Student-led IEPs

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Students with disabilities are often left with little understanding about their own disabilities. Not only are they sometimes unaware about their own disability, but they are often excluded from the process of developing their own academic plan on how to overcome their disability.

When schools provide students with disabilities the guidance of planning their education through a mandated Individual Education Program (IEP), the benefits are substantial. Students with disabilities that are taught to lead their IEP meeting is one way for them to become better self-advocates. They learn to apply skills of self-determination, goal-setting, and self-evaluation that can be applied beyond high school.

**WHAT ARE STUDENT-LED IEP’S?**

**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), also known as Public Law 94-142 became a landmark legislation that required a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities (Huelett, 2009, p.29). Congress has made numerous reauthorizations throughout the years to this legislation. One of these reauthorizations occurred in 1990 when the title of EHA was changed to “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (IDEA) which is how it is commonly referred to as today (Huelett, 2009, p. 27). IDEA has become the foundation for special education in the United States by requiring a specifically designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.” IDEA regulations define “specially designed instruction” as “adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the
IDEA’s support structure is based on six elements. These elements include the individualized educational program (IEP), the guarantee of a free appropriate public education (FAPE), the requirement of education in the least restrictive environment (LRE), appropriate evaluation, active participation of parent and student in the educational mission, and procedural safeguards for all participants (Huelett, 2009, p. 31). IEPs and active participation of parent and student in the educational mission are the most relevant elements when discussing student-led IEPs.

**What is an IEP?**

An IEP is the cornerstone for educational planning and implementation under IDEA. It is a written statement for those eligible for services under this law. It is described as a management tool for ensuring that the educational design for the student is appropriate to his or her special needs and that services are delivered and monitored. An IEP team is formed to develop the plan and the team considers “the strengths of the child, the concerns of parents, and the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child” (Huelett, 2009, p.31). Formal meetings are conducted to discuss and develop the IEP.

Prior to the 1997 amendments, students were not required to participate in the IEP development process. Decisions were left to parents and educators to make on the child’s behalf. Students were uninformed about their disabilities, which led to denial, low-self esteem, and limited academic success (Huelett, 2009, p.152).
In 1997, the amendments strengthened student involvement by requiring the student with the disability to be invited to his or her IEP meeting if the purpose was to plan transition services. This was seen to give the student an opportunity to have input in the type of services he or she needed to support their current and future educational and career goals. The amendments also requires ensuring that a coordinated set of transition activities are based on student needs, taking into account the student’s preferences and interests (Huelett, 2009, p. 152).

**What is a Student-Led IEP?**

A student-led IEP increases student responsibility and demonstrates the student taking ownership for their education. Student-led IEPs encourage self-determination in young people with disabilities. According to Myers and Eisenman (2005), self-determination “embraces cultural values of autonomy, choice, goal-directedness, and action, as well as the belief that acquiring these traits signals maturation” (p.52). As cited by Myers (2005), Martin and Marshall described self-determination as a process that includes the following:

- Knowing one’s strengths, weaknesses, and preferences
- Setting personal goals
- Making plans and taking action achieve goals
- Evaluating outcomes
- Adjusting one’s knowledge, goals, or plans accordingly (Myers, 2005, p.52)
WHY IT IS AN ISSUE?

Traditional IEP planning

Traditionally, the development of an IEP is largely created by special education teachers and other staff. The student’s initial involvement occurs during assessment where he or she only demonstrates what they are able or unable to do in front of educators, psychologists, medical staff, or other staff involved in the IEP development process.

Additionally, students are sometimes present at the actual IEP meeting where they are surrounded by the IEP team discussing their strengths and weaknesses. The student has little interaction with, little or no interest in, or little understanding about what is taking place during the meeting.

Parents are required to be present at IEP meetings. Their involvement ranges from being substantially engaged to being just as passive as their child. Involvement gets lost in complicated jargon and policies and they sometimes rely on IEP staff to figure things out because they are the so-called experts.

