

Student-Led IEP Meetings: Planning and Implementation Strategies

Becky Wilson Hawbaker

A Case Story Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 3, Issue 5, May 2007

Student-Led IEP Meetings: Planning and Implementation Strategies

Becky Wilson Hawbaker

Abstract

Although self-determination in general and student-led IEPs in particular have received attention nationally, the extent to which students are leading their IEP meetings remains uncertain, and the rhetoric does not seem to match the reality for the majority of students with disabilities and their IEP meetings. Self-determined educators are needed to translate the rhetoric into action. In this article, the advantages of student-led IEPs are discussed, obstacles to implementation are examined and answered, and specific teacher-friendly and teacher-tested activities are suggested to challenge readers to implement a student-led IEP program in their schools within one year.

Keywords

student-led IEP, self-determination, self-advocacy

Acknowledgments:

The author would like to thank Bridget Hartz Bakula, who helped initiate student-led IEPs at Price Lab School through an experiential learning grant from the University of Northern Iowa. The author would also like to thank Andrew, Amber, and all of her students who routinely surpass all expectations, as well as their parents and Hawbaker's colleagues at Price Lab School, who enthusiastically supported piloting and fully implementing student-led IEP meetings.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Hawbaker, B.W. (2007). Student-led IEP meetings: Planning and implementation strategies. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 3(5) Article 4. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol3/iss5/art4>

Student-Led IEPs: Rhetoric vs. Reality

Self-determination strategies in general and student-led IEPs in particular have received growing attention in recent years (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998). Publications proclaim the virtue of student-led IEP meetings (Gillespie & Turnbull, 1983; VanReusen & Bos, 1990), state-wide pilots have been implemented in Arizona (Barrie & McDonald, 2002) and district-wide implementation has occurred in pockets of the nation (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000). There is a growing collection of curricula available for teachers (Test, Karronen, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2000), most notably the works by McGahee-Kovac and Mason (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001; McGahee, 2002). Yet Furney and Salembier (2000), in their review of the literature of student and parent participation in IEP meetings, continue to find that this rhetoric does not match the reality of student and parent participation in IEP meetings. Books, research, and curriculum can certainly help provide impetus and support for change in school districts and classrooms, but as Price, Wolensky, and Mulligan write, "It takes self-determined individuals (e.g., students, teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, administrators) with collaboration and risk-taking skills, to be facilitators and not enablers" in order to translate student-led IEP rhetoric into action (2002, p.109). To borrow a phrase from Wehmeyer and Sands (1998), "Making it happen" is everyone's responsibility. Educators are challenged to determine for themselves that despite barriers and obstacles, they have the power to implement student-led IEP meetings, and by following the suggested activities below, they can set goals and begin action to make student-led IEPs happen in their classrooms and districts by next year.

Why Should Schools Implement Student-Led IEP Meetings?

Every teacher's goal for his or her students is success and happiness in life. Follow-up studies of students served in special education have found that too few have achieved this goal (Sitlington, 1993), but the one skill set that appears to be associated with successful life outcomes is self-advocacy and self-determination (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999). Preparing students to lead their IEP meeting provides a perfect, real opportunity to learn and practice these critical life skills, as well as many other related skills (see Table 1), many of which are likely related to district or state standards. This is especially important to do and even easier to implement in schools that use student-led conferences with their parent-teacher conferences for all students as the format and advantages mirror those of student led IEP meetings (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996).

Wehmeyer (1992) defines self determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and to making choices regarding one's actions free from undue external influence or interference" (p. 305). Most special education teachers indicate they value self-determination (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Agran, Snow, & Swaner 1999; Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004), but sometimes our choices in the classroom can actually undermine empowerment of students. A logical connection between self determination and student-led IEP meetings should be clear. The IEP is the most important document developed regarding the student with disabilities at school. At the IEP meeting, critical issues are discussed, and imperative decisions are made. If the IEP is developed without the student, or with only token involvement, the student learns that his or her voice really doesn't matter and that important decisions are best made *for* them, compromis

