

Getting Involved in the IEP Process

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The law requires physical educators' involvement, but it does not guarantee it.

Ms. Crowel is a physical education teacher in United City Middle School. She has been teaching there for three years and is very meticulous about her teaching, curriculum, and paperwork. She has an undergraduate degree in physical education, which included one course in adapted physical education. Ms. Crowel is very conscientious and always tries to do the right thing for her students. Because she is so conscientious, Ms. Crowel has had several students with disabilities such as Down syndrome and autism placed in her class. She knows that each of these students has an IEP (Individualized Education Program,) but she has never seen them. When talking to the special education teachers of these students, she discovered that there would be an IEP meeting for one of the students in a few weeks. Knowing that she should be involved in the writing of the IEP and an active participant at the meeting, she called the chair of the Committee on Special Education, who asked Ms. Crowel, "Why would you be involved in the IEP?" Ms. Crowel was disappointed and frustrated by this question. She knows that physical education is an important part of the student's educational program, but had no idea how she could ensure involvement in the upcoming IEP meeting and in subsequent IEP meetings.

The Current Situation

The above scenario is common. Although physical educators are integral members of the IEP team in many districts, in other districts physical educators are only partially involved in the process or are not given the opportunity to be involved at all. For example, some physical educators do see their students' IEPs and provide feedback, but do not attend the IEP meeting and are not involved in the assessment. In other districts, general physical education teachers do not get to see their own students' IEPs and never know when the IEP meetings occur, even though they have expressed the desire to be involved in the process.

Because the IEP committee is organized under special education in most states, many districts do not perceive the general physical education teacher to be a part of the IEP process. Although physical education teachers work with the students with disabilities in their classes, they are often left out of what other professionals are doing with respect to developing the students' IEPs, thus creating a "disconnect" in the IEP process. There are several problems with this:

- The physical education teacher does not have the opportunity to be involved in assessment or share the results of his or her own assessment in developing the IEP goals and objectives in physical education or in other domains such as physical therapy, daily living skills, behavior management, or communication. It should be noted that under the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-2004; PL 108-446), short-term instructional objectives are no longer required in the IEP document (Sherrill, 2005). Although legislation no longer mandates short-term objectives, the authors believe that school districts should elect to include them for physical education.

- Being left out of the process further marginalizes physical education as an integral and important subject area necessary for appropriate educational development. It not only devalues physical educators, but leaves them emotionally estranged from the process. Without any involvement, it is no wonder that some general physical educators feel frustrated and resentful when students with disabilities are placed in their classes.

- Last, but perhaps most important, physical education is a direct service required by law (IDEA, 1990) and *must* be included on an IEP. In the scenario, Ms. Crowel knew that her students with disabilities should have IEP goals, but she did not know what they were because she was never given the opportunity to see their IEPs. By not including physical education in the present level of performance, as well as the student's goals on the IEP, the school is violating the law. It should be noted that students with unique needs that are not in the psychomotor domain are the only ones who do not have physical education goals on their IEPs (Lieberman, James, & Ludwa, 2004).

Value of the Physical Educator's Involvement

Regardless of whether or not a school district employs an adapted physical education specialist, the general physical educator plays a key role in the implementation of a student's IEP. Physical educators are one of the few teachers in the school who see students every year and therefore can provide longitudinal feedback, whereas classroom teachers usually have students only for a year. In addition, physical education often provides an opportunity for students to actively apply, in an authentic situation or setting, many of the cognitive, motor, and social skills that they have acquired (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2002). Therefore, the physical educator can provide more well-rounded information because they see the student involved in all three domains, the affective, the cognitive, and the psychomotor. Table 1 describes seven reasons why the general physical educator's involvement in the IEP process is very important.