In a Virginia Department of Education documentary on student-led IEPs (2008), students expressed their feelings about lack of contributing to the IEP process. One student in elementary school stated that the meetings were “boring” and that he “didn’t have much to say” and was “just there to listen” (VDOE, 2008). Similarly, the mother of this child stated “In the past, we had been banging out what we want for him: What we think he should do, what his needs are” (VDOE, 2008). Even teachers have reported little confidence in students being involved in the IEP process. One teacher expressed, “Special Ed teachers as a whole have sheltered students. We did not want to use the
terminology around the students. We just told them that they learned differently” (VDOE, 2008).

**Students with Student-led IEP**

A student-led IEP is a way for students to become more involved in the IEP process. Most importantly, it teaches students with the disabilities how to take ownership in their own education, and to demonstrate that ownership in the IEP meeting. Self-determination and self-advocacy are by-products of student-led IEPs and substantially engage not only students, but parents and teachers as well.

In the research by Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) on student-led IEPs, teachers and students reported that students using this process knew more about their disabilities, legal rights, and appropriate accommodations than other students without disabilities. The research also showed that students increased their self-confidence, and the ability to advocate for themselves. Parental participation in the IEP meetings increased substantially. General and special educators were enthusiastic about the changes they observed in the students, even in follow-ups that occurred in implementing IEP goals (Mason et al, 18).

When preparing students to lead their IEP meetings, it can strengthen their involvement in transition planning (Mason et al, 2005, p.19). This includes evaluating and planning for employment, postsecondary education/training, residential, and recreation/leisure beyond high school. Research from Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2005) shows students gain confidence and communication skills through leading IEP meetings. Students who have
graduated say that because they practiced asking for accommodations and talking to others about their disability, they find it easier to apply self-advocacy skills in college or on the job (Mason et al, 2005, p. 22).

**HOW TO DO A STUDENT-LED IEP**

Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2005) suggest preparing students to lead their IEP meeting in a series of five to six sessions. Each session varies from 25 to 45 minutes. They are designed best to work with students with mild to moderate disabilities in secondary schools, but can work with other levels and types of disabilities, if modified appropriately (Mason et al, 2005, p. 19). Research shows that the process works with developmentally disabled students and those with limited communicative skills. It also has shown to work for students as young as six years old. The responsibility of the student just decreases with age and the vocabulary of the planning/meetings become different. The concept of leadership however is the same (Mason, 2005, p.22)

A good way to begin student-led IEPs is to start with one, or a few students, in a pilot program. Select students that are natural leaders and have good communication skills; the teacher should consider allies, such as other teachers. The teacher will also want to talk to parents and administrators to gain support. When talking to students and parents, the teacher should use language that they can understand (Mason et al, 2005 p. 22).

There are three critical keys to success that Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2005) stated in their report. They are 1) “use language in wording goals and objectives that students can understand, 2) make sure you have student
buy-in, and 3) find adequate time not only to prepare for the meeting, but to monitor progress” (Mason et al, p. 22).

The following are recommendations based on research on how to structure the sessions for students with disabilities:

**Session 1**
During the first session, teachers introduce information on IDEA to the student. This session includes informing the students of their rights to an IEP, a transition plan, and other rights such as accommodations. Teachers may want to consider covering this information with a group of six to eight students and at the beginning of every school year (Mason et. al, 2005, p.19). Teachers should describe the law in way that is easily understood to the student is extremely important. Students and teachers must also discuss needs and concerns in each class (Mason et al., 2005, p. 20).

Students also start preparing invitations to the eventual IEP meeting. Students can distribute these invitations to those in the IEP meeting (Mason et. al, 2005, p.20). One example of a student creating invitations involves a special education teacher working with a 17-year-old student with a cognitive disability in a functional-skills high school program. The student an interest in computers, so the teacher used a computer form to create invitations for the other participants. The interest of the computer eventually evolved into a way for the student to share transition goals during his meeting using pictures gathered from his parents (Myers, 2005, p.56).
**Session 2**

For students in their first IEP meeting, students and teachers discuss assessment information. They will also discuss career interest inventories and transition needs. For those students who have a current IEP, students and teachers read sections of the IEP together. They highlight sections where the student agrees and disagrees, and place check marks next to goals the student has achieved. Quarterly reports can be used as a reference tool. For both initial and current IEPs, the student and teacher should consider post-school preferences and draft transition goals (Mason et. al, 2005, p. 20).

