How to Help Students Lead Their IEP Meetings

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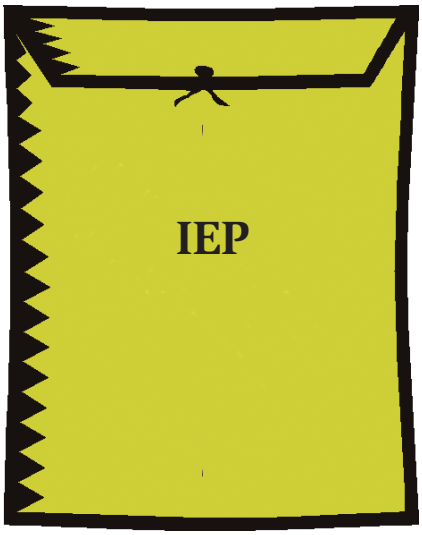
- Searching for a way to increase parent attendance and participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings?
- Looking for a way for students to be more involved in their education?
- Feeling that students don't take enough responsibility for their own learning?
- Wanting general educators to be more supportive of students with disabilities?

Though we offer no panacea, we believe that increasing student responsibility for their IEPs can influence student and parent buy-in and involvement in the IEP process. Building on the success that others have experienced with self-determination and self-advocacy (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Martin & Marshall, 1995; O'Brien, O'Brien, & Mount, 1997; Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990), we have found a way to substantially engage teachers, parents, and students in planning for the education of students with disabilities. That process—student-led IEPs—teaches students to take ownership for their own education and to demonstrate that ownership at an annual IEP meeting.



Through our research on student-led IEPs, we found that students and teachers alike reported that students using this process knew more about their disabilities, legal rights, and appropriate accommodations than other students and that students gained increased self-confidence and the ability to advocate for themselves (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002). This process also increased parental participation in IEP meetings (with 100% of the parents participating in IEP meetings during the year). Moreover, many general and special educators were enthusiastic about the changes they observed in student involvement in education, including the follow-up that occurred in implementing IEP goals.

To prepare students for the many responsibilities they will assume after they leave school, students—while they are in school—need to learn to think for themselves and advocate on their own behalf, including learning how to overcome obstacles to the successful pursuit of their goals (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). Certainly students need both an understanding of and experience with an array of self-determination activities (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Ward, 1988, 1992). Whereas others have presented curricula for involving students in general self-determination activities, little information is readily available to assist teachers in substantially involving students in IEP and transition meetings (Lovitt, Cushing & Stump, 1994; Powers, Turner, Matuszewski, Wilson, & Phillips, 2001; Salend, 1983; Snyder & Shapiro, 1997).

Despite the lack of resources to assist teachers in adequately preparing students for their participation in IEP and transition meetings, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 requires the transition process to include (a) inviting students to IEP meetings when needed transition services are going to be discussed and (b) ensuring that a coordinated set of transition activities are based on student needs, taking into account the students' preferences and interests (34 C.F.R.300. 344 (b) (1) and 300.29).

Simply inviting a student to meetings where transition services are discussed won't ensure that the transition activities are based on that student's needs, preferences, and interests. Recognizing this, many districts have implemented

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Levels of Student Involvement at the Meeting

Level 1

Student presents information about or reads from his or her transition plan for the future.

Level 2

Student explains his or her disability, shares information on individual strengths and weaknesses (present levels of performance), and explains the accommodations needed. Students present Level 1 information and may suggest new IEP goals.

Level 3

Student leads the IEP conference, including Level 1 and Level 2 responsibilities, introductions, and closing.

procedures for transition planning, including interest surveys that are used with students before their IEP or transition meetings. Many teachers, however, are so involved in preparing students for high-stakes assessment that even with the best intentions, they may find themselves focusing on academic goals that can be achieved in general education classrooms, while allotting less time for transition plans.

Preparing students to lead their IEP meetings can strengthen student involvement in transition planning and IEP meetings. Depending on student capability and preparation, student participation will occur at three general levels ranging from presenting limited information during the meeting (Level 1) to assuming responsibility for all aspects of the IEP or transition meeting (Level 3). (See box, "Levels of Student Involvement at the Meeting.") Students can become involved to a greater or lesser extent under each level. For example, some students at a Level 2 may begin by sharing information about their disability but not take a lead role in discussing strengths and weaknesses or accommodations.

