



What's the Big IDEA? # 24

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. This series is designed to offer information about IDEA as amended in 2004. Each fact sheet will focus on a different aspect of IDEA.

Student-Led Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meetings

Who should attend your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting? You probably thought of teachers, specialists your child works with, and school administrators. Did you think about your child attending? It may be a new concept for you, but there is increased interest and support in students not only attending, but leading their IEP meetings. Would this work for you and your child? This fact sheet will review the law regarding students attending their IEP meetings and the advantages of students leading their IEP meetings.

Attendance at IEP Meetings

There is no set age for a child to begin attending his or her own IEP meeting. In the primary grades (K-3) students can be involved in just a brief part of the meeting. For example, they might want to share some of their best work to give the team examples of their present levels of performance or give input on what they think they need to work on in school. As children get older, they can be more involved in the discussions that take place during the IEP. Now they may want to talk about the types of accommodations and modifications that will help them in the classroom. They should know what their goals are. They especially need to be part of the discussion about where they receive their services. If they are going to be pulled out of a general education classroom or spend most of their day in a separate classroom they should know why that is happening. Of course, how much your child participates in the discussions will be governed by many factors including cognitive ability and verbal skills. However, it is advisable for your child to be regularly involved because by the time your child is 14, he or she must be invited to participate in the IEP meeting if transition needs or services are going to be discussed. If the student does not attend the IEP meeting, the school staff must take steps to ensure that the child's preferences and interests are considered. If a student will reach the age of 14 during the IEP year, transition planning for secondary coursework must be included in the IEP for that year. In addition, New Mexico requires a Next Step Plan for all students by the end of the eighth grade. This plan identifies transition goals and courses of study to reach those goals. Students will have an IEP in place by the end of 8th grade that includes the components of the Next Step plan and meets the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Once your child is in high school, he or she is expected to attend each IEP meeting.



I'm not sure about my child attending her IEP. I don't want her to hear a lot of negative comments. She already has low self-esteem because she is in a special education classroom.

This is probably the primary reason parents don't want to include their children in the IEP meetings. As parents, we may sometimes feel that the IEP meeting is just an opportunity for teachers and specialists to tell us everything that is wrong with our child. Of course we don't want our child to hear that! However, when a child is actively involved, the whole tone of the meeting changes. It becomes much more collaborative because the team is aware that they are talking about a real person, not a generic "student." The IEP can also be a chance for

your child to hear about the progress she is making and to express her ideas about her program. This can help build your child's self-confidence. Too often children think they receive special education services because they are "stupid." The IEP meeting can be a wonderful opportunity to address this misconception and let your daughter know how proud the team is of the progress she is making. Of course, the school staff may need some training in conducting an IEP meeting with a student present. For example, they need to be sure to use the student's name, to talk to the student, and not to refer to the student in the 3rd person (he/she). If there are negative issues that need to be addressed, you can choose to have your child stay to offer her perspective of the issue. Or, if you feel that topics are going to be brought up that you do not want your child to hear, you can always ask that she go back to class after giving her input.

Leading the IEP Meeting

As students get older, they can move from attending their IEP meeting to leading the meeting. If we want students to learn to advocate for themselves, here is a perfect way to let them begin to take charge in a controlled situation. All students can benefit and each student may participate in different ways. It can even be one of the student's academic goals. For example, goals can be developed around understanding and explaining the purpose/parts of the IEP, gathering information from the educational team in order to prepare present levels of performance, and writing and sending the notification of the meeting and any reminders.



Communication goals can be addressed by students leading or co-presenting the meeting, learning to facilitate discussions, and appropriately stating any disagreements. After all, who knows best what the student needs? The student does. Who knows what he/she is willing to do or not do? The student does. Why write goals and plans that the student will not buy into? That is a waste of time for everybody involved.

You may be concerned that your child will respond negatively to the situation. What if he can't maintain his focus on the meeting? What if he starts to feel overwhelmed and stressed? The team should plan in advance for ways to respond. Think about the accommodations that work in the classroom and implement those in the IEP meeting. For example, if the student starts to feel overwhelmed by the situation, he can provide a cue to the team – by either a visual signal, such as raising his hand, or by simply asking for a break. Preparation for the IEP meeting can be used to promote student learning. What does a person do if he or she feels uncomfortable in a situation? Parents or the team can even role play some situations ahead of time so the student has some practice responding in appropriate ways before the actual meeting. Adults can share the coping strategies they use when they are faced with stressful situations, such as taking deep breaths, taking a break, or trying to look at a situation from the other person's viewpoint.

As parents, it may be difficult to step back a bit and let our children take the lead. However, remember, our goal is to help our children become as independent as possible. Taking charge of the IEP meeting can be a safe step towards that ultimate goal. Students respond positively when they feel that they are listened to and that what they feel and say matters to the adults around them. The IEP meeting can provide that opportunity. We need to step back and let them grow!

Contact us at the New Mexico Parent Training and Information Center at Parents Reaching Out for more information about transition and student-led IEPs – 505-247-0192 or 1-800-524-5176.

Another great resource is the *Student's Guide to the IEP* published by The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY). You can find this on their website:

<http://www.nichcy.org/InformationResources/Documents/NICHCY%20PUBS/st1.pdf>

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