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It's My Life! Considering the Student-Directed IEP Process (Part One of Two-Part Series)

By Julie Maier, CDBS Educational Specialist

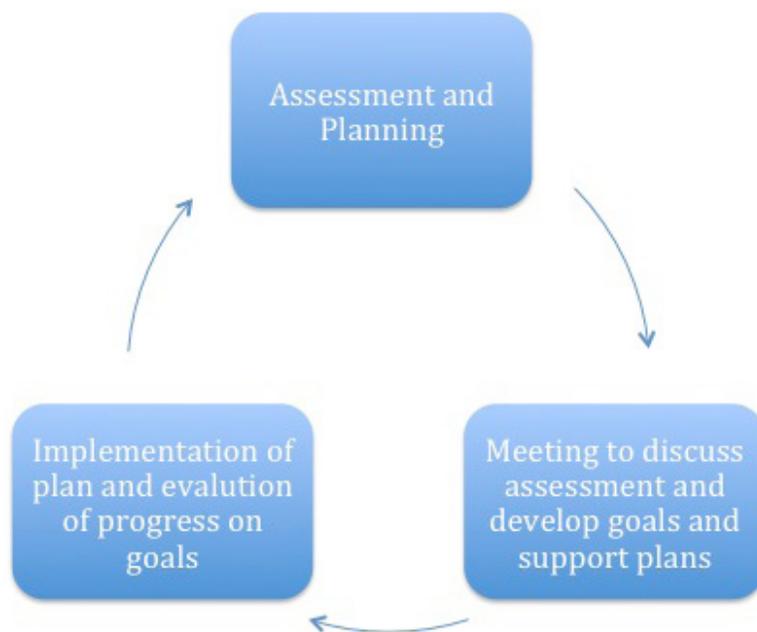
“Self-led IEPs amplify the volume of the traditional IEP process. IEPs can often feel clinical and negative. Student-directed IEPs ensure the purpose of the IEP, the student’s hopes, dreams, and goals, remain the focus of the meeting.” – Alyson Furnback, Transition Program Teacher, San Francisco Unified School District

Summary: IDEA requires that students are involved in their *individualized education plans* (IEPs) beginning at the age of 17, a year before the student reaches age of majority (18 years of age), and are legally responsible for their IEP at the age of 18 unless they are otherwise conserved. Following a student-directed IEP process is a meaningful and effective way to prepare students for this important adult role. This student-centered process promotes and teaches many of the relevant self-determination and self-advocacy skills that have been identified as high-priority post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. For students to be meaningfully involved in the development of their IEP plans they need to be aware, informed, and allowed to participate, to the greatest extent possible, in all phases of the process—planning and assessment; participation in the meeting and development of goals and identification of supports and services; and consistent evaluation of progress on those goals and effectiveness of supports and accommodations. Students will require varying levels of instruction, support, and feedback from their teachers, support staff and families in order to successfully direct this IEP process.

An essential goal of education for all students is the skill development in the areas of personal responsibility, citizenship, self-determination and self-advocacy. For more than two decades many people, including myself, have believed that these are increasingly important and high-priority areas to address for students receiving special education services. When students graduate high school or complete the transition phase of their education we should hope that they have developed a plan and goals for their lives as adults and can effectively advocate for themselves. I have been fortunate to observe and learn from many special education support teachers in local high school and transition programs as they have implemented dynamic curriculum and relevant activities to promote and support the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills, including the use of a student-directed IEP process for all of their students.

Many of us probably have the view of an IEP as a meeting held once a year in which the family, and sometimes the student, are informed of assessment reports, student progress on past goals, and the school team's plans for the student's program for the next year. In these meetings the student is often not present, or if present does not contribute or participate much in the discussion of the assessments and goals, nor in the decisions about appropriate services, supports, and accommodations. Yet, the IEP is much more than that and IDEA never intended it to be viewed as simply an annual administrative meeting to discuss a student and their progress. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a cyclical process that continues each year that a student is identified as needing these services and supports. The IEP process involves three main phases:

- 1) assessment of a student's skills, interests, present performance levels and support needs and a preliminary discussion of potential educational goals for the upcoming year;
- 2) a collaborative meeting between the student, their family, and educators and relevant related service providers with expertise in the areas of the student's educational and support needs to discuss the results of assessments and identify high-priority, meaningful goals for the upcoming year; and
- 3) implementation of the plan and goals agreed upon at the meeting and continual evaluation of the student's progress toward meeting the goals and the effectiveness of the identified supports.



