

## **Transition for Students with Disabilities How Parents Can Be Effective Advocates in the IEP Meeting**

### **What You Need to Know**

If you're a parent of one of the 5 million children with disabilities in the U.S., you're undoubtedly aware of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meeting. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents of a child who receives special education services meet at least once a year with representatives of the local school district to prepare their child's IEP - a detailed, written description of the child's educational program.

For many parents, the annual IEP meeting can be a difficult and stressful encounter. You may have trouble making your child's case because you feel intimidated by school administrators and experts. There may be obstacles beyond your control, such as a teacher shortage, inadequate funding, or limited program options. While the process can seem overwhelming to a parent, it doesn't need to be this way.

You don't need to be a special education expert or a lawyer to be an effective advocate for your child in the IEP process. What you must do is be prepared and plan ahead. Every parent -- whether it's their first or their tenth IEP - will benefit from reviewing the following steps well in advance of the IEP meeting.

### **Step 1: Understand your child's legal rights to special education.**

Your school district is required by IDEA to give you copies of special education statutes, regulations and policies. Read these carefully, keeping in mind that under the law, parents are equal partners with school representatives in decision- making. You are just as important as everyone else at the IEP meeting!

### **Step 2: Obtain a copy of your school district's IEP form.**

Become familiar with the sections you will be filling out at the IEP meeting, which typically include:

- *Program or Class* - the appropriate learning environment for your child, such as a regular classroom for all or part of the school day, a special class for children with learning disabilities or a private school for deaf children.
- *Goals and Objectives* - the general academic, linguistic, social, vocational, cognitive, self-help and other goals you have for your child, such as reading or math skills, healthy peer relationships or independent living skills, plus the specific steps your child will have to take to reach these goals.
- *Related Services* - the developmental, corrective and other supportive services necessary to facilitate your child's placement in a regular class or to allow your child to benefit from special education. Examples include a one-to-one aide in the classroom, speech therapy or transportation to and from school.
- *Transition Services* - any supportive services addressing vocational and advanced placement needs of children age 14 and older, including post-secondary independent living.
- *Other Educational Components* - anything else your child needs to succeed, such as particular curricula and teaching methods.

### **Step 3: Become an expert about your child's educational performance and needs.**

Keep in regular contact with your child's teacher and other school representatives, and gather opinions from professionals who know your child. Get copies of everything in your child's school file, including assessments, testing data and written comments from teachers. Figure out what each item means and think about whether you can use it to demonstrate your child's need for a particular program, service, or methodology.

### **Step 4: Know your options.**

Gather information about various programs and services within your school district (as well as those outside of it) that may be appropriate for your child. Talk to your child's teacher, professionals who have evaluated your child, the district special education administrator, and other parents. Visit as many of these programs as you can before the IEP meeting.

### **Step 5: Develop your child's ideal IEP.**

While you and the school district will develop the IEP together, it's a good idea for you to put together a clearly expressed blueprint of the educational program and services you want beforehand. This will not only help you learn your material, but it will also help you think about how to demonstrate that your child needs the educational help you want for him or her.

If your child has special health care needs, some items to consider are:

- Modifications to physical education program
- Classroom seating, such as avoiding being next to windows because of allergies or noise
- Accessibility, such as entrances, school activity areas, transportation, emergency evacuation
- Stamina and strength issues, such as carrying heavy books, scheduling classes
- Medication, medical supplies, and equipment

If your child is transition age (14 years or older), items to consider include:

- Self-determination and self-advocacy skills
- Understanding own needs and required accommodations
- Health care management skills, self-care, and knowledge of health insurance
- Vocational training that won't conflict with health needs

### **Step 6: Gather all available information that supports your position and your child's ideal IEP.**

This may be a statement from your child's teacher, an independent assessment of your child (an evaluation by someone outside the school district) or a statement from your child's pediatrician or other professional

### **Step 7: Find out who will attend the IEP meeting on behalf of the school district.**

Try to find out who will be attending the meeting and what programs or services the school district might propose for your child. Typically, your child's teacher and the school administrator responsible for special education and specialists will attend the IEP meeting. Be especially clear on the teacher's position; he or she has had lots of contact with your child and is a very influential IEP team member.

### **Step 8: Invite appropriate allies to speak at the IEP meeting on your child's behalf.**

This may be your child's physician, an independent evaluator who's assessed your child, or a specialist who supports the program, service or other IEP component you want for your child. If key people can't attend (or it's too costly for them to do so), have them prepare a written statement for you to read at the meeting.

### **Step 9: Organize your materials.**

Put all your papers and documents in a three-ring binder, with clearly labeled sections you can easily access at the meeting. Mastering these tasks requires you to be generally organized (but not fanatically so), willing to ask questions and make use of resources that are widely available. If you plan, organize and persevere, you will help your child. You may not make the IEP meeting perfect, but your child will benefit from your efforts.

### **Step 10: Explore additional resources that might help your child.**

There are many resources available to help you better understand IEPs and support your child – and to empower your child to become a strong self-advocate! Advocacy groups and disability organizations can help tremendously in the process. Here are a few good web sites to explore:

- *Wrights Law*  
[www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.index.htm](http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.index.htm)
- *Embedding Health Outcomes in the IEP Process*  
<http://dpimedia.wi.gov/main/Viewer/?peid=f44dfa70439241dd85e99cce0cb70e26>
- *Navigating Your IEP: Are You on the Right Track towards Your Future?*  
[www.familycafe.net/images/stories/pdffiles/navigating%20your%20iep%202-25-10.pdf](http://www.familycafe.net/images/stories/pdffiles/navigating%20your%20iep%202-25-10.pdf)

**Reference:** *National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities*, <http://nichcy.org/disability>