

# Involving Students in the Planning Process

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He knows how to tell what he likes and doesn't like and what he wants to do. It does no good to decide something for someone else. If he decided, maybe he would be more eager to do it.

—Mother of a 12-year-old physically handicapped student

If she were told it was to help her, it would give her a sense of importance in planning her own life. She is maturing and she needs to feel some responsibility for her education and her life.

—Guardian of a 17-year-old emotionally handicapped student

W. could get ready to explain his past history and his feelings about how he has not been able to learn and has tried to keep up. It would help him know how far he has come.

—Mother of a 17-year-old learning disabled student

## LOOKING AT THE LAW

Public Law 94-142 provides for the participation of the student, "whenever appropriate," in meetings to develop the individualized education program (IEP). Although a great deal of progress has been made by education agencies in implementing parent participation in educational planning, very little has been done to include students with special needs in planning their own programs. The potential of this involvement for furthering students' growth, maturity, and the exercise of appropriate power over their own lives is tremendous.

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P.L. 94-142 regulations specify those persons who should be involved in the IEP meeting. They include a representative of the school other than the child's teacher who is responsible for providing or supervising special education, the teacher, the parents, and the child, "whenever appropriate." While most persons are aware that school officials and parents are involved in IEP planning, many are not aware that the student may be included in helping to develop the IEP.

## CRITERIA FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION

The words "whenever appropriate" have seldom been defined by policymakers. Only a few articles have suggested criteria for deciding when it is appropriate to include students. The student's age, severity of handicap, and ability to handle the situation have been suggested as possible considerations (Winslow, 1977).

More recently, student interest in participating has been recommended as an important criterion. In a study designed to elicit ideas from those who are most affected by the IEP, 47 special education students (12 years of age and older) and their parents were asked to cite considerations in deciding when to include a student (Gillespie, 1981). Respondents were classified by their schools as learning disabled, educable mentally handicapped, seriously emotionally handicapped, or physically handicapped.

More than 75% of the students and 90% of the parents said that they were unaware of the possibility of involving students in IEP meetings. When asked about their attitude toward student participation, both parents and students expressed positive feelings. Over 90% of the parents and over 75% of the students reported that they either completely agreed or mostly agreed with the idea of student involvement.

## Student Opinions

Very often, individuals who agree with a general concept fail to find that it applies to them personally. In this case, however, over 70% of the students said that they believed it was a good idea for them to attend their own IEP meeting. Almost 90% of parents indicated that involvement of their child would be appropriate.

Student responses to questions concerning why they should attend their own IEP meeting were varied.

I would like to go, but the first time would be hard. It would be good so that if you have some feelings you could ask them if they could change it a little bit, and you could ask for help.

—17-year-old physically handicapped student

The teachers and parents get everything out and students have feelings and want to get them out, too.

—13-year-old emotionally handicapped student

I could learn more about why I'm in a special class.

—14-year-old EMR student

## DECIDING WHEN TO INVOLVE A STUDENT

Each year, parents of students with special needs receive notification from the school that an IEP meeting will be held to discuss goals, objectives, and services for the student. Most local education agencies conduct these meetings in the spring or early fall. P.L. 94-142 requires that the first IEP meeting be held within 30 days of the time a student is determined to be in need of special education services (*Federal Register*, 1977).

Once parents have been notified, it is advisable that some preparation take place. Parents can make significant contributions to the development of the IEP by giving information about the student's interests, abilities, and behavior at home. They may also serve an important advocacy function for the inclusion of specific goals, objectives, or related services. As part of the preparation for the IEP meeting, it is important to consider whether the student himself should be involved.

The decision to involve the student should be based on individual characteristics, rather than on labels or classifications. The following considerations can assist parents and teachers in deciding whether a student could benefit from IEP involvement:

- **Communication.** Does the student understand conversation conducted in simple language? Can the student communicate preferences and interests either verbally or nonverbally?