In the case of the 17-year old male student with a cognitive disability, the teacher decided to focus on the transition goals of the IEP; an area she thought the student would most likely understand. She began by taking an informal assessment of his strengths, and discussed how he best liked to learn. Both the student and teacher then looked at his previous IEP (Myers, 2005, p.56).

**Session 3**

Prior to the third session, students contact their teachers and parents to request their input concerning individual goals. The students ask the parents and teachers if their goals been met in the current IEP, and obtain recommendations for areas of concern or future goals. Students prepare written note or email asking for this information. The teachers return notes-emails to student’s IEP manager. The student and teacher together make and modify lists of strengths and needs according to each subject. New goals and benchmarks are developed from teachers’ input (Mason et. al, 2005, p.20).
In one case study of a teacher starting the process with a ninth-grade female with mild cognitive disabilities, the student completed a self-appraisal of her strengths and weaknesses and matched it to information collected from other teachers who knew her. From this information, the student created relevant goals in math relating to her desire to count money faster. The student also chose accommodations she thought would help her most, and rejected the ones she thought would not be beneficial (Myers, 2005, p.55).

In another case study involving a seventh grade, 12 year-old female with learning disabilities, the teacher and student obtained a copy of course offerings from the local high school, and mapped out a tentative plan for courses the student could take to prepare for a desired career in either teaching or nursing. This process involved setting additional goals of the student leaving the self-contained classroom and attending a team-taught science course (Myers, 2005, p.57).

Session 4 and 5

Prior to session four, the special education teacher prepares a draft of the district’s IEP form. The draft includes possible goals for the coming year. The student and teacher will review proposed goals, and the effectiveness of accommodations are currently in use or that are proposed. The student will use the draft IEP to practice his/her presentation for the IEP meeting. Other students who have been in a student-led meeting can model how to lead the meeting (Mason et. al, 2005, p.20).
Session 6
A sixth session may be considered for additional discussion and practice.

An option for teachers would be to videotape a rehearsal, play it back for the student, and then discuss how to make improvements (Mason et. al, 2005, p.20).

Teachers and students make notes on index cards to assist students on remembering what to say during meetings (Myers, 2005, p.56).

The IEP Meeting
During the IEP meeting, it is important to keep the focus on what the student can perform. There may be times when the student struggles explaining what they have rehearsed because of complications with the subject, or nervousness. For those areas in which the student needs support, the teacher should take the time to help clarify what the student is trying to say.

It is also important to have a backup plan if something unexpected happens. Prior to the meeting, the student should be made aware that if something unexpected happens, it is okay, and that the teacher will be there to support them. The IEP manager should look for signs of conflict or struggles that may happen throughout the meeting. The IEP manager and student may want to work out a secret signal, prior to the meeting, they can use should they struggle.

After the meeting, it is imperative the student be praised regardless of any mistakes made. The student may focus the mistakes rather than on the accomplishments. The teacher should remind them of what they achieved rather than missed opportunities. If it is appropriate, encourage them to talk with their families afterwards (McGahee et al, 33).
**Disadvantages**

Though the benefits of student-led IEPs far outweigh the disadvantages, one of the biggest barriers is finding the time to practice for meetings. Time availability for both the teachers and students is limited during the school day. Teachers experimenting with student-led IEPs have said that they needed to make time for conversations with their students to develop rapport, gather information, and encourage in them confidence to try new leadership and self-advocacy roles. Other teachers needed time to adapt lessons and materials for students who had significant disabilities, or who had little background knowledge about their disabilities or educational options (Myers, 2005, p. 58).

Recommendations are needed from educational leaders on this issue. Some ideas so far include a pull-out or resource course, or even one-credit courses for self-advocacy. Some educators may find time before or after school, or during lunch periods (Mason et. al, 2005, p.22). These times, however, are often inconvenient or too critical to forfeit. Because of these time constraints, it is critical that planning sessions be well structured and efficient.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the complications of beginning student-led IEPs, the benefits will be great in the long term for students with disabilities. Not only will students benefit, but the IEP team, the school, and the community prospers from students taking more ownership in their education. Students developing their own IEPs and leading their own IEP meetings provides valuable opportunities for self-determination and self-advocacy. These skills will help students while they are in school, and beyond.
References


The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and VDOE’s Training and Technical Assistance Centers. (2008). *I’m Determined: Student Involvement in the IEP [DVD]*.