

HOW TO PREPARE FOR IEP MEETINGS

Published in Thompson's "Special Ed Advisor," March, 2007

It seems a curious phenomenon of life on earth that we often ask great big questions and expect itty bitty answers. Why is there air? How do fish swim? What's the best way to prepare for an IEP meeting? As I am asked this particular question (about IEP's), my mind begins to huff and puff and rattle and creak in an effort to begin to focus. And what does it mean to focus except to take a perhaps very broad field of perception and make it more simple and clear? In other words, to answer this (or *any* question), we have to sort and organize a sometimes huge quantity of information and begin to arrange it in such a way as to give a meaningful explanation and a practical direction. The operative words are *meaningful* and *practical*.

Why do fish swim? Because nature made them that way and that's just what fish do. Hmmm. Meaningful? Not really. Practical? Not at all. So, as we apply these two operative words to an effort to bring into focus what helps people prepare for IEP meetings, these are what we must be looking for: meaningful and practical.

As a consultant in conflict resolution in special education, I have had the wonderful opportunity to "play middle man" and take what I learn from one group and then go share it with others. I have by now collected a great many ideas about how to prepare for IEP meetings, and as I sift through all that has been shared with me, I find a certain organization and a long list of great suggestions – meaningful and practical. And yet I think it's important to start by looking first at what it is we are trying to accomplish. We have to start at the beginning, with the *purpose* of the IEP team.

Most will agree that it is to develop a well-designed IEP for the particular student. And how is the team going to do that? Well, by a method known as collaboration leading to consensus. This point is very important, because there are a number of routes that might theoretically get the team to its goal, but not all are exactly the same nor of equal value. It is not enough to simply design an IEP. The IEP has to be a product of the group, it has to (hopefully) be a *high quality* product of the group, and it has to have the buy-in, or ownership, of the group if it is to have much chance of success. If you agree with me so far, then we have the broad picture (a meaningful vision), and we can now turn to look at the specifics – the practical details that will help us get where we're trying to go.

I also think it is important to understand that the IEP meeting never, ever exists in isolation. It is not quite the same as a picnic, where we can best prepare if I just

bring potato salad and you just bring the cookies and beer. Instead, the meeting is a link in a very long chain, and the “strength” of the meeting will depend on a great many factors *other than* just who brings what to the meeting, in a more narrow perspective.

In my work with school professionals and parents, at almost every meeting, someone will ask a question about a particular parent, or child, or school administrator, and the answer always includes a friendly reminder of this very much broader perspective – that each IEP meeting depends on the strength of the committee, a committee made up of many participants who are expected to function with a high level of skill, commitment, knowledge, and harmony. These are not fashioned overnight, nor in the week or even month preceding the particular meeting. And yet they are the critical features that will make for success or failure, efficiency or inefficiency, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, throughout all the years of the child’s progress through school. And so, the best answer to the question is to see the IEP team as a dynamic organism, dependent on each of its members, involving a wide range of skills and abilities, and relying very heavily on the *relationships* developed over an extended period of time. All participants must therefore value and nurture these relationships - staff with staff, parents with staff, parents with parents, consultants with parents *and* staff, and so on. The development and nurturing of these long-term relationships is probably the single greatest contributing factor in the overall success of the individual IEP team. Such nurturance will involve respect, trust, communications, listening skills, responsiveness and openness, commitment to shared goals, and similar characteristics that promote success in *any* relationship and working team. These become like the tires that allow the car to roll smoothly – the part of the much greater whole that allows the rest to play their parts (the skills, the knowledge, the tools and techniques, the curriculum, the placement, the staff and supports...).

In my workshops, I like to emphasize that there are four “corners” that determine what transpires at every IEP meeting: law, budget, knowledge, and attitude. I love to ask my groups to tell me: which of these most determines the level of harmony and efficiency of the group? The answer I *always* receive is attitude, and I am reminded of a button I was given when I first started my work in special education, and it says, “Attitudes are the *real* disability.”