- **Comfort.** If the meeting is conducted in a nonthreatening way, will the student feel reasonably comfortable? If disagreements occur, how will he or she react? Some uncertainty is always present in new situations, but a few students may feel completely uneasy in a formal setting with school officials and parents.
- **Interest.** Does the student understand what the meeting is about? When the meeting is explained, does the student want to attend? As parents and teachers, do you feel that the student's involvement could be beneficial, either to you and other IEP committee members, or to him or her?

If parents and students decide that it is appropriate for the student to attend, the teacher can work with them in a coordinated fashion to help them prepare the student for the conference.

## PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

The accommodations necessary to involve a student effectively in the IEP meeting should serve to make the meeting more comfortable and to encourage active participation by parents. As a result, the IEP which is developed will usually be a more personalized document, reflecting the individuality of the person whom it concerns.

### Suggestions for Parents

- Ask your child if he or she would like to attend the meeting. Explain why the meeting is being held and who will be there.
- Inform your child at least one week in advance that he will be able to attend the meeting.
- Show your child last year's IEP (if available) and review what was included.
- Request copies of the evaluation report and a draft copy of the teacher's recommendations for the IEP in advance of the meeting. Make notes of questions, comments, or concerns. Review this information with your child, and tell him generally what you plan to say at the conference.
- Discuss with your child issues to be covered at the IEP meeting such as goals, objectives, placement, and related services. If you and your child differ in what you consider to be appropriate, pinpoint these differences as much as possible before the meeting. Share your viewpoints with each other and work hard to develop compromises acceptable to both of you. Remember that it can create discomfort for both of you to strongly disagree with each other in the IEP meeting.
- Stress that everyone's ideas are welcome in the meeting.
- Caution your child that all of his suggestions may not be followed, but that his thoughts are valuable.

- Gather as much information as possible from your child about his present educational program. It may be helpful to make a list of specific questions and to discuss each question with him.
- Help your child make a list of three things he likes about school, three things he would like to change, and three things he wants to learn to do in the future.
- Discuss the meeting at home among family members (perhaps using role-playing).
- On the day of the meeting, review the purpose, the persons who will be there, and the list of ideas about school you developed together.
- Make sure your child takes his list of ideas to the meeting.
- Help your child feel comfortable in the meeting by talking with him and encouraging him to talk. It may be necessary to ask him questions about items on his list.
- After the IEP meeting has been concluded, tell your child that you are proud of him for helping to make some very important educational decisions.

#### Suggestions for School Personnel

- Schedule the meeting at a time convenient for all parties, including the student.
- Allow enough time for the meeting so that all participants can share their views.
- Realize that, in order for the IEP to reflect the views of the group, more than one meeting may be needed.
- Inform all IEP committee members that the student will be present.
- Work with the parent to help the student prepare for the meeting in advance by making a list of information to share.
- Consider having students who have previously participated in their own IEP conferences with success share suggestions with students preparing to participate for the first time.
- If a draft IEP has been developed, review it with the student in advance of the meeting.
- Begin the meeting by introducing each person and asking the person to explain his role. Whenever possible, ask the student to share some information about himself—his age, class, etc.
- Conduct the meeting in an organized but informal manner.
- Resist the temptation to use jargon which parents and students may not understand.
- Phrase suggestions positively and emphasize the strengths of the student.
- Address both the child and the parent in the meeting, not just one or the other.
- When the student or parent makes a contribution to the meeting, actively reinforce their participation by telling them that their contribution was helpful.

- Carefully explain the goals, objectives, and services to be provided.
- Ask questions of the student and parents about each aspect of the program.
- Structure questions in an open-ended manner and avoid leading questions.
- Ask the student and parents to share their list of the student's ideas about school.
- Discuss these ideas and include them whenever feasible.
- Make sure that all persons present understand and agree with the information contained in the final IEP document.
- Have the student sign the IEP, as well as the parent.
- Provide a copy of the IEP and minutes of the meeting to the parents (and to the student, if appropriate).
- After the meeting is concluded, tell the student that his participation was valuable.
- As lessons and assignments are later given to the student, relate them back to the IEP. Assist the student in seeing the connection between IEP meeting decisions and the instructional program.

#### REFERENCES

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