Preparing for the IEP Meeting

In an ideal world, students would begin receiving self-advocacy and self-determination instruction in elementary school and would experience significant participation in IEP meetings before high school. Although such experience is highly desirable, students can lead IEP meetings even if they have not received previous preparation in self-determination and self-advocacy. Teachers should schedule a minimum of four to six sessions over a period of several weeks for training and preparation for the IEP and transition meeting. These sessions can occur with individuals or small groups and should cover information on the following:

- Plans for postschool activities and transition needs.
- Current level of performance, current goals, and recommendations from teachers, parents, and others.
- Student strengths and needs in each class—including appropriate accommodations.
- Student's legal right to an appropriate education and appropriate supports.

SOME PRELIMINARY DATA SHOWS THAT GENERAL EDUCATORS ARE NOT VERY INTERESTED IN SELF-ADVOCACY OR SELF-DETERMINATION.

The preparation sessions for involvement in IEPs and transition planning that follow are designed to be used with students with mild to moderate disabilities in secondary schools; however, with some modifications, these basic procedures can be used with students of varying ages and levels and types of disability.

IEP Preparation Session #1

Before or during the first session, teachers need to introduce information on IDEA (1997) and the student's right to both an IEP and a transition plan, as well as other rights, including a right to accommodations. Teachers should have copies of laws available during the session to discuss key concepts from IDEA (1997), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. (See box, "Public Law 105-17" and "Additional Resources.")

An efficient procedure is to cover this information prior to the first session with a small group of six to eight students. Teachers may find it helpful to conduct this activity at the beginning of every school year in a basic skills, study skills, or resource class. Rather than the IEP manager assuming responsibility for sharing information with each student,

Public Law 105-17: Reauthorization of IDEA

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997

Some of the important sections to review with secondary students with mild disabilities when considering IEP participation are:

- Disability. 34 C.F.R. 300.7.
- Development of the IEP. C.F.R. 300.346 (1).
- Considerations of special factors in development of the IEP (behavior, limited English proficiency, instruction in Braille, communication needs, and assistance technology). 34 C.F.R. 300.346 (a) (2).
- Evaluation. 34 C.F.R. 353.2 and 300.533.
- Student involvement in transition plans. C.F.R. 300.347(b)(1) and 300.347(b)(2).
- Age of majority. C.F.R. 300.347(c).
- Graduation from high school. C.F.R. 300.122(a)(3)(ii)-(iii).
- Participation of regular education teacher. 34 C.F.R. 300.344 (a) (2) and 300.346 (d).
- Access to the general curriculum. C.F.R. 300.26(b) (3) (ii).
- Accommodations and modifications for state wide testing. C.F.R. 300.138.

all special education teachers can work together and share responsibility for this orientation efficiently, if time management is a concern.

Describing the law in student-friendly language is helpful not only to the student but also to the parents, who—particularly those whose first language is not English—may not ask for clarification if they don't understand what is being said. Some of the parents with whom we have worked have commented that they never fully understood IEPs and the right to education until their child explained it in layman's terms.

If a separate session has been held at the beginning of the year covering disability laws and rights, the individual student and teacher review this information during their first IEP preparation meeting. Students and teachers at this first meeting also discuss needs and concerns in each class and prepare invitations to the eventual IEP meeting. Students will distribute these invitations to teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and others prior to the next IEP preparation meeting.

IEP Preparation Session #2

If this is the student's first IEP, teachers should discuss assessment information (including career interest inventories and transition needs) during the second session. For those students who have a current IEP, the individual student and teacher read sections from the student's IEP together, highlighting sections of the IEP in which the student disagrees or has questions and placing check marks next to goals that the student feels have been met. Students and teachers can reference the required quarterly progress reports as they review the student's estimates of his or her achievements.

In this session, the student and teacher should also consider postschool preferences and draft transition goals.

IEP Preparation Session #3

In preparation for the third session, students contact their teachers and parents to request their input concerning individual goals, including their opinions about whether those goals have been met, and to obtain their recommendations for areas of concern or future goals. Students invite such feedback through preparing either a written note or an e-mail communication. The teachers and parents return their responses to either the student or the student's IEP manager. Rather than relying solely on opinions and new input, the student and the teacher add to this third session the student's goals, which are reviewed quarterly, as well as quarterly progress reports that are sent to parents.

