

3. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AT SCHOOL

Family involvement in children's educational development can take place in a variety of settings, including at home, at school, and in the community. The preceding chapter focused on involvement at home; this chapter shifts the focus to school. Families may be involved at school in numerous ways, including volunteering in classrooms or with class or school activities, participating in parent-teacher organizations and school decision-making bodies, attending school or class events or parent-teacher conferences, and participating in the individualized education program (IEP) process (Epstein, 2001; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; Mapp, 2003).

Parent involvement at school has been linked to a range of positive student outcomes, including improved academic achievement, better attendance, and more positive attitudes and behavior (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In addition to student benefits, family participation at school provides opportunities for communication and interactions between staff and families, thereby strengthening linkages between school and home (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). When families are involved at school, teachers report being more aware of family perspectives, as well as benefiting from parent volunteer efforts (Epstein, 1987a, 2001).

The chapter begins by examining school-based family involvement activities that are available to all families, regardless of whether their children have a disability.¹ These include participation in:

- ◆ General school meetings
- ◆ Parent-teacher conferences
- ◆ School or class events
- ◆ Volunteer activities at school.

The chapter continues with a comparison of levels of involvement in the school setting for families of youth with disabilities with those for families in the general population. It then includes a discussion of involvement in a school-based activity that is specific to families of youth with disabilities—participation in IEP meetings. The chapter concludes with an examination of variations in school-based family involvement for students in different disability categories.

Involvement in School-Based Activities, Other Than IEP Meetings

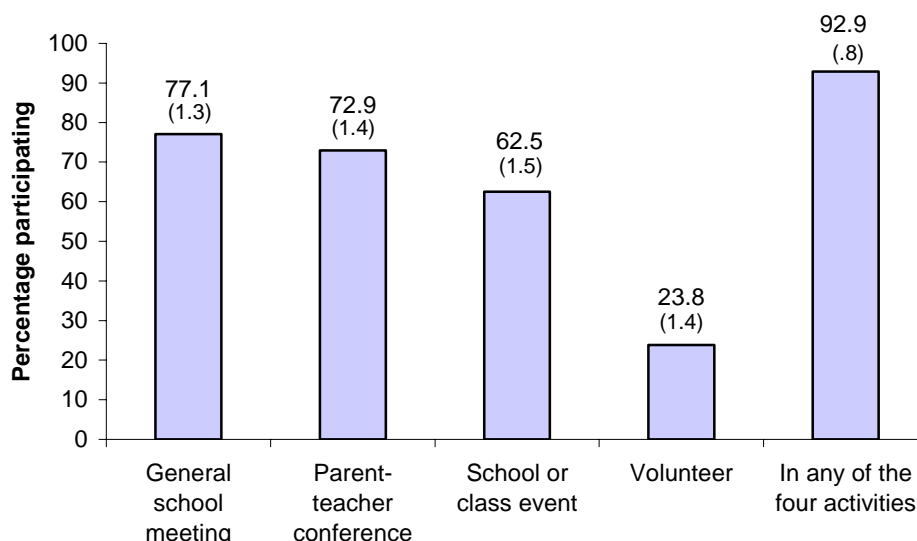
Families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities participate in a wide range of school-based activities, including schoolwide meetings (e.g., back-to-school nights or PTA meetings), conferences with individual teachers, student or class activities (e.g., attending

¹ This chapter describes the experiences of youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 17 at the time of the parent interview. Findings are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age group, as well as those in each disability category individually. Only differences among groups that reach a level of statistical significance of at least .05 are mentioned in the text.

science fairs or musical performances), and volunteering at school (e.g., chaperoning class field trips or serving on school committees) (Exhibit 3-1).

- ❖ Approximately three out of four parents report attending school meetings (77%) and parent-teacher conferences (73%).
- ❖ Almost two-thirds (62%) report attending school or class events.
- ❖ Parents also report volunteering at school, although to a lesser extent than other types of school-based involvement, with about one-quarter volunteering.
- ❖ Overall, 93% participate in at least one of these types of school-based activities.