Because education in an inclusive environment continues to gain acceptance, the general physical educator is the one most likely to provide direct instruction to the student with the disability. It makes sense that the person who should develop a student's goals in physical education is the same person directly responsible for carrying out the IEP program (Houston-Wilson & Lieberman, 1999). The physical educator is the "expert" on his or her curriculum/program area. If the physical education portion of the IEP is written by professionals other than the adapted physical education specialist or general physical educator (i.e., by the school psychologist, special education teacher, occupational therapist, or director of special education), it not only gives the impression of indifference or lack of knowledge about the importance of physical education, but it leaves the teacher who provides

Table 1. Importance of the General Physical Educator in the IEP Process

1. *Modification list.* In order to accommodate students with disabilities in general physical education, adaptations are often made. In order to document these needs and ensure that they remain an integral part of the student's education, they must be included in the IEP (Tripp & Zhu, 2005).
2. *Documents support needs.* Many students with disabilities benefit from small student-teacher ratios or a 1:1 situation. The IEP is an important place to document the student's specific need for a paraeducator and/or peer tutor in physical education. The general physical educator is vital in providing this input.
3. *Communication tool.* The IEP is the document to communicate placement, supports, modification, present level of performance, goals, and evaluation procedures. The general physical educator can provide valuable feedback to parents and the IEP committee.
4. *Documents progress toward goals and physical education standards (NASPE, 2004).* The IEP is where the teacher can document progress made in each goal or standard (Tripp & Zhu, 2005).
5. *Accountability for teaching.* The documentation of progress made in physical education is an additional way for the teacher to demonstrate accountability for student learning (Huettig, Simbeck, & Cravens, 2003).
6. *Showcase your program.* The information gathered about assessments, modifications, improvements, and successes is a natural way to show off good programs and the benefit of physical education for all students.
7. *Placement decisions.* Discussing assessment results and helping to determine least restrictive environment (LRE) placement decisions are important components of the IEP process. Without direct involvement, these decisions would be made without the physical educator's input and consent (Silliman-French & Conner-Kuntz, 2003).

direct service to the student alienated from what should be occurring in physical education for that student (e.g., appropriate placement, assessment, goals, modifications). The full and active participation of *all* professionals involved in a student's IEP fosters a healthy environment of collaboration and communication, whereas lack of the general physical educator's participation jeopardizes that collaborative environment.

In some situations, special education directors may be willing to have physical educators involved in the IEP process, but are challenged in providing appropriate services because of a lack of district support. Although a challenge, it is crucial that all administrators involved work together to make sure that the physical education teacher providing direct service to the student participates in the IEP process.

It is important to note that the physical educator generally will not have to write the IEP goals alone (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2002). Communication, collaboration, and a team approach are critical to providing an optimal environment for all students, including students with disabilities. The adapted physical education specialist (if the district has one), special education director, physical therapist, or occupational therapist can and will assist in the documentation of goals as well as other aspects of the IEP (Horton, Wilson, & Gagnon, 2003). Assessment information in the psychomotor domain should be completed by the *expert* in the field, which is the physical educator, adapted physical educator, or physical therapist, not the school psychologist, nurse, or special education teacher. This input at the IEP meeting is essential to a successful placement decision. When the physical educator

is left out of contributing to the student's assessment, it may result in an inappropriate placement, and it diminishes the collaborative environment that is critical to providing an optimal learning experience for the student.

Six Actions to Get Involved

What should physical educators do if they find themselves "left out of the loop" with respect to their students with disabilities? Do not just sit back and grumble! If teaching in a district where physical educators are not included in the IEP process, first remember that it may not be an intentional omission. The IEP development comes under the special education department, and physical education is not commonly perceived as part of the process. To begin to create change, one needs to take the initiative. If a teacher is not already involved, the chances are that no one is going to come down the hallway to the gymnasium to invite the physical educator to an IEP meeting. Change will not occur by staying in the gymnasium and complaining about not being involved. Remember that every district is slightly different in structure and procedures. Here are six actions or things to do (not in a rigid order), to help get a foot in the door and become an integral part of students' IEP (summarized in table 2):

