Dear Students, Parents, and Colleagues:

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education’s (OSSE’s) Division of Specialized Education (DSE) is pleased to offer training and resources for students, educators, and parents to prepare youth with disabilities to lead their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. As we know, students who are self-determined experience better outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and independent living. Creating a leadership role for students in the IEP process helps students learn about their strengths and challenges and advocate to get their needs met.

We are happy to present this Discussion Guide, which is designed to support DSE’s Student-led IEP initiative. This document serves as a roadmap for review of the video modules and provides specific questions that will lead your audience to a rich discussion around what it means for students to be self-determined and take the lead in their IEP meetings.

As we continue our hard work on improving in-school and post-school outcomes for students, we look forward to your feedback on the Student-led IEP initiative and the resources that accompany it.

Best Regards,

Dr. Amy Maistra
Assistant Superintendent, Division of Specialized Education
How Do You Implement a Student-led IEP?
Remember – there is no single correct way to prepare for and conduct student-led IEPs. Each school, family, and student will develop different processes and practices in response to the structure of the school and the needs of the individual students. The Best Me I Can Be and the Student-led IEP Toolkit (available online at www.ossesecondarytransition.org) encourage innovation and support schools and families in enhancing the ability of students of all ages and abilities to meaningfully participate in the IEP process.

What is a Student-led IEP?
During a student-led IEP, the student is considered a primary member of the team and takes a leadership role in making decisions about his/her future. Members of the IEP Team include students, families/caregivers, special educators, general educators, support staff, related service providers, and administrators. IEP Teams achieve meaningful student participation by individualizing the student’s role and ensuring that the student is adequately prepared. Appropriate levels of involvement should be based on the age, needs, and abilities of the student. Throughout the process, IEP Team members guide the student in exploring strengths and needs and support him/her in developing goals.

Specific roles vary and are individualized, based on age, needs, abilities
Approach can be utilized from K to 12th grade
Requires investment in preparing students and parents
Occurs within the context of the overall IEP

Defining the Student-led IEP

Students with special needs are expanding their roles in managing their own education in Washington, DC through student-led Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Active participation by students in the IEP process and transition planning promotes successful outcomes and goal achievement in school and in the future.

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How to Host a Screening

1. Conduct Outreach
   a. Advertise the screening via various methods, including e-mail lists, newsletters, phone, invitations, social media, etc.

2. Plan the Logistics
   a. Access the film. The film is available at www.ossesecondarytransition.org/studentled_ieps. Click on “The Best Me I Can Be Film” link. You will be given the option to watch the entire film or watch individual modules. We recommend showing the film in its entirety; however, consider sharing individual modules depending on time constraints (i.e., shorter meetings or trainings).
   
   Note: You will need an internet connection to view the film via the website. If you do not have access to the internet, contact OSSE’s Office of Specialized Education at osse.tta@dc.gov to borrow a copy of the DVD.
   
   b. Prepare technology ahead of time. Test the audio, computer, projector, and internet connection to ensure that the technology is working properly.
   c. Enable closed captioning. Captions are available in English and Spanish. To enable captions, click “cc” on the bottom right hand corner once you have the video pulled up. You will be given the option to select English or Spanish.

3. Introduce and View the Film
   a. Explain the purpose of the Student-led IEP initiative to the audience and share why you chose to host a screening.
   b. Tell the audience that the film length is 43 minutes and invite audience members to stay and participate in a short facilitated discussion following the film.
   c. Play the film.

4. Facilitate a Discussion
   a. A list of suggested discussion questions is provided (see pages 6 to 10). Depending upon the allotted time and interests of the audience, you may choose to use general discussion questions or select a few questions to explore for each module.

5. Get Started Now!
   a. At the film’s conclusion, review the Take Action: Get Started Now! section of the guide. Make sure that everyone leaves with the website url with so that they can contact the project team and access the Student-led IEP toolkit, which contains resources, activities, lesson plans, and guidance for students, parents, and educators. www.ossesecondarytransition.org

Discussion Questions

General
- What are your reactions to the film?
- Who or what from the film impacted you the most? Why?
- After watching this film, is there anything that you are thinking about differently? What?
- As a result of watching this film, is there anything that you plan to do at home or at school? What and why?
The Student-led IEP process is important to the academic and social success of students with disabilities. This module highlights the benefits of meaningful student participation, support from institutional leadership, and creating a student-led IEP program that is clearly understood by all members of the IEP Team. It provides practical suggestions for how teachers, students, and parents can begin implementing a student-led IEP process.

- During this module, participants speak about the benefits of student-led IEPs. Rossana Mahvi shares how IEP participation helped a student who was repeating a grade to understand how to improve academically.
  - What are additional benefits of a student-led IEP?

- As Desirée Brown mentions, the concept of student-led IEPs is new to most DC schools and require a change in perspective and an investment of time and resources.
  - What are the challenges for implementing student-led IEPs?
  - What preparation do schools and parents need to support increased student participation?

“I want others to know that I HAVE A BRIGHT LIFE IN FRONT OF ME and I’m going to achieve my goals by working hard.”

– Marnai
5th Grade Student
Module 2 explores how to work with students to build self-awareness about their disability and develop an understanding of how it impacts them in the classroom and beyond. Students identify and request the accommodations and modifications they need to be successful, resulting in greater motivation to achieve their IEP goals. This module also includes information that parents and caregivers may need in order to support children in their student-led IEP process.

“They are able to say THESE ARE MY STRENGTHS, but I do have some weaknesses and HERE’S WHAT I NEED HELP WITH in the classroom that will help me be the best me I can be.”