**Exhibit 3-1
INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES
BY FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

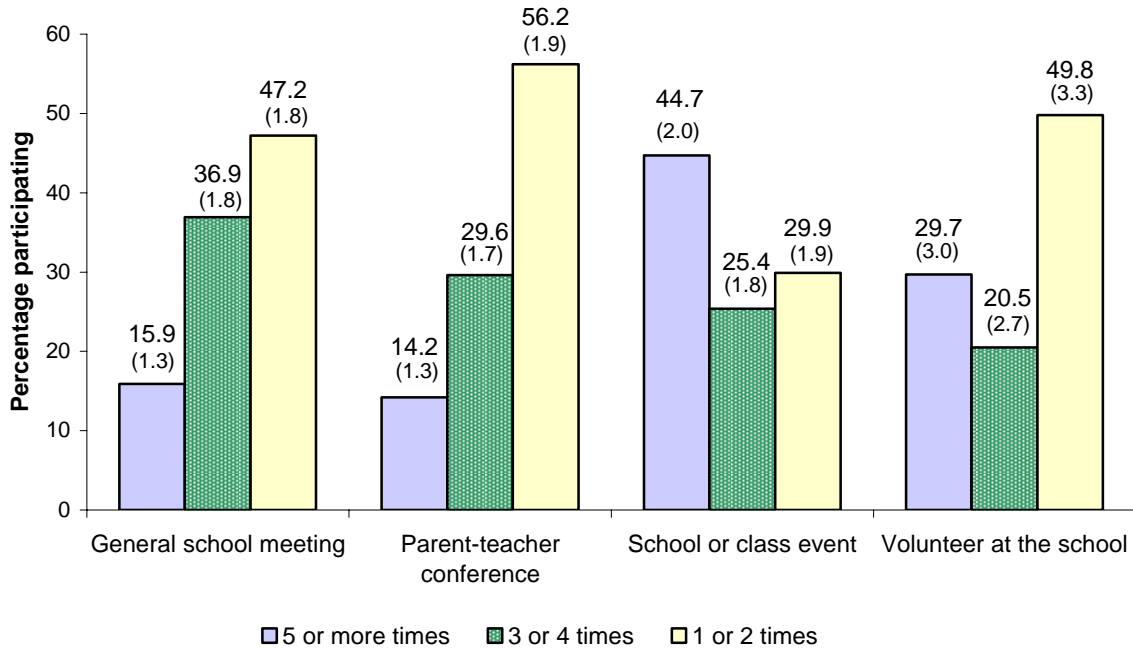


Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Among parents who participate in school activities, the frequency of their involvement varies by type of activity (Exhibit 3-2).

- ❖ Parents who participate in school-based activities are most frequently at the school for school or class events, such as science fairs, student performances, sports activities, and awards assemblies. In this they are similar to their peers in the general population, in that “the best way to get parents to attend events at school is to have students involved” (Epstein, 2001, p. 445).
- ❖ Of those who attend school or class events, 45% report attending five or more events during a school year.
- ❖ In contrast, most parents who participate in other school-based activities do so only once or twice a year.
- ❖ Almost half (47%) who attend general school meetings do so once or twice, 56% attend one or two parent-teacher conferences, and 50% volunteer at the school infrequently.

**Exhibit 3-2
FREQUENCY OF INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES
BY FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Scale of Involvement in School-Based Activities

A family involvement scale was created to examine the frequency of family involvement in the four types of school-based activities. Summing values from 0 to 4 for each of the four types of involvement at school—participation in general school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, school or class events, and volunteering at school—results in a scale that ranges from 0 (never involved in school-based activities) to 16 (involved in all four types of activities five or more times per year) (Exhibit 3-3).

- ❖ With 8% of the families receiving a scale score between 10 and 16, very few parents are highly involved at school by participating in all types of school-based activities very frequently.
- ❖ More than half of the families (56%) report fairly infrequent participation in the four types of school-based activities (i.e., a score of 0 to 4).
- ❖ The mean scale score is 4.5.
- ❖ On average, families are less frequently involved at school than at home.

