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## **STUDENT-LED IEP MEETINGS: DEVELOPING STUDENT LEADERS**

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### **Introduction**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) became law in December 2004, with final regulations published in August 2006. One of the key changes to the law, which has directed special education services in this country since 1975, was in the provision of secondary “transition services.” This article will discuss the added requirement imposed by the law to invite the child to the individualized education plan (IEP) team meeting when the purpose of the meeting includes the consideration of postsecondary goals and the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals [34 CFR 300.321(b), 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(1)(B)]. Thus, inclusion of the student into the discussion of his/her individual transition plan is a legal requirement.

Aside from the legal requirement to include the student in the transition process, there is a growing body of research to support the practice not just of including the student but to also use the meeting itself as a means to increase self-determination skills. Here we are referring to the practice of teaching students to plan and to lead their own IEP team meetings. Benefits cited in the literature include an increase in student self-advocacy and self-determination skills (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), increased student confidence and knowledge about their own disability and accommodations, increased participation of parents and general education teachers in the meeting, and the creation of a more relaxed, positive tone during the IEP meeting (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004).

### **Project Goals**

In the fall of 2007, the North East Independent School District (San Antonio, Texas) began planning and organizing training for the Student-

Led IEP Meeting as the vehicle to train self-determination and leadership skills to students with disabilities who were served under special education. A high school and a feeder middle school were identified as part of the pilot project. The selection of the two schools was made based on the experience, expertise, and child-centered philosophy of the special education teachers and campus coordinators. Prior to the selection of students, a general training about the strategies to implement the process was provided to teachers in the Student-Led IEP pilot. A matrix was provided to the pilot schools as a guide to select students for the pilot.

In order to promote success of the pilot, it was important to design the training in a manner that would facilitate learning the process without the complication of factors unrelated to Student-Led IEP meetings. For example, teachers were advised to select students who already displayed leadership skills, communication whether vocal or assistive technology, and a desire to learn. Teachers would be learning alongside the students, and the goal for the teachers and students was to focus on learning the Student-Led IEP process. Once teachers had learned the process, they would be in a better position to teach the Student-Led IEP Meeting process to all students served by special education. The 2007-2008 academic year was Year One of the initiative. Year One included professional development on Student-Led IEP meetings, planning the Year One pilot, the selection of schools, teachers, and students, the joint training of students and teachers, and the implementation of the training by the students and teachers from the pilot campuses. During Year Two, 2008-2009, the pilot will be expanded to include two additional high schools and four middle schools. The central office special education staff participated in a Trainer of Trainers (TOT) to learn to train students and teachers across the district, from elementary through secondary. Another Train the Trainers was conducted, but this one was for students. Students, who were trained in 2007-2008 sessions and directed all or part of their IEP Meeting, participated in a Peer TOT to learn to train peers on Student-Led IEP Meetings. Day Two of the training included parent information and parent training to support their child's participation in the IEP Meeting.

## **Empowering Students**

According to Palmer & Wehmeyer (2006), some of the self-determination skills to be taught during the elementary years are choice-making, reconsidering choices made in the past by considering the results, teaching "thinking aloud" so children hear the steps adults take as they problem-solve,

systematic self-evaluation of the student's work, setting goals, implementing the goals, reviewing the goals for results, and making necessary adjustments to the goals. The steps described above mirror the activities in developing the IEP, implementing the plan, monitoring the plan, and making necessary adjustments to ensure success of the plan.

One key to the model was to move past training teachers. In recent years, the demands of teaching, paperwork, and local, state, and federal initiatives leave few precious minutes for teachers to integrate new skills and strategies into existing schedules. Teachers leave professional development with the best of intentions only to return to the hectic pace of the classroom with the newly-found materials on the desk with the "to-be-done-in-the-future" stack. The new training design was to take the training directly to the students and have the teachers learn side-by-side. It was key to limit the number of adults in order to ensure a comfort level for the students and keep the focus as a student training and not a teacher training. This enabled the students, not the teachers, to leave the training with the "to-do list," and moved the teacher role to facilitator rather than initiator.

## **Curriculum to Empowerment**

Research from the Arizona Student-Led IEP Toolkit for Teachers and the Boerne Independent School District's Finding My Voice funded by the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities were some of the many resources used to develop the training. In addition, research by Ed O'Leary, James E. Martin, Laura H. Marshall, and Michael L. Wehmeyer, along with many others, provided information and resources to the model.

