

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

Angela Kelly: Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 452.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach Angela Kelly.

Hello, Empowered Principals. Happy Tuesday and welcome to this episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. I have a guest for you today. We're going to talk about a very interesting topic, a topic that's relevant for both students, staff members, families, and school leaders. And I have Youness El Fehdi here today to talk with us about the IEP experience and what it feels like on the parental end to have conversations around 504s, IEPs, students with disabilities, and how to navigate those conversations in a way that is a win-win.

I like to call it a win-win, where it's the land of and, it's a benefit for obviously the student, but also for teacher, for school leader, and for the parents. We want to keep in mind as we're entering into this new school year, the experience of a family coming into our school and needing to navigate the experience of supporting their student in whatever learning capacities and supports that they need. So, Youness, welcome to the podcast.

Youness El Fehdi: Thank you, Angela, for inviting me.

Angela Kelly: Could you please tell the listeners a little bit more about you and your background and how you came to write a book on this very topic?

Youness El Fehdi: We had a boy. His name is Adam. And the first couple of years, the first two years, everything was normal. But about two-and-a-half-year-old, we started noticing that the eye contact is not there and the food, he was not eating a lot of food. I mean, he was eating

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

just one type of food. We decided to go, you know, start asking questions, and the doctor back then told us you might want to check with a doctor for to diagnose he might have autism.

So, we went over to the doctor and did the diagnosis. He was diagnosed with autism. Back then, we didn't have any idea what is autism, what's going on, how we deal with autism. So, it was a kind of an experience that made me think about seeing how difficult that experience was. That's what inspired me to write the book.

So, after doing a lot of researches and going through a lot of experience, after learning by research and by experience, like learning the hard way, two years after the maybe, what was 2019, like two, three years after the diagnosis, after going through all those experiences, I decided to share my story with specifically the parents that's going through the same experience that I went through. And they can benefit from it and save time instead of going the going through it the hard time. And sometimes you learn, sometimes you don't. And everybody's condition or circumstances is different. So, I decided to write that book to share my experience. So, we put Adam in therapy.

Angela Kelly: How old was he at this point?

Youness El Fehdi: We put him in therapy. He was like three years old.

Angela Kelly: Okay. So he was quite young.

Youness El Fehdi: Yeah, he was quite young. And that therapy is what saved Adam's, you know, saved him. He started getting like eye contact, and they started experimenting with some food, and his behavior improved. And like my advice to all the parents out there with kids with autism is just get them to therapy as early as possible. The longer you wait, the more difficult will be for your kid to develop skills and match and match his kids

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

with his age, his or her age. So, early intervention is very important for the kids. And then after that, here comes the school experience.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Youness El Fehdi: So going to school, we enrolled Adam in school in kindergarten and the first day we started getting calls from the teacher. I told Adam to do this. He didn't do this. I told him to go here. He didn't do that.

Angela Kelly: How did that feel as a parent to receive those phone calls? Because he was just a kinder at that point, right? He was in kindergarten?

Youness El Fehdi: Yes.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Youness El Fehdi: It feels that there is a lack of understanding of how to deal with kids, neurodiverse kids. And with that, I don't blame that teacher, but it should be like some type of training or enough training for those teachers to understand how to deal with kids with autism or any other type of disability. That would have prevented that issue of calling the parents every day, like, "Hey, come get your son."

On the parent's side, this is the challenges. You know, we all have jobs. So you got jobs, you got to work, this and then that interruption, a daily interruption, cause a lot of problems.

Angela Kelly: Mmhmm. So how did you navigate that as a parent?

Youness El Fehdi: We asked for an IEP meeting because at that point we already had an IEP in place. So, we went for that IEP meeting and we discussed with the school, the school committee, and we talked about what's the issue, what's like, they said that Adam was having meltdowns. So, they showed me a video of him having a meltdown.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

What I noticed in that video that, first of all, there were 30 kids around him, and when he was having that issue, the teacher was just saying, "Stop." So, "What do you suggest we do in cases like this?" I said, "First of all, we got to isolate him when he's having a meltdown because the more people around him, the worse he gets. That's the first step. And then just give him time. Give him like about 15, 20 minutes by himself, and usually that meltdown goes away. It don't stay forever."

They noted that, so after that, it got a little better. What I noticed is just the training, because sometimes even you get a certified teacher, especially if they're new to the job, they don't have that real experience with disabled kids. So, there is something in the book, but they never went through it. So, for the teacher's credit, I will tell parents, don't be impatient at first because at first, their the teachers are still getting used to your kid because autism is a spectrum. Not everybody is the same.