Exhibit 3-3
SCALE OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN
SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES

Percentage of families with school-based scale score ^a :	
High (10-16)	8.2 (1.6)
Medium (5-9)	35.6 (1.5)
Low (0-4)	56.3 (.9)
Mean school-based family involvement scale score	4.5 (.1)

Source: NTLS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

^a Range = 0 to 16.

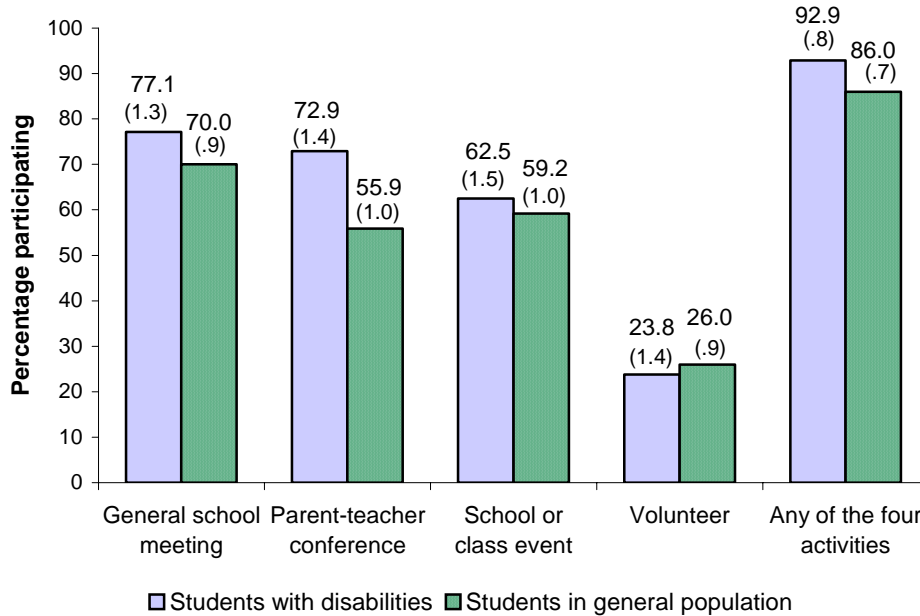
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Comparison with Families in the General Population

Families of students with disabilities are as likely as, and in some cases more likely than, their peers in the general population to participate in several types of school-based activities (Exhibit 3-4).

- ❖ More than three-quarters (77%) of families of students with disabilities attend general school meetings in a school year, compared with 70% of other parents ($p < .001$).
- ❖ Almost three-quarters (73%) participate in parent-teacher conferences, compared with 56% of their peers in the general population ($p < .001$).
- ❖ Families of students with disabilities and families of other students have similar levels of attending school and class events (62% and 59%), and similar levels of volunteering at school (24% and 26%).
- ❖ Families of students with disabilities are more likely to be involved in any of the four types of in-school activities than are their peers. More than 9 out of 10 parents of youth with disabilities (93%) participate in at least one of the four types of school-based activities in a school year, compared with 86% of families of students in the general population ($p < .001$).

Exhibit 3-4
INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES BY FAMILIES
OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND STUDENTS IN THE
GENERAL POPULATION



Sources: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews and U.S. Department of Education, NCES, National Household Education Survey, 1999 parent survey (responses calculated for youth ages 13-17). Standard errors are in parentheses.

Involvement in the IEP Process

Participation in the development of their children’s IEP is a type of family-school partnership specific to families of students with disabilities who qualify for special education services. The family-school relationship for families of students with disabilities is more clearly prescribed by law than is the relationship for families of other students. The cornerstone of this relationship is the IEP, specified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA ’97). The process for developing an IEP is the mechanism through which a student’s unique needs are identified and an education program is crafted to meet them.

“An IEP is a written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with certain requirements of law and regulations. ... Two general purposes of the IEP are (1) to establish measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives, for the child; and (2) to state the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services that the public agency will provide to, or on behalf of, the child” (NICHCY, 2000, p. 10).

