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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](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>

# The Case for Wider Access to Braille in Schools

By Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

**Summary:** Students who do not have vision should have the same access to braille as children who are sighted have to print materials. Labeling familiar objects with braille and giving children access to basic braille books can be provided at little or no cost and does not require training in teaching braille or even previous knowledge of the braille alphabet.

Classrooms are full of access to print for students who have sight. From bulletin boards on the walls that surround the student desks to the print in picture books that are passed around small groups of students so that children can see the graphics and words, sighted students are constantly immersed in letters and words. Some students may choose to look at all of this print and study it over and over to try to make sense of what it means and to tie it to the letters and words that are part of their instructional activities. Conversely, some students might ignore all of this print access or at least avoid it when these students' attention and arousal levels aren't consistent with paying attention to the environment. Regardless of whether or not it captures the attention of all students, this access to print is based on a single, fundamental truth:

**Print is provided to sighted children regardless of whether or not anyone thinks they may someday be readers.**

Many sighted students who receive special education services do become readers and use this skill for everything from reading for pleasure to using print as an important life skill to read signs or perform work tasks. Others may not ever be readers in the print sense, but might develop effective literacy skills around alternative modes such as picture symbols, photographs, and/or concrete objects of reference.

For children who do not have the vision necessary to read print, this same level of access to letters and words can be provided with braille. It is not necessary to determine whether a specific child has the potential to someday be a braille reader, or to assess children to determine whether or not they have acquired pre-braille skills. Students who are deaf-blind and do not have functional vision can be provided the same level of access to braille as sighted students are provided with print.

## How to Provide Braille Access

One of the easiest ways of providing braille access is to label familiar items and places throughout the school environment. I learned about this from an amazing teacher named Bil Hawkins when I was doing fieldwork back in 1981 as part of my teacher-training program. Bil would surprise students with braille all over the classroom by placing braille labels where students would likely find them when going about their everyday activities. For example, he would braille the word "door" on the inside of the door handle, so that every time someone used the handle to open the door, they would feel that word. Braille words were always in uncontracted braille, so that the braille letters spelled D-O-O-R. There was one-to-one

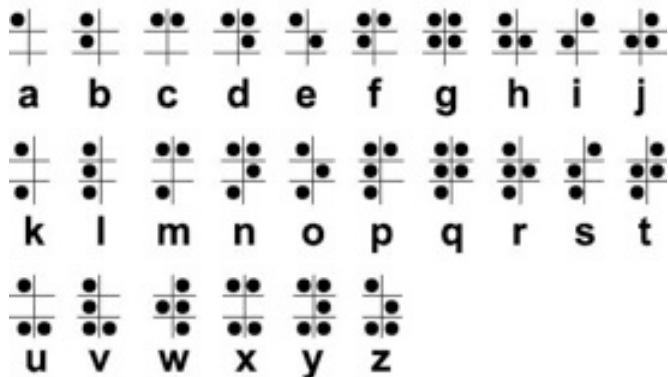
correspondence between the letters of a word and the brailled word. No contractions were used (e.g., contractions for common words, consonant and vowel blends, etc.). Here are some other examples of places Bil would hide braille:

- Along the rim of a pot for an indoor plant
- On the trunk of a tree
- On the inside handle of the classroom refrigerator
- Under the railing on a set of steps
- On condiment bottles
- Under the students' desks

You can see that the placement of the braille wasn't the same as where sighted children would see print, but rather where students who are deaf-blind would naturally come in contact with these objects.

### But I Don't Know Braille!

If you are using uncontracted braille, you just braille words by using each letter in the word. For example, the word chair is brailled C-H-A-I-R (without the dashes, of course). You don't have to learn the braille alphabet. Just use a "cheat sheet" like the one below:



You can see that each braille letter is a combination of one or more dots that make up a six-dot braille cell: The letter "a" is just dot one. The letter "b" is made up of dots 1 and 2. The letter "c" is made up of dots 1 and 4. If you end up memorizing the braille alphabet, that's great, but it is certainly not required for brailing basic words.

