

## SCHOOL STAFF SUGGESTIONS FOR SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

### COOPERATION AMONG PARTICIPANTS

- 1) **Members must be on time and prepared** for meetings, recognizing that the entire team is dependent on the professionalism of its members.
- 2) **Members must treat one another with respect.** Attitude is critically important in any endeavor, and an atmosphere of mutual respect is vital.
- 3) **Members must follow through on commitments** made at IEP meetings. No one member can assure the success of the team, and each member must make it a priority to fulfill their responsibilities.

### SUPPORT OF PARTICIPANTS

- 4) School administrators must **support teachers being out of their classrooms** for IEP meetings and assist in providing class coverage.
- 5) School administrators who are not there in person must **support the decisions of the team.** Decisions are made after review of many factors, and it is unreasonable to designate a committee chair but then reject the decisions made; similarly, the team must be supported to follow the law and district policies, and not expected just to do what any particular administrator wants done.
- 6) **Accountability of all participants** in the IEP process: principals and superintendents must help designated committee chairs assure that team members fulfill their obligations (without such support, the designee has little authority and little recourse).
- 7) **The chain of command must hold a similar vision** of the importance, authority, and legal responsibilities of the committee. Principals need to have a clear understanding of the IEP environment so that they can provide appropriate guidance and leadership to staff. Superintendents must recognize and assure this knowledge base among the school administrators in their districts.
- 8) The IEP environment is complex, and school administrators **must support the provision of training** for parents and school staff, and not just for a limited few.
- 9) **Clear job descriptions should be developed** so that all school staff understand their responsibilities to the IEP team.
- 10) **Clear channels of resources should be provided** so that IEP team members can get assistance when needed, and receive timely responses to legal and other IEP-related questions.
- 11) **Routine evaluations should be done** so that teams have some means of measuring their effectiveness, satisfaction, and success.

## TRAINING OF PARTICIPANTS

- 12) **School administrators must receive training in how to chair IEP team meetings**, as well as training in what should be expected of anyone they select as their designee.
- 13) **Regular classroom teachers must receive training** in IEP matters, with periodic follow up as laws and policies change.
- 14) All team **members must have a clear understanding** of what an IEP meeting entails and what the legal responsibilities of the team are, as well as the responsibilities of each individual member.
- 15) **Mentoring of new IEP team chairs** by those who are more experienced would be very helpful, as well as periodic training programs in IEP-related topics.
- 16) **Opportunities should be provided for IEP team chairpersons** to present, discuss, and perhaps role-play with other IEP team chairs the challenging situations they encounter
- 17) Supervisors should provide assistance in developing **professional growth plans** to help individuals enhance their IEP team skills.

## WORKLOAD ISSUES

- 18) Teams benefit from a **suitable meeting place** that is reasonably quiet, comfortable, and free from interruptions.
- 19) Administrators must be responsive to such issues as **flex time**, especially when staff must work long or unusual hours to accommodate IEP meetings, or the needs of participants for evening or weekend meetings.
- 20) Administrators must help assure **equitable workload** distribution so that some school staff are not spending excessive amounts of time in IEP meetings and associated paperwork at the expense of other responsibilities (this often happens when there are many more eligible students at a particular school with fewer staff to serve them).
- 21) Administrators should assist teams to develop an **efficient method of paperwork**, perhaps through updated technology and software, to ease the time demands that reporting can require.
- 22) **Clear channels for funding should be developed** so that teams can efficiently follow through on the commitments they make, and avoid resistance and arguments about who will cover what expenses.

## SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS IEP TEAM PARENT CONCERNS

9/06

- 1) Getting **parental involvement** at IEP meetings, parent trainings, information exchange, and related activities **can often be a challenge**. What can be done to get the parents of children with special needs to attend?
  1. Provide programs that are specifically designed for parents.
  2. Get parents involved earlier in the IEP process.
  3. Provide a language interpreter when necessary or helpful.
  4. Make a personal phone call to invite and encourage them.
  5. Do a “transition fair” to address issues related to transition.
  6. Provide transportation, gift bags or door prizes, and especially child care.
  7. Enter those who attend in a drawing for a prize.
  8. Provide lunch and/or snacks.
  9. Pay them to come or give gift certificates (use funds that might otherwise go to legal fees; the cost of just one due process would pay for a lot of incentive money).
  10. Get involved with them, develop a rapport and relationship.
  11. Develop a program for students and invite parents to come watch.
  12. Hold IEP meetings at homes or by phone when necessary.
  13. Coordinate with other community agencies who serve these families.
  