An IEP team is responsible for developing the IEP. As specified by IDEA regulations [Section 300.345(a)] parents are expected to be members of the IEP team, “each public agency shall take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate.” The IEP “meeting can serve as

an excellent communication vehicle between parents and the public agency. It enables the parents and other members of the IEP team to decide what the child's educational needs are, what goals and objectives or benchmarks are appropriate, what services will be provided, and what results can be anticipated, and to specify these in the IEP” (NICHCY, 2000, p. 13).

Parents can face multiple barriers to their active participation in the IEP process. Some are similar to barriers faced by all parents to school involvement in general, including logistical problems, such as lack of transportation or child care or conflicts with work schedules; a lack of understanding of the school system; or language or cultural differences (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Smith, 2001; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Other difficulties are specific to the IEP process, such as miscommunication or discomfort with educational jargon or with technical terminology related to testing, statistical analysis, placement, and services (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Smith, 2001).

Attendance. When asked about their attendance at an IEP meeting:

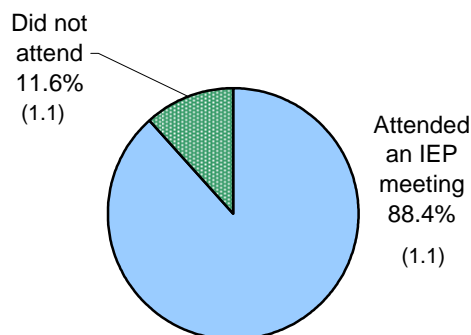
- ❖ Nearly 9 out of 10 parents of secondary-school-age students with disabilities (88%) report having participated in at least one IEP meeting in the current or prior school year (Exhibit 3-5).

Teachers’ perceptions of parents’ involvement in their children’s IEP meetings are consistent with parents’ reports of their own involvement. When asked whether NLTS2 students’ parents had attended the most recent IEP meeting:

- ❖ Teachers report that 83% of parents had attended the meeting in the current school year.

Although this is slightly lower than the parent-reported attendance rate of 88%, some difference would be expected since teachers’ reports are for a 1-year period instead of the 2-year period reported by parents.

**Exhibit 3-5
FAMILY ATTENDANCE AT
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION
PROGRAM MEETINGS**



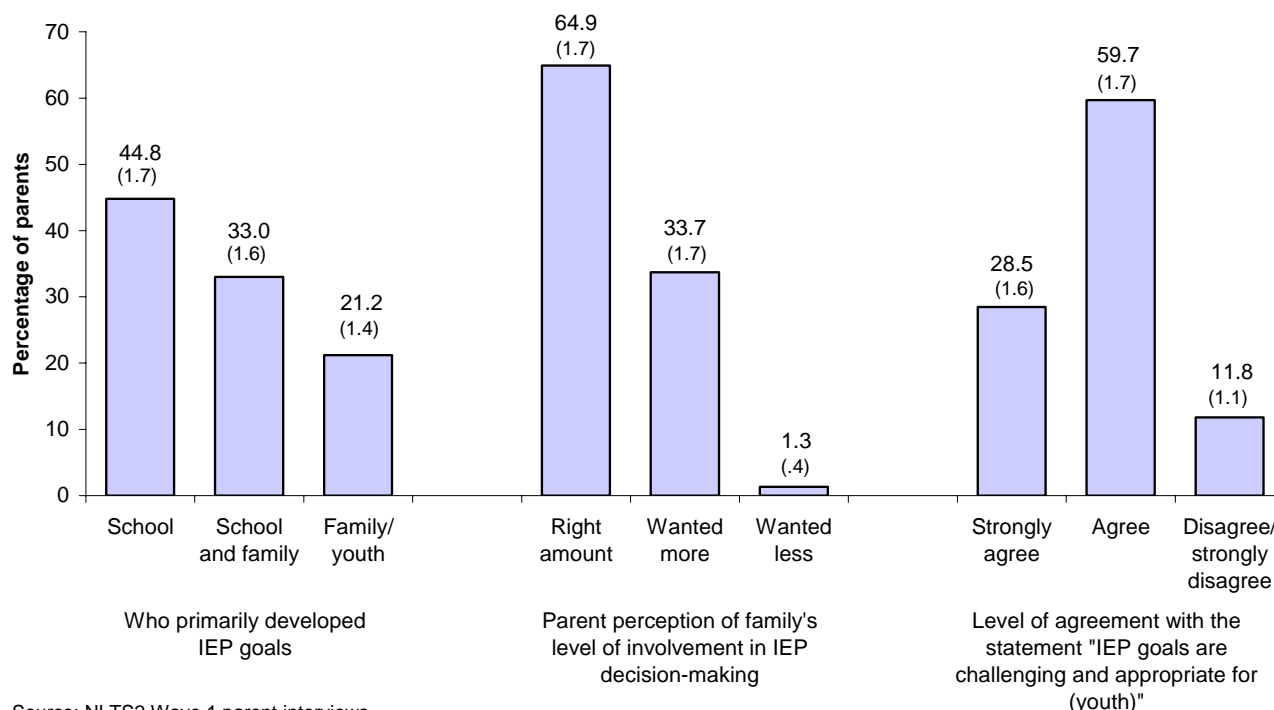
Family attendance at an IEP meeting in the current or prior school year.

