

The IEP Meeting: Preparation and Participation

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As the parent of a child with special needs, the most important meeting or meetings you may participate in each year is your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting(s). The IEP is a written document which states the student's needs and strengths, and spells out the services that will be provided. Once your child has qualified for special education services, the IEP meeting provides the framework for the implementation of an individualized plan, which will directly affect your child's growth and development. An IEP meeting can be requested by the parents or members of the school staff at any time during the year. At the very least, each student receiving special education and/or related services must have an annual IEP meeting.

There is much you can do in advance to be fully prepared for your child's IEP meeting. And your preparation will go a long way when you are sitting with half a dozen or more school staff and teachers. You may be the only one who doesn't work for the school system, but you are the only one responsible for this child year after year. You are partners with all these people as you work together to develop an appropriate Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child. But, you have the most to gain or lose according to the effectiveness of the plan and its implementation.

Prepare Well

Organize a notebook with pockets and dividers for copies of IEPs, test results and school records, copies of dated correspondence, medical reports, report cards, progress reports and work samples. It is also important to have a copy of state and federal special education laws, procedural safeguards and parental rights. The document, *Virginia*

Special Education Procedural Safeguard Requirements Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, should be sent to parents with the advance notification of an IEP meeting and given to them again during the IEP meeting itself. If you want to become familiar with this important information in advance, you can request a copy from your child's school or view the document, on the Virginia Department of Education Web site at www.pen.k12.va.us.

As you organize your notebook of information, don't forget to include a log of telephone calls and conferences with staff, teachers and other professionals and any other information relevant to your child, such as key terms that relate to your child's diagnosis or learning needs, your observations about your child at home and at school, articles you have clipped, etc.

Periodically review the confidential school file. Make sure you have a copy of everything in it and ask for what you are missing. The school is required by law to provide copies of anything in the student's confidential file for parents for just the cost of copying the material.

Visit your child's classroom. Volunteering is a great way to find out how your child is functioning on a daily basis. Talk to your child's teacher(s). Prioritize what you see as your child's needs. Record your goals for your child as well as terms, questions and issues that you may need answered or clarified.

Make a list of all identified needs and make sure that the IEP addresses these needs. Also ensure the goals are written specifically enough so that you can measure whether they have been obtained.

Active Participation

Your child's IEP meeting can be a positive experience. Most administra-

tors and teachers are compassionate and competent. They are often experts in their field. You, however, are the expert about your child, and through your preparation have placed yourself in the position to be the only person at the IEP meeting to know the total child.

Make a list of topics and focus on the most important issues. If the purpose of an IEP meeting is, for example, to develop an updated IEP, but you also want to discuss whether your son or daughter may be in need of assistive technology (AT) equipment or services, notify the IEP chairperson or principal well in advance (preferably in writing). He or she will then be able to make arrangements to address the specific issue and be sure that any additional staff needed are available to attend and participate in the meeting.

Take notes. Ask for an explanation or clarification of terms, concepts, procedures and options you may not fully understand. If you have goals, ideas, suggestions, or concerns, share them. Be honest and use your best communication skills. Make sure that you get a copy of the IEP, the team notes, the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) forms and written reports of any tests or assessments. Be sure that you ask about whether your child may qualify for Extended School Year (ESY) services. (See "Could Your Child Qualify for ESY Services?" on p. 53.)

Mediation/Due Process

If you are unable to have an issue resolved that you are convinced will impact your child negatively, you can challenge the school system's action by asking for mediation, where an impartial mediator makes recommendations to help resolve the issues, and/or by requesting a due process hearing in which a hearing officer listens to both sides of the case. ■