Table 1: Skills used when leading an IEP meeting:

- Choosing mediums to communicate progress (graphing, writing, pictures/video, drawing, homework, notes)
- Paraphrasing technical/jargony language
- Reading and writing in context
- Using technology such as presentation software and word processing
- Introducing people
- Explaining the purpose of an IEP meeting (stating the main idea)
- Thinking and planning for the future (vision)
- Goal setting
- Taking turns and inviting others to speak
- Listening and responding with a relevant and appropriate answer
- Asking relevant, proactive questions
- Advocating - Stating opinions, backing with data
- Using presentation skills (e.g. eye contact, volume, tone, posture, body language)
- Compromising/Reaching consensus/Proposing compromise solutions
- Closing, summarizing decisions made, expressing thanks to IEP team

ing and even sabotaging any subsequent self-determination lessons. As one general education teacher at the author's school commented, "For a young adolescent who craves independence, a student-led IEP is one more opportunity for him to be in control of his world."

Research suggests that when students lead their IEP meetings, there are a number of positive outcomes. Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) observed and interviewed participants involved in 43 students' IEP meetings and found that the students who lead their meetings were involved and contributed to the meetings, knew about their disability rights and accommodations, gained increased self confidence and were able to advocate for themselves, interacted more positively with adults, assumed more responsibility for themselves, were more aware of their limitations and the resources available to them, and parental participation increased.

The author's implementation results with secondary students with mild to moderate disabilities in grades 6 through 12 were very similar to the research. Students who led their IEP meetings were more knowledgeable

about the purpose of an IEP, as well as what their individual goals, objectives, accommodations, and modifications were. In addition, student facilitation changed the tone of the meeting in significant ways. IEP meeting participants reported a more relaxed, positive atmosphere, focused more evenly on growth and accomplishments as well as the inevitable weaknesses. Parents tended to contribute more as well, perhaps because of the less intimidating climate, perhaps because their child's speaking encouraged it. The meetings and the resulting IEP were more of a team effort rather than a teacher directed meeting or a primarily teacher-written IEP shared as a fait accompli.

One administrator who attended student-led IEPs at the author's school remarked, "Oftentimes, parents of students with disabilities have had to struggle with their student about school... [but] with student-led IEPs, parents are proud of the confidence and growth exhibited by their 'in charge' student." General education teachers in attendance reported gaining a different perspective with students who were often more passive and quiet in a large class setting. One teacher

stated, “In my opinion, [the student] demonstrated a level of confidence and ability during the student-led conference that he had not achieved in class. I attribute this to social concerns that were not at work during the conference. As a result, I changed my opinion about his placement in my class. Before the

conference I doubted whether he was making progress. The conference convinced me that he had made greater strides than I had thought.” In short, “Everyone leaves smiling,” summarized one teacher, “even when tough issues were discussed.”

TABLE 2: Obstacles to Implementing Student-Led IEP Meetings and Suggested Answers

Obstacles	Answers
Lack of Time—How can I fit this in on top of everything else?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is about priorities — remind yourself how critical this is and make it a priority • It doesn’t have to take that long. Although some writers recommend semester-long courses devoted to preparing for a student-led IEP meeting, an adequate place to start is with as few as four or five class periods or sessions (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004). As students get more practice and experience, it will take less time to prepare. • Prepare for the actual meetings to be a bit longer because of increased participation.
High Stakes Assessments/State Standards/Access to General Education Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are also very important priorities. However, many of the skills needed for student-led IEPs are directly or indirectly related to standards and the general education curriculum. • Remember that student-led IEPs are focused on skills critical for success in life. Self determination skills are highly correlated with successful life outcomes, and thus we should make time to teach and support them.
Lack of Student Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may not be motivated to do a lot of things at school, but we still insist they do what is important. • Using this as a reason to avoid student-led IEPs is a self-fulfilling prophecy: “Students are ultimately more involved in transition-related activities when they are provided with overt, on-going opportunities to plan, express, and actively pursue their own goals, as well as to evaluate their progress and adjust their activities accordingly.” (Sands, Bassett, Lehmann, & Spencer, 1998).