### But Wait! I Don't Even Have a Braille Writer!

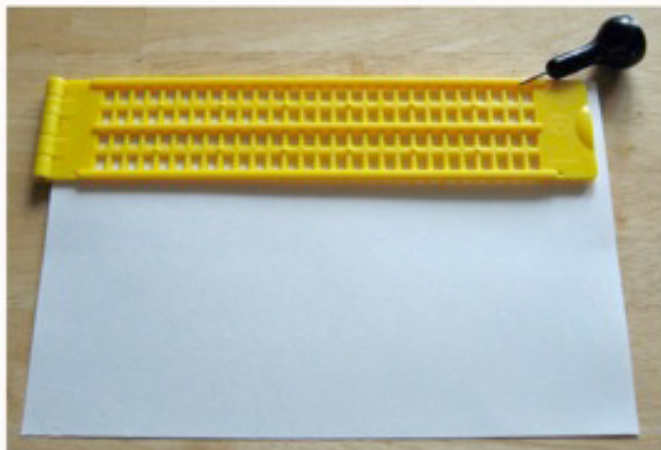
While it is easier to braille labels with some kind of braillewriter or embosser, braille labels can be made simply and quickly using a no-tech device: an old-fashioned slate and stylus: You place the label material in the slate and then use the stylus to punch the braille dots to make the words. There are special adhesive-backed braille sheets that are available, but if you don't have access to these, just use laminating sheets available at office supply stores or if you can't find those, just use sticky back contact shelving paper sold at most home stores.

### A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

- Heather Walsh: Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Contra Costa County

*Children and youth who are deaf-blind should be exposed to braille for several reasons. One is that it is very difficult to know the potential abilities of children who are deaf-blind, so students may have "hidden" potential to learn braille, at least to some degree. Also, they deserve to have exposure to as much typical education experience as possible, and access to braille for a blind student is part of that.*

*I like to use braille name tags for my students on their cubbies, chairs, etc. I think many students who may not be readers still understand that the braille name tag means that something is theirs. The APH books with raised images and braille are also popular with a lot of students because they are really interesting tactilely, and some of them have some bright color which is appealing for low vision students.*

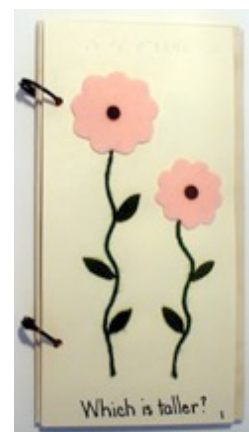


The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) sells plastic adhesive labeling sheets for \$1 apiece, so you can get a lot of labels from a single sheet. And NFB, along with a number of other manufacturers or distributors, sells all kinds of slate and stylus sets. Just enter “slate and stylus sales” in a search engine and you’ll find many low cost options for getting a set.

When using a slate and stylus, it’s important to remember that you are punching braille dots on one side of the paper, to be read on the other side of the paper. Therefore, start at the top right corner of the sheet you are brailleing on and write the individual braille letters backwards. This sounds more complicated than it is. For example, a braille letter “a” is dot 1 when reading, but a dot 4 when writing with a slate and stylus. To practice, write with the slate and stylus and then turn the paper over to see if you did the letters correctly.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) also sells a braille Label Writer for \$20 so if you don’t want to use a slate and stylus, this is an affordable option for making labels:  
<https://nfb.org/independence-market>

There are other free or low-cost options for providing access to braille. The Oakmont Visual Aids Workshop in Santa Rosa, California, produces hand-made concept books that include braille and textures and/or raised images: <http://www.teachersaidsforblindchildren.org/products.html>



Their products are offered at no cost!

An act of the U.S. Congress established the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) as the official supplier of educational materials for school-age students who are blind or visually impaired. APH offers simple braille books with corresponding tactile features and these can be purchased with APH quota funds: <http://www.aph.org/federal-quota/>

Your student’s teacher of the visually impaired will know how to order these materials.

Finally, many libraries, including specialized libraries for children who are blind or visually impaired, have Twin Vision books available for loan. Twin Vision books are familiar children’s books that have clear Braille overlays over each page so the child can feel the Braille while the other children can still see the printed words and graphics:



## But Shouldn't Students be Assessed for Braille Readiness?

It's important not to confuse access to braille with teaching braille in the same way that we don't confuse access to print with teaching reading with print. A teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) will be the team member to lead the educational team in making the decision of when and how to teach braille. This assessment will consider many factors, including the level of a specific student's vision or the degree to which a student's vision might decrease over time as a result of a diagnosed eye condition. But no assessment is needed to simply provide access to braille.

