

Family Support Group

Fitzmorris Elementary

Arvada, CO



COLORADO
Department of Education

For families of students on the Autism Spectrum Disorder and with other disabilities, supporting one another in a welcoming and safe environment can provide an opportunity for families to connect and to more deeply understand their students' learning and progress. At Fitzmorris Elementary, the need for such support was recognized by a family leader who then approached the Family Engagement Liaison with the idea. The result, The Family Support Group, provides families with an opportunity to develop relationships with other families whom they can share their challenges and successes with.

Together, the family leader and the Family Engagement Liaison created a framework that included topics for the group and recruitment strategies. They made sure this framework aligned with school policy and processes, as well as adhered to confidentiality requirements around students with special needs. Additionally, they set up numerous meetings with the school principal to ensure the group goals aligned with the school's needs.

As Fitzmorris Elementary has an Autism Lab, many families of students with autism participated in The Family Support group, although it was offered to any family in the school with a child with a disability. The group met once a month for an hour to discuss the pre-designated topic and listen and support one another. The group then identified common areas in need of more discussion and created a list of topics they wanted to invite guest speakers to present on, such as the Autism Society and other support services. Presenters also provided families with activities they could do at home with their children and information on other resources. The family leader planned and implemented all sessions, while the liaison attended each meeting and helped with the logistics of the group. After each meeting, the family leader and the liaison met to debrief by identifying areas of challenge and areas of success.

It took time to build trust between the families, but staff report that by the third meeting, parents had begun to feel comfortable discussing their concerns and sharing strategies for supporting their students. Over time, the group agreed to open the meetings to all families in the district that have a student with a disability. While this increased the size of the group, they were able to maintain the necessary level of trust. The family leader also reached out to families who did not consistently attend—simply by doing so increased these families' attendance.

Students benefited from The Family Support Group as the participating families were able to try new strategies at home, as well as collaborate with teachers to advocate for their students' special needs. The school benefitted from The Family Support Group as participation increased families' confidence in ways they could support their child both in school and with learning activities at home.

Standard 4—Speaking Up for Every Child