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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to help individual teachers as they plan for and implement student-led Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities. It presents activities for helping secondary students develop and participate in their IEPs. The first part of the guide is organized around the following five stages for involving students: (1) starting a student-led IEP program, ensuring confidentiality, involving parents, and determining instructional goals; (2) helping students understand their IEPs; (3) engaging students in developing an IEP, helping students assess their IEPs, and helping students write sections of their IEPs; (4) preparing students to participate in and/or lead their IEP meetings and providing support during the meeting; and (5) monitoring ongoing self-advocacy. Each section highlights key information related to the stage and suggests activities that may be used with students. The suggestions for activities are presented for individualized delivery and are designed to be adapted to meet individual needs and abilities. A section on group instruction is included that discusses considerations for this type of service delivery. Finally, a section is included that describes programmatic aspects that may be considered when implementing the approach on a schoolwide basis. (Contains 21 references.) (CR)

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Student-Led IEPs

A Guide for Student Involvement

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Preface

Students are often their own best advocates. Not surprisingly, they are frequently the ones who know best what they need and want. While this is not a new idea, rarely do schools take advantage of student self-advocacy in their day-to-day operations. Nonetheless, student self-advocacy is especially important as IEP teams make decisions about the student's future and transition to post-school activities. To assist schools in increasing student involvement during the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, this guide presents information on how to coach students and develop the specific advocacy skills that are most relevant to IEP and transition planning. For more comprehensive information on transition planning we recommend the ***Integrating Transition Planning into the IEP Process*** (West et al., 1999).

Under a grant focusing on student-led IEPs, the University of Minnesota, The Council for Exceptional Children, and Fairfax Public Schools collaborated in developing and refining the recommendations in this guide. Based on documents published in 1995 by the National Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) (Kupper, 1995; McGahee-Kovac, 1995), the guide has been updated to include information relevant to the 1997 *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA '97) amendments, especially regarding changes in transition requirements.

The ***Student Guide to IEPs*** is designed to help individual teachers as they plan for and implement student-led IEPs. However, after teachers experience success, they will want to consider how to integrate student-led IEPs into the overall instructional plan for schoolwide implementation. The last section of this guide provides some useful information that we recommend teachers revisit when they are ready for such broad implementation.

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Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement

Mohammed, a high school sophomore with severe learning disabilities, participates in his Individualized Education Program (IEP) in a variety of ways. With his case manager, Mohammed works through his transition plan. Mohammed contributes to the discussion of his present level of performance and identifies academic goals he believes will help him reach his transition objectives. Mohammed has great insight into the accommodations he requires and is able to articulate those to his teachers and write them onto his IEP. With the help of cue cards and lots of rehearsal, Mohammed is able to facilitate his IEP meeting.

Karla, a high school junior with developmental disabilities, reads on a pre-primer level — but that does not stop her from participating in her IEP meeting. In preparation for the meeting, Karla and her special education teacher brainstorm ideas for how to present information. They decide that the teacher will prompt Karla with a predetermined question and Karla will answer it. With practice in class and at home, Karla is able to advocate for herself during her IEP meeting.

Maria, a high school senior with mild learning disabilities, has participated actively in her IEP meetings for the past three years. She now takes full charge of the meeting, explaining her learning disability, talking about her desired future of attending community college, and describing her progress in her classes, her goals, and her challenges. She shares how accommodations have assisted her in progressing toward her goals, and makes recommendations for additional accommodations that may enable her to achieve even greater success.

Increasingly, students with disabilities are actively participating in their IEP meetings. As these three vignettes show, with ample support from their teachers and families, students with disabilities can make significant contributions to their educational plans. They may help draft their IEPs, present information about themselves at the IEP meeting — and in some cases — actually lead the meeting. At the very least, they understand the purposes of the IEP.

This guide is designed to provide educators and related service providers with selected strategies for involving students in developing their IEPs and participating in their IEP meetings. While these are not the only strategies that can be used to involve students in developing their IEPs, they have been used successfully by practitioners.

The rationale for involving students in developing their IEPs is substantial. Many students with disabilities today exit high school without adequate understanding of their disabilities — including their individual strengths and needs — or how certain accommodations can enhance their lives (Hughes & Carter, 2000). Further, many have not developed sufficient knowledge of their civil rights — as supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA '97), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended — or how they may need to advocate for themselves. This is particularly true for students with disabilities who attend institutions of higher education. A recent research study showed that few students with disabilities take advantage of the resources and accommodations available to them because they must ask for needed services. This requires self-advocacy skills they may not have developed in high school (Lynch & Gussel, 1996).

Teaching students how to participate in their IEPs is one way of helping them become better self-advocates. They learn to apply the skills of self-determination, goal setting, and self-evaluation. Self-determination and self-advocacy are interrelated in that self-determination involves making and implementing choices based on personal needs, interests, and values. Self-advocacy involves the actions that one takes on one's own behalf (Field, 1996). As Martin and Marshall (1995) stated:

> *...self-determined people know how to choose. They know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs, self-determined people choose goals. (p.67)*

These are the skills that teachers capitalize upon when preparing students for involvement in their IEPs. To be a self-advocate in the context of an IEP, students need to accept their disability, understand what they need to learn, and know how to go about getting help (Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994; Merchant & Gajar, 1997).

Person-centered planning and mapping are two practices that lead to greater self-determination and self-advocacy for all students. These two practices can be implemented when students are young — even as young as elementary school — in order to get them and their parents involved in the IEP process at an early age. Person-centered planning involves determining what the student and the parents want for the future and then taking steps to ensure those goals are met. Mapping is part of person-centered planning. It involves producing visual representations of people who can serve as supports for the student and community settings the student uses.

Person-centered planning includes making a list of things that "work" and "don't work" for the student and a list of the student's interests and strengths. After studying the lists, team members work together to develop goals, list actions that must be taken to meet those goals, and identify the parties responsible for these actions. Though the student should be the center of this process, involvement will vary depending on his or her ability to self-advocate (Miner & Bates, 1997). Person-centered planning is an ideal way for teachers and parents to foster self-determination at an early age and set the stage for student-led IEPs, which help students to develop a sense of responsibility as well as self-esteem and self-advocacy.

In addition, student involvement in IEP development is supported by the IDEA '97. The public agency shall ensure that the IEP team for each child with a disability includes, if appropriate, the child. 34 C.F.R. §300.344 (a)(7). Moreover, IDEA '97 contains provisions that strengthen the involvement of students with disabilities in decisions regarding their own futures, facilitate movement from school to post-school activities, and the final regulations require that the student be invited to transition-related meetings. [See the sidebar for specific language.]

For some time now, the special education field has embraced the concept of self-determination, and special education teachers have included students with disabilities in various aspects of their IEPs. However, students may need preparation to be active participants in the IEP process. Such participation requires that students have sufficient knowledge about IEPs, learn skills related to developing an IEP, and develop skills that will facilitate participation in their IEP meetings. This

IDEA '97 Statement on Student Involvement in Transition Planning

Student involvement regarding transition services 34 C.F.R. §300.344(b)(1) — an important part of IEPs for students beginning at age 14, or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team — provides that the public agency shall invite a student with a disability of any age to attend his or her IEP meeting if the purpose of the meeting will be consideration of: the student's transition services needs 34 C.F.R. §300.344(b)(1)(i) or the needed transition services for the student 34 C.F.R. §300.344(b)(1)(ii) or both. If the student does not attend the IEP meeting, the public agency sholl take other steps to ensure that the student's preferences and interests are considered. 34 C.F.R. §300.344(b)(2).

guide provides suggestions for helping students with disabilities participate in developing their IEPs, present information at IEP meetings, and possibly lead their IEP meetings.

About This Guide

Building on research about self-determination conducted during the past decade (for a summary see Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998), The Council for Exceptional Children and the University of Minnesota have prepared *Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement.* This guide highlights the work at a secondary school in Falls Church, Virginia, and others from across the United States. Recommendations from national transition projects also have been incorporated to ensure flexibility of use.

This guide has been developed for teachers and other practitioners who are interested in increasing the involvement of their students in the IEP process. While secondary teachers are the primary audience, others also should find valuable information for implementation across grade levels (adaptations will be needed with younger children).