It is an ongoing, dynamic process and within each phase of the process there are multiple ways for a student to take responsibility and direct the IEP.

Typically, the actual work and decision-making involved all three of these phases is completed by the education professionals and sometimes parents. Often the student remains unaware of the assessment results, educational goals, and progress on goals.

In a student-directed IEP process, the student is involved in each phase as much as possible. This

level of involvement requires specific instruction, interactive discussions, selection of necessary accommodations and supports, and consistent feedback and encouragement from educators and families. You may have heard the terms, "student-led IEP meeting" or "self-led IEP" used interchangeably with "student-directed IEP". I prefer to use the term "student-directed IEP" as it encompasses more than just the meeting and it also is more inclusive to students that do not have the skills or experience to truly "lead" the entire process. "Student-directed" infers that the student's involvement is as full and meaningful as possible for that individual student.

The skills and knowledge necessary to fully participate in all aspects of the three IEP phases may be easier to imagine for a student with more academic and expressive language skills. However students who are more impacted by their sensory losses or other physical or intellectual disabilities can certainly participate in the student-directed IEP process in meaningful ways with direct instruction, appropriate supports, adaptations, and accommodations, and a supportive team behind them. The key here is to identify ways in which the student can share personal information and goals for their future, make meaningful choices, state preferences, and agree or disagree with goals and plans that other team members are suggesting. Even a student who can respond to yes/no questions or can share information with others by selecting a choice from a field of two or more options using photos, picture symbols, or tactile objects of preferred people, activities, places, and things is helping to direct their IEP plan.

One book I consistently refer to when sharing information on Student-directed IEPs is “*Getting the Most Out of IEPs: An Educator’s Guide to the Student-Directed Approach*” edited by Colleen Thoma and Paul Wehman. The contributors in this book provide wonderful tips and examples of ways to involve students with a wide range of skills and support needs in each phase of the IEP process. In this book the authors stress that once you view the IEP as a process rather than just an annual two-hour meeting, then you can easily identify multiple ways for any student to direct their IEP to some extent. The opportunities for student involvement include:

- Describing strengths, needs, legal rights, and present levels of performance
- Evaluating progress, weighing alternative goals, and engaging in goal-setting and goal-attainment activities
- Preparing for a formal presentation and advocating for one’s self in a formal setting
- Communicating preferences and interests
- Accepting responsibility for areas where improvement is needed
- Participating in discussions regarding post-school plans and needs
- Determining accommodation needs and securing appropriate accommodations. (Konrad & Test, 2004)

TEACHERS’ THOUGHTS

My students participate in their IEPs, creating the PowerPoint presentations as much as possible, whether it be giving them the different slide titles and saying ‘go for it’ or having the students choose pictures of themselves/take pictures, write about their favorite things about themselves or interests, etc. Basically they participate in the preparation process as much they are able. As for the meeting, the students “lead the meeting”. It looks different for everyone but they can read the entire slides, just the titles, or click through the PowerPoint and point.
~ Dana Zimpelmann, high school teacher

For running student led IEPs, developing a template of agenda questions that cover the components of the IEP and are written in the first person, for example “My strengths are _____,” can help teachers. With regards to goal monitoring, the more you involve students in the process of goal monitoring, the more successful your outcomes will be.
~ Alyson Furnback, transition teacher

A student-led IEP doesn’t really mean that the student is there to conduct all the meeting or with only some support from me. It means that the student is engaged in the planning and conducting the meeting to the best of their ability. Sometimes it could be that the student is only pushing buttons on the computer. I once had a student who could only push an adapted big red bottom to move through slides of the presentation of the meeting. However, that is—for her—still a form of leading an IEP.
~ Heidi Seretan, transition teacher

Another important reason for considering the student-directed IEP approach is the distinct shift of the focus to the student. This is clearly a student-centered process and, as with most child or student-centered processes, it highlights the student's interests, strengths, skills, goals and hopes for the future. It is another effective way to ensure that the educational plans which the team develops is focused on the student's skills and capacities and identification of services and supports that will enable to the student to meet meaningful goals that are a high-priority for the student and their family. The teachers and support staff with whom I have worked report increased involvement and motivation of students, family members and other team members when a student-directed IEP approach is used. Evidence-based research has also documented that parents and students participate more and general education teachers learn more about the student's preferences, strengths and challenges when this process is employed (Martin et al., 2006).