### So in a Nutshell...

Go ahead and provide access to braille. It doesn't take any specialized training and it doesn't take an assessment. For children who can't access print, it allows multiple opportunities throughout the day to come in contact with braille. Will all children who have this level of access become braille readers? Probably not. But many of the children we serve surprise us every day, despite their complex sensory needs and learning styles. It can't do any harm, and it just might open a door that could have profound consequences for communication, learning, and self-worth.

### Tips From the Field -

Jennifer Hirsh and Roberta Williams: Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Monterey County

*Children and youth who are deaf-blind should be exposed to a rich, tactile environment, including braille as appropriate, regardless of whether they may or may not be braille readers someday. With limited sensory channels, the sense of touch becomes critical to understanding, interpreting and organizing one's world. Even though a child may never acquire an understanding of written language (braille), it is possible that he or she could develop functional tactile literacy.*

*Exposure to tactile experience begins as early as possible through exploration of a variety of textures, shapes, and real objects. If a student has vision, texture can be added to pictures to promote and encourage touch.*

*For example: Real (3-D) objects are paired with (2-D) raised line tactile images to create an understanding of symbolic representation. For instance, a child learns to match shape blocks to raised-line shapes. The raised line shapes are progressively reduced in size until the child can discriminate tactile shapes the size of a braille cell. This level of symbol discrimination allows functional literacy. Symbol stickers (available through APH) can be utilized for labeling, choice making and organization. If the student demonstrates this level of tactual discrimination, braille can be introduced and explored.*

*Although a child may never develop individual braille letter recognition, with repeated exposure he or she may be able to recognize certain patterns or shapes, such as the brailled shape of a name.*

*For a student that is at risk of losing both vision and hearing, braille could likely become the primary mode of communication and literacy.*

## The Power of Connection

by Julie Maier, CDBS Educational Specialist

People who are part of the world of deaf-blindness – either personally, as a family member, or as a professional – are aware of the importance of social connections and relationships for individuals who are deaf-blind, as well as the challenges of making, supporting, and sustaining those connections. One of my most indelible memories from this past summer occurred in late June near the end of a rather impromptu picnic lunch at San Francisco’s Crissy Field between members of DeafBlind Citizens in Action (DBCA) and a few students from the San Francisco State University Specialization in Deaf-Blindness teacher training program.

DBCA was in the San Francisco Bay Area for their annual retreat and, in addition to their annual planning for the next year’s planned goals and activities, they reached out to make connections with numerous individuals who are deaf-blind or working in the field of deaf-blindness in the local area. DBCA’s mission and advocacy center around their commitment to improving the quality of life for people with deaf-blindness through their ongoing leadership activities; educating others about rights and responsibilities of individual with deaf-blindness; and their ongoing informed involvement in current events related to educational, technological, and national and state legislative developments that affect the deaf-blind community. The two hours we spent with these self-determined, dedicated young men and their interpreters and support providers was so interesting and enjoyable. It was the perfect way to spend one of those rare fogless summer days along a bright blue bay of water looking out towards Alcatraz Island and under the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge.



*Members of DeafBlind Citizens in Action and students in SFSU Specialization in Deaf-Blindness Program meet at Crissy Field*

One of the first people I met at the picnic was Mussie Gebre, the current president of DeafBlind Citizens in Action. His interpreter supported our conversation about his past legislative advocacy efforts to gain more access for individuals with sensory disabilities and the group's current efforts to develop a Leadership training program to promote self-determination and leadership skills of youth and young adults who are deaf-blind. Mussie's own leadership skills were demonstrated through his informed and committed investment high-priority issues related to individuals who are deaf-blind, balanced equally with his thoughtful humility about his commitment and efforts on the behalf of others. His quiet, reflective nature really shone forth at the end of the picnic when he had the chance to meet a young boy with deaf-blindness, let's call him "*David*", who had accompanied Kayla Kenton, one of the SFSU students, to the picnic.