The guide presents activities for helping students develop and participate in their IEPs. Although the skills of self-determination and self-advocacy are essential for students with disabilities and will enhance their IEP participation, this guide does not provide specific activities or curricular approaches for developing those skills. (A listing of curriculum resources for teaching self-determination and self-advocacy is found at the end of this guide.) Rather, this guide focuses on the fundamental knowledge and skills directly related to IEP development and participation.

Active student participation in the IEP process is dependent upon students' having sufficient knowledge about IEPs, learning skills related to IEP development, developing IEP meeting participation skills, and becoming self-advocates. This is an ongoing process. Teachers and others who wish to strengthen student participation in IEP meetings may find it helpful to plan a course of action for the following five stages:

1) Starting a student-led IEP program.

2) Helping students understand their IEPs.

3) Engaging students in developing an IEP.

4) Preparing students to participate in and/or lead their IEP meetings.

5) Monitoring ongoing self-advocacy.

The first part of this guide is organized around these stages. Each section highlights key information related to the stage and suggests activities that may be used with students. Most special education teachers will likely begin by working with individual students in settings such as basic skills classes, study skills classes, or transition-related classes. Thus, the suggestions for activities are presented for individualized delivery. While activities are designed for students with mild to moderate disabilities, they should be adapted to meet individual needs and abilities. Teachers who have used the strategies recommended in this guide suggest allotting a month to prepare the student for initial involvement. From there, it is contingent upon the teacher to schedule and design activities that strengthen and build on the student's foundation of knowledge and skill.

In some cases, special education teachers may want to use the strategies to provide group instruction. To this end, a section on group issues is included. Most activities may be adapted for group purposes; however, teachers should be aware of certain cautions that arise when students deal with their feelings and thoughts in a setting that includes their peers. Collaboration with the school psychologist or social worker may be beneficial in this process.

Finally, a section is included that describes programmatic aspects that may be considered when implementing the approach on a schoolwide basis.

Starting a Student-Led IEP Program

Don't be frustrated if students are reluctant to participate in their IEP process. Over the past 10 years, I have had very few students volunteer to lead their IEP meeting for the first time. At the beginning of the school year, I inform my students that my goal is to teach them their rights as students with a learning disability, explain the content of their current IEPs so they understand what is written about them, assist them in helping me write their future IEPs, and guide them in leading their IEP meetings.

Special Educator

You've decided to help students participate in their IEPs. Where do you start? First, realize there is much you can accomplish even if you only do a little each day. Second, you will likely need to take several steps before talking with students. These are:

- Involving administrators.
- Ensuring confidentiality.
- Selecting students.
- Involving parents.
- Determining instructional goals.
- Planning lessons.
- Scheduling time.

Involving Administrators

Make sure you have administrative support before beginning this program. Depending upon your school and school district, you may need to confer with any or all of the following individuals: department chairs, principals, and special education directors or other supervisory staff.

At the very least, administrators will likely want you to state your reasons for greater student involvement in the IEP process, so be prepared to explain the rationale and benefits. Administrators also will probably want to know how much time will be needed for student preparation and participation, how you will organize and conduct the instruction, and how you will make decisions about student involvement. In many cases, administrators may be more supportive if you recommend starting with a few students and expanding the program only after you have successfully implemented the process with initial students.

Ask your administrator about parameters to follow, particularly when it comes to student participation, parental notification, confidentiality, and student access to their IEPs.

Ensuring Confidentiality

A student's educational record, including the IEP, is confidential. Every effort must be taken to ensure that it is kept secure and private. New issues related to confidentiality arise when helping a student learn IEP-related skills. If you are making copies of IEPs for individual student review, you will need to have some procedures in place for safeguarding them. Consider the following:

- **Do you have a locking cabinet in which to store IEPs?** Cabinets that lock help to ensure that only authorized people have access to IEPs. They frequently are located in a central administrative office or, in secondary schools, in the office of the department chair.
- **Does the school district have a policy for students who request their own personal copies?** The procedures you follow will most likely need to be approved by your school administration. As a general matter, a part of that policy should require, as appropriate, parental notification and/or consent before providing copies to students. While it may be helpful for students to have a copy of their goals and objectives, they need to understand and value confidentiality and the right to privacy. They need to recognize the potential problems that may arise if information is shared too broadly or if the IEP is lost or misplaced. You may wish to issue each copy in a large envelope with a metal clasp.
- **Does the school district have a policy concerning outside agencies or individuals that request copies?** Parental consent is necessary to release copies to others. 34 C.F.R.
- **Does the school have a procedure for returning copies?** A check-out system is recommended, noting the date the IEP was checked out and an expected return date (usually within two weeks).

If your school district does not have specific policies regarding copies and storage of IEPs, consider procedures you will follow and seek approval of your plans by your school administrator. Be sure to keep in mind any other applicable district and local school policies.

Finally, some teachers like to use other students' IEPs for instructional purposes. It is important not to use examples of student IEPs that contain personally identifiable information. To safeguard a student's privacy, you may not even be able to use an IEP with the student's name and identifiers removed in demonstrations. Check with district officials prior to making copies of any IEPs for instructional purposes.

Selecting Students

Having students actively participate in their IEP planning and conference should be an important component in special education today. Too often we plan students' lives without their input or consent. It's their life! If one of our main goals is to prepare students with disabilities for a life after high school, we need to begin teaching them to advocate for themselves in elementary school.

Special Educator

Ideally, each student should be involved in planning and implementing his or her IEP from a very early age (Field et al., 1998). At the very least, IDEA '97 states that IEP transition planning activities must commence by age 14, and that the student must be invited to the IEP meeting if transition services needs will be discussed. Given this, how do you make decisions about which students to involve in IEP leadership roles?

Some teachers have found that it helps to start with students whom you predict will have a high probability of success. The reason is twofold: You need to become comfortable with the strategies before you tackle more challenging situations, and you need good student role models who can encourage other students to participate. For these reasons, consider starting with students who already demonstrate leadership skills (e.g., interest in their own IEPs and self-advocacy, individual communication skills, and perceived status in the eyes of peers). Once you, the teacher, have become comfortable and familiar with the process it will be easier to teach other students.

To plan your initial instruction, you may want to examine students' schedules to assure that you select students who will have time to learn and practice with you. It also may be helpful to have a calendar for annual IEP reviews. Examine your schedule of IEP annual reviews for the next two to three months. It may be that one or more of these students are prime candidates for instruction.

After a few months of success, you will be ready to expand your student-led IEP program to include more students. While not every student will be able to write and/or lead his or her entire IEP, every student should be able to participate in some fashion. A student may participate in the IEP meeting in one or more of the following ways:

- Student states or reads his or her plan for the future.
- Student explains his or her disability, describes the need for accommodations, shares his or her strengths and weaknesses (present levels of performance), and talks about his or her plans for the future.
- Student leads the IEP meeting.

Involving Parents

Before you approach the student, inform his or her parents or guardians about your plans to involve the student in the IEP process. Typically, parents will have questions. If their child has not been participating in the IEP up to this point, they may want to be assured that their child's rights under IDEA will not be violated. They also may want to know how this will affect their participation at the meeting. In some cases, they may have questions that mask concerns about the student's ability to self-advocate (e.g., "How will you guarantee that my child plans reasonable goals?"). In all cases, explain the rationale for student participation and be as specific as possible

about your plans for the meeting. In addition, encourage the student to talk about what he or she is learning about IEPs at home.

Determining Instructional Goals

It is important to think about the end result — what you want the student to be able to do during the IEP meeting. Then, ask yourself, "How will I plan lessons to help him or her reach that goal?"

Parents are often enthusiastic supporters of student-led IEPs. An added benefit is that parents typically become more engaged in the planning process as they see their son or daughter taking responsibility for his or her goals and plans.