Let me now answer the question very specifically by sharing a list of practical suggestions made by about 45 full-time IEP team facilitators who were asked what could be done at the local level to best improve the IEP system for all involved. Here’s how they replied:

COOPERATION AMONG PARTICIPANTS

- 1) **Members must be on time and prepared** for meetings, recognizing that the entire team is dependent on the professionalism of its members.
- 2) **Members must treat one another with respect.** Attitude is critically important in any endeavor, and an atmosphere of mutual respect is vital.
- 3) **Members must follow through on commitments** made at IEP meetings. No one member can assure the success of the team, and each member must make it a priority to fulfill their responsibilities.

SUPPORT OF PARTICIPANTS

- 4) School administrators must **support teachers being out of their classrooms** for IEP meetings and assist in providing class coverage.
- 5) School administrators who are not there in person must **support the decisions of the team.** Decisions are made after review of many factors, and it is unreasonable to designate a committee chair but then reject the decisions made; similarly, the team must be supported to follow the law and district policies, and not expected just to do what any particular administrator wants done.
- 6) **Accountability of all participants** in the IEP process: principals and superintendents must help designated committee chairs assure that team members fulfill their obligations (without such support, the designee has little authority and little recourse).
- 7) **The chain of command must hold a similar vision** of the importance, authority, and legal responsibilities of the committee. Principals need to have a clear understanding of the IEP environment so that they can provide appropriate guidance and leadership to staff. Superintendents must recognize and assure this knowledge base among the school administrators in their districts.
- 8) The IEP environment is complex, and school administrators **must support the provision of training** for parents and school staff, and not just for a limited few.
- 9) **Clear job descriptions should be developed** so that all school staff understand their responsibilities to the IEP team.
- 10) **Clear channels of resources should be provided** so that IEP team members can get assistance when needed, and receive timely responses to legal and other IEP-related questions.
- 11) **Routine evaluations should be done** so that teams have some means of measuring their effectiveness, satisfaction, and success.

TRAINING OF PARTICIPANTS

- 12) **School administrators must receive training in how to chair IEP team meetings**, as well as training in what should be expected of anyone they select as their designee.
- 13) **Regular classroom teachers must receive training** in IEP matters, with periodic follow up as laws and policies change.
- 14) All team **members must have a clear understanding** of what an IEP meeting entails and what the legal responsibilities of the team are, as well as the responsibilities of each individual member.
- 15) **Mentoring of new IEP team chairs** by those who are more experienced would be very helpful, as well as periodic training programs in IEP-related topics.
- 16) **Opportunities should be provided for IEP team chairpersons** to present, discuss, and perhaps role-play with other IEP team chairs the challenging situations they encounter
- 17) Supervisors should provide assistance in developing **professional growth plans** to help individuals enhance their IEP team skills.

WORKLOAD ISSUES

- 18) Teams benefit from a **suitable meeting place** that is reasonably quiet, comfortable, and free from interruptions.
- 19) Administrators must be responsive to such issues as **flex time**, especially when staff must work long or unusual hours to accommodate IEP meetings, or the needs of participants for evening or weekend meetings.
- 20) Administrators must help assure **equitable workload** distribution so that some school staff are not spending excessive amounts of time in IEP meetings and associated paperwork at the expense of other responsibilities (this often happens when there are many more eligible students at a particular school with fewer staff to serve them).
- 21) Administrators should assist teams to develop an **efficient method of paperwork**, perhaps through updated technology and software, to ease the time demands that reporting can require.
- 22) **Clear channels for funding should be developed** so that teams can efficiently follow through on the commitments they make, and avoid resistance and arguments about who will cover what expenses.

The foregoing material is adapted with permission from *A Guide to Collaboration for IEP Teams* (Brookes Publishing, 2005). The author, Nicholas Martin, is a conflict resolution consultant and Director of The Center for Accord, Inc. near Fort Worth, Texas. He provides training services nationwide to help school personnel and

parents develop the skills they need to work together effectively while preventing conflict.