On Day One, students arrived at a location that was the district's professional staff development center. Five to six students were placed at round tables with one or two teachers per table. Each student was provided a student edition of the Student-Led IEP handbook, and each teacher received a teacher edition. Differentiated Instruction was used to conduct the training through the use of differentiated lectures, flexible grouping, audio/visuals, and cooperative learning. Accommodations and modifications were used as needed. The training was interactive, and the PowerPoint presentation used graphics rather than text as much as possible to convey the information. The trainers were two outside consultants from Mitchell-Panter Consulting, LLC, in Montgomery, Texas. Both consultants were not only educators, but were a mother-daughter team that could share personal experiences of the

special education process from the family side as well as the professional side.

During Day One, students were taught about special education law that pertained to the IEP meeting and their rights as students. Sometimes educators neglect this information or graze over it so as not to create or feed adversarial roles in students. We found that after providing very specific information to the students on their rights and roles in the IEP Meeting, no student misused the information; instead the students became very collaborative in their new roles as partners in the education planning process.

To fulfill their roles as partners, students had to understand their disability. To do this, one of the trainers, Mrs. Beth Panter, talked to the students about disabilities and what it meant. Mrs. Panter was served under special education and the impact of disabilities on education and postsecondary goals. She explained to the students that their disability was not who they were but rather one part of them. After Mrs. Panter shared how her learning disability affected her and what she did to help herself be successful in spite of her disability, teachers and students participated in interactive discussions at their tables about their disabilities. One finding in the activity was that adults had more difficulty and a greater sense of discomfort discussing their disabilities or disabilities of the students than the students had in discussing their personal disabilities.

Students brought with them information regarding their academic standing, and transition assessment results that had already been conducted. During the training, each student participated in a learning styles and multiple intelligence assessment. Students were taught how to look at the assessment results and draw conclusions about their strengths, needs, interests and preferences. These are also requirements of transition services under federal law. During the “Discovering Me” activity, students recorded their findings on a personal profile form and used the assessment information to identify postsecondary goals for employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. After learning what a “measurable, postsecondary goal” was, students were assisted in writing their personal measurable, postsecondary goals to submit at their IEP Meeting.

In transition services, the coordinated set of activities includes the course of study, agency connections, and other activities that facilitate the student

meeting their personal postsecondary goals. Teachers brought course selection handbooks for secondary campuses, and students used their postsecondary goals to review the academic achievement record (transcript) and select courses that would help them to meet graduation requirements and facilitate what they wanted to do after high school in terms of employment and/or participating in postsecondary education. Trainers and students discussed transportation issues, related services, extracurricular activities that were aligned with postsecondary goals, and natural support systems. Trainers taught the role of employment in preparing for postsecondary goals and encouraged students to participate in employment while in high school. Students were advised to look for employment opportunities related to their postsecondary goals that would help with career awareness and career investigation in addition to building a meaningful employment resume.

Day Two was a half-day format with one group attending in the morning and the second group in the afternoon on a Saturday. A joint pizza lunch was provided with parents who were picking up and dropping off, encouraged to stay and eat pizza with the students and learn about the Student-Led IEP training their child attended. Day Two of the Student-Led IEP training focused on the actual meeting and preparation activities. Students were taught what the meeting looked like and viewed a video from Martin and Marshall of a Student-Led IEP meeting. Trainers discussed the dynamics of seating arrangements and how to lead a meeting. Students were reminded they could invite people they believed would be beneficial participants in helping them plan for the future, but as with all meetings, the number of participants should be kept to a manageable number in order to accomplish the tasks. Examples and templates were provided for meeting invitations, brochures, PowerPoint presentations, and student IEP meeting agendas. Students were encouraged to use the templates as a guide and to personalize the meeting tools to display their goals and demonstrate who they were as a person, a student, and a young adult with plans for a future.

An important component of Day Two was to address the role of parents in the Student-Led IEP meeting. While the trainers took notes on poster paper, students were asked to brainstorm how their parents could help them prepare to lead their IEP meeting and to meet their personal postsecondary goals for after high school. During the joint pizza lunch with the students, teachers, and parents, the trainers shared with the parents the ideas the students had about how parents could help. A question-and-answer session followed the information-sharing portion of the working lunch. The last

part of each group's training was to remind students to celebrate after they directed their IEP meeting. Many adults have never led an adult meeting. The students involved in the pilot training were ahead of the game in leadership activities.