Consider this example:

> *Hector, a high school sophomore, and his teacher, Mr. Wooten, decided that Hector would participate in his IEP meeting by describing his disability, telling what accommodations he needs, and stating his plans for his post-school career. Mr. Wooten designed an instructional program to achieve this goal. In September, Hector learned more about his disability and explored his reasonable accommodations. In October, Mr. Wooten worked with Hector to determine Hector's plans for post-school life. During October and November, they worked together to complete an update on Hector's progress in his classes. Before the December IEP meeting, Hector and Mr. Wooten practiced the presentation. When Hector's meeting was held in December, he was able to achieve his goals.*

It helps to think in terms of goals spanning a semester or a year, just as with other IEP goals and objectives. Decide what the student should accomplish by the end of the time period, establish short-term objectives, and plot milestones along the way. When working with a younger student, you may want to take a long-term approach that spans several years, modifying goals each year. Always consider how activities potentially may further self-advocacy.

Usually, the first step is to decide what the student should accomplish. Generally, consider the following steps:

- The student will understand the purpose

Parent Involvement

Invitation of parent participation in the IEP meeting is the responsibility of the public agency and shall include: notifying parents early 34 C.F.R. §300.345(a)(1) and scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed upon time and place. 34 C.F.R. §300.345(a)(2). If neither parent can attend, other methods that may be used to ensure parent participation include individual or conference telephone calls. 34 C.F.R. §300.345(c).

A meeting may be conducted without a parent in attendance if the public agency is unable to convince the parents that they should attend. In this case, the public agency must have a record of its attempts to arrange a mutually agreed on time and place, such as detailed records of telephone calls made or attempted and the results of those calls, copies of correspondence sent to the parents and any responses received, detailed records of visits made to the parent's home or place of employment and the results of those visits. 34 C.F.R. §300.345(a)-(d).

of an IEP and be familiar with its parts.

- The student will gather input from the IEP team members prior to the meeting.
- Based on information from team members, the student will write sections of the IEP for amendment and approval at the IEP meeting.
- The student will co-present information at his or her IEP meeting.
- The student will lead his or her IEP meeting.

Given the requirements in IDEA '97, you must include a statement of the transition service needs under the applicable component of the student's IEP for students beginning at age 14 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team), and include a statement of needed transition services beginning at age 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team).

Planning Lessons

The same effective instructional practices that are used to teach academic subjects should be used to teach students how to participate in their IEPs. You will want to tailor discussions and activities to the individual interests and strengths of the students. Initially, individual sessions should be short, with strategies built in for monitoring student progress toward goals. Allow sufficient time for practice and reflection.

Because students must apply their knowledge and skills related to IEPs to their own experience, you will need to be prepared to discuss sensitive issues. It helps to start slowly and allow adequate time for students to share their reflections.

Be aware that some information in the IEP may embarrass or surprise the student. For example, consider the following reflections from a special educator:

> *Many students are in denial about the fact that they have a disability. Some believe that if they try harder in school, the disability will go away. We have found that many of our graduates have chosen not to disclose that they have a learning disability in college until after they receive failing or unsatisfactory grades. They tell us repeatedly that they knew they should have talked to the college's special services coordinator, but they didn't because they wanted to be like 'everybody else.'*

Be prepared for such situations. Read through the student's IEP in advance of instruction and identify issues where there may be questions. Consider also how to support self-advocacy. Typical examples include:

- **Identification.** Students may want to know why they have been identified as having a disability (e.g., mental retardation, learning disability, emotional disturbance). They also may want to know who identified their strengths and weaknesses. Consider how you will answer these questions. Also, check on district policies regarding disclosure of test scores. If none exist, seek advice from general and special education administrators.
- **Present level of educational performance.** Students may have concerns about their progress in one or more classes. Facilitate a discussion with the student and teachers to arrive at strategies for improving grades.
- **Goals.** Students may want to know why they need to continue working on goals that may be easier or different than those of other students. They may question the necessity of functional goals.

- **Medications and other medical needs.** Students may want to know if they will need to take their medication forever, why they need to take a medication that produces side effects, and how to talk with teachers about their medication or other medical concerns. This is a good opportunity for a collaborative session between the school nurse and the student to develop a list of questions to share with the student's physician.
- **Accommodations.** Students may have questions regarding how other students will react to their use of accommodations. They also may have questions about how to discuss their needs with teachers.

Provide information and honest responses to student questions. At the same time try to encourage students to focus on their strengths and abilities.

Scheduling Time

Gayle Weiss, a first year teacher, planned to work with Alicia, a high school freshman, during a three- to five-week period leading up to her IEP review meeting. They scheduled five 45-minute blocks. The following is a description of each meeting.

At the first meeting, Alicia learned about her strengths and needs in each class. Alicia also composed invitations to her IEP meeting and delivered them to her teachers, the principal, the counselor, and her parents. At the second meeting, plans for post-school activities were discussed and Alicia drafted the transition section of her IEP. During the third meeting, Alicia reviewed her current level of performance, current goals, and benchmarks suggested by her teachers. Ms. Weiss and Alicia spent most of the session drafting new goals and benchmarks for her sophomore year. During the fourth meeting, Ms. Weiss and Alicia reviewed the draft of new goals. They also discussed how accommodations were based on her disability. They reviewed how current accommodations were being used in specific classes and possible changes to recommend at the IEP meeting.

In preparation for the last meeting, Ms. Weiss made a copy of the draft IEP. During that meeting Ms. Weiss and Alicia drafted a script for her presentation and Alicia practiced it. Alicia decided she wanted to make introductions, talk candidly about her disability, explain her rights under the law, and describe her strengths and needs. Alicia's parents were very supportive and encouraged Alicia to practice presenting her IEP at home. On the day of her IEP meeting, she practiced her part once more during her lunch break.

Building knowledge and developing skill require time and practice. You will need to make a long-term plan and schedule sufficient time for students to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to lead their IEP meetings.

Depending on students' needs, most special education teachers schedule both group and individual sessions. Individual sessions may be reserved for discussion about topics that may be more sensitive or confidential or that require individualized attention (e.g., discussing the effect of an individual's particular disability on learning, helping a student determine specific goals, exploring accommodations). Group sessions under certain conditions may be appropriate for instruction in laws and rights that apply to all individuals with disabilities.

Helping Students Understand IEPs

Literally, students' faces light up when they fully understand their IEPs. They carry an air about themselves that says, "I can do anything I want to do!"

Special Educator

Knowledge about IEPs varies from student to student. Some students will know why they have an IEP and what it contains. Some students may have misconceptions about their IEPs. Many students will have little or no knowledge. Before they can participate fully in the IEP process, students will need to have a basic understanding of the IEP. Following are the major areas for discussion, along with suggestions for the type of information that should be covered:

- **Purpose of an IEP**. Review the requirements related to IEPs in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17). Explain the purpose of an IEP. Let students know that the right to special services is dependent not only on a disability but more specifically on the impact of that disability on their learning. Depending on the interest and ability level of your students, you may want to share additional information such as the history of the law, how it has been amended over the years, relevant entitlements other than the IEP (e.g., the process for identifying a student for special education services, participation in assessments, access to the general education curriculum, discipline, transition planning and interagency services, age of majority, and graduation with a diploma.) (See Figure 1.)

- **Rationale**. Help students understand the benefits of having an IEP and in getting involved in developing their IEP. Students need to know that they have a right to be involved in planning their education. To do this, they should share with you and their IEP team members, including their parents, their thoughts about such things as what they want to learn, what they feel they need to learn, what accommodations, modifications or other supports they need to learn, and what they want to do in the future.

- **Sections of an IEP**. Students need to understand the main sections of their IEP. The IEP must include certain information about students such as: current levels of educational performance, special education and related services that will be provided, amount of time spent in the general education classroom, goals for the year, short-term objectives or benchmarks, the duration of services, evaluation criteria, assistive technology devices and services that are needed, and transition services. Because some of the sections are technical in nature, use your judgment as you determine the student's level of participation in the IEP. Typically, the most important sections to concentrate on, particularly in the beginning, are the parts of the IEP that describe the nature of the student's disability; current levels of educational performance; need for positive behavioral supports; goals and objectives; and accommodations, modifications, or other supports. Student-generated notes can be applied to the final, written format of the IEP at the IEP meeting.

Activity Suggestions

The following activities are offered as examples of approaches special education

teachers have used to help their students understand their IEPs. The activities are intended to be used in conjunction with mini-lectures and discussions on key topic areas. Feel free to adapt the ideas to suit your students' preferences, needs, and availability.

What Does My IEP Look Like?