- 2) **Each participant at the IEP meeting may have differing objectives** and constraints – financial, staffing, available resources, time, etc.; how can they be expected to work together effectively under such circumstances?
  1. Active listening and open minds.
  2. Acknowledge the parents’ concerns; let them know they are being heard.
  3. Provide flexibility in scheduling.
  4. Communication and preplanning at the school level so that people are really present and not just there “in body.”
  5. Preconference, especially with those who won’t be attending the meeting.
  6. Know your roles and limitations.
  7. Maintain a focus on what’s best for the child; agree to put the child first.
  8. Clarify and agree on purpose and objectives of meeting in opening remarks.
  
- 3) **Parents of children with special needs too often feel alone with their many feelings**, and school staff may be insufficiently aware or supportive. How can IEP team staff members show greater sensitivity and understanding of the grief process?
  1. Provide brochures of services and resources available.
  2. Provide parent-school forums, such as monthly discussion groups.
  3. Hire a parent liaison to help parents with questions and issues.
  4. Help connect parents with others in similar circumstances.
  5. Refer them to parent resource centers (create one if doesn’t yet exist).

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6. Get training for staff in listening, supporting, and understanding.
  7. Reach out for books, professional videos, etc.
  8. Make time for pre-conferencing and provide an open communication climate.
  9. Talk with them and help them feel welcome to share feelings and concerns.
  10. Encourage parents to verbalize it when they do not feel supported by staff.
- 4) **Parents do not always get evaluation reports ahead of time**, so they are often unprepared for, and sometimes very upset by, what they hear at IEP meetings. Realistically, what should or can be done about this?
1. Send a copy of report even if not requested, and provide a way to help parents understand the language, test process, conclusions, etc.
  2. Preconference: invite parents to come in to review together.
  3. Consider the order of what is presented; don't bombard with negatives.
  4. Instruct report writers to speak in positive and user-friendly terms, and to focus on strengths and what *can* be done rather than limitations and shortcomings.
  5. Help parents know in advance what to expect in a test report.
  6. Help them see how the report is consistent with their observations at home.
  7. Encourage parents to verbalize their thoughts and feelings.
  8. Strengthen staff skills for intervening when upset occurs.
  9. Make yourself available after the meeting for any questions or concerns.
  10. Have the school call with good news from time to time – not just bad.
- 5) **The IEP process is often complicated**, confusing, and poorly understood. What is or can be done to help parents in this regard?
1. Send an introductory packet to explain the process to newcomers.
  2. Use visuals to illustrate when helpful, such as diagrams or charts.
  3. Simplify use of language and avoid acronyms.
  4. Provide a friendly cover letter with any notices sent by mail.
  5. Pre-conference with parents, and provide a clear explanation of the IEP process.
  6. Be well organized and consistent, and use a written meeting agenda.
  7. Be sure introductions are made, including roles with regard to the IEP team.
  8. Watch for cues of discomfort and intervene when necessary.
  9. Develop user-friendly video training materials.
  10. Send a draft IEP proposal for review in advance of the meeting.
- 6) School and district **staff attending IEP team meetings frequently have other appointments and commitments** that preclude their giving adequate time to the IEP meeting. How can this be addressed?
1. Get the support of school administrators and assure a cooperative school climate.
  2. Have a single person serve as coordinator for the meeting, making sure everyone participates in selecting a workable time and keeping it open.
  3. Have a team approach and use team planning.

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4. Remind staff ahead of time so they are sure to keep their schedules clear.
  5. Be sure in advance that all participants have the same time expectations.
  6. Arrange additional coverage, including through aids or substitutes.
  7. Start and end the meeting on time.
  8. Budget meeting time efficiently so meetings don't run longer than necessary.
  9. Clarify who will be leaving early and have them speak early in the meeting.
  10. Politely and privately confront chronic offenders.
  11. Help parents understand the unavoidable realities, and thus know what to realistically expect.
  12. Emphasize the importance and legal obligations of the IEP team.
- 7) **Meetings are often scheduled at the convenience of school staff, rather than parents;** what can be done so that parents' time seems equally valued?
1. Call the parents personally and ask if meeting times fit with their schedules.
  2. Provide an easy means for parents to indicate a meeting time preference – perhaps a tear off and return section of a mailed notice.
  3. Schedule the next meeting at the close of the present meeting.
  4. Have substitutes available so teachers can easily accommodate parents' requests.
  5. Be aware of their situation and individual needs regarding scheduling.
  6. Do meetings early in the morning before school starts as one option.
  7. Help with providing child care if necessary.
  8. Teleconference or meet at their home.
  9. Compensate staff in some way for working at odd times.
  10. Offer separate meetings when divorced parents don't get along.
- 8) Parents of children with special needs have often had **a history of negative experience** with school staff; what can be done to combat a **climate of negative expectations and mistrust**?
1. Invite or encourage them to bring an ally.
  2. Have a meeting in advance to set a friendly tone and establish rapport.
  3. Have a staff member with whom the parent feels comfortable sit next to them.
  4. Meet and greet them when they arrive.
  5. Use everyday language, and be sure to talk about the positives of the child.
  6. Make friendly contact at times other than IEP meetings (perhaps at other school functions like parties and fun activities).
  7. Support their feelings; ask questions; show respect, interest, and concern; try to understand their point of view.
  8. Make some friendly outreach, perhaps by phone just to check in and offer help or show interest, or just to give a friendly reminder.
  9. Be sure they have reports or IEP proposals in advance so they can come prepared.

