

# Transition

## Best Practice Update

### *The IEP Meeting*

The IEP meeting is critical for all partners; learn how to easily implement effective meeting strategies to improve IEP outcomes

Positive and effective IEP meetings are often considered one of the most complex activities in the educational work place. The success or failure of an IEP meeting has a significant impact – it sets the tone. People will remember a good IEP meeting more than they will ever remember a good IEP.

As a case manager, consider how many IEP meetings are scheduled and held each year. Consider the common theme in previous IEP meetings – do you look forward to IEP meetings? How do you feel before and after each meeting? Why do IEP meetings fail to work – what goes wrong?

Make IEP meetings work for you and for the team. Essential outcomes from any IEP meeting should include communication, mutual trust and regard, and positive interaction. The following information is intended to provide educators tips for conducting and/or facilitating more effective IEP meetings.

A typical IEP meeting has five essential components:

- What happens before the meeting
- The beginning of the meeting
- The actual meeting
- The end of the meeting
- What happens after the meeting

#### **WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE THE MEETING**

Preparation, preparation, preparation; the key to a successful IEP meeting is preparation. Not only the case manager, but all team members have the responsibility to prepare for each IEP meeting. Read the most recent IEP, any additional information and make a list of questions or concerns. Communicate with all team members regarding confirmation of attendance, specific issues and decisions to address.

This action exemplifies the commitment to teamwork and the team process. If a team member (other than the four mandatory partners) is unable to attend, request information, reports, and recommendations prior to the meeting and provide copies to other members. While pre-IEP activities are encouraged, it is not appropriate to write the IEP before the team meeting; however, all team members should be given a copy of the most recent IEP and asked to identify questions, changes, or comments.

Before the meeting, consider these often overlooked, but important meeting amenities:

- The room: allow for sufficient table space and seating.
- An agenda: this document keeps members on task; many teams distribute an agenda to members with space for notes, or put the agenda on large easel paper as a reference (see Appendix A for sample format).
- Public minutes: consider using large easel paper for questions, goals/objectives or decisions. The large paper allows the team to follow along and easily participate. Also bring markers and tape.
- Name tags/tents: if the IEP team is large, consider nametags or name tents.
- Extras: paper and pen/pencils for parents to use.
- Coffee, water or snacks is often considered appropriate.

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE MEETING**

Start the IEP meeting on time. Make introductions; don't assume team members know each other or remember names, and identify the team member's relationship to the student. Address housekeeping issues before the meeting begins (i.e., location of restrooms, beverages, and scheduled break times). Case management preparation should confirm the length of the meeting; make a mental note of the critical topics of discussion and pinpoint approximate 'halfway' points. This will later allow you to approximate the pace necessary for the meeting. Ask if time constraints exist for members, identify them immediately and make plans for additional meeting dates if necessary, so as not to rush the team process or decision making. Too often a member leaves before participating in a critical point of discussion. Briefly review the agenda as a group (ask for additions/changes) and how questions or conflicts will be addressed. The IEP case manager should briefly address the goal(s) of the meeting, the need for group interaction, the use of public minutes, confidentiality, ground rules (see Appendix B for sample) and reaching consensus (see Appendix C for sample).

### **THE ACTUAL MEETING**

Now that the team is 'on the same page', the IEP meeting can begin. Start with a general and positive discussion about the student accomplishments since the last IEP. It is comfortable to engage in positive conversation while members are becoming (re) acquainted with each other. Although the IEP form has many required responses and boxes to complete, the intent of the meeting is also to form a strong team understanding of needs, services and progress. Consider a roundtable or other method of dialogue, to seek everyone's opinion. Avoid comments such as "I don't know" or "I don't care".

A simple strategy to use throughout the meeting after each IEP section is illustrated in the following example:

Team completes the Present Level of Educational Performance with group input. Stop to summarize, seek consensus. [Note: research indicates people 'let go' if you check with them often; they leave the thought and mentally move forward to concentrate on the next topic.] Offer appreciation/recognition, make a mental note of the time, and move on to next section. Repeat this process with each section. The theory is that this process allows the team to move through the document at the same pace, increasing participation and dialogue and having a feeling of productivity and involvement.