Give the student a copy of his or her IEP. Help the student find his or her name, grade, and other identifying information. Next, the student should identify the date of the last IEP and project the date by which the next one must be developed. Direct the student to locate key sections: disability, present levels of educational performance, goals and objectives or milestones, and accommodations.

What Does It Mean To Have a Disability?

To help students understand how others with disabilities have moved forward as adults, consider videotapes and guest speakers who may be able to make presentations in regularly scheduled classes. Is someone available whose life can be used as a springboard for discussing disabilities? Advocacy groups are good sources for speakers who have disabilities. When interviewing a potential speaker, make sure he or she understands the needs of your group and is willing to help students talk about what it means to have a disability.

How Do I Learn?

As an introduction, some special education teachers find it helpful to engage students in exploring how they learn. Ask questions such as:

- How do you learn?
- What is the easiest thing to learn?
- What is the hardest thing to learn?
- What helps you learn?
- What things interfere with your learning?
- What do teachers, parents, or classmates do that helps you learn?

Show the student how his or her answers may be used to develop the IEP. For example, a student's comment that time constraints interfere with his learning might lead to an accommodation allowing extra time on tests and projects.

What Do I Want To Know?

Use a KWL technique (Carr & Ogle, 1987): What do I know? What do I want to know? What have I learned? Present students with a list of terms such as learning disability, IEP, and accommodations. Ask students to tell you what they know about each.

Some special education teachers find it useful to survey students' prior knowledge of IEPs before presenting new information. Surveys help to orient students, and provide special educators with information that can be used to tailor the presentation. Make sure students understand that the survey is not a test. Also, keep in mind that, while some students will be able to work on questions independently, others may need to comment on them verbally. A sample survey is found in Figure 2. The survey also can be used as a pre-post assessment tool.

Using the results from the survey and discussion of terms, ask students to tell you what they want to know about each term. Based

Figure 1. Sample Study Guide for Laws (page 1 of 2)

IEP (Individualized Education Program)

- IEP means a written document for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with 34 C.F.R. §§300.341-300.350. 34 C.F.R. §300.340.
- Is accessible to each regular education teacher, special education teacher, and related service provider, and other service provider who is responsible for its implementation; each teacher and provider is informed of his or her specific responsibilities related to implementing the child's IEP; and the specific accommodations, modifications and supports that must be provided for the child in accordance with the child's IEP. 34 C.F.R. §300.342.
- Will be reviewed and revised as appropriate at least once a year. 34 C.F.R. §300.343(c)(1)-(c)(2).
- Beginning by age 14, and earlier when appropriate, the IEP must contain a statement of the student's transition service needs, focusing on the *student's courses of study*. 34 C.F.R. §300.347(b)(1).
- When transition service needs or needed transition services are going to be discussed at an IEP meeting, the student shall be invited. 34 C.F.R. §300.344(b)(1).
- By age 16, the IEP must contain a statement of needed transition services for the student, including, if appropriate, a *statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages*. 34 C.F.R. §300.347(b)(2).
- In a state that transfers rights at the age of majority, beginning at least one year before the student reaches the age of majority under state law, the IEP must include a statement that the student has been informed of his or her rights under Part B of the IDEA, if any, that will transfer to the student on reaching the age of majority. 34 C.F.R. §300.347(c).
- Graduation from high school with a regular diploma constitutes a change in placement, requiring prior written notice. Upon graduation with a regular high school diploma, students are no longer entitled to a free appropriate public education. 34 C.F.R. §300.122(a)(3)(ii)-(iii).

Figure 1. Sample Study Guide for Laws (page 2 of 2)

IDEA Guidelines

- States receiving assistance under this part shall ensure that a free appropriate public education is available to all children with disabilities, aged 3 through 21, residing in the State, including children with disabilities who have been suspended or expelled from school. 34 C.F.R. §300.300(a)(1).
- The services and placement needed by each child with a disability to receive a free appropriate public education must be based on the child's unique needs and not on the child's disability. 34 C.F.R. §300.300(3)(ii).
- Every student with a disability who receives special education and related services must have an IEP that is created for that student's needs and details educational goals and objectives the student will work toward throughout the year. See 34 C.F.R. §300.347.

Child with a Disability

- A child evaluated as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment including deafness, a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment including blindness, serous emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who therefore needs special education or related services. 34 C.F.R. §300.7. See 34 C.F.R. §§300.530-300.536 for evaluation requirements.

Eligibility

- Upon completing the administration of tests and other evaluation materials a group of qualified professionals and the parent determine whether the child is a child with a disability. See 34 C.F.R. §§300.7 and 300.534; for evaluation see 34 C.F.R. §§300.530-300.536.

Figure 2. Information About Me

My Name_____

Date_____

My disability is...

My strengths are...

I have difficulty with...

I learn best...

I would like to learn about...

Accommodations I need and will use are...

[Note: This sample form is not required by IDEA.]

on their answers, begin your information sharing.

What Is a Law?

Most students have not seen the IDEA. Make available a copy of the IDEA (and other laws that may affect students, such as the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) and review with students. Have students find the law and read selected portions on line.

- **www.ideapractices.org/law/IDEAMAIN.HTM**
- **www.nationalrehab.org/website/history/act.html**
- **www.asclepius.com/angel/special.htm**

Students also need to know about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (P.L. 101–336) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. Make sure students know their rights under these laws.

Copies of federal laws are available from the Superintendent of Documents, Attention: New Orders, P.O. Box 371954, Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954. Or, they can be ordered from the U.S. Government Printing Office at 1-877-4-EDPUBS. When requesting a law, you need to specify the exact title. Laws also may be downloaded from the following Web sites:

- **www.ideapractices.org**
- **www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP.index.html**
- **www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html**

What Do These Terms Mean?

Because these laws contain many terms that will be unfamiliar to students (Figure 3 contains a glossary), you may want to consider using standard practice strategies to help students learn the terms (e.g., completing word searches, matching terms to definitions, restating definitions in one's own words, participating in games such as "BINGO," "Jeopardy," or "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?").

When presenting terms to students, ask students what they know about the term and what they think it means. If you are presenting information on IDEA, you may want to prepare a key word poster that contains the main ideas covered in the presentation. For example, a key word poster for the IDEA might contain statements summarizing a student's right to participate in his or her IEP. Or, it might contain key facts such as the year the amendments were signed into law (1997), the definition of an IEP, and the phrases "free appropriate public education" and "least restrictive environment."

How Do I Make the Transition to Adult Life?

If you are working with students who are 14 years old (or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP team), you will likely want to introduce the importance of transition planning. Introduce the topic by sharing how IDEA requires that students be involved in planning for their future. Ask students if they have thought about what they will be doing when they leave school and why. Record their comments. Review the list and discuss the skills that students will need to make those goals a reality. This discussion may be used as a springboard to a discussion of long-term goals and objectives or milestones.

Figure 3. Glossary (page 1 of 4)

Most of the following terms have been cited from the ***Federal Register***, Vol. 64, No. 48, March 12, 1999, as they pertain to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The exception is *"accommodation and modification."* For additional information on terms, see Figure 1.

Accommodation and Modification

There is no universal agreement about the definitions of these terms. However, when referring to the curriculum, the term *accommodation* is commonly used to define changes in instruction, presentation, format, response, setting, timing, or scheduling that do not alter in any significant way the content of the curriculum. In contrast, changes in the curriculum content are typically referred to as curriculum *modifications*. Generally, accommodations refer to changes in the way instruction occurs; modifications refer to changes that alter the content of the curriculum in substantial ways.

The IDEA and its regulations use the terms *accommodations* and *modifications in administration* in connection with state and district-wide assessment programs. 34 C.F.R. §300.138 requires that children with disabilities be provided with *accommodations and modifications in administration, if necessary,* that would include the full range of accommodations and modifications commonly used in assessment practice.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Special education and related services that – (a) are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, without charge; (b) meet the standards of the state education agency (SEA) including the requirements of this part; (c) include preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state, and; (d) are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements of 34 C.F.R. §§300.340-300.500. 34 C.F.R. §300.13(a)-(d).

