



Things to Think About!

The Yearly IEP: Priorities and Compromise

By Linda Jorgensen

Every fall begins a new school year. For the majority of families this means back to school nights, new shoes and shopping for school supplies. For special needs children this also means parents have an Individualized Education Plan meeting and planning session to look forward to.

When my children were in school I participated in at least 2 IEP meetings a year, one for each of my 2 children, and some years one or two more meetings were needed. I must admit I never really looked forward to these annual wrangling sessions with school staff with any real enthusiasm but the prosaic reality is this. An IEP is the process that gives us as parents the opportunity to improve the education our child is receiving and this is our chance for input and direction in the education process both at school and at home. This process is how we all work together as a team to assist our child in becoming the best he or she may be. Going in with a good attitude is paramount for success.

This year, as in years past, families and school districts all over the country will be faced with some very hard choices. However, the current economic climate has made it even more difficult on everyone. Many state budgets are in turmoil with school districts receiving fewer dollars to educate larger numbers of students. Many special needs programs must be downsized or cut outright. This presents not only a great challenge but also a great opportunity. Cooperation between families and school staff accompanied by heavy doses of creativity will be needed in order to ensure each child receives the maximum education possible given the circumstances.

An IEP is a process designed to help the parent and the child make the most of the child's education. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) intended IEPs as an opportunity for families and schools to work

together for the best benefit of each child with a disability. It is a process tailored specifically for the individual child with special needs calling for creativity and cooperation.

A little background may be helpful.

Under IDEA, an evaluation determines if a child is eligible for special education and related services. If the child is eligible, the law requires that a team of people (the IEP team) gathers to talk about what special instruction and services the child will need to succeed at school. This team **MUST** include at least one of the child's parents and/or legal guardian, as well as school staff and others as appropriate. Together, the IEP team then reviews the information they have gathered that tells them how the child is currently doing in school and what his or her special needs are. If the child has difficulty in reading, paying attention, writing, speaking, behaving appropriately, or safety issues need addressing the team discusses these needs and ways to meet those needs. These decisions are written down in what then becomes that child's Individualized Education Program or IEP.

Preparing for Your Child's IEP

Proper preparation by parents can equip them for what may be a lengthy discussion on how to help their child. Keeping your child as the main focus of the meeting often becomes the biggest challenge. It can be easy to become side tracked by minor issues causing the entire team to miss items that are more important. When a parent prepares in advance by considering issues, options and courses of action that may be addressed, they are better prepared to keep the conversation civil and focused on their child. The goal being a productive, effective IEP best benefiting your child. Never let meeting participants forget that this is a **REAL** child– **YOUR** child under discussion. The goal of any IEP meeting should be the child, first and foremost.

Before the meeting parents can develop a priority list of goals they would like to see addressed during the school year. This list can help keep the IEP meeting on track. Encourage creativity in problem solving and goal preparation by all parties and be willing to negotiate if need be. School staff will often be more able, and willing, to address many goals for your child if you are willing to allow for creativity and focus on the most pressing goals first. Some goals may need to be addressed at home. Be willing to listen. Don't forget the goal is to have a productive, effective IEP best benefiting your child.

Things To Consider Before the IEP Team Meeting

1. Obtain a copy of the Federal Publication, "[A Guide to the Individualized Education Program](http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/iepguide.pdf)".

(<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/iepguide.pdf>) and give it a quick read.

2. Consider ways to involve your child in the IEP process. Start as soon as your child is able to participate in making simple goals if possible. IEP meetings are an excellent opportunity to begin developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

3. Think about the long range vision you have for your child then break that vision down into smaller, shorter range goals that can be used as goals for the upcoming school year. Be reasonable in your expectations and prioritize your list. Allow for creativity among the school staff as appropriate.

4. List your child's interests, strengths, weaknesses, medical needs and other concerns you may have about their education. Identify areas that you, the parent, are willing to work with at home.

5. Consider how your child's disability affects his or her education. Are there services such as Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy or augmentative services/equipment available to assist them? (See, "[A Guide to the Individualized Education Program](http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/iepguide.pdf)", pg. 9 for complete list of services.)

6. Think about your child's current educational progress. What has worked in the past and what has not? This is your opportunity to be creative. Are there other strategies, resources, or opportunities that have yet to be considered?

7. Obtain a written copy of your child's previous evaluation results and review them. It may be necessary to have a separate meeting with the evaluator in order to understand those results and prioritize a course of action before attending your IEP meeting.

8. Review the evaluation results. Do they fit with what you know about your child? Does the evaluation appear complete and accurate? Are there questions left unanswered? If you disagree with the school's evaluation you may request, in writing, an Independent Education Evaluation (IEE) usually at no cost to you. The school must pay for this evaluation and show through due process that the evaluation is appropriate. The IEE results MUST be considered at your child's IEP meeting. *(Bear in mind that if, through board hearings it is found that the schools original evaluation was appropriate, you may be responsible for the costs of the IEE. See IDEA act section 300.502 for full details.)*

9. If necessary, plan to bring someone with you to the meeting with knowledge or expertise regarding your child, such as a spouse, relative, friend, related service personnel, parent mentor or even a representative from a local disability organization. (See, "[A Guide to the Individualized Education Program](http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/iepguide.pdf)", pp. 7 & 8 for a list of possible team members.) If these individuals are unable to attend you may bring letters, documentation, Physicians orders etc. that may be relevant to your child's education plan and the setting where that education takes place.

Proper preparation, planning and goal setting by the parent will help ensure the best interests of the child are maintained. The goal of every IEP meeting is to specifically and effectively assist all persons involved in ensuring the best possible education is obtained for your child. Remember. The child, first and foremost.

If there is anything that is not discussed in our newsletters and you would like to see it discussed, or you would like to be added to our newsletter mailing list, please contact us at snrproject@hotmail.com

