

The Legal Center for People
with Disabilities and Older People



Colorado's Protection & Advocacy System

Avoiding Stormy IEP Meetings

By
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Principal Fife was the captain of the good ship HMS Middle School. He knew his mission—keep the school ship shape, hatches battened down, and sailing straight. Through twenty years serving in her majesty's local education agency he'd successfully weathered the storms sent his way. Why then had the IEP meeting he just chaired been such a disaster? He was assigned to act as the designee for the Director of Special Education and, though he had attended many IEP meetings, this was the first time he scheduled, planned, and chaired an IEP meeting for a student with a disability.

He thought he'd run a tight meeting. He invited only the essential professionals. To keep the meeting on time as well as nonadversarial, he kept discussion to a minimum and discouraged the questioning of the

professionals. After all, each professional was an expert in their area of service provision, and their recommendations shouldn't be second guessed by others. Thanks to him the meeting was completed in ninety minutes (thirty minutes past the one hour he had announced at the outset as the time allotted for the meeting). So, what was the deal? Why did the parents leave angry and threatening to see a lawyer?

In the above scenario Principal Fife wanted to have a productive Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meeting. He wanted to develop a good program for the student, but his emphasis on efficiency sacrificed quality and unnecessarily angered the student's parents. Sure, there are going to be disagreements in IEP meetings. Educational programming is not an exact science. You should

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expect that, at times, parents will disagree with the recommendations of the educational professionals, and educational professionals will disagree with one another. But proactively seeking parent input in the IEP process can help you avoid unnecessary disagreements and help make those disagreements that may be necessary less disagreeable.

Eight Tips for Planning and Chairing an IEP Meeting

1. Schedule the meeting at a time reasonably convenient for the parents. The IDEA requires this and it makes good sense. Let the parents know in writing when the meeting is scheduled and make sure they know they can reschedule for another time and who to contact if they wish to reschedule. Then, if they ask, reschedule. You do not want parents to call the wrong person and be told the date is set, etched in stone, and cannot be changed.
2. Tell the parents, in writing, who the school district is inviting to the IEP meeting and what their role is. The parent may not know what role each professional plays in their child's life. You don't need to provide a biography of

each IEP team member, but include their title and be sure the parents know they can find out more information if they wish.

3. Make sure all of the right people are invited to the IEP meeting. For example, if the student will be transitioning from elementary school to middle school next year, it might be wise for you to include some of the middle school teachers in this year's IEP. Or, if you expect a discussion regarding placing the student in a private or nondistrict program, make sure appropriate staff from that program attend the meeting to describe the program and answer questions. Parents and other professionals cannot make a decision about a placement in a vacuum.
4. Ask the parents if they would like other individuals invited to the meeting. The IDEA requires that "not less than one of the student's regular education teachers" attend the meeting, but students in middle school and high school often have more than one regular education teacher. The parent may want to have more than one regular education teacher. The IDEA also allows parents or school personnel to include on

the IEP team other individuals who have knowledge or expertise about the child's special needs. For example, the child may be seeing a therapist privately, and the parent may want that individual invited to the meeting. When it comes to IEP meetings more is not necessarily merrier, but too few is clearly not enough.

5. Do not set a time limit for the meeting. Try to schedule sufficient time, but if the IEP is not completed in that time, schedule another meeting to complete the IEP. Be sure that the parents and other professionals know that this IEP will not be rushed to completion.
6. Facilitate open discussion among all members of the IEP team. Encourage parents to ask questions of the professionals and the professionals to ask questions of the parents and each other.
7. Translate professional mumbo jumbo. Break down education speak so that all team members understand what is being said.
8. Remember whose child it is. Listen to the parents and treat them as you wish to be treated: as a professional. Parents are

members of the team. While school professionals want what's best for the child, they are not the parents. The professionals know the child as their student while at school and during the child's school career. But the parents will be the child's parents for life.

Using these tips will tell parents that you and the other educators in the IEP meeting really want what is best for their child and value the parents' input. If parents think that you are not open to their ideas, they can become frustrated and angry. Refusing to reschedule meetings or to invite individuals that the parents would like at the meeting sends a message that you don't really care. Since you do care, don't send that message. Also, listening to the parents, having the right people at the meeting, and facilitating open discussion will help ensure that a good plan is developed. There will be disagreements in IEP meetings. That's OK. There are times when IEP meetings may become rancorous and adversarial. That's OK too. But you don't want the meeting to become needlessly adversarial because you didn't seek parent input into putting the IEP team together and you didn't respectfully listen to the parents' concerns.

About the Author

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