Figure 3. Glossary (page 2 of 4)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Ensures that the rights of all children with disabilities and their parents are protected. The Act ensures that eligible children receive a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living. 34 C.F.R. §300.1(a)-(b).

Least Restrictive Environment

Each public agency shall ensure (1) that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are non-disabled; and (2) that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. 34 C.F.R. §300.550(b)(1)-(b)(2).

Figure 3: Glossary (page 3 of 4)

Placements

The educational placement of a child with a disability, including a preschool child with a disability, is a group decision made (1) by parents and other persons knowledgeable about the child and the placement options, and (2) in accordance with provisions for least restrictive environment. 34 C.F.R. §§300.550-300.554.

The child's placement is (1) determined at least annually; (2) based on the child's IEP; and (3) as close as possible to the child's home; unless the child's IEP requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school that he or she would attend if nondisabled.

In selecting the least restrictive environment, consideration is given to any potential harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services that he or she needs; and a child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum. 34 C.F.R. §300.552(a)-(e).

Related Services

Transportation and such developmental, corrective and other supportive services are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and include speech-language pathology and audiology services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, early identification and assessment of disabilities in children, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. The term also could include school health services, social work services in schools, and parent counseling and training. 34 C.F.R. §300.24(a).

Figure 3. Glossary (page 4 of 4)

Special Education

Specially designed instruction provided at no cost to the parent to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including: instruction in the classroom, home, in hospitals, and institutions and in other settings; and instruction in physical education. The term includes the following if it is specially designed instruction in speech-language pathology services or any other related service if the service is considered a special education service rather than a related service under State standards; travel training; vocational education. 34 C.F.R. §300.26(a)-(2)(iii).

Transition Services

A coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that (1) is designed within an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; and (2) is based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests. Transition services include: instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. Transition services for students with disabilities may be special education, if provided as a specially designed instruction, or related services, if required to assist a student with a disability to benefit from special education. 34 C.F.R. §300.29.

Engaging Students in Developing IEPs

When I started working on the student-led IEP, I was very excited because I could tell the teachers what I need instead of them telling me what I need. For example, I could tell them I already had that math and needed to learn something harder.

Student

Once students have a general understanding of IEPs, the next step is to help them apply their knowledge to their own IEP. This process should be individualized, as it requires students to consider their own abilities, interests, and needs, and it may take weeks, months, or semesters to complete. It also requires them to collect information about their interests, skills, and barriers to learning.

The main components of IEP development for students who currently receive special education services are assessing the current IEP and updating the new IEP.

Helping Students Assess Their IEPs

After students have familiarized themselves with their current IEP they will need to assess goals accomplished and evaluate emerging needs. The goal is to have students state their own thoughts about their IEP. Most likely, you will need several sessions to complete the analysis of all sections.

A suggested process to follow in helping students assess their IEP follows. Have students:

- Review each section.
- Ask clarification questions. Questions may be posed to you, or they may be posed to others (e.g., other teachers).
- Highlight statements with which they disagree.
- Add their own ideas for what might be included in each section.

In addition, you may want to provide more in-depth instruction in particular areas. Following are sample strategies for reviewing the goal and the accommodations sections.

Suggestions for Reviewing the Goals Section of the IEP

Consider the following suggestions for reviewing the goals section:

- Make lists of strengths and needs according to each subject. Use the form in Figure 4 to guide students' work.
- Provide students with a template for reviewing the section, such as placing a plus sign or check mark next to the goals they feel they have achieved, placing a question mark next to goals they do not agree with, and adding any goals they believe should be included.
- Ask students to describe how they know they have met certain goals. Ask students what their quarterly or periodic review indicates. Ask them if they have evidence to justify their success (e.g., portfolio). What other evidence do they have that shows they have been successful? You may need to prompt students by suggesting they consider such things as their opinions, test scores, completion of tasks, comments from teachers, etc.

Figure 4. My Strengths and Needs

My Name _____ **Date** _____

Class: _____ Teacher: _____

What do I do well?

What helps me do my best?

What do I need to do even better?

Class: _____ Teacher: _____

What do I do well?

What helps me do my best?

What do I need to do even better?

Class: _____ Teacher: _____

What do I do well?

What helps me do my best?

What do I need to do even better?

[Note: This sample form is not required by IDEA.]

- Ask students to show the goals in their current IEPs to their parents and teachers. Have them ask these individuals, "Do you think I have met these goals? What goals haven't I met?"
- Discuss their thoughts. Ask them to decide what they would like to include in their new IEP. Consider giving students an interest inventory if they are having difficulty talking about future plans. Prompt them with a question, such as "Are there parts of your education or school work that you would like to change?"

Suggestions for Reviewing the Statement of the Special Education and Related Services and Supplementary Aids and Services to be Provided to the Child

When reviewing this statement, consider the following suggestions:

- Find out what information students already have about accommodations and modifications. Do they know what accommodations are? Can they provide examples of accommodations that work for them? Why are they helpful? What subjects are they helpful in?
- Have students discuss what might generally go into this section. Write their ideas on the chalkboard or flip chart paper. Then have students read this section of their own IEP.
- Ask students to tell you what helps them learn. You may want to ask them to think of their best class and to list what they do well. As they review their lists, encourage students to think about what helps them do well in the class (e.g., how tests are designed, the way the teacher presents new information).
- Ask students to tell you what gets in the way of their learning. You may want to ask them to think of their hardest class and to list what makes it difficult for them (e.g., too much reading, too much information to remember for tests). As they review their lists, encourage students to think of ways to improve their learning in this class. If students have neglected to cite a class in which they are not doing well, prompt them to talk about it. For example, if a student has not mentioned earning a C- in math, ask him or her to help you understand why the grade is low.
- Have students ask their subject area teachers, "What do you see as my strengths and needs in your class or subject area?" Ask students to share their findings with you.
- Review an accommodation needs checklist. (See Figure 5.) Remind students that accommodations address learning needs associated with their specific disability and are not intended to give them an unfair advantage. Ask students to check off the accommodations that they believe they need to learn in each class or subject area. It may help to first have students check off the accommodations they are already using and to rate them according to usefulness. Encourage students to describe examples of what works for them and what does not. Remind students that an accommodation may work in one subject area but not in another. Sometimes a teacher's style may have an impact on accommodation needs. Make sure students understand any new accommodations that are reviewed. Be prepared to demonstrate unfamiliar ones.
- Complete an accommodation request form with each student. Make sure that students understand the purpose is not to check off

Figure 5. Accommodation Needs

Student: _____ Date: _____

Teacher: _____ IEP Manager: _____

Setting
- ❒ Preferential Seating
- ❒ Small Group

Assignments
- ❒ Reduced Level of Difficulty
- ❒ Shortened Assignments
- ❒ Reduced Pencil/Paper Tasks
- ❒ Extended Time
- ❒ Opportunity to Respond Orally

Instruction
- ❒ Shortened Instructions
- ❒ Assignment Notebook
- ❒ Frequent/Immediate Feedback
- ❒ Dictated Information, Answers on Tape
- ❒ Taped Lectures
- ❒ Reduced Language Level/Reading Style
- ❒ Incorporation of Learning Styles
- ❒ Peer Tutoring/Paired Working Arrangement
- ❒ Outline with Due Dates for Assignment Test
- ❒ Negotiated Respite with Teacher (Medical)
- ❒ Rest Room Use (Medical)

Teacher Supports
- ❒ Consultation
- ❒ Information
- ❒ Other

Behavior
- ❒ Positive Reinforcement
- ❒ Frequent Breaks
- ❒ Clearly Defined Limits/Expectations
- ❒ Quiet Time
- ❒ Behavior Management Plan

Materials and Technology
- ❒ Taped Text/Material
- ❒ Highlighted Text/Materials
- ❒ Manipulatives
- ❒ Braille Materials
- ❒ ESL Materials
- ❒ Calculator
- ❒ Keyboard Modifications
- ❒ Access to Keyboard/Work Processor
- ❒ Large Print
- ❒ Use Tape Recorder in Classroom
- ❒ Use Another Student's Notes
- ❒ Use Teachers Notes
- ❒ Have Note-taker in Class
- ❒ Extra Set of Books for Home (Physical)
- ❒ Electronic Speller

Testing
- ❒ Scheduling
- ❒ Setting
- ❒ Presentation
- ❒ Response
- ❒ Extended Time
- ❒ Individual/Small Group Testing
- ❒ Take Test in Quiet Area
- ❒ Test Read Orally
- ❒ Take Test Orally
- ❒ Dictate Answers to a Test/Quiz
- ❒ Use Calculator on Test/Quiz
- ❒ Open Book Exams

Other:
- ❒ _____
- ❒ _____
- ❒ _____

[Note: This sample form is not required by IDEA.]

as many accommodations as possible, but to identify those that really will help them learn better. Ask students to share the completed forms with their teachers and report back on their meetings. Discuss findings and make any revisions on the accommodation checklist. Explain that the final form will be completed at the IEP meeting. Figure 6 presents a sample of a form used in one school to track students' progress on this task. Fitting this form onto an index card will make it easier for the student to carry it around and less visible to his or her peers.