To support student involvement, other students who have previously participated in student-led IEP meetings may model how to lead a meeting.

Before the meeting, the student and the teacher make and modify lists of strengths and needs according to each subject. They use these lists, along with input from teachers, parents, and others, to develop new goals and benchmarks. Team members can use similar processes to discuss accommodation needs and concerns, using a checklist of potential accommodations to stimulate discussion.

IEP Preparation Sessions #4 and #5

The special education teacher may want to prepare a draft of the district's IEP form that includes possible individual goals for the coming year. In the fourth session, the student and the teacher review the proposed goals and the effectiveness of accommodations that are being used in each class.

During both the fourth and the fifth sessions, the student uses the draft IEP to practice his or her presentation for the IEP meeting. To support student involvement, other students who have previously participated in student-led IEP meetings may model how to lead a meeting. This is followed by verbal practice, feedback from teachers and others, and additional practice.

IEP Preparation Session #6

In some cases a sixth meeting is scheduled for additional discussion and practice. Teachers sometimes videotape a rehearsal session and play that back for the student, discussing how to improve the student's presentation at the IEP meeting.

Our project individualized training and sometimes varied the precise approach with the teacher and the individual student. Students with prior experience leading IEP meetings often required fewer practice sessions to prepare for the meetings. (For an individual example, see box, "Erika's IEP.")

Results From Our Research

More than 100 students with mild disabilities from a range of cultural backgrounds had been involved in student-led IEPs annually at the high school where we implemented this project. Between September 1999 and July 2000, we conducted three studies involving 43 students. The studies included

- Observations of student-led IEP meetings.
- Interviews with teachers.
- Interviews with students.

Teachers prepared the students to lead their IEP meetings using three to six preparation sessions that lasted 20-45 minutes each. During these preparation sessions, students helped determine their needs, goals, transition preferences, present levels of performance, and accommodation needs. Following this preparation, project staff and consultants observed 5 student-led IEP meetings and interviewed 10 teachers and 35 students. (Four students had left the school, and 4 were not available at the time of the observations and interviews.) Our results confirm the following:

- Students were involved and did contribute to meetings.
- Students knew about their disability rights and their accommodations.
- Students gained increased self-confidence and were able to advocate for themselves.
- Parental participation increased.

Erika's IEP

At the beginning of the year, Erika, along with other students, reviews legal rights in her resource class. In preparation for the upcoming IEP meeting, Erika meets with her special education teacher, Ms. Livia; and they discuss their perception of Erika's progress and needs, including some review of her disability and her rights under IDEA (1997). They also consider who else might need to be involved in planning for Erika's education during the year. Together they develop invitations to come to the IEP meeting, and Erika distributes these invitations prior to the next IEP preparation session.

At the second session, Erika and Ms. Livia read sections from Erika's current IEP, highlighting areas where they have questions or disagreements. They also place check marks next to goals that Erika believes she has met. At this session, Erika and her teacher also discuss her transition plan, reviewing information from a transition assessment she had completed earlier. This information is used to draft IEP goals that focus on transition concerns.

Erika next contacts her other teachers and her parents and asks for their input concerning both progress on her current goals and ideas for future goals. At the third session, Erika and Ms. Livia discuss the knowledge they have at that point, considering Erika's grades, interests, successes, and problems from both their perspectives and the perspectives of other teachers and Erika's parents. Together, Erika and Ms. Livia draft other possible IEP goals and benchmarks.

During the fourth meeting, Erika and her teacher review how Erika will be involved in the IEP meeting: How much leading will she do? What kind of prompts might she need? How will Ms. Livia assist with this meeting? Will Erika handle the welcome and introduction? Will she review her progress and dreams? When will she ask others for their input? Is she likely to hear criticisms? How will she react if she is criticized? How can she avoid possible criticism by owning up to any difficulties or problems that have occurred? How comfortable will Erika feel in leading the meeting? How prepared will she be to follow through on recommendations and decisions from that meeting? What should she do if she finds that she disagrees with a recommendation?

After talking with Erika, Ms. Livia assumes the role of a coach and facilitator and helps Erika decide on many other details regarding the meeting and its desired outcomes. To help Erika prepare for the important leadership role she will assume, Ms. Livia and Erika rehearse the meeting, videotape the rehearsal, and review it to polish Erika's performance.