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Decision-making. Family attendance at IEP meetings does not always ensure active participation in the decision-making process (Exhibit 3-6).

- ❖ One-fifth of families report being primarily responsible for developing IEP goals.
- ❖ Almost 45% report that their children's IEP goals were developed primarily by the school, with little family or youth input.
- ❖ The finding that almost half of the parents report that goals were developed primarily by the school is consistent with other research that found that IEPs frequently are written by school staff before the IEP meeting (Winton, 1994).
- ❖ When asked how they feel about their family's involvement in decisions about their children's IEP, approximately two-thirds feel they have been "involved about the right amount."
- ❖ Although the majority of families report being comfortable with their level of participation, one-third want to be more involved; almost none would prefer to be less involved.
- ❖ The rate of dissatisfaction with their level of participation in IEP meetings is similar to that reported by other studies of parent involvement in IEP meetings (Salembier & Furney, 1997).
- ❖ Parents who are unhappy with their children's IEP goals are more likely to feel that they wanted to be more involved in the process.
- ❖ Almost 9 out of 10 parents (88%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that their children's IEP goals are challenging and appropriate.
- ❖ Parents' feelings about their participation in IEP meetings is related to their feelings about their children's IEP goals. More than three-quarters (76%) of those who do not think that their child's IEP goals are challenging and appropriate want to be more involved in the IEP process, compared with 23% of those who strongly agree that the goals are challenging and appropriate ($p < .001$).

**Exhibit 3-6
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM DECISION-MAKING**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Differences in School-Based Family Involvement across Disability Categories

Family involvement in educational activities at school varies by disability category, with more variation in some forms of family involvement than others (Exhibit 3-7). Attending a general school meeting and attending an IEP meeting are more uniformly reported activities across disability categories than attending a school or class event or volunteering at the school. For example, there is an 11-percentage-point difference between families with the lowest and highest rates of attendance at IEP meetings (96% of families of students with other health impairments vs. 85% of families of students with mental retardation, $p < .001$), compared with a 20-percentage-point spread in the rates of families' attendance at a school or class event (70% of families of students with other health impairments vs. 50% of families of students with emotional disturbances, $p < .001$).

- ❖ Families of students with speech or orthopedic impairments are consistently among the most likely to participate in school meetings (82% and 78%) or in school or class events (68% and 68%), or to volunteer at the school (32% and 34%).
- ❖ Families of students with emotional disturbances or mental retardation are among the least likely to participate in three of the four types of school-based activities—school meetings (72% and 72%), events (50% and 57%), and volunteering (15% and 21%)—but they are among the most likely to attend parent-teacher conferences (73% and 74%).

- ❖ Families of students with other health or speech impairments have the highest school-based involvement scale scores (5.1 and 4.9).
- ❖ Families of students with mental retardation or emotional disturbances have the lowest school-based involvement scale scores (4.0 for both).
- ❖ Families of students with other health impairments (96%) or traumatic brain injuries (96%) are among those most likely to attend IEP meetings.
- ❖ Families of students with mental retardation (85%) or speech impairments (86%) are among those least likely to attend IEP meetings.