Suggestions for Transition-Age Students

- Have students complete informal and formal surveys to determine their interests and preferences.
- Ask students to look at any accommodations that are listed on their IEPs, think about their daily lives, and discuss which accommodations they will need *after* they exit secondary school. Contact agencies that provide these and other related services and invite them to meet with the students (e.g., if a student uses a wheelchair, you may need to contact agencies that provide transportation).
- Identify potential adult living, working, and educational environments. Learn more about them and make any necessary applications by the student's last year in the public school system.
- Develop goals and objectives in the following areas that help the student work toward life after high school: employment, recreation and leisure, home/independent living, community participation, post-secondary training, and learning experiences.
- Encourage students to investigate and participate in job shadowing, school-to-work, and other vocational programs.
- Encourage students who are interested in going on to college to investigate admission requirements and support services. Most high school career centers offer web-based search opportunities.
- One year before the student reaches the age of majority or leaves the system, have the student and family consider if he or she is ready to be his or her own guardian. If so, the student should take on even more responsibility for his or her IEP. If not, continue to reinforce the importance of self-determination and self-advocacy.

Helping Students Write Sections of Their IEP

Although IEP development benefits all students, the students who seem to gain the most are the younger students — those eighth and ninth graders who have never really focused on why they have an IEP or what it means to their education and future. Some of the older students have to be convinced that they need to participate. Be prepared for some to ask you, 'Why don't you just write it?'

Special Educator

Students' ability to write their own IEP varies widely. However, teachers should try to include the student to the greatest extent possible. For example, a student may be able to complete one or more sections on his or her own. Or, a student may be able to dictate to you his or her thoughts about a particular section. Think of the process as a long term one — for example, the student may only be able to complete one section on his or her own this year, but may be able to complete

Figure 6. Student Information

Student:_____ ID#:_____ Grade: _____

IEP Manager:_____ Date: _____

One of our main goals is to teach you how to be your own advocate. During the school year each student is expected to actively participate in writing and leading his or her own IEP meeting. The purpose of this activity is to support and teach you how to begin advocating for yourself this school year. First, you will better understand your disability. Second, you will discover your strengths, weaknesses, and preferred learning styles. Third, you will be able to ask for and use reasonable accommodations to help you be more successful in all your classes. Finally, you will practice communicating information about yourself to teachers who will work with you throughout the school year.

Each student will review his or her IEP in the basic skills class or, if he or she does not have a basic skills class, with the case manager at a mutually agreed upon time. Information from your IEP will be copied to this sheet and shared with all your classroom teachers. You will need to request a 5 to 10 minute meeting with each of your teachers to share information about yourself with them. A copy of your accommodation request form also will be given to each classroom teacher for his or her records. If you need support from your IEP manager, please ask.

Please return this form to your IEP manager by _____.

Class Period	Teacher Name	Reviewed Disability Information with Teacher	Accommodation Needs Received	Date	Teacher Signature
Period 1					
Period 2					
Period 3					
Period 4					
Period 5					
Period 6					

[Note: This sample form is not required by IDEA.]

an additional section next year. Because the transition plan is the foundation for course planning in high school, begin with this section of the IEP.

Following is an example of a process for engaging students in writing their IEPs. You may use some or all of the steps, depending on the students. The process assumes that students have had preparation in reviewing and assessing their IEPs. Make sure students have writing materials (pencil and paper, access to a computer or audiocassette and scribe) before beginning the activities.

- Have students describe their disabilities. Prompt them with the following questions: Describe your disability. How does your disability affect you in school, at home, and in the community? What things are harder because of your disability? What do you think is important for others to know about your disability? Some special educators have found that it helps for students to define their disability in practical terms (e.g., it is hard for me to learn new material that is presented in a lecture). When reviewing the section that describes their present level of performance, encourage students to include positive statements (e.g., I catch on to new math concepts quickly when they are presented visually).
- Ask students to look at their old IEP goals and objectives and determine whether they have met them. Ask students to check off the goals they have met. Ask them to identify new goals. In some cases, you may need to help students limit the number of goals by stressing the concepts of "achievable" and "realistic."
- Ask students to state their strengths and needs in each subject area or class. Have them make a list. It may help to have students use a new sheet of paper for each class (e.g., title the page "My Strengths in Math," or "What I Have Difficulty with in Math"). Consider using Figure 4 for this step.
- Ask students to state their behavioral and social strengths and needs. It may be helpful to use a checklist on which the student can mark "yes" or "no" in response to specific questions (e.g., Am I on time? Do I talk to my peers outside of school? Do I avoid conflict by giving in all the time?).
- Ask students to have their parents and general education teachers add to their lists of strengths and needs.
- Ask students to describe the accommodations they will need to meet their goals in each class. Consider using Figure 5 as a guide.
- Ask students to describe the responsibilities they will need to accept to succeed with their goals in each class.
- Ask students to think about their plans for the future and what they want to do after they have completed high school. Prompt them with the question, "What do you think you should be doing to get ready for next year?"
- Help students prepare draft copies of their IEPs. Encourage them to share their drafts with their parents and teachers. Schedule a time for them to report any feedback from these individuals. If anyone has suggested changes to what a student has written, provide ample time to discuss and make possible revisions prior to the IEP meeting.

After the students have completed their work on the IEPs, have them put them aside for a few days and then reread them. Ask them if what they wrote still reflects what they want to say. If not, spend time revising them. As a variation, you may ask students to read their IEPs from the perspective of a parent or teacher. Encourage students to role-play the other person's reaction. Prompt students with questions such as, "Do you have questions about what you have written?" "Can you explain?" and, "Do you agree or disagree with what you have written?"

Preparing Students To Participate in Their IEP Meetings

> *Students were very honest and knowledgeable about their weaknesses. Some weaknesses mentioned included: getting confused, needing to ask for help when necessary, needing to take criticism better, talking too much in class, and remembering job tasks. Students were very clear about accommodation needs and indicated that they were interested in accommodations such as extended time on assignments, peer tutoring, and assistance with assignment notebooks.*
>
> (Mason, et al., 2000)

Although many students have attended IEP meetings, few have participated in all aspects of a student-led IEP meeting. Until students have had a chance to prepare, practice, and actually lead a meeting, the idea of real participation may be unnerving to them. Even with significant preparation, the first meeting may be overwhelming for most students, especially students who only recently have been found eligible for special education and related services.

As you make long-term preparations to involve students in their IEPs, keep in mind the different levels of participation. These are:

- **Attending the IEP meeting and sharing information.** The student is present and treated as a full member of the IEP team. The IEP team leader directs questions to the student, such as "What helps you do well in science?"
- **Co-presenting.** The student shares responsibility for presenting information with the IEP team leader. For example, the

student may read or present information that should be incorporated into the new IEP. There usually is a delineation of responsibilities, with the student knowing his or her responsibilities in advance.

- **Leading.** The student is the leader of the IEP team. The student welcomes everyone, makes introductions, orients team members to the agenda, and directs the conversation throughout the meeting.

It is important to encourage students to participate to the greatest extent possible. However, student participation is contingent on solid and sufficient preparation. In all cases, it is assumed that students understand their IEPs. Considerations in helping students prepare for their role — whether it be sharing information, co-presenting, or leading the meeting include:

- **Preparing for the IEP meeting.** These are general suggestions that apply to all students.
- **Preparing students to lead their IEP meetings.** These suggestions apply only to those students who will lead their meetings.

