

## Testimony for the Senate Committee on Education

June 16, 2010

On behalf of TCASE I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I am Lana Fincher, director of special education in Amarillo ISD. Currently I also serve as President of TCASE, the Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education. Amarillo is a diverse district with 61% of our students being classified as economically disadvantaged and 9% identified as needing special education.

I have been a special education administrator since 1988. In that time we have had only four due process hearings. I am here today to bring to light three issues related to this panel; challenges we face across Texas, how we approach these challenges in Amarillo, and some possible solutions.

One of the challenges includes the complexity of the ARD process. In 2002 the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education found more than 814 IDEA procedural monitoring requirements for compliance by state and local programs. This does not include the additional requirements formulated by the state. This rubric creates a disconnect between educators who are trying to comply and parents who are trying to focus on their child. During ARD meetings school personnel tend to focus on these procedural and legal requirements. To parents, some of the documentation required might appear cumbersome and unrelated to the education of students. I will discuss more on how we handle this situation to maintain a student focus.

School districts are not immune to shrinking resources. Just like all of you, we have to make tough choices as we face this challenge.

In Amarillo we have several processes and district-wide initiatives that I believe promote positive interactions between parents and schools.

- Every ARD meeting in our district is chaired by a campus administrator, either the principal or assistant principal. Our superintendent, Rod Schroder, supports this process that has been in place for many years. We provide training to our administrators in regards to ensuring that all members, parents and students, have an opportunity to speak and be heard. It is our fundamental mission that everyone knows they have a voice during the process. We also want the parent to be an active and equal partner.
- At the end of each ARD meeting parents are given a short survey card that they may return by mail or leave with the school. You have a copy of the survey card and a chart showing our results for the past five years. As you can see the results show that parents who responded are very satisfied. My co-director and I review every card that is returned and if there is a negative response and the parent has given their name and phone number we call and try to resolve the issue or concern. Every campus principal also receives a copy of the survey cards for their campus.

- District wide training in Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) also lead to acquiring results for students and better communication with parents. Our superintendent has led our district in becoming a Professional Learning Communities district with principal Professional Learning Communities occurring monthly, as well as campus based and other district Professional Learning Communities meetings. These types of initiatives help us as educators become focused on building relationships with our parents, students, and communities.
- In Amarillo we have regular meetings for parents of students with autism. We also facilitate group meetings for siblings of students with autism. In addition, our focus on Positive Behavior Supports has led to several campus parent meetings to help parents understand how to implement Positive Behavior Supports at home.
- In the past we have trained our campus administrators and others in a facilitated IEP process. We used an outside source for the training. While this training was beneficial, the training was focused on having a neutral facilitator at ARD meetings. This is a costly process. Since that time we have determined that elements of that initial training are very important and we will continue with them. Some of those include building relationships with parents, using agendas and ground rules, and getting consensus at various times throughout the ARD meeting. We also strongly encourage ARD committee members to have one facilitator and at least one other person who focuses on the documentation. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to facilitate the ARD meeting and document the process at the same time. I also think it is important to note that when people use the term facilitated IEP process it means different things to different people.

Some ideas that we have on finding solutions to creating positive communication between parents and schools include:

- Gathering information from our Texas districts that have ideas and processes in place that work. For example, several other districts use survey cards. DeNette Krawczynski from Northside ISD is here to speak today during the public comments section concerning their programs. I have also included a handout for you with many examples from some of our districts. This list is certainly not all inclusive but has some excellent programs in place for promoting positive communication between schools and parents.
- I know that the commissioner is looking at ways to reduce some of the requirements placed on school districts. It would be most helpful if we could reduce or eliminate the state requirements for special education that go above the federal law requirements. Let's work together to eliminate the complication of the process as much as possible.
- At TCASE we have begun some preliminary conversations with Kathy Clayton concerning how we can work together to develop training in communication models that promote good outcomes for all of our students.

Again, thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today. I will be happy to entertain any questions or comments you may have.