So, it's normal to have issues during that beginning phase. And then all you got to do as a parent is to give the teachers advice because you're more qualified to advise a professional because you got the edge. You got that little edge, which is the real-life experience with your kid at first. So, with that specific teacher, throughout the day, throughout the month, it got better. She started understanding what triggers him, what appeases him, and it got better throughout the years.

Angela Kelly: Mmhmm. That's wonderful. So, as frustrating as it may have been in the beginning for both you and your child and the teacher, because everyone was new. It was a new situation. The teacher wasn't, was new to your child and your child was new to school. And so, there was a little bit of confusion there in the beginning, but it sounds like with patience, both the teacher, the patience of the parents, you guys were able to communicate and work together by calling an IEP meeting and saying, "Hey, let us inform you of what we know works." And give it some time and patience. And they implemented that.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

And all of a sudden, we start to see this collaboration between parent and school, parent and teachers and the IEP team, where with just a few conversations, you were able to come up with a plan and an approach for Adam that was more comfortable for him in the long run.

Youness El Fehdi: Yes. I think what causes all the friction between parents of disabled kids and teachers or school administrators is, is instead of collaborating, there's the blame game. Like if the teacher call for your kid and you go over there with that attitude of like, "Oh, she's incompetent. She doesn't know her job." This and that.

And you just go there and you just start saying all that, that's going to make the problem worse because with that attitude, the teacher shut down. So, it takes step by step, like to tell them how your kid operates in this life because you got the inside knowledge that they don't know.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes.

Youness El Fehdi: And then after that, it's get better. But when we go there with that attitude of like, "I demand this and that," but you can demand all day long, and if you don't give them a clear picture of how to deal with your kid, the problem's just going to persist. And that's my advice for the parent. You just communicate. I know it's frustrating, and I'm saying it from experience because I was one of those parents that goes over there and...

Angela Kelly: Well, that's all you knew.

Youness El Fehdi: So, I'm not saying that blaming those parents for that either, because they're frustrated, they're interrupted, they see their kids cannot cope with the new school life, and it's all come one time. They're disrupting their job and their life and their and then they see your kids there's no, they don't see the lights at the end of the tunnel. But from my experience, if you communicate and you keep now, we do like a daily, like almost every two, three emails a week with the teacher. This is what he did

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

at home, and they said, this is what he did in school, and we try to come to a common ground to how to deal with him.

But that's my advice for the parents because to go over there during the meetings and there's friction and blame this, blame that. The teachers feel they're not heard. So, they start resisting. And then the parents feel the same thing that they're not heard and they start resisting and the conversation don't go anywhere. So, it's all about understanding and listening to each other.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes. You make such a valid point. And it sounds very simple because it sounds, you know, you would intellectually, it's like, of course, let's listen to the parents and we'll listen to the teachers and we'll work together and get along. But you said there's the element of life, where, you know, you're expecting your kid to be able to fit in, and you want your kid to feel safe and be happy and fit in at school and be able to do the things that the classroom is doing.

And you also have this whole life outside of parenting while your child is at school, you're building a business, you know, running a company or doing whatever work it is that you're doing out in the world and expecting your child to be in their element while you're in yours, and then having that interruption can bring up frustration in the lives of parents. And teachers are feeling the same way. They're feeling like we've got to come together somehow and figure this out because it's interrupting the classroom. So, while it sounds simple, it's not easy to do when emotions are running high.

Youness El Fehdi: Yes.

Angela Kelly: For both sides. So, as you're thinking about your IEPs are all coming in for the school year, you'll have new families coming in with new IEPs. And you're, you know, your little ones, if you guys are elementary principals out there, you will have students coming into pre-K, TK, kindergarten with IEPs already because you can get an IEP from a very

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

young age. So, that might be something worthwhile to check in with each and every family to see if they have an existing IEP so you have a foundation in which to start conversations and to call that meeting together right from the get-go so teachers don't feel misinformed or uninformed around the best approach for a student.

And vice versa, I think it's a great way to and I'm proud of you for being a parent who called the meeting and said, "Hey, we need to have this discussion." So, if you're a parent listening to this, don't be afraid to advocate. The educators want to know. They want to talk with you and they want to understand how best to work with your child.