In addition, there are certain logistical considerations that must be addressed to ensure the meeting is efficient and effective. To this end, suggestions are provided for the following tasks:

- Setting up the meeting.
- Providing support during the meeting.
- Debriefing after the meeting.

Preparing for the IEP Meeting

I am convinced that all students with disabilities can actively participate in their IEP meetings as long as they plan, practice, and have support. Be prepared for some students to react emotionally when planning for their IEP meetings. In some cases, no one has ever asked them what they thought about their own life! It is important that you take time to listen to their stories and support them as they work through the learning process. Sometimes it is better to take small steps than to take none at all. Always look for a win-win solution to problems.

Special Educator

All students must be familiar with their IEPs and/or specific sections of them. Generally, students will need to start with an outline for the meeting. (See sidebar for a sample agenda.)

Following are suggestions for helping students prepare their comments for the IEP meeting.

- Orient students to the task by asking, "What would you want to say if you were involved in your own IEP meeting?" "What do you want your teachers to know about you?" "What do you want your parents to know about you?"
- Have students select the topics (i.e., sections of the IEP) they wish to present.
- Help students organize their presentations. Depending on their preferences, encourage the students to write or state (into an audiotape player or to a scribe) everything they want to say about the topic. Review the statements and assist students in crafting their presentations.

- Provide students with prompts, such as a script. This can be typed on standard paper or recorded on index cards. (Note: If using index cards, make sure students number the cards. Also, consider attaching the cards together with a ring.) Or, have students make notes on their IEPs, using sticky notes or another color of ink. Allow students to use highlighters as appropriate. Or, have students prepare a Powerpoint presentation on the computer.
- Make sure students have sufficient opportunities to rehearse. Encourage students to practice at home with parents. Consider videotaping practice sessions and allowing students to critique their performances.
- Consider putting sticky notes with the proposed goals in the appropriate place on the IEP form. At the IEP meeting, students and teachers may modify the proposed goals and objectives or develop new ones based on input from team members.

In addition, students will need to have some practice in being good team members. This includes instruction in such social skills and social behaviors as:

- Listening.
- Speaking clearly.
- Asking questions.
- Stating disagreements in an appropriate way.
- Taking notes.

Some special educators build practice sessions around mock IEP meetings. Sometimes it is helpful to take the part of the student and model certain behaviors and responses. It also can be useful to role-play potential situations that might arise during the meeting that may result in hurt or angry feelings. Provide students with tips on how to address situations constructively.

Preparing Students to Lead Their IEP Meetings

You will need additional preparation for students who will be leading their IEP meetings. For example, students may need instruction, including role plays, in the following areas:

- Greeting people.
- Making introductions or asking participants to introduce themselves.

Sample IEP Meeting Agenda

Welcome and introductions.

State the purpose of the IEP meeting.
- Discuss student's disability.
- Discuss student's strengths and needs.

Determine future/transition goals and activities.

Review sections of the IEP:
- Consider student's needs for transition.
- Explain student's goals.
- Explain student's accommodations.

Solicit questions and answers.

Summarize.

Obtain signatures (if required by the SEA/LEA).

Reminders and feedback to student.

Close the meeting.

- Reviewing the agenda.
- Explaining legal requirements.
- Asking for questions and/or feedback.
- Dealing with differences of opinion.
- Sticking to the agenda.
- Keeping track of time.
- Closing the meeting by summarizing decisions and thanking everyone.

Again, practice and preparation will be necessary to help students feel comfortable. You can help students during the meeting by providing templates and cues. For example, after each agenda topic, the student's agenda should include: Look at each person, ask if anyone has questions, and tell people we are moving on to the next topic.

It is normal for students to be nervous. Help students handle their feelings by teaching them relaxation tips. For example, some people need 10 minutes of silent time before the meeting to review notes and concentrate. Some people benefit by having something to do with their hands (e.g., a rubber ball to grip in one's pocket). Others may need a pep talk where they restate positive affirmations (e.g., "I will do well" or "I am prepared").

Setting Up the Meeting

Once the meeting dates, times and locations are set, encourage students to prepare invitations. (See Figure 7 for an example.) Because invitations do not take the place of an official letter, it is essential that all formal procedures are followed as well.

One week before their IEP meetings, ask the students to send out reminders to the people who will be attending the meeting. These notes should include the meeting information (date, time, and location), and a statement from the student such as, "I am looking forward to seeing you at my IEP meeting."

If this is the first time the student is participating in the IEP meeting, it is a good idea to contact parents or guardians and remind them of this change. Parents must be informed of their child's participation in transition planning. 34 C.F.R. §300.345(2)-(3).

It also is a good idea to orient other team members. Team members need to understand their new roles and the expectations for helping students participate. You might want to share some tips with them on how they can support students. For example:

- Look at the student when he or she is talking. It shows the student that you are listening.
- Use the student's name when speaking to him or her. It helps the student feel like he or she belongs to the group.
- Remember that the student is present. When making comments about the student, direct them to the student. Do not refer to the student in the third person.
- Ask the student what he or she thinks first, before asking other adults. It helps the student understand that his or her input is important.
- Allow the student to finish what he or she is saying before commenting. Sometimes it is hard for a student to "get everything out," so be patient.

Figure 7. Invitation to Participate in IEP Meeting

To: _____

From: _____ and (IEP Manager) _____

You are invited to my Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meeting on _____, at _____, in room _____. At my IEP meeting I will be sharing information about my disability and my strengths and needs in all of my classes. I hope you will plan to attend.

Thank you,

• • • •

- Restate what you heard the student say. This lets the student know you were listening and that you care about what he or she said. It also helps to ensure that you have understood what the student said.

Providing Support During the Meeting

Follow procedures that you and the student have practiced.

Have someone take notes at the meeting. If materials are needed (e.g., copies of past and proposed IEPs, copies of the Accommodation Needs checklist, examples of student work), make sure those are ready as well. If possible, involve the student in preparing a portfolio for the meeting.

Do not worry if you must take extra time to explain something. If necessary, ask participants to provide clarification so the student understands their point of view.

You may need to help the student discuss difficult subjects. Focus the discussion on what a student can do. Keep in mind that the student will be nervous. He or she wants to do his or her best. Make sure to acknowledge the effort and time it took the student to prepare for the meeting. Share things with the student that he or she did that fostered understanding and decision making in the group.

Be sure to have a back-up plan should something go amiss at the meeting. For example, a student may become overwhelmed and need more support than was originally planned. Or, a team member may trigger a conflict or an uncomfortable situation. Plan in advance how you might need to intervene. Consider sharing your back-up plan with the student, so he or she feels safe. You also may want to work out a fail-safe signal that the student can use should he or she begin to feel overwhelmed.

Debriefing After the Meeting

After the meeting, be sure to praise the student. Regardless of any mistakes or missed opportunities, it is important that the student understands that he or she has accomplished much. If appropriate, have the student share his or her reactions with peers and/or family members.

Encourage the student to send thank you notes to the participants. These can be short and simply acknowledge members' participation. Or, the notes can be more personalized and describe something specific the individual did that the student appreciated.

As with all IEPs, the key to success is making sure they form the basis for the student's education throughout the year. Encourage the student to help you monitor the goals and objectives or milestones, how the modifications, accommodations, and other supports are working, and whether the transition plans are relevant.

Monitoring and Ongoing Self-Advocacy

Planning for and conducting an IEP meeting is only part of the self-advocacy that is needed if students are to assume more responsibilities for their lives. After the meeting, teachers and others will want to make sure the student continues to follow through with the agreements reached in the IEP meeting.

There are several areas that usually require follow-up. It is important to make sure students are coming to class regularly and on time, spending sufficient time studying, following through on class assignments, and completing course requirements. Students sometimes fail to use agreed-upon accommodations or modifications. This may mean checking in with students and their teachers to determine if, for example, students bring their laptops to class and actually use them.

Many opportunities exist each day for students to make decisions that will affect their futures, but students will need support and encouragement. You will want to continue to find the few minutes in the morning, during lunch, or after school to have private discussions and to help students solve problems.

