

# Involve Students in the IEP Process

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**Keywords:** self-determination; individualized education program; self-management; IEP meetings; transition

When students become involved in the process of developing their own Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), they have the opportunity to practice many of the essential self-determination skills they need in school and in life. Unfortunately, students are often excluded from this process, and their presence at an IEP meeting does not necessarily mean that they are actively participating (Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997). Students may be left out of the process because teachers are not familiar with the concept of self-determination or are unsure how to use the IEP process to support the development of self-determination skills. However, there are many simple strategies teachers can use to engage their students in this process.

The IEP process typically has four stages: planning, drafting, meeting to revise and finalize the draft, and implementing the program (Konrad & Test, 2004). However, when involving students, an additional stage must be added at the beginning of the process to provide students with the necessary background knowledge and a rationale to facilitate their active and meaningful participation. Therefore, the following 20 simple ways to involve students in the IEP process is divided into five stages (see Figure 1).

## Stage 1: Developing Background Knowledge

1

**Use your resources.** Several books and online guides are available to help students learn about their disabilities, special education, and

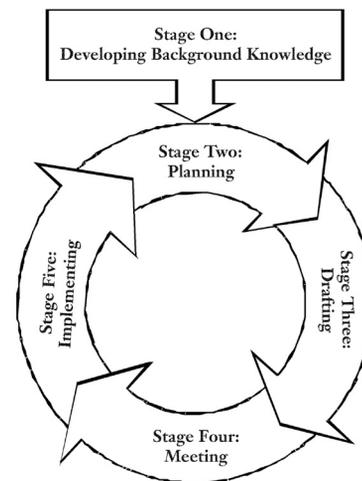


FIGURE 1. Stages for involving students in the IEP process.

the IEP process. For example, Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, and Stillerman (2002) found that using *Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement* (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001) increased students' knowledge about the IEP process. Become familiar with such resources and select appropriate ones for students. An added benefit is that reading these materials with students is one way to embed reading comprehension activities into a unit on IEP planning.

2

**Develop an IEP scavenger hunt** (Konrad & Test, 2004) that requires students to find certain information in their own IEPs. For example, prompts on the scavenger hunt might include the following: (a) find the signature page of your IEP and name two people who attended your last IEP meeting, (b) tell how many goals are in your IEP, or (c) count how many pages are in your IEP. The difficulty level and length of the scavenger hunt should be adjusted for students' ages, skills, and previous experiences with IEPs.

3

**Assign students the task of evaluating their IEPs** to determine if they contain all the sections required by law. Provide students with a checklist that begins, "Does your IEP contain . . . ?" Then list sections of the IEP required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004; e.g., present level of performance, goals). Assist students in finding each section in their own IEPs.

4

**Have students read** (or read to them) fiction books featuring characters with disabilities. Work with the students to identify the characters' strengths and needs and discuss what might be included in the characters' IEPs. Students can then develop mock IEPs for the characters using the same forms used by the school district.



## Stage 2: Planning for the IEP

5

**Work with students to help them develop vision statements** for themselves. What do they want to do with their life beyond school? The vision statement might begin with a prompt such as "After high school, I plan to live \_\_\_\_\_, learn \_\_\_\_\_, work \_\_\_\_\_, and play \_\_\_\_\_." Assist students with filling in the blanks with ambitious, yet realistic, goals.

6

**Get students involved in the assessment process.** For example, students can take interest and career inventories to help develop their vision statements and transition goals. You can also share with students results from academic assessments and teach them how to use these data to set ambitious goals for the

upcoming IEP. When deciding what information to share with students and what information to withhold, consult with parents and use your best professional judgment.

7

**Have students write letters inviting meeting participants to attend** and notes or e-mails reminding them about upcoming meetings (see Figure 2). For students who struggle with writing, use a fill-in-the-blank letter template (see Figure 3). This activity also provides an opportunity to embed writing instruction into a unit on IEP planning.

8

**Use commercial programs** such as *The Self-Advocacy Strategy* (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994) to help students create lists of potential needs, goals, services, and accommodations. Several studies have demonstrated positive effects of *The Self-Advocacy Strategy* (e.g., Hammer, 2004; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994).

9

**Involve students in preparing for the meeting.** For example, students can make name tags or name tents for meeting participants. Discuss with students appropriate apparel for their meetings and whether refreshments (e.g., coffee and doughnuts) should be served. They may even practice their leadership skills by approaching the principal to discuss whether the school budget might pay for refreshments.

Dear Mr. Epps,

I am writing to invite you to my IEP meeting January 14 at 1:30. I have attached a draft of my IEP to this letter. Please look at it before the meeting if you can. I used a highlighter to show the parts that are related to my general education classes (including my accommodations) since you are a general education teacher. If you have any suggestions, you can let me or Ms. Wren know before the meeting so we can make the changes, or you can bring your ideas to the meeting. We will finalize the IEP at the meeting. See you in class!

