

Teaching Student Engagement in the Transition Planning Process

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that youth be invited to their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting each time transition services are discussed (section 300.321). A clarification letter from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services indicates “the parent and student are required IEP team members at meetings where transition services and postsecondary goals are discussed” (Musgrove, 2013, p. 3). Because transition goals and activities need to be based on students’ needs, strengths, preferences, and interests, IDEA (2004) insists students be invited to attend their IEP meetings (Sanderson & Goldman, 2020). Federal district courts upheld student participation in their IEP meeting and concluded special educators need to maximize students’ participation in the IEP meeting process (Prince et al., 2014).

What is Student Engagement?

Martin and Williams-Diehm (2013) believe student engagement in the transition planning process happens before the IEP meeting, during the IEP meeting, and after the IEP meeting ends. During the transition assessment process educators facilitate student involvement by (a) asking students to select assessment tools, (b) having students complete student assessment versions when these are available, and (c) teaching students how to understand assessment results. During the IEP meeting student engagement means the student takes a leadership role by actively participating as an IEP team member who discusses the issues, shares results of transition assessments, presents their strengths and needs, and asks questions when something is said they do not understand. After the IEP meeting ends, active student engagement continues when educators teach students goal attainment skills and students work at least weekly to attain annual IEP transition goals.

What the Research Says

Student involvement in their IEP transition meetings predicts positive postsecondary education and employment outcomes (Burnes et al., 2018). In an analysis of national data, Johnson et al. (2020) discovered 91% of students with mild/moderate disabilities had been invited to attend their transition IEP meeting although only 67% attended. About the same number of students with significant cognitive disabilities had been invited (87%) and 75% attended. Unfortunately, attendance at IEP meetings does not result in meaningful student participation. Martin et al. (2006) found students only talked 4% of the time during teacher-directed transition IEP meetings. Adults talked to adults and seldom looked at the student when discussing student issues.

To facilitate meaningful student participation, educators need to teach students what to do at their IEP meetings and provide students opportunities to engage during the meetings (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Sanderson and Goldman (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of published group design studies that examined the impact of lesson materials to increase student participation in their IEP meetings. Across studies, results indicated “adolescents who participated in interventions participated significantly more during IEP meetings than students in control groups” (p. 165). The authors conclude by indicating that when students are not taught how to engage during their IEP meetings they end up not participating at all. Table 1 depicts the lesson packages the researchers used in the studies Sanderson and Goldman (2020) examined.

Table 1

Lesson packages used to increase adolescent IEP meeting participation

Lesson Package Title	Available From
Next S.T.E.P	www.proedinc.com/Products/9265/next-step-complete-program.aspx
Self-Directed IEP	www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/choicemaker-curriculum/self-directed-iep
My IEP	www.myiep.com
Self-Advocacy Strategy	www.edgeenterprisesinc.com/product/self-advocacy-strategy-enhancing-student-motivation-and-self-determination/
Getting Ready for the Transition to High School	Not Readily Available
TAKE CHARGE for the Future	Not Readily Available

Guidelines for Practice

To achieve meaningful student engagement in the IEP process, students need to be taught the language of the IEP process and what to do at the actual IEP meetings. They also need to have knowledge of their transition assessment results and be able to identify their strengths, needs, and interests and assist in developing their annual goals and post-secondary goals (Martin & Zhang, 2020). Educators then need to provide students with ample opportunities during actual IEP meetings to meaningfully participate. Special educators and administrators need to develop and implement a process where students learn in an iterative fashion to first attend

their IEP meetings in grade school, then become active in their IEP meetings in middle school, followed by leading their IEP meetings with coaching in high school.

Additional Resources

I'm Determined website

This website contains several videos depicting students engaged at their IEP meetings and presenting their present level information. A scoring rubric for teaching student engagement can also be found. Materials exist for youth, educators, and parents.

www.imdetermined.org

University of Oklahoma's Zarrow Center

A wealth of transition education materials can be found at this site, including the TAGG, numerous self-determination assessments, various transition education resources, and the Self-Directed IEP lesson package and videos.

www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow

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