



The Individualized Education Program (IEP)

What is an IEP?

Each child in public school who receives special education and related services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a set of goals for a student, and a plan for how they will be met. An IEP must be designed specifically for a student and must be a truly individualized document that keeps the child's personal characteristics and needs in mind. The IEP gives teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) the chance to work together to improve the educational experience and result for children with disabilities. The IEP is created as part of an overall process that aims to identify children in need and connect them with the appropriate services and accommodations to improve educational results.

Who Writes the IEP?

By law, certain people need to be involved in writing an IEP. These people work together as a team to write the IEP, which must be done within 30 calendar days of deciding that a child is eligible for special education and related services. Each team member brings important information to the IEP meeting that adds to the team's understanding of the child and what services he or she might need.

An IEP meeting includes:

- Parents
- Regular Education Teacher(s) (at least one, if the child is participating in the regular education environment)
- Special Education Teacher(s) or provider
- An individual who can interpret the child's evaluation results
- An individual representing the school system
- The student (as appropriate)

The IEP team may also include additional individuals with knowledge or special expertise about the child. These people can be invited to participate on the team by parents or the school system. For example, a parent can invite an advocate who knows the child, a professional with special expertise about the child and his or her disability, or others who can talk about the child's strengths and/or needs. The school system may invite one or more individuals who can offer special expertise or knowledge about the child, such as a related services professional (an occupational or physical therapist, an adaptive physical education provider, a psychologist, or a speech-language pathologist) who can contribute some information about the child's strengths and weaknesses.

When an IEP is being written for a student with disabilities that is going to be entering adult life, the team will also need to include a representative from a transition service agency. This person can help explain what types of options are available to the student after they leave school, and also explain how they can prepare while they are still in school. Transition planning begins when the child is 14, and is updated annually.

How is an IEP Written?

To decide what special education and related services the student will benefit from the most, the IEP team will usually start by looking at the child's evaluation results, such as classroom tests, individual tests given to establish the student's eligibility, and observations by teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, related services providers, administrators, and others. All of this information tells how the student is currently doing in school, which helps the team write goals to address areas of need or weakness.

The IEP team must also discuss some specific things about the student:

- the child's strengths;
- the parent's ideas for enhancing their child's education;
- the results of the initial evaluations or the most recent evaluations; and
- the academic, developmental and functional needs of the child.

In addition, the IEP team also needs to consider other special factors such as:

- Behavior that interferes with the student's and the learning of others
- Limited proficiency in English
- Blindness or visual impairment
- Communication Needs
- Deafness or hearing impairment
- Need for assistive technology devices or services

All of this information helps the IEP team to think about and plan how to help the student make progress towards annual goals, how the student can be involved in and progress in the regular curriculum, how the student can participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities, and how the student can be educated with and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children. The IEP is written with all of these things in mind, and includes the services and supports that the school will provide for the child to be most successful.

Where Will My Child Be Placed?

In addition to writing goals and deciding how they will be met, the IEP team must also decide where the IEP will be carried out. The placement decision is made by a group of people, including the parents and others who know the child, what the evaluation results mean, and what types of placements are appropriate. The child's placement is determined at least annually; is based on the child's IEP, and is as close as possible to the child's home. The parents have the right to be members of the group that decides the educational placement of the child.

Placement decisions must be made according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) "least restrictive environment" (LRE) requirements. These requirements state that as much as is appropriate, children with disabilities must be educated with children who do not have disabilities. The law also states that: "special classes, separate schools, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment shall occur only if the nature or severity of the child's disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily."

Depending on the needs of the child, his or her IEP may be carried out the regular class (with extra aids and services, as needed), in a special education classroom (where every student in the class is receiving special education services for some or all of the day), a public or private Separate Day School (where a student with a disability receives special education and supportive services greater than 50 percent of the day in school), at home, in a hospital or institution, or in another setting.

Then what?

When the IEP has been written, parents must receive a copy at no cost to themselves. It is also important that everyone who will be involved with implementing the IEP also have access to the document, including the regular education teacher(s), the special education teacher(s), the related service provider(s), and any other service provider who will be responsible for a part of the child's education. Everyone needs to know what his or her specific role is for carrying out the child's IEP. This includes the special accommodations, modifications, and supports that child must receive, according to the IEP.

How Can I Help Things Go Smoothly?

Once the IEP is written, the child can be provided with the special education and related services that are listed in the IEP. While every IEP is different, there are some things that parents and school staff can do to make the process go more smoothly.

- Every person should know and understand his or her responsibilities for carrying out the IEP.
- Continue to work as a team; keep track of progress and events that might help the team make decisions or changes.
- Keep the lines of communication between home and school open.
- Designate a person that is in charge of coordinating and monitoring the services the student receives to be sure that things are going according to plan.

Can the IEP Be Changed?

The IEP team must review the child's IEP at least once a year. One reason for this review is to see whether a child is meeting his or her annual goals. The team must revise the IEP as necessary to address:

- the child's progress or lack of expected progress toward the annual goals and in the general curriculum;
- information gathered through any reevaluation of the child;
- information about the child that the parents share;
- information about the child that the school shares;
- the child's anticipated needs; or
- other concerns.

Although the IEP team is required to review the IEP at least once a year, the team can actually review and revise the IEP more often. Either the parents or the school can ask to hold an IEP meeting to revise the child's IEP. Additionally, parents and the school may agree not to convene an IEP meeting to make changes to a child's IEP between annual IEP reviews. They may choose to develop a written document to amend or modify the child's current IEP. The parent must be provided with written notice.

What If Parents Don't Agree With the IEP?

There may be times when parents don't agree with the school's recommendations about their child's education. The law states that parents have the right to challenge decisions about their child's eligibility, evaluation, placement, and the services that the school provides.

If parents disagree with the school's actions, they can do the following:

- Try to reach an agreement by talking with school officials about their concerns.
- Ask for mediation by an individual who is not involved in the disagreement.
- Ask for Due Process, a hearing where the parents and school personnel appear before an impartial hearing officer and present their sides of the story so that the hearing officer can decide how to solve the problem.
- File a complaint with the state education agency stating why part of IDEA they believe the school has violated.

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