**Exhibit 3-7
SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY INVOLVEMENT, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY**

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities	Deaf-Blindness
Percentage whose parents report in the last school year:												
Attending a general school meeting	78.7 (2.0)	81.9 (1.9)	72.0 (2.2)	72.1 (2.3)	75.6 (2.5)	79.1 (2.9)	77.9 (2.3)	77.2 (2.0)	77.9 (2.2)	77.1 (3.9)	75.6 (2.4)	70.5 (4.7)
Attending a school or class event	64.9 (2.3)	67.5 (2.3)	57.0 (2.5)	49.6 (2.6)	68.6 (2.7)	66.3 (3.4)	68.2 (2.6)	70.3 (2.2)	59.3 (2.7)	53.5 (4.7)	55.5 (2.7)	61.8 (5.0)
Volunteering at the school	24.7 (2.1)	31.6 (2.3)	21.1 (2.0)	14.7 (1.8)	23.2 (2.4)	26.9 (3.2)	33.7 (2.6)	29.0 (2.2)	31.4 (2.5)	25.1 (4.0)	24.9 (2.4)	26.5 (4.5)
Attending a parent-teacher conference	73.0 (2.2)	71.7 (2.2)	74.2 (2.2)	73.2 (2.3)	67.1 (2.7)	65.7 (3.4)	69.3 (2.6)	74.2 (2.1)	73.5 (2.4)	68.4 (4.2)	70.8 (2.5)	59.7 (5.2)
Percentage involved in any of the above four school-based activities	93.7 (1.2)	95.0 (1.1)	91.3 (1.4)	90.1 (1.5)	93.5 (1.4)	92.8 (1.8)	94.2 (1.3)	94.4 (1.1)	93.5 (1.3)	89.8 (2.8)	89.1 (1.72)	84.9 (3.6)
Mean school-based involvement scale score	4.6 (.2)	4.9 (.2)	4.0 (.2)	4.0 (.1)	4.8 (.2)	4.5 (.2)	4.8 (.2)	5.1 (.2)	4.6 (.2)	4.2 (.3)	4.3 (.2)	4.3 (.4)
Percentage whose families report attending an IEP meeting in current or prior year	87.6 (1.7)	85.8 (1.9)	85.4 (1.8)	91.2 (1.5)	89.0 (1.9)	92.7 (1.9)	92.4 (1.5)	96.2 (.9)	93.2 (1.4)	95.9 (1.8)	92.0 (1.5)	89.9 (3.2)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Summary

Many families of students with disabilities are involved at their children's schools, with almost all participating in at least one type of school-based activity.

- ◆ Families attend general school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school or class events, and, to a lesser extent, volunteer at school.

- ◆ Parents who participate in school-based activities are most frequently at the school for school or class events, such as science fairs, student performances, sports activities, and awards assemblies.
- ◆ Families of students with disabilities are as involved as their peers in the general population; and, for some types of school-based activities—general school meetings and parent-teacher conferences—they are more involved.
- ◆ Nearly 9 out of 10 parents of secondary-school-age students with disabilities report participating in at least one IEP meeting in the current or prior school year.
- ◆ Slightly more than half of the families report being involved in developing IEP goals.
- ◆ About one-third want to be more involved in IEP decision-making.
- ◆ Family involvement in educational activities at school varies by disability category, with more variation in attending a school or class event or volunteering at school than in attending a general school meeting or an IEP meeting.
- ◆ Students with speech or orthopedic impairments have parents who consistently are among the most likely to participate in several types of school-based activities.
- ◆ Families of students with emotional disturbances or mental retardation are among the least likely to attend a general school meeting or a school or class event, or to volunteer at the school, but are among those most likely to attend parent-teacher conferences.
- ◆ Families of students with other health impairments or traumatic brain injuries are among those most likely to attend IEP meetings.
- ◆ Families of students with mental retardation or speech impairments are among those least likely to attend IEP meetings.

This chapter has examined family involvement at school, focusing on overall experiences and differences across disability categories. Chapter 4 will expand these findings by using a multivariate analysis approach to examine the relationship between student and family characteristics and levels of both school-based and home-based involvement.