

# Enhancing the Knowledge and Tools Available to Mental Health Professionals Related to the Special Education Needs of Pediatric Patients

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## Defining the Problem

- Children requiring psychiatric evaluation and treatment have a complex set of needs, including counseling and care coordination. These needs may include school-based evaluations and special education and related services associated with childhood psychiatric diagnoses and other disabilities.
- A mental health professional may be the first person to recommend that a child be evaluated to establish eligibility for special education and related services.
- To be good advocates for their patients, mental health professionals must be aware of services and supports available to their patients, and the requirements for student eligibility for special education and related services.
- The assessments, interventions, and accommodations provided by the school system are structured around a legal framework, not the biopsychosocial framework of clinical diagnoses and treatment plans.
- Mental health professionals may need additional resources to appropriately counsel and coordinate care for their patients with respect to the school system.

## Purpose of the Project

Develop resources to facilitate patient care by guiding patients and their families as they navigate the special education process.

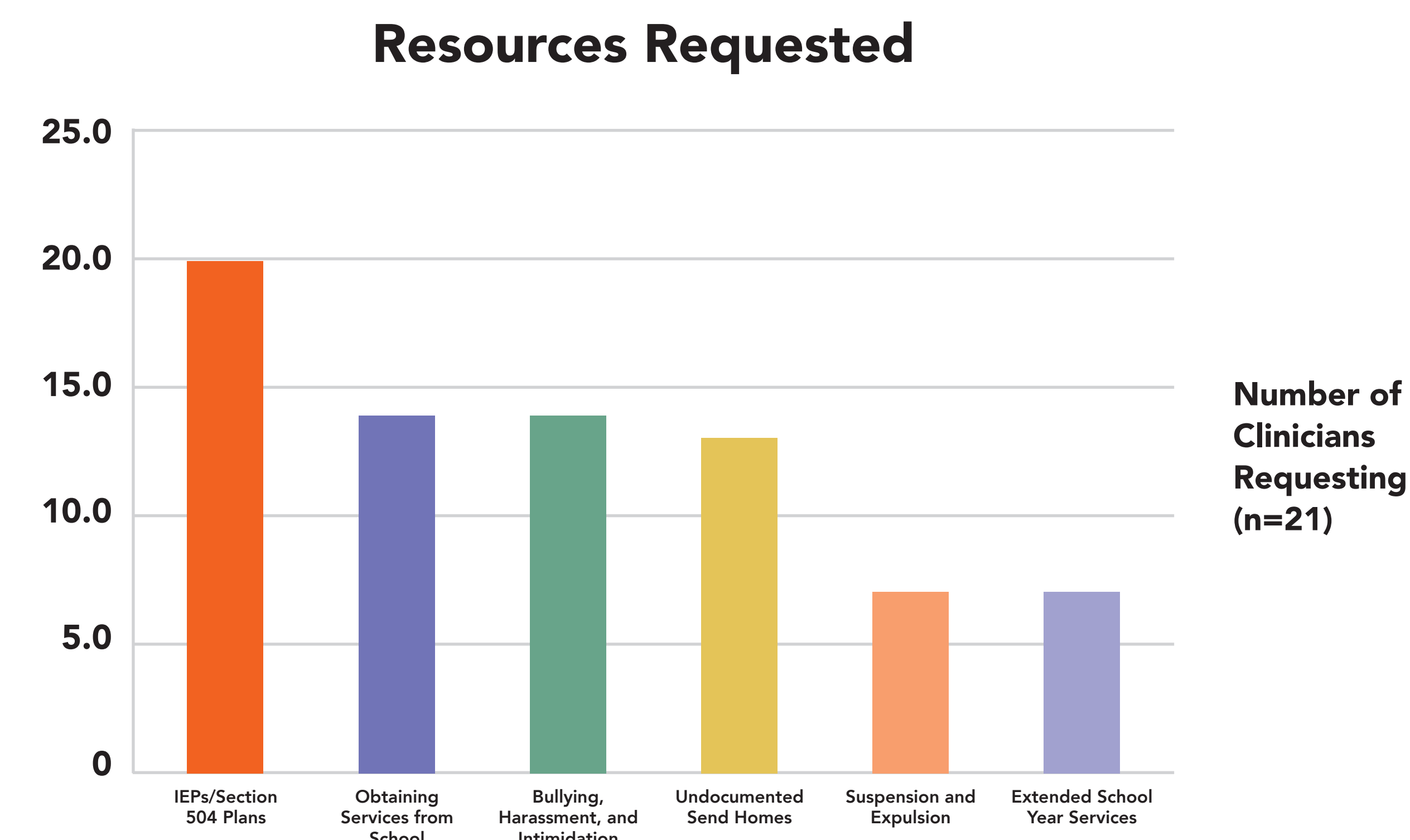


## Method

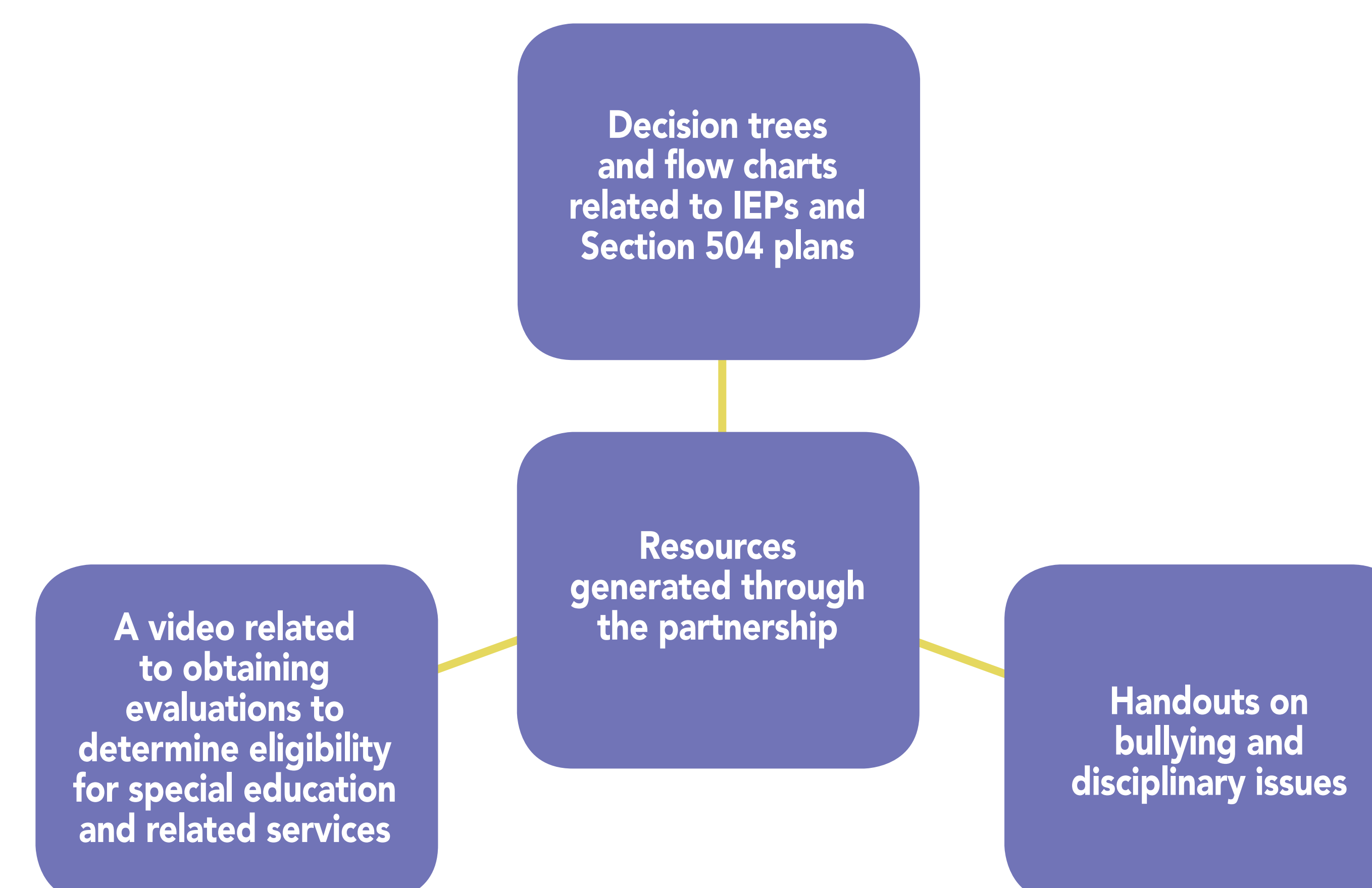
- Twenty-one mental health professionals, including nine psychiatrists, seven clinical social workers, two psychiatric nurse practitioners, two clinical psychologists, and one case management assistant, completed a brief, online survey.
- Based upon respondents' preferences, the authors of this work created a partnership between Project HEAL (Health, Education, Advocacy, and Law) and the Psychiatric Mental Health Program at Kennedy Krieger Institute, to develop resources addressing school-related issues.
- Project HEAL is a community-based program of the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities which provides advocacy and legal services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families who receive clinical services at Kennedy Krieger Institute.

## Results

- Mental health professionals requested information primarily in the form of decision trees that will provide a roadmap for navigating services and troubleshooting issues (85%), followed by handouts that are appropriate for mental health professionals, patients, and their families (80%).