1. The most important action in the process is to develop a working relationship with the classroom (special and/or general education) teachers of students taught in common (Horton, Wilson, & Gagnon, 2003). Developing a good working relationship with the classroom teachers is paramount in planning and implementing a student's IEP effectively (Stainback & Stainback, 1985). The special education/classroom

Table 2. Actions to Get Involved in the IEP Process

Action	Explanation
Contact the classroom teacher.	If not already known, the first thing to find out from the classroom teacher is whether the student has IEP goals and objectives <i>in physical education</i> .
Speak to the parents.	Discuss the role in teaching important lifetime skills connected to their child's goals. This can help them understand the physical educator's value in attending the IEP meeting.
Speak to the principal.	Make your interest known! If the general physical educator has not been involved in the past, it may be assumed that you are not interested.
Contact the IEP committee chair or special education director.	Request to "sit in" on your student's next IEP meeting and observe <i>on an informal basis</i> .
Collaborate with other professionals.	The physical educator may need to initiate collaboration with other professionals involved in a student's IEP.
Attend the IEP meeting.	Come prepared with information documenting strengths and weaknesses or progress on the student's goals.

teacher is essential in assisting with the implementation of the IEP, as well as coordinating required and related services (Horton, Wilson, & Gagnon, 2003). If not already known, the first thing to find out from the classroom teacher is whether the student has IEP goals and objectives *in physical education*. If the student has goals and objectives in physical education and physical educators are not involved in the process, find out who completes the assessment and who has developed the present level of performance and goals. The physical educator should read the IEP of each student he or she is directly involved with, share perceptions about the student's motor abilities, and discuss commonalities with their abilities in the classroom. Share the desire to be involved in the student's IEP development with the teacher and discuss the meeting times and timelines for your student's IEP.

2. Physical educators must make time to introduce themselves and the physical education program to the student's parents. This may require seeking them out. Parents play a powerful role in their child's IEP and may not be aware of the physical educator's commitment to their child's program. By explaining how the teaching of important lifetime skills is connected to a child's goals, physical educators can help parents understand the value of the physical education program and potential placement issues.

3. Discuss involvement in the IEP process with the principal and/or physical education director. Make them aware of your interest. Because general physical educators have not been involved in the IEP process in the past, it may be assumed that you are not interested.

4. Contact the IEP committee chair and/or special education director directly. Request to sit in on your student's next IEP meeting and observe *on an informal basis*. This is a positive approach to becoming more involved; express interest without being demanding or irritated about being left out of the process. By simply being present at a meeting, the physical educator may be drawn into conversation and asked questions relative to the student's abilities.

5. Seek out other professionals involved with the student to collaborate in developing the physical education portion of the IEP. Although physical educators may be willing, it does not ensure that other professionals will automatically think of including them in team meetings. The physical educator may need to initiate the conversation to encourage a meeting to share and collaborate.

6. When the physical educator is able to attend a student's IEP meeting, he or she should make sure to come prepared with information documenting strengths and weaknesses or progress on the student's goals. This way the physical educator will be prepared if the opportunity arises to share information about the student.

Increasing Involvement in the IEP Meeting

After getting a foot in the door, working on assessment,

writing the IEP, and collaborating with other specialists, the physical educator now must become an active participant in the IEP meeting itself. Support for general physical educators, involvement comes from clarification in IDEA-2004 regarding who must attend IEP meetings. According to IDEA, *all* professionals involved in providing direct service on a student's IEP *must* attend the IEP meeting when their specific content

area is being discussed. This change assures that physical educators "will not be accidentally or willfully omitted from IEP meetings when physical education is to be discussed" (Sherrill, 2005, p. 55). The following important ideas will help to ensure that the physical educator and program considerations for the student are included in the student's educational team and IEP meeting:

- *Request the support of the principal and/or physical education director.* After involvement in the IEP process is approved by the principal, special education director, and/or physical education director, the physical educator should plan on going to the meeting. Because IEP meetings may be scheduled when the physical educator is teaching or has other school-related commitments, it is important for the principal to have a clear understanding of the necessary support, such as providing for substitute coverage.