Sincerely,

Dear Ms. James,

I am writing to remind you about my IEP meeting next Wednesday at 1:30. We will be meeting in the seventh-grade resource room (Room 233). As you know, you will be the LEA representative, so it is very important that you attend. Please take a look at the draft of my IEP we developed so you can be prepared for the meeting. I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Dear Dad,

As you know, my IEP meeting will be next Wednesday at 1:30. I'm glad we had a chance to look at the draft together last night. I worked with my teacher today to make some of the changes you suggested. We'll be able to make more changes at the meeting if we need to. I'm looking forward to seeing you at the meeting (and at home!).

Love,

FIGURE 2. Sample IEP invitations and reminders.

### Stage 3: Drafting the IEP

10

**As part of a unit on paragraph writing, have students write paragraphs about their strengths and needs.** For students who need more support, provide them with a topic sentence: "I have many strengths." Then assist them in writing several sentences to support that topic. These paragraphs, once approved by the IEP team, can be copied and pasted into the present level-of-performance portion of a student's IEP. As a follow-up, teach students to write IEP goal paragraphs in which the topic sentence is a goal and the supporting detail sentences are objectives to help them reach the goal (Konrad & Test, in press; Konrad, Trela, & Test, 2006). These activities provide more opportunities to integrate self-determination skill building with writing instruction.

11

**Once students have identified their needs, have them take each need statement and turn it into an "I will" statement.** For example, a student who needs to work on fractions may write, "I will add and subtract fractions." These "I will" statements can then become the students' IEP goals. This process teaches students that each goal in their IEP comes directly from a need they have. These needs may be related to academic, social, daily living, or vocational skills.

12

**After helping students develop a draft of their IEP document, you can require students to meet with their parents** at home before the real IEP meeting to review the draft. This meeting gives students an opportunity to communicate their goals with their parents and gives parents an opportunity to see what is being considered for the IEP. The pre-IEP conference may also help the actual IEP meeting run more smoothly and efficiently.

### Stage 4: Meeting to Develop the IEP

13

**Keep in mind that there is a range of options** for involving students in IEP meetings. Participation for younger students or those who are just learning about the process may simply involve attending the meeting,

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,  
I am writing to remind you about my \_\_\_\_\_. The meeting will take place on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. We will be meeting in Room \_\_\_\_\_. I have attached a \_\_\_\_\_ of my IEP so you can \_\_\_\_\_. I look forward to \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,  
I am writing to \_\_\_\_\_. To prepare for this meeting, I have \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. Before the meeting, I hope you will prepare by \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for taking the time to \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

FIGURE 3. Sample templates for IEP invitations and reminders.

introducing participants, and demonstrating appropriate listening behaviors. As students get older and learn more about the process, their level of involvement should increase. For example, they may share their vision statement and goals at the meeting. Eventually, students can learn to lead the entire meeting, which gives them excellent practice with self-determination skills such as selfadvocacy and leadership.

14

**Use published curricula, such as *The Self-Directed IEP* (Martin, Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1997), to provide students with the skills to lead their own meetings.** Several studies have documented that *The Self-Directed IEP* increases participation in IEP meetings for students with a variety of disabilities (e.g., Snyder, 2002).



15

**Provide students with several opportunities to rehearse for their meetings.** Test et al. (2004) found that verbal rehearsal, role playing, and prompting were strategies often included in instruction that led to increased student involvement in IEP meetings.

## Stage 5: Implementing the IEP

16

**Have each student create a fact sheet that summarizes his or her IEP for general education teachers.** The fact sheet should provide an overview of the student's disability, strengths, needs, services, and accommodations. Students can deliver these fact sheets to their general education teachers during the first week of school or after their IEP meetings. Students can also clip them inside their planners so they can carry them to their classes.

17

**Teach students self-advocacy and self-recruitment skills.** For example, you might describe a scenario in which a general education teacher forgets to provide a testing accommodation. **Model different ways students can handle the situation, and then give students opportunities to practice self-advocating through role playing.** Students with disabilities can also learn to self-recruit praise and assistance from peers and teachers (Alber & Heward, 2000).

18

**Provide students with access to their IEP files and build time into the schedule for students to go into their folders to check on items specified in the IEPs.** A structured worksheet might prompt the student to check on the following questions: Are your accommodations being provided? Are your goals being met? Are there changes that need to be made?

19

**Teach students to self-monitor and self-evaluate their progress toward meeting their IEP goals.** There is an extensive body of literature supporting the use of self-management strategies, including self-monitoring, for students with disabilities (e.g., McDougall, 1998; Reid, Trout, & Schartz, 2005).

20

**Have students develop first-person progress reports to share with their parents and the IEP team.** Students can write a narrative self-evaluation for each goal, evaluating their progress and stating whether they are on track to reach the goal by the date indicated in the IEP. Students can also include graphs illustrating their progress.

The IEP process is a cyclical one (as seen in Figure 1). Implementing the IEP involves collecting data, so getting students involved in this last stage helps them (and the teacher) initiate the planning stage for the next IEP. Getting students invested in the entire process makes the next round easier!

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