Public minutes are often used to allow members to stay focused, understand and view points the team has determined, and use as a reference point for discussion. Public minutes provide a sense of comfort for those not taking notes or working from a computer. Public minutes can later be transcribed and shared as an attachment to the IEP document. Public minutes are often viewed as meeting notes in that they generally contain the same information.

### **THE END OF THE MEETING**

Upon completion of the IEP form and discussion of additional pertinent information, the case manager should be responsible to briefly summarize the IEP changes. At that point, ask for questions/comments and seek final consensus from the team. Thank everyone for his or her time and contributions on behalf of the student. If relevant, provide names and telephone numbers to members. Explain to team members when they can expect the completed IEP and other related information and whom they should contact if they need clarification or have questions. Identify when the team will need to meet again and for what purpose.

### **WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE MEETING**

Make time to review notes and make additional comments to clarify any abbreviations, unanswered or incomplete IEP sections. Team collaboration is often strengthened with a brief note or group memo of thanks with the final document.

The above strategies may initially extend the time of the IEP meeting, but the strategies also improve communication, increase effectiveness and prevent future conflicts.

### **ROLE OF CASE MANAGER**

Although difficult to maintain, the role of the case manager is actually one that should remain neutral. The case manager has the responsibility to ensure procedural safeguards and keep the team moving towards consensus of a completed and well-written IEP.

A good meeting needs structure and leadership, but one person should not attempt to be the team facilitator, note taker, timekeeper, waitress, etc, etc, etc. Often the case manager, thought of as the ‘leader’, has assumed authority and control of the meeting and decisions. The case manager also tends to talk the most, make decisions in the absence of other ideas and discussion, and does the IEP writing, resulting in low participation. Consider these alternatives:

- a co-teacher to share the responsibilities of facilitation and writing;
- a secretary who can listen and capture the pertinent information and take minutes, complete the boxes, etc. while the case manager facilitates the meeting; or
- co-facilitation with parent or student. This requires time to share information and teach the individual about the process, required discussions and general meeting/IEP protocol, but the opportunities created by co-facilitation increase team efficiency, ownership and advocacy.

### **ROLE OF STUDENT**

The team should discuss the role of the student who attends his or her IEP meeting. Factors such as disability and age may be relevant. Often it is appropriate to have young children attend a portion of the IEP meeting when the team can offer positive statements about accomplishments. Attendance and participation can increase accordingly with age. Time and understanding will increase a comfort level in the team process and the student’s ability to discuss their disability and educational needs.

At age 14 students must be invited to attend their IEP meetings. As individuals prepare to become adults, their role with the IEP team becomes critical. Benefits to students attending their own IEP meeting include: positive support from team members, self-advocacy, decision making about career planning and exploration.

Self-advocacy will often extend beyond the IEP meeting to individual classrooms and teacher relationships. Students become comfortable with such tasks as inviting team members and participating in the discussion. Many students facilitate their IEP meetings in middle and high school. Curriculum is readily available for preparing students for this role. Other students sometimes request that a sibling or peer attend the IEP meeting. The sibling or peer can often speak to personal accomplishments and needs and offer an age appropriate support. This leadership role creates a foundation for self-advocacy and self-determination for future employment, independent living and citizenship.

### **ROLE OF PARENT**

Parents who attend IEP meetings are not expected to retain the information and knowledge about the team process that is the responsibility of the case managers. Typically, case managers attend dozens of IEP meetings in one school year. The appropriate modeling of teaming and communication to parents will enhance their ability to fully participate. The ultimate outcome of parental participation is that parents leave each IEP meeting with questions answered and an understanding of activities to do at home to enhance the success of IEP goals and objectives.