And if you're a school leader listening to this or a teacher listening to this, look into the students assigned to your classroom or assigned in your school, particularly if they are younger, coming in or they're new to your community. Check in with them just to make sure that if they do have a 504 and IEP that it's addressed right off the bat so you can open the door and have a collaborative conversation right from the get-go.

Can I ask you something in terms of school leadership? Is there anything as a parent that school leaders can do to help you feel more comfortable, more welcome, more included into the school community or the classroom or the IEP process? Now, IEPs generally are the same across the board, but each school has a little bit different procedure for how they go about scheduling them and conducting them. Is there anything that you feel a school leader could benefit from your story that would be helpful for them to know to make things easier for everyone involved?

Youness El Fehdi: Yeah, I think the most important thing to do for neurodiverse community in schools from the educator standpoint is, you know, schools got their own rules and policies, and it's very good. It's very important to have policies and rules in school because that's how it's going to function.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

But in some cases, in the case of like neurodiverse kids, there's some rules that not fit for that specific case. It's like, let's say you tell a neurodiverse kid to, "Hey, you're not going to get a break until, you got to finish this assignment. And if you don't finish it, you're not going to get a break. You only get a break every 30 minutes, whatever." But that kid gets a meltdown, gets impatient.

And then let's say an inexperienced teacher will be like, "Oh, well, this kid is violating the rules. So, we're going to do a disciplinary write-up and we're going to call the parents and we're going to, if it happens again, we're going to suspend." The problem with that is like neurodiverse people in general, they play with different sets of rules, different sets of their nature is different than neurotypical people. So, when you apply the rules that govern the neurotypical people on neurodiverse, it don't work.

So, for the administrator's standpoint, I would just suggest like to look at the cases that involves neurodiverse kids differently. Like if the school got strict rules, that's good. That's very important. It's good. But when it comes to neurodiverse, we need to look at being flexible with them like tweaking that rule to fit the needs of that specific disabled person.

Otherwise, we will have issues like we talked about, phone calls every day, suspensions, maybe expulsion, whatever. So, those are the things that we need to distinguish when we're coming up with rules and applying the rules. We first look at who is that person and what type what type of rules that practical in their case and what type of rules are not that are not practical in their case. And that's how we separate the neurotypical and the neurodiverse because in reality, we all want inclusion. We want the disabled kids to be with the neurotypical kids together. But the nature of the disability does not support that.

Angela Kelly: And just understanding that and here we're talking about autism, but there are children with all different kinds of, you know,

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

disabilities or differences in their, you know, neural makeup. And they, rules are meant to keep people safe and to keep some structures in place. I mean, that's the intention of them. But when we use the rule, when it's so firm and there's no flexibility or accommodation considered, then the rule isn't creating the safety that we want it to create in the end, right?

If someone's having a meltdown because they can't get a physical break because their assignments' not finished, and then they have a meltdown, that's not safe for student, for those around them. And so, we want to keep in mind the purpose of rules, why we have them, and then also in working with individuals, what will maintain the purpose of the rule versus black and white, was the rule followed or not.

I really appreciate you sharing that because we can get kind of caught up in this is the rule, they didn't follow the rule, and now therefore we need to do something about that versus how do we work with the child in order to keep them safe and to get the work done. So, it's looking at why they may not be following the rule and what their needs are in order to get the work done, but also get the break they need versus this is the one way to do school, the one way to do it.

Youness El Fehdi: And this is coming from a law enforcement officer. So, I'm a law enforcement officer. I'm talking about the rules. Talking about the rules here, but...

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Youness El Fehdi: In terms of disabled kids, it's a different story because I believe in the rules because I live and die by the rules. This is what my job is anyway. But sometimes in terms of school and school environments and the disabled kids, we have to be flexible.

Angela Kelly: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. So, tell us a little bit more about the book that you wrote around this topic because I know you've written

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

several books, and we're actually planning on having Youness back on the podcast for another topic, but today I was like, I really want to capture this because it's the beginning of the school year, new families are coming into campus with all the new children, and this is the perfect time to build relationships with our families, to determine if they have specific needs or if they have already a plan in place where we can start implementing that plan and working together.

So, tell us more about the book. What's in the book? What are the tips and strategies that you've researched and learned and what are some things that we can do as educators to be as supportive as possible?

Youness El Fehdi: The book came out in a period when I was I was just start to get solutions for whatever a new parent, new parents have whenever they have a kid with disability. And the first thing I discussed the social issues like, let's say you're at Walmart and your kid has a meltdown. I talk about how people would be staring at you like and judging you as a bad parent because you cannot control your kid, which is not the case.