– Mo Chamble Thomas
Special Education Teacher

Through various lessons and activities, Preston realized that he is a visual learner and can ask for visual representations to aid him in the classroom. After looking at her IEP, Marnai realized that she needed to improve in math. Why is it important for students like Preston and Marnai to have information about their disability and how it impacts them?

Kelly Custer recognizes that many adults, himself included, are hesitant to talk to students about their disabilities. However, he stresses the importance of providing students with information about their disability in order for them to be successful. Kelly recommends framing these conversations around strengths, abilities, and learning styles rather than around disability labels.

- How do you talk to students about their disabilities and other difficult topics?
- What support is available for families dealing with complex emotions that arise when supporting a child with disabilities?

How can families and educators help students understand their abilities, limitations, strengths, assessments, and needs in order to set goals for themselves?
Module 3 shares methods for helping students understand (a) their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (b) the general framework and language of the IEP process, and (c) specific details from their own IEPs (goals, assessments, present levels, accommodations, etc.). With this knowledge, students are able to advocate for the supports and services necessary to their success.

Participants in this module speak about students needing to understand the elements of their IEPs. For example, Mo Thomas teaches students about accommodations when they are in middle school. What else is important for students to know about their IEPs?

At the Ivymount School, Sharon Nickolaus begins by teaching IEP vocabulary to the students. What other strategies do the teachers, parents, and other members of the IEP Team in this film use to teach students of different ages and abilities about their IEPs and their rights? What additional strategies do you suggest?

“Now I can TELL PEOPLE like my teachers WHAT I NEED, MY GOALS, and what I don’t need.”

- Preston Evans
7th Grade Student
Module 4 introduces creative methods IEP Team members have used to involve students in journeys of exploration about themselves and their needs. Students share input about developing and achieving their goals. This module illustrates ways in which students can be prepared to meaningfully participate throughout the IEP process.

In each of the schools featured in the film, teachers utilized different approaches for preparing their students, including using planning time to work individually with students, hosting a transition group, and integrating student-led IEPs into a self-advocacy curriculum.

- How can educators embed opportunities to develop greater self-determination within the general education curriculum, to assist students in developing greater self-awareness and leadership skills?
- What are some other creative ways that schools can find time to prepare students?

What preparation strategies could be utilized at home to support student participation in the IEP process? What supports are available to assist families and caregivers in navigating the IEP process and supporting their child?

At the Ivymount School, Chanel uses an e-mail template to create invitations to her IEP meeting. What strategies, tools or resources could be used to support student-led IEPs for students with varying levels of disabilities?

“What we’re hoping is that starting in middle school, as they get older, they will have heard everything so much and [will have been] practicing so much that THEY REALLY WILL BE SELF ADVOCATES and be able to make decisions and HAVE A SAY AND A VOICE IN THEIR LIVES.”

- Amy Alvord
  Director of Student Services
  Transition Specialist
In Module 5, students express increased feelings of empowerment, self-awareness, and self-determination as they lead and reflect on their own IEP meetings. The final module connects the individual components of the student-led IEP process and illustrates different ways in which students can meaningfully participate. Students express their feelings about why all students with disabilities should receive support and encouragement to actively participate in the IEP process.

- What are helpful ground rules that all IEP Team members should follow during a student-led IEP?
- What are examples of different ways for students to meaningfully participate in their IEPs?
- How do you plan for the unexpected and ensure you have a plan if conflict arises during the meeting?
- Djimon’s mother, Lisa, talks about the importance of actively listening to the student to understand the ways that he/she learns. Preston’s aunt Crystal suggests getting involved by talking to others about the student-led IEP process. Kelly Custer stresses the need for talking to students about the difficult topics. What can you do to support Student-led IEP implementation in your school or with your child?
- Jabez from Two Rivers Public Charter School says that he is proud of himself for participating in his IEP. Educators and parents discuss the growth they witnessed in the students who were part of the student-led IEP process. How do you anticipate increased student involvement would impact the dynamics of the IEP teams and the IEP process?

“I think HE’S BECOME HIS OWN ADVOCATE. He’s practicing even in our home. I think that this whole process has been the MOST EMPOWERING THING that he’s been involved in probably since he’s been identified as a special education student.”

- Crystal Evans, Parent
Get Started Now!

It is never too early to encourage students to develop a vision of what they want their life to look like after high school and plan how they will achieve their postsecondary goals. Student-led IEPs are just one way in which students of all ages can build self-determination skills and play a more active role in the transition planning process. Refer to the following sources for more information about student engagement and secondary transition.

OSSE Secondary Transition Website

Students, parents, and educators can access the OSSE Secondary Transition website (www.ossesecondarytransition.org) for resources, tools, and information on best practices and upcoming events to help support students in planning for postsecondary success. The website categorizes resources within four key areas of transition:

- Community Living
- Employment
- Postsecondary Education & Training
- Self-Determination

To learn more about how to help students in preparing for secondary transition, access the OSSE Secondary Transition: Planning for Postsecondary Success website by visiting www.ossesecondarytransition.org.

Student-Led IEP Toolkit

One way to help students develop self-determination skills and plan for secondary transition is to support their meaningful involvement in the IEP process. The Student-led IEP Toolkit supplements the film and is aligned with the five film modules. The toolkit provides detailed instructions, tips, tools, and resources for students, educators, and families interested in implementing student-led IEPs.

To learn more about how to help students to meaningfully participate throughout the IEP process, access the Student-led IEP Toolkit online by visiting www.ossesecondarytransition.org/studentled_ieps.
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