Dana Zimpelmann, a high school teacher in San Francisco Unified School District who uses a student-directed IEP approach with all of the students she supports, shared these thoughts:

I personally think that student-led IEP meetings, especially for students with significant disabilities, not only speak to student involvement in their education, goals, etc., but also show their unique capacities. Oftentimes I feel that we talk about students in their IEP meetings as if they are some kind of a subject that we run tests and trials on and we forget that they are actually individuals that we all care about. Furthermore, especially in high school, we stress the ideas of self-advocacy, determination, and responsibility. Part of practicing what we as educators, parents, and service providers preach is allowing students to have a say in their education and there is no better way to do that than involving them in the IEP meeting and writing process.

It can be helpful to consider the level of a student involvement as a continuum from some participation that is highly supported to full participation with little or no support with a lot of variations in between. No student will begin at the far end of the continuum of full participation, but with specific instruction, proper accommodations, and initial support and encouragement many more students can achieve this than we may think possible. Many students will fall somewhere in the middle and will need adaptations and accommodations and support to first learn more about the IEP process and learn ways to share information about themselves and goals and supports they would like to select for the next year. For the students who will need continued higher levels of support and adaptations to meaningfully participate, it is still worthwhile for them to be part of this process in order to increase their awareness of the goals they are working on, keep the team focused on the unique skills, strengths, interests, and support needs of this student, and to promote the student's ability to self-advocate in as many situations as possible. For some students this may be as simple to agreeing that a social greeting goal would help them meet more people or sharing that visual schedules and checklists help them complete a job by showing the team a video using such accommodations.

Many might think that participation in a student-directed IEP is a structure only used in high school and transition programs. However, elementary and middle school students can participate in some aspects of this process that can help prepare them for more active involvement in the process when they are in high school. When I was an elementary school teacher, during preparation for a student's IEP meeting I assisted my students to review their

past goals and self-evaluate both their progress and their interest in continuing any goals. We also discussed what skills they wanted to learn in the next year and what sorts of things helped them to learn new skills. Finally, I asked them what they wanted me to tell everyone at the IEP meeting. With some students I needed to gather this assessment information from the students by offering yes/no choices, offering choices from a group of photos, or recording the responses the students offered on their AAC devices. Due to their ages, my students did not attend their meetings, but they participated in Person-Centered Planning meetings and friendship groups where they were able to identify their strengths, support needs, and dreams and goals for the next year or the future with peers and other important people in their lives. Teaching students about the IEP process and the importance of selecting meaningful goals and then measuring progress toward meeting those goals is an important building block for greater participation in the process when they enter secondary schools.

First Steps

Planning: If you do feel like you would like to move forward this approach, you will first need to come up with a plan for how you will implement this process with the realization that your implementation of this plan will grow and improve over time. There are many resources for teaching students about the IEP process that are available commercially or on the Internet (see the “Recommended Resources” section at the end of this article). These can be helpful as you develop your own lessons and information packets for students. Some teachers start out with a few students the first year and then expand. However, I have seen many teachers just dive in and begin to use this approach with all of the students they serve and individualizing how the material is presented and how each student participates.

Sharing Information with others: Another critical piece of implementing this process is providing information to the families of the students and any other team members about this new approach. It is important to remember that others may have no knowledge or experience with this level of student involvement and may not feel comfortable with the presence or increased involvement of the student. In those cases it is important to outline the reasons for using a student-directed approach and the expected outcomes of this approach.

Families will likely need information about this approach and why you have decided to use it. They may need assurance that this is not taking away their rights and responsibilities as their children’s advocates or their opportunities to provide important information regarding their children’s educational plan and goals. Finally, for students with more complex disabilities and support needs, the parents may need specific information about their child will be involved and participating in the IEP process.

Other team members will benefit from information prior to the meeting as well. Last spring during a discussion with a teacher of the visually impaired (TVI), I learned that a general education teacher was not comfortable with the presence of the middle school student with deaf-blindness at his IEP meeting. She was not aware he would be present and had not attended IEP meetings with students present before. Her discomfort seemed to stem from her feeling that she could not be candid with her report about this student’s areas of difficulty in her class and his need for some additional supports. She felt sensitive about talking about these concerns

and needs in front of the student. After hearing the teacher's concerns, the TVI was able to share with the teacher that it would have been okay to share her report since she also listed many of the student's strengths and the accommodations and supports which were working for this student. She expressed that this student needed to be aware of his areas of needs and take an active role part of determining what accommodations and supports could help. In this case, ensuring that everyone on the team was aware that the student would be present and participating and leading portions of his IEP meeting would have been helpful.