Student Disability Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With some students, you will have to make creative adaptations, but that is what we do best in special education. • All students can communicate in some way, either in writing, with pictures, with assistive technology, or with signs or gestures, so he or she can lead the IEP meeting in these same ways. • The law requires student participation “whenever appropriate.” Wehmeyer argues that “‘whenever appropriate’ means always” (1998, p.4).
Loss of Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True, the meeting will not be as scripted as your past meetings. True, you can’t be sure what the students will actually say at the meeting, but it is definitely worth the risk. Many times, students will surprise you with how perceptive and polished they can be. And you’ll still have your turn to present your data, information, and recommendations, you just may have to be prepared to persuade a bit more than usual. • It is a good thing to lose some control. If you always get your way, your students are probably not being allowed much self-determination!
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cost for portfolio supplies (binders, dividers, plastic protector pages) is minimal and most supplies can be re-used year after year. • Some curriculum packages cost more than others. Consider starting with McGahee’s materials, which are free, and build up your own video library of IEPs that you can use as you teach other students (of course, get a signed release from parents and students to videotape and share the tape).
No One Else At My School Wants To Try It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, it is easier to implement change with a collaborative team, but if you do not yet have this, do not use it as an excuse to avoid change. Your successes will inspire others to join later.
Lack of Administrative Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep working on changing their minds (start with sharing Barrie & McDonald, 2002). Suggest that student-led conferences could be a great school-wide approach for all students (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996) • Do it anyway. Of course things are easier with administrative support, but do not let the lack of it stop your efforts to do what is right for students.

Obstacles and Answers

There is no shortage of obstacles when implementing any form of change, and implementing student-led IEPs is no exception. Educators who commit to implementa-

tion must be honest about the barriers they will face and must constantly remind themselves of the reasons they must find ways around the barriers. Table 2 offers some suggestions. Teams of educators studying imple-

mentation should consider adding to the table with their own context-specific barriers and answers.

Making It Happen

Despite obstacles, committed, self-determined educators can make student-led IEPs happen, one step at a time. If your school isn't using student-led IEPs now, the following section is a road map that can lead you step by step towards changing that in one school year.

Like many other discrete skills, teaching students to lead their own IEP meetings can be taught in a straightforward and systematic way. In the author's experience, the key to a successful student-led conference is to carefully scaffold the process in ways that provide support if the students lose their nerve or their memory. An IEP portfolio is the perfect way to help the students organize their thoughts, script out the key components, and scaffold elements such as self-evaluation, reflection, and problem-solving. Such scaffolding is often necessary because students may lack social competence and confidence to master all of the complex skills involved independently, but gives the student equal footing with others at the table, because they too are bringing data and recommendations.

Figures 1a through 1d provide an electronic template for students to use in leading an IEP meeting (the complete template, a Microsoft Word Form, can be downloaded at the author's web page) The template begins with an introduction page that prompts the student to welcome and introduce everyone and explain what the meeting is about in his or her own words. The second page is the "Vision for the Future" and asks the student about what they currently envision for their future in areas such as education, career, family, transportation, and living arrangements. Next, there are pages for each goal from the IEP, including an end-of-the-year overall self-evaluation and a proposal for the goal area

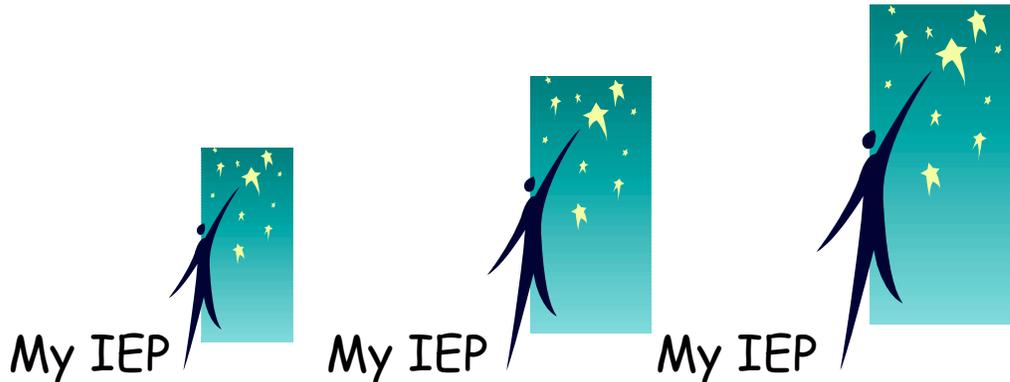
wording for next year. Finally, there is an accommodations and modifications page, where the students enter and evaluate current accommodations and modifications, and propose possible changes.