- *Go to the meeting on a free period.* If the meeting occurs during a free period, the physical educator could fully participate in the meeting and provide valuable input and insight regarding the student's present level of performance, appropriate goals, or progress towards meeting already written goals and objectives. Although this is a great idea, the meeting does not always fall on a free period and will often take longer than the one period.

- *Get a substitute or a colleague to cover your classes.* If the meeting does not occur during a free period, then a request for a substitute could be submitted. Of course the request must be in advance to ensure that a substitute is available at that time. This is another reason why collaboration and communication with the classroom teacher is critical, in order to keep abreast of upcoming meetings. If that is not possible, request that another physical educator in the department cover the class during the meeting time or combine it with his or her class. If another teacher has a free period, ask that teacher to switch the free period with yours and teach your class for you while you attend the IEP meeting. In either case, it is important to leave a lesson plan with specific directions; this will make your colleague more willing to do it again for another meeting. Just remember, if a colleague takes a class for you for an IEP meeting, you should expect to reciprocate when your colleague has an IEP meeting.

- *If the above options are impossible and the physical educator cannot attend the meeting at the specific meeting time, there are several alternatives to choose from.* Again, IDEA-2004 clearly states that if the person responsible for a content area is unable to attend the IEP meeting when it is to be discussed,

Recent legislation has reinforced the role of the physical educator in the IEP process.

that person must provide written input into the IEP to both the parents and the IEP team prior to the meeting (Sherrill, 2005). A well-written narrative report submitted by a colleague at the meeting assures that the physical educator's thoughts and data are on record. In addition to providing written input, the physical educator could meet with the parent, special education teacher, and/or paraeducator and share assessment results, feedback, and/or recommendations with them before the meeting. Especially if there is specific information or recommendations to be shared, it is important to have them written down so they can be shared at the meeting. The physical educator could also meet with the special education director to ensure that what is to be shared is expressed exactly as intended. Another good idea is to show a short video of the student's performance at the meeting to ensure understanding by the team, especially if there are specific issues or successes to be shared.

- *Often the best way to make things happen is to get the support of the student's parents.* When physical educators show parents how much they care about their child's progress, it helps the parents understand how important it is for the physical educator to be involved in the IEP process. Supportive parents serve as an important resource, especially if the administration is resistant to the physical educator's involvement, because they are able to request that specific individuals be present during the IEP meetings (Sherrill, 2005).

- *Another way to promote change is to attend meetings of the local special-education parent organization and become a part of it.* Be visible and make your voice heard at these meetings. This can serve to help all parents understand the value of the physical education program and how the teaching of important lifetime skills is connected to their children's goals.

Summary

The way students with disabilities are educated in physical education has changed significantly since the first laws were passed in the 1970s. Because education in an inclusive environment continues to gain acceptance, general physical educators are, now more than ever, teaching students with disabilities in an inclusive setting. If physical educators are to truly meet the needs of all students, those providing direct service *must* work in a more interactive and collaborative environment.

However, collaboration takes additional effort and time that many professionals are unwilling to give. Sometimes, physical educators are their own worst enemy. They complain about teaching students with disabilities placed in their classes, but do not want to be involved in the process. When physical educators are not involved, they allow others to make important decisions regarding the assessment, placement, and program of students in physical education classes. Physical educators can no longer afford to be left out of the IEP process. If physical educators fail to take active and positive steps in the IEP development of students taught in physical education, then they have no grounds to complain.

Being a part of the IEP process is vital for creating a healthy educational environment for students and professionals alike. Breaking the traditional school environments where physical educators are not included in the IEP process may be difficult, but it is not impossible. Recent legislation has reinforced the role of the physical educator in the IEP process. The help and support of the administration and the parents are of vital importance to create this change. By following the ideas outlined in this article, the physical educator who provides direct service to children with disabilities can have a rich positive experience as part of the IEP team. This will be a win-win situation for everyone involved.

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