Kayla had previously served as David's intervener for a few years of his schooling. Although she has now moved on to teach her own class, she still occasionally provides care to David and his brother. It just so happened the day of the picnic was a day she was spending with David. As with most young boys in a wide open space, upon arrival David was much more interested in the things he was experiencing at the picnic—the grass, rocks, dirt, wind, and white canes—than in all of the adult picnickers. Eventually he was introduced to all of the members of DBCA, yet it was his encounter with Mussie that stood out because of the true connection they appeared to make that in their short exchange just before the picnic ended.

As I watched this introduction I first noticed that that Mussie rather quickly picked up on and understood David's trepidation of meeting so many new adults. I also noticed that David seemed to become more interested in Mussie as the minutes passed, as if he sensed this someone who really understood, or "got it", and was willing to give him time and space to interact in a reciprocal way. Mussie signed to David and the rest of us that he remembered when he was young he also often felt nervous and unsure when meeting new people. That seemed to be an important part of the connection that was unfolding — Mussie, a recognized leader in citizen action and advocacy for the deaf-blind community, could recall his own personal childhood memory and relate it to what this child might be experiencing. Perhaps David sensed this too.

As I thought more about this encounter later that evening, it occurred to me that another essential piece of this successful connection was the support both Mussie and David were provided. For David the support came from the presence of a trusted intervener who supported David through total communication, in that she used both signed communication and speech. She was also fluent in ASL and easily understood Mussie and his interpreter as they signed and was able to share that with David at his individual level of communication.

Mussie's support was two-fold. First, there was trusted interpreter present who used tactile sign to interpret the conversational exchanges. The second support was the presence of Mussie's friend, Amy Parker (from the National Center on Deaf-Blindness and a DBCA Board Member), who thought to provide audio description of the scene and David's actions and expressions so that Mussie, who is completely blind, could get a more complete picture.

So as the interpreter and intervener provided communication support, Amy provided detailed audio descriptions, which she asked the interpreter to share with Mussie...



*knee now and looking at your face.”*

*“Mussie, David is looking at your hand, but it doesn’t look like he is ready to touch it yet. He seems a little nervous and is leaning against Kayla.”*

*“Now he seems more excited. He is smiling a little and rubbing his hands up and down on his stomach.”*

*“Mussie, he is moving closer and reaching out to touch your cane. I think he might almost be ready to meet you.”*

*“He is moving closer to your right*

The interpreter faithfully relayed the audio description Amy was providing in real time and it was this full description of the scene, interpreted through tactile sign, that allowed Mussie to be fully aware and involved in this exchange at every level—the physical, social, and emotional levels. The parts of the interaction he was missing by not being able to see David’s expressions or actions were easily replaced through excellent audio description. The portions of interaction that both Mussie and David missed due to hearing loss were successfully bridged with effective signed communication. Finally, the interaction might have been quite brief and meaningless, if Mussie had not instinctually given David the time and space to regulate himself and move past his nervousness or uncertainty before approaching and interacting with a new adult in his environment.

It was a short encounter compared to some of the others that occurred at the picnic, but for me it was filled with deep meaning. Certainly, on a concrete level it demonstrated the value and need for effective intervention and supports to create and maintain social connections and relationships. On another, even deeper, level it provided me with a greater understanding of how small the community of deaf-blind individuals really is and the importance of providing opportunities for shared stories, passing of information, and the building of connections for these individuals – across the country, the world, and even across generations. I don’t know if Mussie and David realized how remarkable their conversation appeared to others, but as an educator its impact on me both professionally and personally was incredibly strong.

*For more information about DeafBlind Citizens in Action, please visit:  
[www.dbcitizens.org](http://www.dbcitizens.org) or <https://www.facebook.com/dbcitizens?fref=ts>*



## Closing Ceremony 2015 “Student Reflections”

by Graduates of the Specialization Program in the Education of Students with Deaf-Blindness  
at San Francisco State University

In the fall of 2014, the Moderate-Severe Disabilities Program at San Francisco State University received a four-year federally-funded personnel preparation grant to prepare student teachers in the education of students who are deaf-blind entitled Specialization Program in the Education of Students Deaf-Blindness. CDBS staff collaborated with this SFSU specialization program by leading seminar sessions and providing fieldwork and internships experiences to seven selected student teachers. The following selections were compiled from reflections written by the first cohort of students in response to course readings and presentations from CDBS staff, as well as fieldwork experiences. We found that each piece selected is a strong representation of each candidate’s unique experiences, philosophies, and approaches to the fields of deaf-blindness and education.