**THE IEP MEETING ENVIRONMENT**

IEP meetings are typically held in the school or classroom; however, they can be held in alternative settings. Suitable environments that guarantee confidentiality and accessibility can include a local restaurant meeting room, the student's home, park, or outside setting. Comfortable settings are conducive to team development, comfort and trust.

**SEATING ARRANGEMENTS**

Research indicates that the most productive meetings are held at round tables. This arrangement eliminates the 'head' seating position (indicative that someone is 'in charge' rather than equal participants) and allows all members to physically view each other. It is recommended that the student be seated next to the case manager. The case manager can share notes/information and offer physical assurance when/if the student contributes to the discussion. Another teacher could be seated opposite the student. This person can provide positive non-verbal reactions (nod of the head, smile, thumbs up) which are difficult to see from the teacher seated immediately beside the student. Invite the parent(s) to sit on the other side of the case manager. Co-facilitation of the meeting and sharing information is easier if parent(s) and case manager are seated together.

Establishing an IEP team of many people may involve many different personalities. Be aware of possible reactions as a result of diverse personalities:

**WHAT TO DO IF...**

- 🔔 **THE TEAM CAN'T STAY ON TASK**  
Refer to the ground rules  
Bring the discussion back to the current topic; clarify if additional time is needed through alternative means to complete discussion
- 🔔 **MEETING IS DOMINATED BY ONE OR TWO PEOPLE**  
Refer to ground rules, ask others for input  
Thank people for input and remind everyone that team input is critical
- 🔔 **NOT ENOUGH CONVERSATION OR DIALOGUE**  
Give two or three options or suggestions, and then ask for discussion/preference
- 🔔 **OBVIOUS CONFLICT / TEAM DISAGREEMENT**  
Stop the meeting, take a break  
Refer to the ground rules and discuss them again  
Refer to the group's consensus method and discuss

**SUGGESTIONS FOR AN INTERACTIVE & PRODUCTIVE IEP MEETING**

- Discuss strengths before discussing weaknesses or needs.
- Direct comments to the issue or problem, not the student.
- Write IEP goals in first person (I will...).
- Listen, listen, listen - be aware of the non-verbal clues and subtleties.
- Be creative and stay focused on the student.
- Don't speak in acronyms.
- Have fun! Remember that you really do want to be there!
- Remember this is someone's child, act as though he or she is your own.

IEP meetings are a necessary and pivotal component to the special education process. If implemented using the suggestions described, IEP meetings lead to maximum results and positive outcomes for students, teachers and all team members.



**APPENDIX B**

**SAMPLE IEP MEETING GROUND RULES\***

START AND END ON TIME AS DETERMINED BY ALL.

FOLLOW AGENDA, STAY ON TASK.

DON'T INTERRUPT OTHERS WHO ARE SPEAKING.

KEEP DISCUSSION TO CURRENT TOPIC.

STAY POSITIVE; NO "STINKIN' THINKIN'".

FEEL FREE TO ASK QUESTIONS OR SEEK CLARIFICATION.

PARTICIPATE AND CONTRIBUTE YOUR TALENTS;  
AS LONG AS YOU'RE HERE, BE GLAD YOU'RE HERE.

WE WILL SEEK CONSENSUS, NO VOTING.

KEEP WHAT YOU SAY AND HEAR CONFIDENTIAL.

\* Often posted on easel paper in room

**APPENDIX C**

**SIX LEVELS OF CONSENSUS**

I can say an unqualified “yes” to the decision.  
I am satisfied that the decision is an expression  
of the wisdom of the group.

I find the decision perfectly acceptable.

I can live with the decision.  
I’m not especially enthusiastic about it.

I do not fully agree with the decision and need to  
register my view about it. However, I do not choose  
to block the decision. I am willing to support  
the decision because I trust the wisdom of the group.

I do not agree with the decision and feel the need to  
stand in the way of this decision being accepted.

I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group.  
We need to do more work before consensus can be reached.