In this scenario, Erika has a practical reason to master some important skills that might be useful in other situations. Erika knows that planning is important and that the other team members value her involvement and ideas. She understands she is assuming major responsibility for both planning the meeting and following up on the plan.

General educators described students who lead IEP meetings as

- Interacting more positively with adults.
- Having greater knowledge of their legal rights.
- Assuming more responsibility for themselves and having more support.
- Being more aware of their limitations and the resources available to them.

Detailed information on our results are in our article, "Implementing Student-Led IEPs: Student Participation and Student and Teacher Reactions" (Mason, et al, 2002) (See box, "Questions About Leading IEP Meetings.").

Future Directions for Student-Led IEPs

Preliminary data from a recent CEC Web survey indicates that of 529 respondents, approximately 70% rated student involvement in IEPs as "very important"; yet, only 65% of that group was satisfied with the current level of student involvement with IEPs (Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, in press). Other data from that survey also show that respondents had a strong interest in self-determination and a similar dissatisfaction with the approach school districts are taking in this area.

Similar results are reported by others. For example, in a statewide survey, self-determination was ranked as "important" or "very important" by 77% of the respondents (Agran et al., 1999). Only 55% of those respondents included self-determination skills on their student's IEPs.

The findings of researchers such as David Test and his colleagues provides a positive outlook for the future involvement of students in determining their own goals and contributing to their educational plans. They report an increasing popularity in the use of these terms at special education meetings and in a proliferation of self-determination curricula (Test, Karvonen, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2000). Moreover, in a recent compilation of articles published by the National Transition Network, Johnson and Emanuel (2000) have included a series of articles that all suggest an increase in student involvement in the IEP process.

Most of the authors of articles in this compilation are concerned about the significant number of students who are not involved in the IEP process. Johnson (2000), for example, suggests that classes should be offered to enhance decision making and that students' goals for self-determination must be clearly stated within IEPs. Furney and Salembier (2000) noted that a growing amount of literature supports the efficacy of student involvement in terms of increased achievements in adult life, and Johnson and Sharpe (2000), from a survey of 548 local special education administrators, report increased involvement of students in IEP meetings.

We might expect that the strong indicators of teacher interest and the efficacy of student involvement in goal setting that have been reported by researchers would lead to more widespread implementation of student involvement in goal setting and participation in IEP development and imple-

Questions About Leading IEP Meetings

How old do you need to be to lead an IEP meeting?

Although it is perhaps easiest for teachers to envision students in high school preparing to leave school as IEP team leaders, we have experience implementing student-led IEPs with students as young as 6 years of age. The vocabulary is different, and the degree of responsibility is different; however, the concept of leadership is maintained through the emphasis that is placed on asking the child about what is important to him or her and using that information in planning goals.

What about cognitive or communication skills?

Students with mental retardation or other cognitive disabilities and students with limited communication skills are among those who have helped lead their own IEP meetings. Sometimes picture prompts are used and certainly individuals who communicate through communication boards and other electronic means can participate using those devices to facilitate communication. Sometimes the student is videotaped presenting his or her statement, and that is shown at the meeting. Sometimes interpreters help with the statements. Sometimes students begin by leading one part of the meeting, rather than assuming responsibility for the entire meeting.

Is this an important skill that will generalize to later situations, or is too much time spent on a skill that won't be useful later in life?

Results from our research tell us that students gain confidence and communication skills. Students who have graduated also tell us anecdotally that because they have practiced asking for accommodations and talking to others about their disability, they find it easier to apply self-advocacy skills in college or on the job.

How can I find time to practice?

This issue needs resolution. Some teachers use time during a pull-out or resource course, or even offer one-credit courses for self-advocacy. Others find time before or after school or during their lunch hours or planning periods. Sometimes teachers pull students from other classes for planning. Some of these are not very good alternatives. These skills are so critical that they should be considered part of the curriculum for each student with a disability. With that framework, finding time is important. Recommendations are needed from educational leaders about how to best find that time. We are currently reviewing recommendations in this area and will have suggestions for enhancing scheduling available later this year.

What happens when students practice these skills over a period of years?