With the template, much of the instruction regarding student-led IEPs occurs informally and is individualized to student needs as they complete each section. The template can be completed with a number of accommodations, including dictated responses typed in for the student, Kurzweil scan and read, and inserting picture cues for goal areas instead of writing. The template is the place for the student to say exactly what they think, even if everyone else on the IEP team is likely to disagree, and provides the opportunity to role-play how to resolve the disagreement appropriately. In the author's classroom, helping students to create, maintain, and add to their IEP portfolio is the focus of many or most of activities preparing for the student-led IEP meeting throughout the year. The template can also be pasted into Microsoft Power Point slides as a presentation tool at the actual IEP meeting for an even more polished performance. Students with more moderate to severe disabilities who use augmentative or alternative communication systems or devices lead meetings with a simplified template that included more picture cues. In addition, mini lessons on what an IEP is can be presented as needed. See Figure 2 for an example lesson the author created to introduce and reintroduce students to an IEP.

Translating a belief in the efficacy of student-led IEPs into action requires planning and commitment, but not an overwhelming amount. Just as we task-analyze complex skills for our students, we can break down implementation steps into smaller, manageable steps over a longer timeline for ourselves. Below is an example of a year-long action plan leading up to implementation of student-led IEP meetings.

Figure 1: Example of an IEP Portfolio Template, a Microsoft Word Form, which students complete and then use as a script or prompt at the IEP meeting. [the actual template has a page border frame]

Figure 1a: Andrew's introduction page allowed him to create a 'script' to get the meeting off to a good start.



Welcome to My IEP Meeting!

Here is my welcome and thank you to you for coming to my meeting.

Thank you for coming to my IEP meeting. It is nice to have so much support from all of you.

Introductions

Here are the names of the people who are at this meeting, and what their role is at this meeting.

As we all know, my name is Andrew . This is my mother, Marty Jensen-Kilbourn. This is my teacher and advisor, Dr. Stone. My Resource teacher and babysitting employer is Becky Hawbaker. This is the Support Services Coordinator, Dr. East.

Why are we here? Here's what an Individualized Education Plan is in my own words and what we will be doing at this meeting.

IEP stands for Individual Education Plan. This plan is to help me advance through my learning here at NU High and towards college. It involves extra supports like accommodations and setting goals for next year and looking back on the goals for this year.

Figure 1b: Andrew's vision for the future page of the IEP portfolio template reminded everyone at the meeting what the ultimate goal is.



My Vision for the Future

After I graduate from high school, this is what I see in my future:

More School? (College? Technical School? Apprenticeship?)

I would like to attend [a community college] for two years, then transfer to the [university] to earn a teaching degree so I can get a teaching license.

Career Possibilities:

I would like to be a first or second grade teacher or a middle school language arts teacher.

Family Possibilities (Marriage? Children? Near parents/siblings?)

I would like to get married someday and have at least two children.

Places I would like to live:

Somewhere near the Midwest, or up north like Canada.

How I will get around — transportation:

I have a driver's license and I drive around a lot. Someday I hope I have my own car. Maybe I will get one for graduation (nudge nudge, mom).

Things I will do for fun:

Video games (you're never too old to play and it can help battle arthritis, but perhaps bring on carpal tunnel syndrome), playing basketball in a rec league, reading books to myself and to children, listening to music.