Some special education team members and administrators are initially uncomfortable with his new approach as well, perhaps because it can require more time to complete the meeting and a concern that all legally required aspects of the IEP meeting must be covered. The teachers I have observed make sure that the student knows the typical agenda and structure for an IEP meeting and include all major portions of the IEP meeting in the presentation the student creates for the meeting including: discussion of present levels of performance; review of progress on past goals; identification and development of new goals and method for measuring progress; and identification of appropriate accommodations, and supports and services. These teachers have also reported to me that once these team members have attended one student-directed IEP, they look forward to more. The meeting is the same, however the information and discussion are modified to allow for meaningful student involvement.

I hope this article sparked an interest in considering and learning more about the student-directed IEP process. I have witnessed how this process makes substantial changes in the lives of students and families, specifically a noticeable change in the students' self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-advocacy efforts and I cannot recommend this process highly enough. However, I think the strongest evidence I can provide of the promise of this approach is the testimonies of the people who consistently use this approach and I'd like to end the article with their thoughts.

Alyson Furnback, a transition teacher in San Francisco, noticed these changes once she implemented this approach,

The changes I have noticed in my program before and after running student led IEPs and involving students in their goal monitoring have been huge! Our program outcomes are so much more comprehensive and successful because we involve our students in the creation and implementation of their educational programs. My students understand that success is a process and not a product.

A transition-aged student shared,

I like to use my presentation when I am in my IEP meetings because it's all about me. I really like showing my pictures because everyone likes it and wait for them. I never did this in middle school, but we had a conversation about it and then in high school I started doing it. But this year is my last IEP because I am graduating and I am very excited for my meeting.

Another transition-age student explained,

I really like to use the PowerPoint presentation when I have my IEP and using the computer to hear my IEP. Before I came to this school I used to only sit down in my meetings and then they asked me to sign the paper at the end. Now, I like to be the one in charge of putting together the information and presenting it to everyone in the meeting. I am going to have my own computer soon.

Support staff from local transition program shared,

... (Student-directed IEPs) are important for the student understanding and making connection to what they do everyday in school. It gives meaning to why are they trying to learn travel training, job skills, certain specific IEP goals, etc. I see the student connecting what they do everyday at school with the experience of leading or actively participating in the information that goes into their IEP.

Another support staff member added,

...(the student-directed IEP process) makes the student feel proud and take ownership of what happens at school. I didn't know that not every school uses the student-directed IEP process. I thought this was a standard part of every high school and transition program.

Edith Arias, a parent of an adult son with vision impairments and intellectual disabilities, shared these thoughts with me.

As a parent I believe that the value of a student-directed meeting is to see my child able to do more than I thought possible. I see him with more potential when he is being part of directing his own meeting and giving out information, than when I am the one in charge of letting others know what I think is better for him. I see my son as a person capable of speaking for himself and making choices in his life. I always felt that I had to be the one making choices for him because he had disabilities. Now that I see him in charge of developing the content of the meeting and leading his meeting with help from the staff at his adult program, I can see him as an individual with strengths and abilities to make decisions.

He never before in his years at the school district (kindergarten to transition program) was able to lead his own IEP. The only exception was when he was about to exit his transition program at 21 years old and I was able to facilitate a Person Centered Planning meeting in which he was absolutely involved. He was able to answer all the questions ahead of time that others needed to answer about him. He was able to help put together a PowerPoint presentation with his own information and select pictures for it. In addition, the day of the meeting he was in control of switching from slide to slide and picking up sticky notes with answers from the attendees and putting them in a big piece of paper in the walls for his meeting. He was very excited and absorbed all the information because he was part of all the planning process and content.

After this meeting he kept using the phrase, "Since I am an adult now..." even though he had been legally an adult since he turned 18 years old a few years before. The meeting gave him the reassurance that he could take risks and decisions such as going to the corner market, walking to the library that was three blocks away from our house, using his bike around our block and more! As a mother, I was able to let go of my fear of what if something happens to him because I am not there with him. I let him take some of this risks (according to my perception) and he evolved into a even more confident individual able to make decisions and being around our community by himself as an adult.

Edith's adult son, Ulisess Arias, shared his thoughts as well.

I didn't like when I had to be in my IEP meetings and just sit and listen to everyone talk. It was long and boring. I like it better now that Annette [adult service provider] asks me to meet to talk about my meeting. During my meeting now, I help to set it up and I go make copies of papers when they need me to. I also like that I was told that I am the "quarterback" of my meeting. I am in control. I stand up and talk about the things that I am doing good.