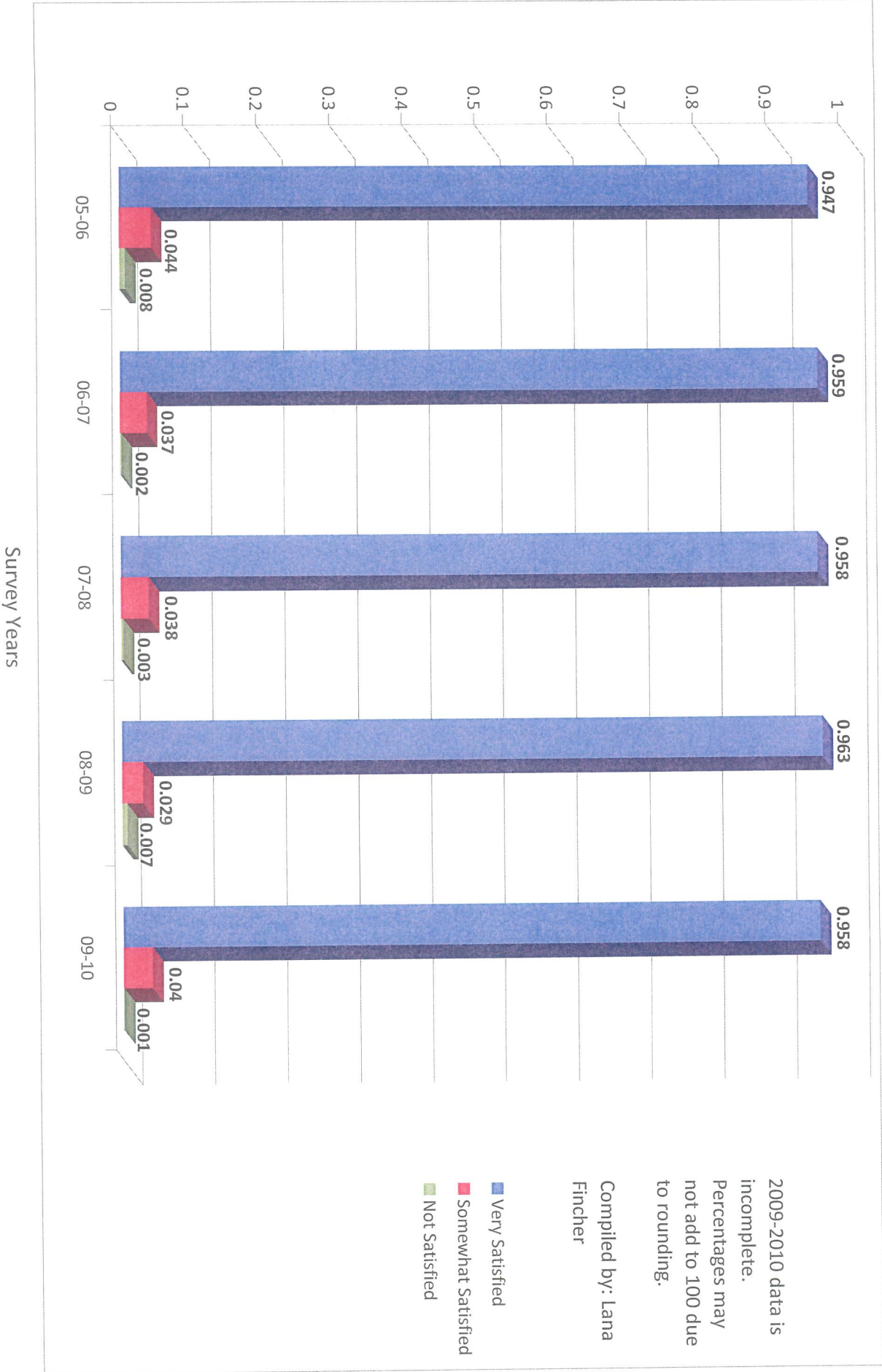
Lana Fincher

Director of Special Education

Amarillo ISD

# Amarillo ISD Parent Survey

Combined Survey Percentage Results (%)



## Special Education

Please complete this card and drop it in any mailbox. (No postage is required)

- | Are you pleased with . . .                                | YES    | SOMEWHAT | NO  |
|---|--------|----------|-----|
| 1. The way the ARD committee listens to your suggestions? | 1. ( ) | ( )      | ( ) |
| 2. The way modifications are being used with your child?  | 2. ( ) | ( )      | ( ) |
| 3. The way the teachers work with your child?             | 3. ( ) | ( )      | ( ) |
| 4. Your child's progress?                                 | 4. ( ) | ( )      | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Your child's school: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_ Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_



NO POSTAGE  
NECESSARY  
IF MAILED  
IN THE  
UNITED STATES

**BUSINESS REPLY MAIL**

FIRST-CLASS MAIL PERMIT 22 AMARILLO TX

POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY ADDRESSEE

SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR  
AMARILLO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT  
7200 W INTERSTATE 40  
AMARILLO TX 79106-9978



## Activities to Promote Positive Parent Communication Texas School Districts

### United

- Parent Festival
- Parenting skills focusing on gang and drug related activity

### Austin

- Power of Three

### El Paso

- Self-Determination
- Student Led IEPs
- Bilingual parent liaison to attend ARDs with parents

### Klein

- Training to parents in behavior, compliance, autism
- Training to parents on guardianship and life planning

### Humble

- "The Incredible Years" training for parents which is long term and long range
- Transition issues for post school outcomes

### Ysleta

- Post ARD survey card
- Parent Picnic

### Round Rock

- Parent Liaisons who meet with parents prior to the ARD
- Informal lunch and/or coffee meetings to listen to parents and keep them informed
- Specific trainings focused on different aspects of the process
- Facilitated ARD training

### HEB

- Parent University is hosted twice a year

### Northside

- Parent Advisory Committee which sponsors Family Night and other trainings
- Parent Liaison
- Parent Power

## Irving

- Brown Bag Sessions for parents—12 a year are hosted with different topics
- Transition Parent Night with vendor participation

## Amarillo

- ARD Survey Cards
- Guardianship and Life Planning trainings for parents
- Parent and sibling trainings related to Autism
- PBS trainings for parents