Figure 1c: Each IEP goal is summarized and evaluated by Andrew, who then invited others at the meeting to share their perspective and data. Two examples are given.



Goal #1: Writing

This year's goal is: With scaffolds and supports, Andrew will gradually learn to independently structure all essays for his classes according to required conventions. He will submit rough drafts in advance of the deadline and will revise to earn 80% of available points.

Table of Contents: a list of the things I have chosen to put in my portfolio to demonstrate my progress

Drafts and Final Papers from Research and Writing class, grade sheets

My Final Evaluation of this goal (complete this part a few days before your meeting)

1

I made no progress on my goals

2

I improved a little, but was far from meeting my goal

3
xx
I improved, but didn't quite meet all parts of the goal

4

I improved and I met all parts of the goal

Explain:

I give myself a three, because I improved a great deal, I believe. I still have a ways to go, however. I can't give up and say I'm a 4 yet, there's still much I can do to improve, like turning in papers on time, and getting closer to 100% on every paper.

How should this goal change for next year?

I think we should keep the essay writing part of the goal, but I think we should add reviewing mechanics and grammar because I need to raise my ACT score in that area. Maybe do a short daily review with 80% accuracy.

Goal #4: Transition



This year's goal is:

This is the exact wording of my goal from my official IEP:

Andrew will: 1) seek additional work experiences with young children, 2) research and apply for scholarships and Vocational Rehabilitation services that could help him in college, 3) research support services in colleges he is interested in attending.

Table of Contents: a list of the things I have chosen to put in my portfolio to demonstrate my progress

Research info from colleges, discussion of Voc. Rehab, flag list from Jane's Day Care, Internship grade, Leadership Conference Application materials, FastWeb and FAFSA materials, article about college support services.

My Final Evaluation of this goal (complete this part a few days before your meeting)

1

I made no progress on my goals

2

I improved a little, but was far from meeting my goal

3

I improved, but didn't quite meet all parts of the goal

4
XX

I improved and I met all parts of the goal

Explain:

I met all parts of the goal, plus I applied for the Governor's Leadership Conference for students with disabilities. I completed an internship at Jane's Day Care and I babysit regularly, I researched scholarships on FastWeb and college support services.

How should this goal change for next year?

Keep work experience, add actually applying for scholarships, ACT and PPST review stuff, research documentation to get services in college, and actually applying for college admission.

Figure 1d: Accommodations and modifications were reviewed and evaluated by Andrew, who then suggests a direction for the next year.



Accommodations and Modifications

Here are my IEP-required accommodations and modifications that were in place this year:

Scaffold structured writing assignments
Extra time on tests
Use of writing center
Use of computer for written tasks.

These accommodations worked the best for me (list and explain):

Extra time on tests and use of computer were the ones I used the most and helped me.

Here are ideas about new accommodations and modifications I'd like to try next year:

Last year we got rid of 'accept late work with reasonable penalty' because I was doing better with it, but this year I got behind again and I was lucky that I had teachers who let me turn in work that was late, but I think we should write it back in to the IEP just in case I don't have flexible teachers. I think I did a good job with homework considering I had two jobs outside of school though. I think we should keep extra time on tests, but another thing I have used is verbal testing with my teachers and that has really helped a lot. Like when my Biology teacher went over questions with me orally after I'd finished the written part. Maybe we should write that in too.

Figure 2: The “IEP Riddle” lesson is one of the devices used to introduce and reintroduce the concept of an IEP to students.

What is an IEP? A Riddle of a Lesson

Objective: Students will state in their own words the purpose, function, and parts of an IEP after participating in a riddle/metaphor discussion. Begin by asking students if they know what an IEP is and discuss their responses. Then ask, “How is your IEP like a...”:

A Game Plan	A Contract	Jeans That Fit Just Right	Ladder That Helps You Reach New Heights	Support Hose	A Sweet Red Rose	And Lots More, Goodness Knows!
						