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10. Be careful where they wait before meetings, and remind staff to be careful about off hand, confidential, or unkind comments.
  11. Have snacks and drinks available to promote a welcoming atmosphere.
  12. Avoid staff gathering before meetings, so parent doesn't walk in and then assume staff have been talking about them or their child.
  13. Provide open communications, including opportunities to talk about previous experiences, to check out assumptions, and to clear bad feelings.
  14. Call the parents to show interest and to talk about progress, needs, and concerns.
- 9) **Confidentiality of IEP-related matters is often breached** by school personnel, especially in smaller communities where IEP team members know one another in a variety of contexts. How can this be remedied?
1. Have continuing education in ethics, including confidentiality.
  2. Have annual refresher training for staff on confidentiality.
  3. Have a clear school policy on discussing sensitive or confidential issues.
  4. Make friendly reminders in the opening remarks at the start of IEP meetings.
  5. Develop a user-friendly list of the laws and policies concerning confidentiality – make the complicated easier to understand and remember.
  6. Don't leave paperwork lying out in visible places when it may contain sensitive or confidential information, or even just the names.
  7. Make a point of not discussing IEP issues when meeting committee members in public – have them phone or visit with you at school; limit public remarks to positives that are general in nature.
- 10) **Parents at IEP meetings often feel intimidated by the presence of several school personnel (one against many)** and give themselves no equal standing as also main contributors in the child's educational process. How can we help them to feel equally valued and empowered?
1. Avoid bombarding the parent with negatives – what the child did wrong. Instead, emphasize positives and achievements; be very diplomatic in relaying negatives.
  2. Start meetings with an emphasis on child's strengths, perhaps from a checklist.
  3. Acknowledge their possible feelings of being intimidated or overwhelmed.
  4. Recognize the importance of this issue and be sensitive to it.
  5. Provide training for school personnel in IEP-related issues.
  6. Committee chairs must set a positive and welcoming tone in their opening remarks and in contacts with the parent in advance.
  7. Provide round table seating in a comfortable setting.
  8. Provide an advocate or support person for the parent.
  9. Parents will feel more empowered if they know in advance what will be discussed, so sending a draft of proposals and/or test results and reports can be helpful.

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10. Avoid having parents walk in on a staff huddle, when they may wonder what is being said about them or their child.
11. Build rapport with parents outside of IEP meetings (at other school activities).
12. Start meetings on a lighter note; see value in small talk and “getting to know you.”
13. Ask if they have any concerns; ask questions and let parents initiate topics of discussion.

11) **General classroom teachers often have a limited understanding of the IEP process** and may see children with special needs as a burden and intrusion in their classes. What can be done about this?

1. Get administrators to support training in IEP-related issues, perhaps using local expertise, such as psychologists, special ed directors, ESC staff, parent panels.
2. Give information about disabilities and what can be done, especially for new teachers so they know what to expect and what resources are available.
3. Provide a mentoring program and role modeling, especially for new staff.
4. Encourage the use of ESC (service center) resources, specialists, and consultants.
5. Make such training convenient and easily available.
6. Provide more teachers’ aides to assist teachers with the responsibilities.
7. Survey teachers about their feelings and provide opportunities for dialogue.
8. Provide training in how to make good use of supports, such as classroom aides and peer buddies.

12) **IEP meetings often lack a clear structure** and clarity about such basic formalities as introductions, objectives, and available time are often lacking. Tangents and digressions are common. How can we show that this is not true at our school?

1. Have a stated and shared purpose, set ground rules, and use a written agenda.
2. Be sure introductions are made of all participants and their roles.
3. Model professionalism, focus, and efficient use of time.
4. Chairpersons must be assertive in keeping the group on task but not rushed.
5. Intervene as needed when others lose focus or stray from ground rules.
6. Provide training for all those who participate in IEP meetings – in how to run an efficient meeting, and in conflict prevention and resolution.
7. Get next year’s teachers involved (those who will teach the child next school year).