- The collaboration between Project HEAL attorneys and the mental health professionals in the Psychiatric Mental Health Program resulted in more efficient and effective sharing of information and resources, and mental health professionals who more effectively triaged patients' issues related to special education and related services.



## What Mental Health Professionals Said

"A resource involving strategies for how to write letters to the school requesting services would be appreciated."

"Would love to see Project HEAL make a series of topical video presentations (10-20 minutes each) that clinicians could locate on the intranet to play for parents on a computer or DVD on a TV."

Mental health professionals identified tools they believed would help them advocate for their patients and coordinate care:

"In addition to a decision tree, it would be nice to have a brief fact sheet that clarifies the differences between an individualized education program (IEP) and Section 504 plan that will educate clinicians as well as families. It would also be nice to provide clinicians with a Q&A document that provides common questions from parents and short/simple responses that we could provide."

"I have several clients who are struggling with bullying. I'd like to learn more about the options students and parents have other than filing the official bullying reporting form."

## Discussion

- This collaboration demonstrated that mental health professionals have expressed interest in increasing their knowledge and skills to better advocate for their patients in matters related to the delivery of special education and related services through the school system.
- In addition to providing information for mental health professionals to share with their patients, resources were designed to optimize clinicians' time with patients (i.e., an informational video and a decision tree).
- Effective education of mental health professionals may help reduce unnecessary consultation with attorneys, or encourage families to seek legal assistance, as appropriate.
- These resources will require periodic updates to stay current with mental health professionals' needs.
- The authors plan to create additional resources in the future on topics such as bullying, harassment, and intimidation and discipline.

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## References:

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