<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone on the IEP team has a job to do and is part of winning the game and helping the student to succeed (discuss who will be at the meeting and what their role is). • There are lots of different “plays” for the team to consider: accommodations, modifications, specialized instruction, support services, etc. (describe each briefly). • Accommodations “level the playing field.” 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a contract! It is a legal document that spells out what everyone has agreed to do. There are consequences if people don’t do what they have agreed to do (discuss due process, legal rights, role of administrator at meeting). 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is just right for you, isn’t the same as others’, wouldn’t work for others (discuss briefly). • You are comfortable with it and it makes you feel good. 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It helps to scaffold your journey to make your dreams come true. • Accommodations help level the playing field and give you a leg up. • IEP Goals are like the rungs on the ladder, and when you reach the goals, you move up. 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes you examine your weaknesses and flaws, but helps you find ways to make the best of it and to use your strengths and supports to overcome, or at least camouflage, your weaknesses. 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An IEP addresses your strengths, and gives you an opportunity to celebrate your progress and successes, like when people throw roses on stage for performers. • It is kept in a red folder. 	<p><u>Possible Answers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to come up with other comparisons and metaphors. Incorporate these into subsequent lessons.

Conclude by reviewing the big idea behind an IEP with the schematic below:

Your IEP meeting has several parts, and all of the parts are designed to help you reach success.



SUCCESS!



3. How can we get to where we want to go?

Goals, Accommodations, Modifications, Support Services, Transition Planning, Special Education Programming.



2. Where are we now?

Foundation, Present Level of Performance, celebration of progress made.



1. START: Where are we going?

Your vision for the future (and your parents' visions for your future)

Action Plan for Summer: Research and Prepare

- ❑ Recruit others who are interested in implementation of student-led IEPs. Everything is easier when shared with a collaborative team. Meet at least once before school begins to delegate tasks and plan details.
- ❑ Read student-led IEP research, technical assistance guides, and commercial curriculums (see references) and decide how to adapt the process to fit the context of your school, your classroom, and your students.
- ❑ Consider identifying students whose IEPs are due early in the year to pilot your process, and then use what you learn from the experience to improve your process for other students. Consider having the pilot students help as peer tutors or IEP coaches.
- ❑ Talk to your administrators. Share your readings and your ideas and request their support.
- ❑ Collect and purchase portfolio supplies such as three-ring binders, tab dividers, and plastic page protectors. Most of these can be reused year after year.

Action Plan for Fall: Commit and Begin

- ❑ Early in the year, commit to student-led IEPs by letting parents and students know that IEP meetings will be student-led this year, to varying extents. Expect questions and perhaps some concerns. Explain to them why you are doing this and how it can help, and enlist their support. Consider sharing with parents McGahee's technical assistance guide written for parents and teachers on the NICHCY website:
< <http://www.nichcy.org/stuguid.asp> >
- ❑ Present lessons designed to teach students what an IEP is and to familiarize them with their own IEP (See Figure 2). Introduce them to the IEP Coach web-

site: <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~pmc2r/web_class/iepccoach.htm>

- ❑ Assist students in beginning their IEP portfolio, including a personalized cover and dividers for each IEP goal.
- ❑ Meet with your implementation team to discuss progress, obstacles, and solutions.

Action Plan for Winter: Build

- ❑ Structure regular opportunities for students to update artifacts in their IEP portfolio and track their own progress. Consider weekly reminders to look over the portfolio and encouragement to add one artifact each week. Consider formal course requirements such as having students choose one IEP goal, design their own intervention, and track progress weekly.
- ❑ Give students recognition and reinforcement for their efforts with portfolios. Encourage students to model their portfolio progress for others.
- ❑ Meet with your implementation team to discuss progress, obstacles, and solutions.