But my advice to the parents on that case is you just get used to it and don't care about it because if you take it too hard every time, it's just going to bring you down and it's not... So, you just develop that, you know, you just go along with your day and don't worry about it because, first of all, those bystanders, I don't blame them because they're uninformed. They don't even know what autism is, probably.

They never heard about it, and they don't even know if your kid is autistic or not because the thing with autism, you can't tell if somebody got autism or not. It's not like let's say a blind person, you can tell because, you know, they're having a cane or whatever, it's physical. But for autism is not physical. If you don't really deal with that person, you wouldn't know. So, people always approach is like a normal person.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

So, that's one of the points and the second point that I emphasize in there is the like we just talked about, early intervention is very important for your kid. That saved us a lot of challenges that would be more difficult if we did not put Adam in therapy at an early age. And therapies are so there you got occupational therapy, you got ABA, applied behavior analysis. And for Adam's case, we tried occupational therapy at first. We didn't see a lot of development in his behavior, and then we switched to ABA, applied behavior analysis. That's what I specified in my book, *Dominate the Challenges of Autism*.

And ABA, that's how he got the skill of eye contact. And that's how he start talking a little bit because he's nonverbal, but he still can before ABA, let's give you an example. Like if you want to drink water, he couldn't say that. He just he would just grab you. He would grab you from your hand and just lead you to the fridge or something and then you got to figure out if you want to eat or drink. But after the ABA, he start he say just sentences. He don't talk, but

Angela Kelly: He can communicate his needs though.

Youness El Fehdi: Yeah, his needs, but he can't like carry a conversation or go back and forth in conversation. But if he memorized a sentence and he know what especially when it's comes to his needs, like water or watch TV or something, he learned that like, I want this, I want that. But he don't really, he's considered nonverbal, but he's still can

Angela Kelly: Verbalize.

Youness El Fehdi: Yeah, can verbalize some sentences to express his needs and wants. So, ABA therapy was really important for Adam. But I read about it, and there's a lot of pushback from people about ABA. They said, "Oh, ABA is just about repeating stuff, repeating this, repeating that." And it should not be the standard.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

But everything, every kid with autism is different. They're on spectrums. For my kid, ABA works best. So, my advice to the parent out there is to try. I'm not saying ABA is the golden rule, but for my son, it was the golden rule. So, for your son, it might be occupational therapy, it might be something else, might be like something about verbal something to train your kid how to talk. It just depends.

So, the spectrum is a multi-dimensional disability. So, what you do just try type of therapy and see what works best for you and then go with it. For our case, we went with the ABA therapy and it's and it works really well. So, the techniques I put over there, there are plenty of techniques. They're very specific. But like the case that happened in school, when the teacher was with Adam and he was having a meltdown, and she was just trying to stop, stop screaming. That's an approach we use with neurotypical kids, not neurodiverse. So, the technique is isolate and just wait it out. Maybe 10, 15 minutes and everything is going to go back to normal. So, that's one of the things.

And other techniques, they're like neurodiverse kids, especially my kid but most of them is probably 95% they don't have the sense of time. They don't understand what time is like. They don't distinguish between tomorrow and today. They live in the present. They live in the present because if you tell them if they if you tell them if like they say, "I want to go to the beach," and you tell them, "Okay, this Saturday we're going to go to the beach." He's then two minutes later, they're going to come back and say, "I want to go to the beach." And then they get frustrated.

Angela Kelly: Right.

Youness El Fehdi: And they're having a meltdown because he's thinking you're refusing to get him to the beach because he don't understand what Saturday is.

Angela Kelly: Right.

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

Youness El Fehdi: So, he was funny the other day. He said, "I want to go to the beach." I said, "We're going on Saturday." So, he finally got frustrated. He came to me and he said, "I want Saturday."

Angela Kelly: That was very clever.

Youness El Fehdi: I said, "Okay. I don't have no control about Saturday, but..."

Angela Kelly: That's so cute.

Youness El Fehdi: One of the techniques about that is you bring an actual calendar, then you show him like calendar, and be, I got a calendar. That was him. And he just be like, "Okay, today is Tuesday." Check. Tomorrow is Wednesday. Show him the calendar, check. And then he will get it. By the time it's Saturday.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Youness El Fehdi: It'd be a good idea to take him to the beach, alright?

Angela Kelly: Yes. You do not go back on your word on that one.