Although our formal research was only over two years, our informal experiences tell us that students gain self-advocacy skills. Some students over a period of years gradually take on more and more responsibility, including responsibility for assisting their peers in gaining the skills needed to lead IEP meetings. Follow-up interviews with six students who had been involved in student-led IEPs for 2-4 years showed that all six students believed that this process was beneficial. All six students indicated increased confidence and improved public speaking skills. More research is needed in this area.

What should I do if I want to implement Student-Led IEPs?

Here are a few basic steps:

- If you don't have it already, you may want to get a copy of a self-advocacy or self-determination curriculum to use with this program.
- Consider how to begin. We suggest some sort of pilot with a few students. Strive for initial success. That enthusiasm may make it easier to expand your program. One way to build this enthusiasm is to begin with students who are natural leaders and have good communication skills. But don't stop there. Often these students later become excellent peer tutors in this area.
- Consider who your allies might be. Are there other teachers in your building or district who might also be interested in this? Perhaps you could form a resource network.
- Talk to a few parents and your administrators and make sure you have support for your pilot.
- Make sure you consider issues such as confidentiality. A locked file cabinet is needed for storing IEPs. Students will need guidance about how to discuss their disability with others, including how much to share with their classmates or employers. Before students are given copies of their IEPs, make sure the building level administration has approved of your plan. Often it is best to present the student with a copy of his or her IEP in a large envelope with a clasp.
- Go to the CEC Web site (http://www.cec.sped.org) to download or purchase *Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement* (McGahee et al., 2001). This guide describes in more detail the procedures used in our research and includes sample forms that can also be helpful in implementing this process.

What are problems I may be likely to encounter?

These are fairly basic. The most frequent problems center around time. If you can't find sufficient time to work with students and provide structured practice in leading the IEP meetings, then students may be more nervous and less effective, or their presentation may seem artificial and less likely to truly represent their needs. If necessary, be ready to step in during the meeting. Even students who've had several planning sessions may need assistance.

Are there any keys to success?

Certainly. Among them are three critical steps:

1. Use language in wording goals and objectives that the student can understand.
2. Make sure you have student buy-in.
3. Find adequate time not only to prepare for the meeting, but to monitor progress.

Are additional resources available to assist in IEP development and self-determination and self-advocacy?

(Yes, see box, "Additional Resources," which follows.)

Additional Resources

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Federal Laws

- ILIAD and ASPIIRE IDEA Partnership projects
http://www.ideapractices.org
- Council for Exceptional Children
http://www.cec.sped.org
- ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
http://www.ericec.org
- Families and Advocates Partnership for Education
http://www.FAPE.org
- Office of Special Education Programs
http://www.ed/gov.OSERS/OSEP
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)
http://www.nichcy.org
- Western Regional Resource Center
http://interact.uoregon.edu/wrrc/wrrc.html

Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Curriculum and Approaches

- *ChoiceMaker Curriculum* (Martin & Marshall, 1995).
- *LCCE Life Centered Career Education* (Brolin, 1991).
- *Self-Determination Across the Life-Span* (Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996).
- *Self-Determined Learning Model* (Wehmeyer et al., 2000).
- *Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement* (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001; hard copies and downloadable pdf version available at http://www.cec.sped.org.)
- *A Practical Guide for Teaching Self Determination* (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998).

Note: See reference list for complete information on these guides.

mentation in the future; however, other factors need to be taken into consideration. Some preliminary data show that general educators are not interested in self-advocacy or self-determination, and that there is a similar lack of interest in related research conducted in the area of self-directed learning, a term used more frequently in the general education literature (Mason, Thormann, O'Connell, & Behrmann, in press).

These data suggest that although special education is implemented most frequently in the general education classroom, general educators are not in step with special educators regarding these practices. Moreover, IDEA reauthorization is around the corner, and decisions made during this process could have a widespread and long-term effect on policy and practices. That is not to say that such involvement must be legislated. Related to these concerns are findings from Johnson and Sharpe (2000) regarding the barriers to implementation—foremost among them is students being unprepared to represent themselves. Other barriers they noted were lack of interest from students and lack of focus on this as a priority within school districts.

Special educators' interest in student involvement in IEPs is growing. These teachers recognize they need additional guidance about how to involve students, but several factors continue to mitigate against this involvement. Given this situation, the good news is that for interested teachers, curricula and expertise are available. A dedicated group of technical assistance providers have many valuable insights into successfully implementing and furthering these practices.

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