Action Plan for Spring: Rehearse and Unveil

- ❑ Assist students in completing Vision Statement page for IEP portfolio (see Figure 1).
- ❑ Provide mini lessons and role playing about introductions, a reminder lesson on the purpose of IEPs, and assist students in completing Introduction page for IEP portfolio (see Figures 1 and 2).
- ❑ Provide a mini lesson on self evaluation, guided discussion, and assistance for students with completing Self Evaluation of IEP Goals page for the IEP portfolio (see Figure 1).
- ❑ Provide guided practice and role playing of presenting self evaluations, soliciting other IEP team members' evaluations,

Figure 3: A student's perspective on student-led IEPs

A Student's View on Student Led IEPs

My name is Amber [last name]. I'm your everyday high school graduate; I like to play on the computer, hang out with friends, shop, and express myself. I'm a lot like the peers that I see everyday, except for one thing: I have a learning disability. A non-verbal learning disability, to be exact. I display all of the symptoms: trouble with math, coordination, spatial issues, time management, the whole nine yards. We didn't even find out that I had a learning disability until I was in middle school; until then my teachers had been very hard on me, and often accused me of just being lazy. I never really understood why I didn't function like everyone else in my class.

When I came to [this] school in 7th grade, I was immediately confounded by everything: the people, the classes, especially finding my way around. I had trouble with grades, mostly in math and science. I was put in an after school tutoring program by the student services department, and eventually I was placed in a Resource class. Ms. H was able to help me through 7th grade until I was properly diagnosed with NLD, after which she turned the curriculum into what would become the most beneficial part of my educational career. In Ms. H's class, my classmates and I would participate in many different activities that helped us find out how we could better our experiences and ourselves, a few of them being goal setting, motivation lessons, working with university students, and self advocacy, the pinnacle lesson of which being leading your IEP meetings.

You may have already read a basic description of a student-led IEP meeting in Ms. H's article, but you might ask, "How do I know if it really is that beneficial?" I'll tell you now, preparing for and leading an IEP meeting is an excellent method of getting students to understand the steps they need to take to prepare themselves for the next level, whatever it may be. And you can trust me, because I'm speaking from experience. The first step to a successful meeting is to make sure to let the student know what an IEP is. Ms H helped us with this with lessons and riddles ("What's like a pair of jeans that fit you just right?") that would allow us to see what all an IEP did for us, and why it was so important. The second step is having the student create a script with basic areas, such as a welcome, an introduction, listing their goals, etc. This was an easy thing for me, and I enjoyed working on it. The third step is rehearsing until the presentation goes as smoothly as possible: practice makes perfect! With these three steps, I was successful in advocating for myself and helping people understand what I was working on, what I was successful with, and what I still needed to work on. It gave me a huge boost of self-esteem to lead my own IEP meetings, and now I feel even more confident in explaining what I'm all about to everyone. If you all as teachers will take interest in helping your students reach out and stand up for themselves, then they will all feel successful and be successful.

Now that I've graduated from high school, you may be wondering what I'm doing with my experiences from the meetings. I'm currently a student at a community college, where I constantly advocate for myself, and can do so more fluently because of the meetings. Also, I have more confidence in public speaking in general – I'm not afraid to ask for what I need! I'm going through both the Photography Program and Associative Arts Degree program, and I know that with my past experiences, along with my current knowledge, I'll succeed. Thank you for your interest in my opinion!

taking turns, disagreeing appropriately, and seeking compromise.

- ❑ Decide with the student which parts of the meeting they feel comfortable taking on, and strongly encourage increasing responsibility year after year.
- ❑ Rehearse meeting format.
- ❑ Require students to send out personal invitations to the IEP meeting.
- ❑ Schedule and hold the student-led IEP meeting. Begin the meeting by reminding team members that the meeting is student-led and turn it over to the student to direct. Direct only the parts the student designates, share only when it is your turn.
- ❑ Consider gathering survey or interview data from parents and students after the IEP meeting regarding their student-led IEP meeting to help you improve the process and to justify it to others.
- ❑ With your implementation team, evaluate how well the process worked this year, make adjustments for next year, and share widely your successes to encourage others to join you.

Summary

Change takes time, and implementing student-led IEPs is no exception, but it consistently pays off in terms of student learning, confidence, and self determination. Students consistently report that leading their IEP meeting was one of the most memorable learning experiences of the year. See Figure 3 for one student's perspective.

