

Individualized Education Programs: Frequently Asked Questions about the IEP

IEP and IDEA are among the many acronyms in the world of Special Education. Together, they grant your child certain rights and spell out a plan to turn them into reality.

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act -- is the set of federal laws that governs how schools approach the special needs of its students. Part of the package is the IEP, or Individualized Education Program. The IEP is the result of parents, teachers and administrators working together at least once a year to plan, in detail and in writing, how they'll approach the child's education.

The IEP meeting can be encouraging, intimidating, eye-opening and rewarding – all at the same time. Here are answers to some frequently asked questions to guide you through the process.

Q. What should I do to prepare for the IEP meeting?

Forethought and organization are great assets in the IEP process. You can bet that your school district has a file on your child, and that someone has given some pre-meeting thought to the desired outcome. As a parent or guardian, you should do the same. Maintain a binder or folder of your child's past IEPs; written evaluations from doctors, therapists, and other service providers; and anything else that makes a concrete statement of your child's needs and abilities.

If you've been through the IEP process already, pull out a copy of that form to refresh your memory about the topics it covers, and review past goals while considering whether progress has been made. If you're new to IEPs, ask your district for a blank copy of the form that will be used during the meeting, and give each component careful thought well in advance of the meeting. Sections of the IEP form address various aspects of an education plan, such as communication needs and assistive technology; instructional materials and strategies; short-term objectives and evaluation criteria; inclusion in standardized testing.

With the IEP form in hand, you can write down some notes to describe what you think your child's education plan should be for the coming school year.

Q. Who will be at the IEP meeting?

Aside from the child's parents/guardians, the IEP meeting will include the child's special education teacher and maybe the regular education teacher; the case manager charged with coordinating the plan; a service specialist; and other school personnel. This group of district representatives is referred to as the Child Study Team.

For a student who participates in a regular education environment – or for whom that is a near-at-hand goal – the IEP team must include a regular education teacher. (That teacher isn't required to take part in IEP discussions that don't involve regular education.)

Q. Can I invite someone from outside the school district to my child's IEP meeting?

You can invite pertinent advocates to the IEP meeting, or bring a written statement or evaluation from them. Likely candidates include your child's doctor, a tutor or therapist not connected to the school, or someone who has evaluated your child independently from the school. You may consider inviting a specialist from the class or program that you want your child to attend as part of his or her IEP. While an attorney may accompany you to the IEP meeting, one typically does not attend. As a courtesy, let the district know who plans to attend on your child's behalf.

Q. Do I have to agree with what the Child Study Team writes in the IEP?

With so many parties coming together to create an IEP, it's possible that everyone won't completely agree. As the parent or guardian, your job is to evaluate each aspect of the IEP and determine whether the whole package fits the needs of the child.

Expect the district to come to the meeting with a plan already sketched out. However, the law gives parents an equal role in the process – don't feel like you can't initiate changes. Be ready with your organized research and your thought-out reasoning. Concentrate on one aspect of the IEP at a time. Be prepared to ask that the meeting be continued at another time if you feel it will help you gather more supportive materials, and resist the urge to sign off on an IEP just because doing so will end the tedious meeting.

Q. How do I protest an IEP?

If discussions at an IEP meeting fail to provide your child what you think he or she should have, you have several options. Consider mediation, which requires an independent person working with both sides to reach a common course of action. More intense would be a due process hearing, during which an impartial judge heard from each side before deciding a solution for them. Parents can also file a complaint with the state education agency, claiming the district is violating a part of IDEA. Resist a suggestion during the IEP meeting that there be a "trial period" of either a short-term change or a short-term status quo. While the plan might call for a near-future evaluation of progress, it makes change even harder.

A lawyer can help you through any part of the IEP process. Parent organizations can also be a tremendous source of inspiration, information and support.

Q. Should my child be part of the IEP?

A student can be involved in his or her own IEP meeting. In fact, a student approaching transition to post-secondary education or a job program should be a key voice in the process. Parents of a younger child will want to consider how much that child can contribute to the IEP and whether giving him or her a seat at the table might be detrimental.

Q. What if I feel the IEP plan is not being followed midway through the school year?

You should be given a copy of the IEP after the meeting. While the IEP team must review the plan at least once a year, you should not relegate it to a dusty shelf during that time. Since the law requires regular progress reports, you can determine whether your child's needs are being met without waiting for the next annually mandated IEP. Either school personnel or parents can request an IEP meeting at any time to evaluate and/or revise the plan. You should do take this action if your child is not making progress toward his or her goals, or the goals were met earlier than anticipated.