Tips for Educators

- Share information with families. Plan a meeting and design an informational handout for parents about the student-directed IEP process and ways families can be involved and support their child.
- Use a self-determination curriculum to teach your students about their rights and the IEP process and ways to set goals and evaluate progress towards meeting goals.
- Plan individual sessions or small group lessons to prepare for IEP meetings and create evaluation systems with students to evaluate their progress.
- Create and teach students to use needed adaptations/ accommodations.
- Inform and share information about the rational and expected outcomes of student-directed IEPs with other team members so that they can support the students' participation and efforts.
- Carefully plan the meeting itself:
 - Make sure there is enough time for the student to share and others to respond and share their input.
 - Ensure student has maximum opportunities to participate, ask for feedback, asks questions, and offer their opinion.
 - Make sure student is comfortable presenting information. Support, don't force.
- Talk to other teachers and, if possible, try to observe a student-directed IEP.
- Plan one specific time each day when students evaluate their performance on goals and chart their progress on a checklist or self-evaluation data sheet.
- Involve younger students in gathering assessment information for meeting and identifying potential goals and self-evaluation of progress. Participation will increase, as they grow older.

Tips for Families

- Support your child's interest in and desire to participate in a student-directed IEP.
- If your child's team does not know about the student-directed IEP process, then inform them by sharing information about the student-directed IEP process with your child's teacher and other service providers.
- If you have questions about the process, meet with your child's teachers and share your questions/concerns and identify ways you can help and support your child within this process.
- Share information with your child's teacher(s) and other relevant service providers about your child's strengths, interests, preferred learning styles, ways of communicating, dreams and goals.
- Have discussions with your child about ways they are preparing for their IEP meeting and ask how you can support them at the meeting.
- Support your child at the meeting by using encouraging words and gestures and interpreting or clarifying what your child may be trying to express to others.
- Allow your child to make choices and have a voice in decisions about their goals and supports and services.
- Once the meeting is complete and goals are set, continue to ask your child to show you how they are evaluating their progress on meeting their goals.
- Talk to other families who have participated in this process and see what they have learned and tips they can offer you.

Please watch for Part 2 of this series in our next reSources e-zine. I will share specific topics, tools, and strategies you can use to prepare students to participate in assessment and drafting of goals, participation in the IEP meeting, and self-evaluation of their goals and progress.

Author's note: I wish to offer special thanks to Edith Arias, Alyson Furnback, Heidi Seretan, and Dana Zimpelmann for sharing so many great ideas and personal reflections about this student-directed IEP approach with me. These incredible educators are graduates of the SFSU Moderate-Severe Disabilities Program who have specialized in the education of students with deaf-blindness and we are very fortunate for their continued work in our local public schools. I also appreciated the perspectives that Ulisses Arias and the young adults and support staff from ACCESS Transition program in San Francisco contributed for this article.

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Thoma, C. & Wehman, P. (2010). *Getting the most out of IEPs: An educator's guide to the student-directed approach*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Recommended Resources:

Thoma, C. & Wehman, P. (2010). *Getting the most out of IEPs: An educator's guide to the student-directed approach*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.—Wonderful text and guide will include multiple examples and resources.

I'm Determined Project —Wonderful Internet resource for educators, families and youth on a variety of topics related to self-determination and self-advocacy. This project was developed by the Virginia Department of Education. It includes a variety of resources that teachers can use to organize student involvement in their IEP meetings, including lesson plans, templates, self-assessments, checklists, brochures, and PowerPoint Training slides. <http://www.imdetermined.org/>

IEP Involvement Tool from I'm Determined Project: Helpful tool for teaching and preparing students for the IEP process.

http://www.imdetermined.org/resources/detail/02_iep_involvement_tool

My Future My Plan.

This curriculum is designed to motivate and guide students with disabilities and their families as they begin early transition planning for life after high school. The curriculum package includes a videotape and discussion guide, a workbook for students, and a guide for family members and teachers. All materials are available in English and Spanish. <http://www.ncset.org/publications/mfmp.asp>

FYI Transition Self-determination Resources: This website includes a comprehensive list of many curriculum available to teach self-determination, self-advocacy, goal-setting, and IEP participation. The list includes a detailed description and contact list for finding or purchasing the curriculum. <http://www.fyitransition.com/Minicourses/selfdetermination/selfdetermination6.html>