When major changes are needed, revisit the IEP development process. In this case, encourage students to interview parents and teachers about their perceptions. If appropriate, allow students to arrange follow-up IEP meetings with parents and teachers to review and revise goals.

Considerations for Group Instruction

Some teachers and other practitioners may decide to teach student-led IEP skills in group settings. Confidentiality issues must be addressed when conducting group instruction. Review the confidentiality needs and procedures of your State, local school, and district. Make sure students (if they have reached the age of majority) or their parents give permission before you or your students share any information that may be confidential with others.

Some of the activities described in this guide can easily be used or modified for group instruction. Lessons might be presented in study skills, basic skills, or transition classes. In some cases, students may be interested in meeting after school.

You may want to consider establishing a "self-advocacy club." Participation in self-advocacy clubs has the added benefit of helping students increase their interpersonal and political power while gaining knowledge and confidence at their own pace (Guiterrez, 1990; Miller & Keys, 1996). Or, if a formal self-advocacy group, such as People First, already exists, inquire as to the possibility of integrating IEP work into its focus.

Groups can provide support to individuals not only prior to and during the IEP meeting, but also after the meeting is concluded. Students can meet together and share progress updates, provide advice, and mentor each other in how to improve performance and reach goals.

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Generally, the most common confidentiality issue relates to student review of their IEP. In a group setting, it is important to set group rules for students, such as "We will respect each other's privacy." Experience suggests that the first time you have students review their IEPs, they become absorbed reviewing it. However, in the course of discussions, students may exhibit curiosity and/or a willingness to reveal personal information. Thus, it is important to have additional ground rules such as, "Anything shared in this group is not shared with others outside of this group."

Schoolwide Implementation with All Students with Disabilities

J.E.B. Stuart High School, located in Falls Church, Va., serves 1,418 students representing 70 different countries and speaking 30 major languages. Fifty percent of students qualify for free and/or reduced lunches. The learning disability department consists of 12 teachers, each of whom teaches the students how to participate and/or lead their IEP meetings. Many of the 155 students in this program lead their IEP conferences in English and their home language. During the past four years, 100 percent of students under the age of majority and their parents have participated in their IEP meetings.

Involvement of all students with disabilities is probably the most productive long-term approach to student-led IEP meetings. Such schoolwide approaches generally are imple-

Case Study

Mason, et al. (2000) used a case study approach to verify student participation and evaluate teacher perceptions of the impact of student-led IEPs in Falls Church, Va. For five IEP meetings, an observer recorded notes on student involvement in 10 areas, including whether or not the student:

- Led the IEP meeting
- Described his/her disability
- Described his/her present level of performonce
- Reported test results
- Described current problems in classes
- Indicated his/her strengths
- Recommended IEP goals
- Described needed accommodations
- Described the transition plan
- Described legal requirements

Students demonstrated student involvement skills on 49 out of 50 occasions.

Interviews with general and special education teachers confirmed a high positive regard for the impact of student-led IEPs. Teachers ogreed that students were generally able to discuss their disability and need for specific accommodations. General educators indicated that students who were more involved in their IEPs were more inclined to meet goals.

mented after teachers have experienced success on a smaller scale.

In implementing student-led IEPs with all students with disabilities, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- Will all special education teachers be involved simultaneously, or will implementation be phased in?
- Will implementation occur simultaneously, or will it be phased in across grade levels?
- What additional resources could help facilitate this process? For example, is the process supported by district inservice training? Could such training be provided at staff meetings or during teacher workdays? Might videos on student-led IEPs or audiotapes support understanding? (See additional resources at the end of this guide.)
- How can special education teachers cooperate in facilitating implementation? Taking turns in leading groups before or after school, sharing responsibility for classes in self-advocacy, sharing resources and information on research and innovations at other schools are some possibilities.
- What kinds of community resources could help support this process? Volunteers with disabilities could serve as role models, for example.
- Could course credit be arranged? Consider developing a one-credit course on self-advocacy. Or, integrate instruction into basic skills courses.

Conclusion

It is extremely gratifying when you see students begin to take responsibility for their own education. You know that when they leave the safety of high school, they will be able to make it on their own!

Special Educator

No matter what approach is taken in the implementation of a student-led IEP program — individual, group, or schoolwide — the benefits are many. Involving students in developing their IEPs and participating in IEP meetings provides valuable opportunities as students choose and pursue goals and develop skills associated with self-determination and self-advocacy. These skills are critical for success in post-secondary education and beyond.

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[Note: The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, has not reviewed the following list of references — with the exception of the Federal statutes, rules, and regulations — for consistency with IDEA.]

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Workforce Investment Act of 1998, P.L. 105-220, 29 U.S.C. §701 *et seq.*

Additional Resources

Associations of Service Providers Implementing IDEA Reforms in Education (ASPIIRE)
1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-5704
(877) CEC-IDEA (toll-free)
(866) 915-5000 (TTY)
www.ideapractices.org

The ASPIIRE Project brings together teachers and other service providers to provide help in implementing the requirements of IDEA '97. ASPIIRE answers questions, keeps educators informed about what works, enhances outreach and widespread dissemination to three million educators and related service providers, and supports efforts to help all children learn.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-5704
(888) 232-7733
(866) 915-5000 (TTY)
www.cec.sped.org

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, students with disabilities, and/or the gifted. CEC serves as the lead organization for the IDEA Partnership ASPIIRE Project described above, which is located at CEC.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
ERIC/OSEP Project
The Council for Exceptional Children
1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-5704
(800) 328-0272
(703) 264-9449 (TTY)
www.ericec.org

ERIC is a national information system designed to provide users with ready access to an extensive body of education-related literature. It is supported by the National Library of Education, a part of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement. ERIC encompasses the world's largest and most frequently searched education data base and a decentralized network of knowledgeable and helpful subject experts. ERIC has a data base of available videotapes.

Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE)
Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)
8161 Normandale Boulevard
Bloomington, MN 55437-1044
(888) 248-0822 (toll free)
(952) 838-0190 (TTY)

The FAPE Project is a partnership linking families, advocates, and self-advocates to the new focus of IDEA '97. FAPE helps parents and advocates by providing written information on IDEA '97, training at workshops and other venues, and by making referrals to other parent training organizations.

IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators (ILIAD)
1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-5704
(877) CEC-IDEA (toll free)
(866) 915-5000 (TTY)
www.ideapractices.org

The ILIAD Partnership increases the knowledge and supports the efforts of local administrators by addressing the general requirements of IDEA '97. It also addresses positive behavioral supports and management of discipline concerns, access to the general curriculum, and strategies for collaboration.

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)
P.O. Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
(800) 695-0285 (toll-free voice or TTY)
www.nichcy.org

NICHCY publishes numerous documents for special education teachers and family members related to serving children with special needs. They include:

- McGahee-Kovac, M. (1995) ***A student's guide to the IEP***. Washington, DC: National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY).
- Küpper, L. (1995). ***Helping students develop their IEPs.*** Washington, DC: National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY).

These booklets and their accompanying audio tapes provide technical assistance for parents and teachers to use, in conjunction with the student version of the guide, to aid students in developing their own IEPs. These booklets include sections that guide students, parents, and teachers through the entire process of empowering the student. They include lessons and sample worksheets for teacher use as well as an overview of the laws, a glossary of special education-related terms, and pages of additional resources for parents and teachers who are interested in learning more. The adult version of the audio tape features teachers and parents discussing how they have helped students become more active in the IEP process. The student audio tape presents information on IEPs and encourages students to become motivated with their IEP.

Western Regional Resource Center
Publications Office
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota
109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 624-4512
FAX: (612) 624-9344

The Western Regional Resource Center has developed a comprehensive guide to transition under IDEA '97: Storms, J., O'Leary, E., Williams, J. (2000). ***Transition Requirements: A guide for states, districts, schools, universities and families*** [On-line]. Available: **http://interact.uoregon.edu/WRRC/trnfiles/trncontents.htm**. Obtain a copy at their web site or by mail.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)
www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/index.html

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is a component of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), one of the principal components of the U.S. Department of Education (ED). In addition to OSEP, OSERS includes the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). OSEP's mission and organization focus on the free appropriate public education of youth with disabilities from birth through age 21.

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