Youness El Fehdi: Yeah. And also like neurodiverse kids, they're very, quote, unquote, how we perceive it's impatient. So, you tell them to wait. Wait 30 minutes or wait 15 minutes for whatever or five minutes, they don't wait. So you just like, you say wait five minutes, then 30 seconds later, they're going to come and ask for the same thing, whatever.

Angela Kelly: Right.

Youness El Fehdi: So, we look at it as an impatience, but how are you going to define it as patience or impatience if they don't even understand the concept of time. They don't know the concept of time. So, that's why I said they play with different set of rules as neurodiverse humans. So, for us, we take it as impatience, and we get mad. "You need to wait," and you

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

know, that's the typical response from a neurotypical person to a neurodiverse that it's just an impatience and you know, you just get mad. But they don't understand the concept of time. So, our job is how to help them just understand that concept. It can't be by just telling them because they don't know.

So, get a timer. You got a little cell phone, a timer, and I thought, he put it by himself. I said, "Put five minutes over there." He puts five minutes, and he just sit there and watch the timer for like five minutes, and then when it's beeps, he showed up.

Angela Kelly: Yes, then he's like, "I'm ready." You said five.

Youness El Fehdi: So...

Angela Kelly: Yeah. That could be good with any small child actually, like the tangibles. I love what you're sharing about like they need to maybe visually see what they can't hold conceptually, right? They need to see visually on the calendar or with a you know, stopwatch or something that has digital, you know, countdown on it. So, those are tools that we can use with probably any kid but particularly important for those who are neurodivergent. So, I love that.

And I also love that you brought up just being aware of how we interpret behavior. You know, when you were saying something like, we interpret it as impatience or as being defiant or disrespectful, and catching ourselves to be aware that, oh, I'm thinking this behavior's defiant. What else might it mean? Like, what are they trying to communicate? Or what else is going on here?

And being open, just being aware of our thoughts around it and our interpretations of it, and then expanding that and being a little more open to what else might be going on here and how we can navigate that. And that does require on our part, the adults, the time and the patience which we will

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

say, well, we don't have the time and we run out of patience, but it's our job as educators to do that. So, thank you for sharing that with us.

Well, what is the title of the book again? I want to make sure listeners are hearing the title of this book.

Youness El Fehdi: *Dominate the Challenges of Autism.*

Angela Kelly: Oh. And I find this book so inspiring and informational because it's such a personal story that you actually took time out of your busy life working, you know, in law management, but also you're a father, you're a husband, and you have your child and you're navigating all these things in life. And you took the time to write this book for informational purposes so that other families can benefit from your story, your experiences.

And so, school listeners out there, this is, you know, very valuable information. It's important. And it's written through the lens of the parent. So, if you have any families out there who might find this book beneficial, I highly invite you to recommend this podcast episode. The book link will be in the show notes and the information that you want to share with us, Youness, will be in the show notes. Are there any final words that you'd like to say to all the educators listening out there?

Youness El Fehdi: The final word to educators is we, parents of disabled kids, we understand the frustrations that come from the constant complaints that come from the part of the parent. But it takes two sides to make it work. So, my main thing is the communication and always asking about what's going on inside the home with the kids. How do you handle this type of issue and how you handle this from the part of the educators towards the parents.

And also, it's the parent responsibility to relay the message to teachers because you do not expect a professional, certified teacher to know

Ep #452: Beyond the IEP: Building Stronger Parent-School Partnerships with Youness El Fehdi

everything because it's your kid, and you have the inside knowledge. You deal with your kids more than them, and you have your kids for a longer period of time than they see him or her. So, it's very important to relay the message and keep a constant line of communication, let's say emails, like two, three emails a week would be enough. That's what we do now.

And that would be more beneficial than just the parents blaming the educators and educators blaming the parents and both side shut down on each other and we end up in gridlock. Like nothing, nothing get done. So, my the main important thing is one word, communication.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes. Well, thank you for your time. Thank you for your expertise. It's been an honor to meet you and know you. You are doing so many wonderful things in the world, and I look forward to having you back on another episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. So, thank you, Youness, for your time today. And we will drop the link to his book in the show notes.

And if you would kindly share this with any families or fellow educators that might benefit from this conversation and this insight through the lens of a parent, I would really appreciate that. Have a beautiful week. We'll talk to you all next week. Take good care.

Youness El Fehdi: Thank you, Angela.

Angela Kelly: Thank you.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit AngelaKellyCoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.