**Edith Arias** reflected upon the importance of motivation to encourage and develop communication and a student’s individual “voice”.

*Communication in general is a key aspect of human relationships. People with and without disabilities are social beings that rely on communication to have essential needs met or have the need to socialize with others. However, when the communication process or the motivation to communicate with others is not there, an isolated and frustrated feeling becomes part of that individual who can’t or won’t communicate... As a future teacher and after observing a student who is deaf-blind in three different occasions, I now understand how important the environment is for communication.*

*I think that is what I experienced in my observations. It wasn’t that the student couldn’t communicate, but it was that she was not motivated or challenged enough to create more communication with others in her classroom...The goal for me will be to motivate the student who is deaf-blind to use more communication and to realize the power of his or her voice. In addition, to create opportunities for personal relationships to flourish and isolation diminish!*



**Jessica Coop** shares the importance of careful observation to recognize all communication attempts and to build rapport with a student.

*In Special Education, we find that sometimes we need to change the environment in order for our students to learn best. This same idea can definitely be applied to learners who are deaf-blind. It should not be seen as a problem with the student being able to communicate, but something that can be worked on when we change how we think and how we are trying to communicate... We need to be very observant as educators because anything that a student does with their body, whether hand/foot movements, vocalizations, anything could be our student attempting to communicate. When we are receptive to the child’s form of communication we can help to establish a rapport and build a richer communication. This will help impact a student’s development and educational program by giving the child a voice and the tools that they need in order to succeed.*



**Mary Gomez** shares her belief that educators must recognize and appreciate the student's view of the world to provide effective instruction and support.

*Recognizing perspective is another essential element an educator should possess as well. It is first essential that we recognize viewpoint, although we may not be able to completely understand how a student is affected by deafblindness, an educator should try and recognize perspective in order to properly support a student. What adaptations does a student require in order to reach their highest quality of life and furthermore their communicative potential? Educators must recognize the ways in which they can support a student so that they are able to communicate their wishes, desires and needs.*

*Based on our last class session, the main takeaway was that educators working with students that are deaf-blind aren't miracle workers and don't have magical powers. They are just patient, caring and observant educators who work hard in assisting students to reach their potential in as many ways as possible.*



**Kayla Kenton** reflects on the impact a dedicated and informed teacher can make on each student and his or her family.

*If a student doesn't learn the way you teach, you should teach the way they learn. An idea that makes so much sense, but is not practiced daily in the classroom. As a teacher of students with different abilities, I can appreciate every student's different way of learning. It's one of the challenges in teaching that makes this job so much fun. For example, if I were to get a student that is hard of hearing, I would get to focus on a new way of teaching my regular lessons focusing more on different senses, such as touch and sight, while keeping the lessons accessible and meaningful for the student...*

*As a well-educated teacher, it is also my duty to be a strong advocate for every family. I need to explain to the parents what their rights are and teach them how to push their child at school and at home. A parent who does not have a sensory problem did not think they would have a child with a sensory issue and most likely didn't choose to have a child with a sensory issue. Which is why it is important for the teacher to be there for the parents, not only as the advocate, but as the bank of information. It's important to give the parents some ability awareness about their own child. Giving parents information about their child's sensory needs and ability can help them feel more confident and proud of their family.*

*As Myrna discussed on the CDBS website, "I really wish I had known early that DCM (Dilated Cardiomyopathy) did not mean the end of the world for Norman, and that we could've spent more time enjoying our life with Norman and as a family" (Medina, 2009). If Myrna had a doctor or therapist at the beginning of this journey to help her advocate and support her and be more positive, this realization she talks about could have happened sooner.*

*Being creative and patient can only help when teaching a new student. Everyone learns differently and some impairments will mean that you adjust your lesson plans. Every child deserves an education and as teachers we are taking on the job to find a successful way of learning for that child! It's important to teach the way the child learns best to have a meaningful and fun learning environment.*



**Sara McGee** shares her thoughts on the importance of emotional reciprocity and meaningful relationships to enhance a student's positive self-image.

