

STEPS FOR COMMUNICATION SUCCESS AT IEP MEETINGS

Not surprisingly, many parents report that their child's annual IEP meeting ranks as one of the most stressful events of the year. Some parents take off the entire day in order to get emotionally ready for the meeting or to decompress after the meeting is over. There are, however, some steps that can be taken to lessen this stress.

Planning Is a Year-round Activity

Although the annual review occurs once a year, hence it's catchy name, planning for the annual review should take place on an on-going basis throughout the year. Parents should receive updates on their child's progress towards IEP goals and objectives as frequently as the general student population in the building receives official report cards. A review of these goals and objectives is helpful for knowing where the child is making gains and where additional support might be needed. Parents can address any areas of concern with the child's teacher after the update, but they should also note concerns for the annual review.

Understanding the Consensus Decision Making Model

One of the most difficult tasks parents face during any IEP meeting is the group decision-making process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) relies on a consensus model for making decisions about special education and related services. Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary defines consensus as: "1. Collective opinion; 2. General accord: agreement . . . a commonly held opinion." The reaching of consensus does not require that everyone in the group agree, nor does it mean that "the majority rules." It merely means that the group as a whole generally agrees on the issue.

The IDEA identifies the group of people responsible for making decisions about the student and for developing the student's IEP as the **IEP Team**. The following people, at a minimum, are required in order for a group to function as the IEP Team:

- 1) one or both parents;
- 2) at least one of the child's general education teachers;
- 3) at least one of the child's special education teachers or providers;
- 4) a representative of the school district who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the child's needs, is knowledgeable about the general curriculum and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources in the district (usually a special education administrator or the administrator's designee);
- 5) an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results (who may be one of the people already described);
- 6) any other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child (for example, private therapists, the school psychologist, etc.)

If any member of the IEP team strongly disagrees with the consensus opinion, that person may document his or her disagreement. Educators and administrators have the option of writing a "minority report" in which they described the action taken by the

IEP team and the reasons why they disagree with the action. A minority report becomes part of the student's educational record and is sent along with the IEP to which it relates. Parents may write a minority report and request that it be included with the student's educational record, or they may use one of the dispute resolution processes available to them, including mediation and due process.

How Do Parents Participate in Consensus Decision Making?

In order for parents to participate actively in the consensus decision-making process, they must be able to assess where they stand on any disputed issue. It is much easier to do so if parents have current knowledge of their child's progress towards IEP goals and objectives, have done their own informal assessment of the child's progress and have some knowledge of the child's current level of functioning at home and in the community. Equipped with this information, parents can make informed decisions and express their opinions based on sound evidence.

Occasionally, the IEP will be divided on an issue. The parents may even find that they are the only ones "holding out" or the only ones advocating for a particular position. At times like this, it is important for parents to reassess where they stand on an issue. It is even better if they have had time to think about possible opposition beforehand and make some decisions.