## **Follow-up**

Following the training, students began to develop tools to direct their IEP meeting and to plan with teachers for the next meeting. Campus coordinators and teachers indicated an immediate positive response from students following the training that included word of mouth sharing of the training. This resulted in additional students requesting to be trained, as well as a significant increase in student involvement in self-monitoring their grades and academic progress.

Although the plan was to increase the implementation by adding two high schools and four middle schools to the Student-Led IEP training schedule, the overwhelmingly positive response resulted in adding all 14 middle schools and seven high schools." District special education administrators were trained to become trainers of students and teachers on the process. Students who participated in the 2007-2008 training and who directed their IEP meetings are being trained as trainers of the Student-Led IEP process. The goal is to have students training students in the future.

In February 2009, the North East Independent School District and Mitchell-Panter Consulting were asked to be a keynote speaker at the state transition conference in Austin, Texas on the Student-Led IEP. Since the peer train-the-trainers (TT) was conducted prior to the state conference, The NEISD students co-presented with the teachers and consultants from Mitchell-Panter Consulting at the state conference. Prior to the keynote training sessions, the students participated in a student-panel to discuss their experiences with Student-Led IEP meetings. Parents and teachers provided insights to the conference audience on the positive changes and leadership qualities they had seen in their young adults. One grandmother noted, "I was encouraging my family to move closer to me since I am getting older. Now, I see what my grandson has accomplished and I don't want him to stop growing." Another parent stated, "I would have never believed my child could lead her (IEP) meeting, much less be a speaker at a state conference of 800 teachers. I am so proud of her." In March 2009, the students who

participated in the Student-Led IEP training and the TT, along with the Student-Led IEP teachers, won the NEISD Superintendent's Award, which is awarded for exceptional performance. The group was recognized for its participation in the innovative student leadership training.

### **Implications for Students with Hearing Loss**

The original group of 20 high school students, who were trained in Student-Led IEP meetings, included a female student with a hearing loss who was a junior. The student had an auditory device which enabled her hear the oral conversation. She was given preferential seating with her hearing ear on the same side as the location of the presenters. Because much of the training was interactive sessions at the group table, hearing was not determined to be a problem. The presenters from Mitchell-Panter Consulting had been made aware of the accommodation needs, and when working with groups at each table, sat on the side of the student that provided the best hearing access.

During the spring of 2009, self-determination training sessions were conducted by Mrs. Panter to train students with disabilities to navigate the postsecondary education system and the use of disability services. One of the high school groups trained consisted of students in the NEISD Regional Day School Program for the Deaf, who were interested in going to "college." Students who participated in the self-determination training for postsecondary education were told strategies to select a college based not only on the college's reputation for academics but also know the competence and philosophy of the Office of Disability Services (ODS). Students learned how to apply to the office that services students with disabilities and if possible visit the colleges and interview staff in the ODS office. As the consultant explained, upon "visiting one of my top three choices, I sensed at the ODS office it would be like pulling teeth to get any help. I eliminated that college based on the attitude of staff in the ODS office." Students were very interested in the suggestion to talk with someone at the college who had the same disability and were either a junior or senior. This would enable the "entering freshman" to learn the strategies the upper-level student who was deaf or hard of hearing used to navigate the postsecondary education system. As Mrs. Panter told the students, it is important to learn from students, "who had already walked the walk," about what worked and did not work for them.

## Summary

Students with deafness or who are hard of hearing must, like all other individuals, navigate their way through the adult world after graduation. This journey is taken without the assistance of special education or other entitled support services. Services in the adult world are not entitlement services and are available only if the services exist, the funding is appropriated, and the staff is available. If the above is present and the young adult is able to receive the service, by the time the adult red tape or the adult system moves, the crisis may have ended with loss of job, being kicked out of postsecondary institutions, or even worse consequences. Learning how to help one's self is the best tool available, leaving other support systems as enhancement or supplementary to what the young adults with disabilities can do for themselves. There are many kits and trainings on self-determination to teach children how to cope, to recognize strengths and needs, develop and implement plans, etc. The problem is that the practice for such skills occurs in crisis situations, which is not conducive to long-term acquisition of skills. Question: What activity already exists within the public school system in which an activity is conducted to assess strengths and needs, develop goals, implement the plan, monitor the plan for progress, make adjustments to the plan, practice social skills and communication, as well as develop leadership? Yes, it is the IEP process. The Student-Led IEP process teaches life-long skills in self-determination and leadership with the opportunity to practice in an adult environment that is not designed to be a "crisis activity." Give students a chance to take control of their lives. Implement Student-Led IEPs at your school.

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