*Developing a positive self-image and a concept of self is an important to improving the quality of life of any human being. Students who are deaf-blind have the capability and the right to participate, belong and grow within their social circles and their community. It is my job to create meaningful opportunities that will extend the student's reach and contribute to his quality of life.*

*When students are deaf-blind, sharing experiences is an integral part of teaching and supporting the development of positive image and the concept of self. Whether it be play with a young child, or crab fishing with a teenager, when creating activities to share experience it is important to remember to also share in the emotion that the activity evokes and have tactile conversations to reflect on the experience afterwards. With consistent emotion sharing experiences and reciprocal interaction, connections will be made and relationships will be created. These relationships will help the student to understand the concept of self and increase his/ her self-image. The shared experiences need to be consistent and close enough in proximity so that the partner can understand and be attentive to what the student is communicating and feeling.*

*Identifying peers who are excited about interacting with their classmate would be a great step in creating more opportunities for the child's self image. When a teacher models positive, reciprocal interaction and joint attention with a student who is deaf-blind for the student's peers, the social circle for the student can grow along with the student. By providing opportunities for the student to recognize that people want to spend time with him and share experiences with him, his self-esteem with increase just as it would for every child. Creating these relationships is beneficial for all parties involved and contributes to the development of individual personalities.*



**Hillary Trainor** considers how an educator finds the balance between providing attentive, responsive support and fostering a student's independence.

*Regardless of ability and disability labels, every student needs to feel safe in their environment before they are able to learn. In the case of working with students who are impacted by deaf-blindness, laying the groundwork of a safe and responsive environment is even more essential... Because the autonomy and ability to experience the world of a child who is deaf-blind are at first entirely dependent on others in order to sift through and make meaning of the environment with which they come into contact, a teacher must demonstrate a readiness to be responsive as incidental learning arises, so connections can form between what outside "life" is taking place around a student and what it means...*

*When teaching, a teacher must also be acutely aware of how much support a deaf-blind student truly needs in order to avoid over prompting or unnecessary dependency on adults/peers. While students who are deaf-blind do need physical and frequent interactions in order to interact with the world, giving too much support can limit opportunities for the student to learn when or how he or*

she can be independent. This may also stifle a student from maintaining their internal locus of control and sense of safety. In order to maintain a student's trust and limit unnecessary support, then, a teacher must maintain a character of attentiveness, as an individual's communicative efforts and strides in independence may be communicated or demonstrated in less obvious ways than with other students.



**Dana Zimpelmann** reflects on the connection between happiness and fulfillment and the development of positive self-concept and how responsive environments, shared experiences, and positive relationships can build “moments of joy”.

*I have a lot of dreams and expectations for my students. I expect them to be independent, strong individuals with something to contribute to the world. I dream of them having strong ties to their communities, being surrounded by people who love them, and holding full time meaningful jobs. However, when I think big picture of what I really and truly want for my students; happiness and fulfillment are the big ideas that come to mind.*

*Concepts are the ideas that give meaning to our world and students with the most significant disabilities, such as deaf-blindness, will develop their own unique self concept based upon personal experience. According to NCDB's article titled “Developing Concepts with Children Who Are Deaf-Blind”, a positive self-concept begins with a responsive caregiving environment. ...as a teacher of students who are deaf-blind I can ensure that their school environment is responsive, supportive and enriching. One way to do this is to foster relationships with the student and be responsive and present when interacting and communicating with the student. Shared experiences between the student and teacher/intervener are also very meaningful and can help create a responsive school environment, especially when the experience can be repeated and the student can be reminded of the moment shared with his or her teacher/intervener.*

*As explained by Jan van Dijk, experiencing “moments of joy” can help students who are deaf-blind develop a positive self-image. At the Texas Symposium for Deaf-blindness I heard a mother and daughter present about how inclusive opportunities and being a member of the school dance team made a huge difference in the life of a girl named Rachel who had CHARGE Syndrome. In fact, feeling a sense of belonging at her school was so important for Rachel that even though her family had to make sacrifices and often her health was compromised it was “worth it” as her mother phrased it. I will never forget when her mother was describing Rachel's experiences on the school dance team and stated “van Dijk calls it moments of joy, I call it belonging, and Rachel calls it friends”. I imagine that for Rachel, who appeared to be a happy, well adjusted high school student, having friends and being a part of a team has been the most influential aspect for her development of a positive self-image.*