

TERA'S TIPS ON THE INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP)

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Your child qualifies for an IEP, what do you need to know?

Know your rights and the rights of your child. Visit your state's special education Parent Training and Information Center for detailed information about the IEP process and laws specific to your state.

What about the details that are not covered? The details that cause parents and school districts so much concern when trying to (1) put an IEP together and (2) follow it to ensure students make progress? I will share my best tips to help you stay strong and prepared throughout the process.

First, be prepared. When attending your child's IEP meeting, whether in person or virtual, be on time and come with ideas and questions to help the team understand your concerns and the needs of your child. The main focus is your child and what will help them make progress for the coming year. Your input is valuable.

Second, take a deep breath! By the time you have the evaluation results for your child and there are professional recommendations for your student's needs, you should feel a bit of relief. You now have some clarity and have identified some people who can help you on the journey. Do not put the future of your student in the hands of anyone else, you are the leader of the team, even if you are not sure how to proceed. It is a team effort and you need to be valued as an active member.

Third, build relationships. It is time to build relationships with those individuals that will be on your child's IEP team. If you will be meeting new support staff, present them with a brief paragraph or statement about your student explaining how they best learn and respond to supports. You know your student better than anyone else. It is also nice to surprise those team members, perhaps a couple of times during the year, with a handwritten note of encouragement to say "thanks for doing a fantastic job." The more support you can give your team, the better equipped they will be to support you and your student during the school year.

Fourth, show up ready to discuss and be an active leader of the team. Have your binder that includes evaluation and additional information about your child's educational needs filled and ready as a resource for everyone on the team.

Fifth, focus on the most important concerns at the meeting. If you are provided with a draft copy of the IEP, be sure to communicate effectively any concerns you have before the meeting with teachers and Intervention Specialists to avoid lengthy discussions at the meeting. Have your support person ready to review with you and take notes that you want to pay close attention to during the meeting.

Let the professionals on the team worry about the nuts and bolts of every section. Be sure to proofread every section and make sure that you agree. Encourage your support person to look over every draft and change and make sure that they match the changes you agreed to.

The parent priority sections are those listed below:

1)Future Planning: As a parent you may be asked about the future plan for your child. In terms of future, it could be as simple as next month, grading period or semester, depending on where you and your child are in the learning process. It is ok if you have to rewrite this statement every single IEP meeting for those first few years of education. Future plan can be a statement or simple paragraph. The goal is for you, the parent to give it some thought before the meeting, when you are not under pressure. This helps the team focus and provides hope for the parents on the journey.

2)Profile: This section summarizes the child's strengths and weaknesses and includes background information about the child, parent concerns about education, and any medical or safety information. It is always important to add any information that is relevant to the child but is not going to be addressed in goals or even during the current IEP. Anything that is necessary for those that will be working with or evaluating the child for the coming year to have a good understanding of the child, put it in the profile. I suggest that the profile is a summary of everything, good or bad. This will provide the person reading it to fully understand the student in all areas of their life. Check for state guidelines for the must haves and then have the team write a full summary that you feel good about.

3)Transition planning isn't required until the student turns 16 and a statement isn't required until 14, I suggest that the parent be ever present in thinking with the end in mind and start the process of letting the future plan for transition into life after high school drive the IEP goals and objectives. The future plan statement, as well as the profile, will start to mold the transition statement and plan. Stay focused as you go through the years of IEP meetings until you reach the time when you want to address the transition formally. Thinking in these terms keeps the team focused for down the road and it also helps with progress and accountability. (Transition assessments and inventories every year help with narrowing down direction)

4)Measurable goals and objectives: I allow the teachers and therapists to tackle this section with one exception: are the goals and objectives focused on how they would help us get to the future plan? Are we taking into account how the profile of this student affects the ability to meet those goals in one year? Also equally important, did we look at the 5 W's: who, what, where, when and for what amount of time? Nothing can be more frustrating than a copied goal for your child off another IEP for the sake of ease. I also suggest that the team keep goals to no more than 3 academic, 1-2 communication, 1-2 other therapy and perhaps no more than 1-2 other needs like behavior/social emotional. More than 6 goals on a one-year plan are almost impossible to properly accomplish and report on. If you have more areas of need, put it in the profile so it is documented.

5)Specifically designed accommodations and services: Make sure that every area you want addressed is covered here. There are specific areas that this section will cover, make sure the agreed upon service, time and staff are included as promised. Be sure to know and understand what is being offered and that it matches what is needed for your student. Your state parent training center will help you, as well as www.Wrightslaw.com, where you can access IEP help books to guide you through the types of services and supports to help your child. A glossary of terms is listed in the appendix to help with the understanding of each of these services.

All areas of the IEP are very important and need to be reviewed; however, those listed above need even more attention by the parent or caregiver. Make sure that you agree with what is presented and if not, ask questions and offer changes. **Do not sign the IEP until you are certain that you agree with each change and section and have reviewed all concerns.**

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