The author has facilitated student-led IEPs for the last six years, and each year the process is improved and strengthened, the students become more active and polished, and the meetings become more enjoyable and easy. Set a goal today to begin your implementation of student-led IEPs one step at a time, using as much of the action plans above as possible, and then go further. It is one of the single most important things you can do

to support self determination in your students, help them to develop self advocacy and to plan for a successful transition to life, and it won't happen without your involvement, commitment, and support.

References

- Agran, M., Snow, K., & Swaner, J. (1999). Teacher perceptions of self determination: Benefits, characteristics, strategies. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 34*(3), 293-301.
- Barrie, W., & McDonald, J. (2002). Administrative support for student-led individualized education programs. *Remedial and Special Education, 22*(2), 116-121.
- Conderman, G., Ikan, P. A., & Hatcher, R. E. (2000). Student-led conferences in inclusive settings. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 36*(1), 22-26.
- Countryman, L. L., & Schroeder, M. (1996). When students lead parent-teacher conferences. *Educational Leadership, 53*, 64-68.
- Furney, K., & Salembier, G. (2000). Rhetoric and reality: A review of the literature on parent and student participation in the IEP and transition planning process. In D.R. Johnson & E. J. Emanuel,

- (Eds.), *Issues influencing the future of transition programs and services for students with disabilities* (pp. 111-126). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.
- Gillespie, E. B. & Turnbull, A. P. (1983, Fall). It's my IEP: Involving students in the planning process. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 26-29.
- Mason, C. Y., McGahee-Kovac, M., & Johnson, L. (2004). How to help students lead their IEP meetings. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36(3), 18-24.
- McGahee, M., Mason, C., Wallace, T., & Jones, B. (2001). *Student-led IEPs: A guide for student involvement*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- McGahee-Kovac, M. (2002). A student's guide to the IEP. Washington, D. C.: National Information Center for Children and Youth With Disabilities.
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (2002). *A student's guide to the IEP (2nd ed.)*. (Document available online at <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/stuguide/st1book.htm>).
- Price, L. A., Wolensky, D., & Mulligan, R. (2002). Self-determination in action in the classroom. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(2), 109-115.
- Raskind, M. H., Goldberg, R. J., Higgins, E. L., & Herman, K. L. (1999). Patterns of change and predictors of success in individuals with learning disabilities: Results from a twenty-year longitudinal study. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 14(1), 35-49.
- Sands, D. J., Bassett, D. S., Lehmann, J., & Spencer, K. C. (1998). Factors contributing to and implications for student involvement in transition-related planning, decision making, and instruction. In Wehmeyer, M. L., & Sands, D. L. (Eds.), *Making it happen: Student involvement in education planning, decision making, and instruction* (pp. 25-45). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Sitlington, P. (1993). Adult adjustment among high school graduates with mild disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 59(3), 221-233.
- Test, D. W., Karvonen, M., Wood, W. M., Browder, D., & Algozzine, B. (2000). Choosing a self-determination curriculum. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(2), 48-54.
- VanReusen, A. K., & Bos, C. (1990) IPLAN: Helping students communicate in planning conferences. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 22(4) 30-32.
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (1992). Self-determination and the education of students with mental retardation. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 27, 302-314.
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (1998). Student involvement in education planning, decision making, and instruction: An idea

whose time has come. In Wehmeyer, M. L., & Sands, D. L. (Eds.), *Making it happen: Student involvement in education planning, decision making, and instruction* (pp. 3-23). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Wehmeyer, M.L., Agran, M., & Hughes, C. (2000). A national survey of teachers' promotion of self determination and student directed learning. *Journal of Special Education*, 34(3), 58-68.

Wehmeyer, M. L., & Palmer, S. B. (2003). Adult outcomes for students with

cognitive disabilities three years after high school graduation: The impact of self-determination. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 38(2), 131-144.

Wehmeyer, M. L., & Sands, D. L. (Eds.). (1998). *Making it happen: Student involvement in education planning, decision making, and instruction*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

About the author:

Becky Wilson Hawbaker is a secondary special education teacher at Malcolm Price Laboratory School, University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa.