expectations that can impact their opportunities to have higher education. People with a disability are expected to have limited opportunities to have higher education and to earn income above poverty level. Likewise, limited benefits deepen the

hardships associated with unemployment. Families in Santa Cruz County with children in Special Education are not prepared to navigate the education system due to cultural barriers. In addition, Special Education program materials are created for English speaking families born in the United States that have a college level education or above (E. Saldaña, personal communication, March 23, 2017).

Shumaker (2017) references a 2014 study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, merely 19.3% of individuals with disabilities in the United States had a job in the labor force or were looking for work.

**Problem Model** (*See Appendix A for the Problem Model Diagram*)

### **III. Project description**

**Title:** *Ven, vamos a platicar* (Come, Let's Talk)

This is an informational gathering project that will share successes and challenges in raising Latino children with special needs. The fact is that parents will be able to provide good care and advocate for their children to enter the job market or higher education after high school.

This capstone project analyzes sixteen months of a social problem in Santa Cruz County. Special Education issues in the Hispanic community have received much attention in recent years due to a high number of students registered in Special Education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). As an illustration, National Education Association (2017) states that students from “poor family backgrounds tend to do poorly in school” and “Hispanics tend to have larger families than other groups.”

The focus of the Capstone Project titled *Ven vamos a platicar* is based on one-on-one conversations. This assignment is the first step to a long-term project in Santa Cruz County. The project provides the opportunity to listen to the stories of Spanish speaking monolingual parents

who have children with disabilities in Special Education. Furthermore, this project aims to identify Spanish speaking monolingual parents who are willing to share their experiences with Special Education services.

### **Justification**

There are deep reasons for parents misunderstanding their rights. The Latino parents do not know that they are not taking advantage of their child's IEP rights. Latino parents frequently work multiple jobs and overtime so they can't be involved in any activities or meetings during their shifts. Often, Latino families believe that the professionals are the only experts. Brochures and flyers have complex words and parents do not read them. Parents know their child and they can be a good asset to the IEP team and encourage other parents to follow what they did. Although most parents do not have a background or degree in education, their stories will impact the community in an immensely positive way.

Ryan et al., (2010) comments that "Latino students often experience less academic success than do their majority counterparts." The research also describes how students with parents who are very active and involved in the IEP process are more successful academically and in post-secondary education (Ryan et al., 2010).

### **Project implementation plan**

According to Ernestina Saldaña the Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities has been waiting for a long time to have a volunteer/intern to work in Education issues (personal communication, February 2, 2017). In order to be prepared and presented to the rest of the commissioners the intern had to do intense research before the regular Commission meeting. During the meeting, the intern explained the project to the commissioners and community members, and it was determined by the Chair of the Commission that the intern continue doing

more research. All the Commissioners thought that the project would be helpful for the community and they would support the intern. An outline of the capstone was necessary because the commissioners needed to add the project to their regular agenda.

The Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities does not have any project completed to help the students in Special Education in Santa Cruz County. The intern's responsibility was to find the Latino parents, go to their meetings, and get their story. Passing on the information within families was the key because the parents talked to one and another and information chains were highly effective.

Another key to implementing the project was that the intern would be a good listener to the parents and to the commissioners. The commissioners showed a lot of qualities to be good leaders and provide insights at the meetings. The intern found an existing Latino parent support groups and joined them. There were no restrictions with those who wanted to join the group and there were no parameters to open the group and conversations to others. Eventually, the Commission needs to find a place so the intern can obtain their stories. Gathering and engaging the Latino parents was the most significant element in this project. Their stories and conversations will allow the Commission to see where there is a gap or need to meet their goals. For this capstone project the intern created a safe environment to the Latino families during conversations. After each meeting, the intern made an analysis to determine the next step.

A very important part of the capstone project's implementation is that the intern should receive support from the Commission and the Commissioners. The intern, Aimee Mangan (mentor), and Professor Alicia Hernandez were the key for this project. With their guidance and constructive feedback, this idea was built successfully.

**Scope of Work and Timeline** *(See Appendix B for methods and updated scope)*

### **Challenges/Obstacles**

School and work challenged the intern. Family emergencies and special circumstances changed the timeline. The most important resources needed were transportation, time, and gas for the intern. This project required a lot of driving and the Commission did not provide financial support. There was a huge need for food and drinks for the parents but, those needs never stopped the intern from completing the capstone project. Santa Cruz School District and the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) could be resources because the State requires them to know the student status after leaving high school, but the intern did not receive support from them.

## **IV. Project Results**

### **Outcome**

The project identified twenty six Spanish speaking monolingual parents who shared their stories and their experiences of having a child in Special Education and who met with the intern.

### **Assessment of project outcomes**

#### **Data Collection methodology**

The intern utilized interviews of parents by administering “open ended” verbal questions. The flexibility of this approach allowed the intern to gain insight into their lives which was very important to the participants. The one-on-one conversations with parents took place in different locations. Few parents felt comfortable going to Starbucks, others wanted to eat something, and others decided to have the interview in their home. During each interview the intern asked four main questions (*see Appendix C*), and the conversation lasted between 1-2 hours.

It was important to understand the parents, their culture, and their challenges for this project. However, communication between the intern and the parents was the key to having a

healthy and honest relationship. A relevant factor during the conversations was that many parents could not answer some of the questions created in the assessment plan like b, c, and d (*see appendix C*). The terms used such as “IEP” and “resources” were difficult and stressful for Spanish speaking monolingual parents to understand.

Under those circumstances, the capstone project changed to just ONE question to facilitate and enable the conversation: What do you know/understand about the school meeting that it is usually every year, the meeting where there are several people? For example, the teacher, nurse, principal, social worker, nurse, interpreter, you, and therapists?

Results were analyzed by the similarity of the parents’ answers that were collected during the one-on-one conversations.

### **Findings**

The capstone project identified and recognized the Spanish speaking monolingual moms who demonstrated leadership and wanted to learn more about Special Education. However, the findings show that Hispanic parents had little knowledge of their rights even though their child has been receiving special education services for years and those parents were unable to communicate in English with the school professionals. Parents feel uncomfortable with having many professionals in the IEP meetings, and with confronting school personnel about their child’s needs. Hispanic parents feel intimidated by the school staff because they see them as a “Government/County employee” and this perception influences their ability of decision making on their child’s behalf.

Although a parent’s role in their child's academic career evolves as kids grow, one thing remains constant: their love for their child is obvious and it is a reminder to develop an effective way for them to speak on behalf of their child. Parenting a child with a disability can be

challenging, and often facing those challenges is difficult without the support of the school district. Most of the parents involved in the conversations know that together they are stronger, and they cannot do this alone. Parents are worried about the unknown, what the future holds, and their child's wellbeing.

Spanish speaking parent participants of the one-on-one conversations faced many obstacles during their IEP meetings. These parents struggled not only because their primary language is not English, but also because of the preconceived notions held by special education professionals who work with them. Parents felt that the IEP teams make assumptions about their level of involvement as well as their communication.

Special education laws have emphasized the importance of parent's participation in the education of the student with disabilities. However, evidence throughout the conversations with the participants suggests that parents face significant challenges while navigating the special education system. This difficulty in participating during the IEP process has negative consequences in the academic, personal, and health outcomes for students with disabilities. Hispanic parents who shared their experiences during the IEP process, agreed that the meetings are dramatic and they do not understand the information that the professional team is delivering to them. Parents feel that there is a huge rush to end the meeting and the professionals do not take the time to explain them nor do they use the right vocabulary, regardless of the translation.

### **Strengths**

The strengths and success of the Capstone project strategy was the ability to identify the primary stakeholders: Spanish Speaking monolingual parents. The communication plan between the intern, the mentor, and the commissioners was identified as the top priority in the commission meetings. The project was proposed and received full support from the Commission

on Disabilities. Most importantly the commissioners with vast experience and leadership skills were identified to help the intern since the beginning of the research stage.

This project was successful because the parents spread the word to their friends and neighbors. As a result, the intern received names and telephone numbers from parents who usually attended school meetings and this created invaluable connections.

Finally, collaboration helped build relationship between the intern and Spanish speaking mothers with a child in Special Education.

### **Limitations/Challenges**

The Capstone project's early phase design depended on having access to professionals in the school district. The access was denied for this project and created a need to make a drastic change after six months of planning. Changes were inevitable, created stress and made it hard for the intern to keep up with the project. Not being prepared for failure was challenging. The intern requested a meeting with the commissioners and incorporated a different plan. Another challenge presented by changes is that more research and extra time from the student was required. Getting information for Spanish speaking support groups through the Internet was difficult. The websites contained inconsistent information, which was not frequently updated.

As a result, the information gathered from the Internet made it necessary to make numerous phone calls and visits to the agencies that could provide information. To engage parents during the SELPA School meetings involved extra time and driving. The hard costs of commuting exhausted the student and took outrageous amounts of money.

### **Personal Reflection/final thoughts**

#### **Conclusion**

The road to success is not straight and this project is not an exception. During the one-on-one conversations with parents, the lack of understanding of their child's IEP was a common occurrence. *Ven, vamos a platicar* capstone is a very important piece for Spanish speaking monolingual parents in Santa Cruz County to show what is needed. This community has many parents who struggled to achieve their children's goals at school. Many obstacles come on their way and inhibited success and proper development. Those parent participants went through different experiences when they dealt with their children education services, some are easy and some are tough. Parent's Rights in Special Education are translated in Spanish, but it is not an easy thing to read for the majority of the parents. The participants showed anxiety and stress during the one-on-one conversations; not being able to communicate with school staff that can help their children creates a phenomenon of culture shock. These aspects made them feel that they are in the wrong place. There is no doubt that helping those parents will make a positive impact on their children. Parents provide a good information about their children, are not afraid to show their feelings, and can be trained to be a good advocate. Every second that goes by, those children are missing out on happiness. We must get off of our chairs and make a positive difference in those children's lives - go help a child!

In conclusion, Spanish speaking monolingual parents deserve for their children to walk on the road of success and live a successful life. Those children are entitled to receive the best support from Special Education that can help them and their families achieve their goals. Finally, their success can be built by having an incredible collaboration between parents and the IEP team.

### **Recommendations**

In order to encourage participation, the commission should allow the parents to continue to have the freedom to choose a time and place for one-on-one conversations. The Commission's goal should be to inform parents that they are equal participants in the matters of dealing with their children and that they have a right to appeal any decision made during their child's IEP. Another long-term goal for the Commission could be to have an advocate for the parents who feel that their experience can be improved. The advocate can also help to break the culture differences barriers between the professional team and the parent. For example, helping to see the potential of the students and their parents and not having low expectations from both. In order to develop the cultural competence required to provide quality services to all children and their parents, the Commission on Disabilities can be a strong support in bringing awareness to school professionals.

Given these points, a mentor is needed to educate, instruct, and inspire Spanish speaking monolingual parents to fight for their children.

### **Personal/professional growth**

Self-motivation created a positive impact on this project and it was the strength during the difficult times, even though the project was successful. This project forced the intern to learn how to build a small community group. The Social Justice topic was the priority of this capstone. Keeping the spirit high and staying positive, no matter how discouraging a situation was, gave a lifetime tool to the intern. Hearing the stories of the parents and how they felt powerless in helping the students get things done made the intern feel more committed to this profession. However, the intern learned that hearing the difficult situations that parents are in can be emotionally overwhelming and that

boundaries are important to be set. The intern showed that she can work without directions and without being monitored. The force and drive that made the intern want to achieve more than the original plan, was that for more than 15 years she was in the same shoes as the participants. The intern carried the same feeling of being useless when it came to requesting and understanding IEP services.

### **Broader social significance**

Students who are not successful are not only the responsibility of the parents, it is a social problem, especially those who are in Special Education. Regardless of the children's success, their parents struggle with a huge level of anxiety and stress; both are big factors in how parents interact with the community, their families, and their own health. A parent dealing with stress usually isolate themselves from their family, friends, and coworkers. For Spanish speaking monolingual parents, most of the time stress and worry go hand-in-hand. Those parents are being set up to fail along with their children. For a country that pompously recognizes that no child shall be left behind, it is incomprehensible that the lack of understanding of the school staff suggest otherwise.

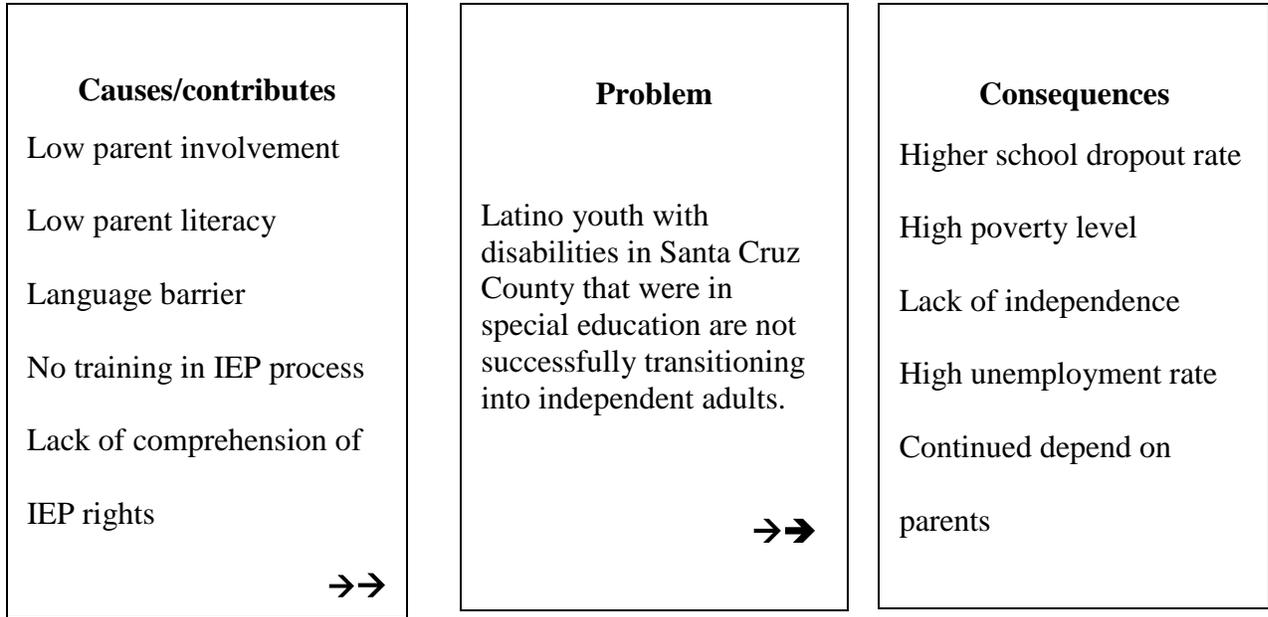
This capstone shows real stories from parents and culture differences. Those parents have grown up in different countries and have their own unique culture and different ways of thinking and behaving. Something that needs to be done is that people who work in Special Education services should have the knowledge about other cultures. Speaking both languages is not enough and the research is proof of this. Professional people who work with Spanish speaking monolingual children should understand how culture affects communication and that they have a totally different cultural background. Special Education needs to show respect and the knowledge of communication from

people from other countries. The importance of cultural difference is crucial and will help those families to live a healthy life and therefore make decisions more effectively in their children's lives.

Finally, for the next intern who wants to join the Santa Cruz Commission on Disabilities must have the passion and be ready to be on her/his own. The commissioners are very supportive but limited when it comes to transportation. They are brave volunteers and strong support for anyone who wants to make a change in Santa Cruz County. Due to the fact that conversations can be emotionally exhausting and often times there is very little that can be done, it is important that next intern makes sure to have a system of support and a way to process these conversations.

Appendix A

Problem Model Diagram



## Appendix B

Scope of Work and Timeline Table

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline	Completion Dates
Attend support groups in Watsonville	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Conduct research	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Commission meetings	Word document	June - November	December 2017
Gather parents information	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Write parents conversations	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Analyze parents conversations	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Identify parents leaders	Word document	June – November	December 2017
Attend SELPA North monthly meeting	Word document	March - October	December 2017
Attend SELPA South monthly meeting	Word document	March - October	December 2017
Final analysis of their stories	Power point	November 10th – 25 <sup>th</sup>	December 1 <sup>th</sup> 2017

Appendix C

This study sought to answer the following questions:

- a) - What do you want for your child?
- b) - What resources are most useful to you?
- c) - What resources do you need that you don't have?
- d) - If you could choose one thing that could be improved about the IEP process, what would it be?

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