

Involving Students in Their Own IEP Planning

“When is the IEP due?” That seems to be the question many educators ask in order to determine how and when to begin drafting the document. With so many demands on teacher time, it is easy to understand why the individualized education program (IEP) is seen as an additional burden and is relegated to the list of last-minute tasks to squeeze into an already crowded calendar.

What if educators did not wait until the IEPs were due but worked on them all year long? What if the IEP were incorporated into lesson planning so that students could take an active role in developing and monitoring their own educational programs? That is just what the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) and others advocate as a means for developing students’ skills such as self determination, awareness, and advocacy. It is a means to ensure that special educators remain focused on the student while maintaining legally compliant documents.

There are a variety of ways students can participate in the IEP process, but the format and procedure needs to be tailored to a student’s age and degree of disability. NICHCY has published activities, audiotapes, and workbooks to encourage collaboration between teachers and older students with disabilities. [“A Student’s Guide to the IEP”](#) provides step-by-step guidelines for walking students through the process of writing their own IEPs. In general, the idea is to begin the process of IEP planning at the beginning of the year.

After reviewing what an IEP is and some of the language that is used, older students may participate in reviewing their own IEP. It is a good idea to discuss key ideas with them, such as what the general education curriculum is or terms such as *present level of performance* and *accommodations*. With students who are able, teachers can take it a step further by having them revisit their IEPs periodically to provide feedback based on guided discussions. Sample questions for these discussions include:

- Are there goals, objectives, or benchmarks that students have met that need to be updated?
- Are there other goals or objectives that the student would like to address?
- Is the student able to recognize the connections between goals and objectives or benchmarks and his or her work in school?

This process may take the form of class discussions, individual seatwork, one-on-one conferences with the teacher or paraeducator, and even homework with parental support. Then, when it comes time for an annual review, the teacher can draft various sections of the IEP using data gathered throughout the year, rather than making a last-minute dash to the deadline. In all of this, privacy issues and age appropriateness play a major role; and, as always, it is a good idea to inform parents of the plan and include them in the process if they are able to participate.

Be creative in involving students in their own IEPs. Now with a handle on writing on IEPs, what about using them to inform teaching and students’ learning? Beyond self-assessment and reflection, how can students and parents actively participate in implementing the IEP? First and foremost, it is important to make the information easily accessible to all interested parties. A stack of 20-page IEPs stored in a file cabinet is formidable even for those whose classes are not overflowing with students. Turning these legal documents into instructional tools is easier than one might think.

Some teachers have chosen to enlist their students in creating “IEP rings” that allow teachers, aides, and students to flip through the goals/objectives/benchmarks written as individual sentence strips several times daily. Again, do not panic! Teachers may not need to create these rings themselves. Are the students able to assist? If so, it is a great activity for familiarizing them with the goals for teaching and learning. For younger students or those with more severe disabilities, find out whether parents are able to help.

Parents benefit from familiarizing themselves with the skills their child is learning and can choose to provide reinforcement at home. Is the idea of a ring of IEP goals/objectives/benchmarks too daunting? If

so, follow the lead of other teachers who have created subject-specific bookmarks listing only the two or three relevant goals/objectives/benchmarks. Students with reading and language arts goals create bookmarks that serve the dual purpose of keeping their page and keeping their attention on the overall goal at hand. The same principle can be used for math and written language goals.

The idea is to turn the data-driven content of the IEP into manageable tools for instruction. It can actually be fun and easy to design these or similar tools, and the benefits extend to both teachers and their students.

(Adapted from [Thriving as a Special Educator: Balancing Your Practices and Ideals](#), edited by Jane Burnette and Cassandra Peters-Johnson [Council for Exceptional Children, 2004].)

See page 21 of the [CEC's 2009 publications catalog](#) for resources to assist you with involving students in their IEP planning.

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