

# A BEST PRACTICES in Special Education

## MASTERING THE IEP PROCESS

By Cynthia Herr, PhD and  
Dr. Mary Ann Winter-Messiers



## Module 1: WHAT IS AN IEP?

### EXPERTS *in the Field*



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TBD, co-author  
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& Objectives*.



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## WHAT IS AN IEP?

In 1975 the U.S. Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Pub. L. 94-142, 89 Stat. 773) which guaranteed children with disabilities the right to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). This law has been amended several times over the years and is now entitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (commonly known as IDEA). Ever since 1975, federal regulations which specify how school districts are to ensure that children with disabilities receive FAPE have included the requirement that every eligible child with a disability must have an individualized education program (IEP), a document that details the educational program designed to meet the child's individual needs. Every child who receives special education services in a public school must have an IEP.



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IEP Under IDEA .pdf.



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## WHO IS ENTITLED TO AN IEP?

All eligible children with disabilities are entitled to special education services and an IEP. To find out if a child is eligible for an IEP, the district conducts a full and individualized initial assessment. A child is eligible for an IEP if the assessment results show that the child has a disability under one of these categories specified in IDEA: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment including blindness.



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Disability Under IDEA .pdf*.



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In addition to meeting the criteria for one of the disability categories, a child's disability must adversely affect the child's educational performance. In other words, the child must need specially designed instruction to progress appropriately in school. Determining whether such need exists is one of the purposes of the individualized initial assessment.



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### Module 2:

## UNDERSTANDING IEP MEETINGS

### EXPERTS *in the Field*



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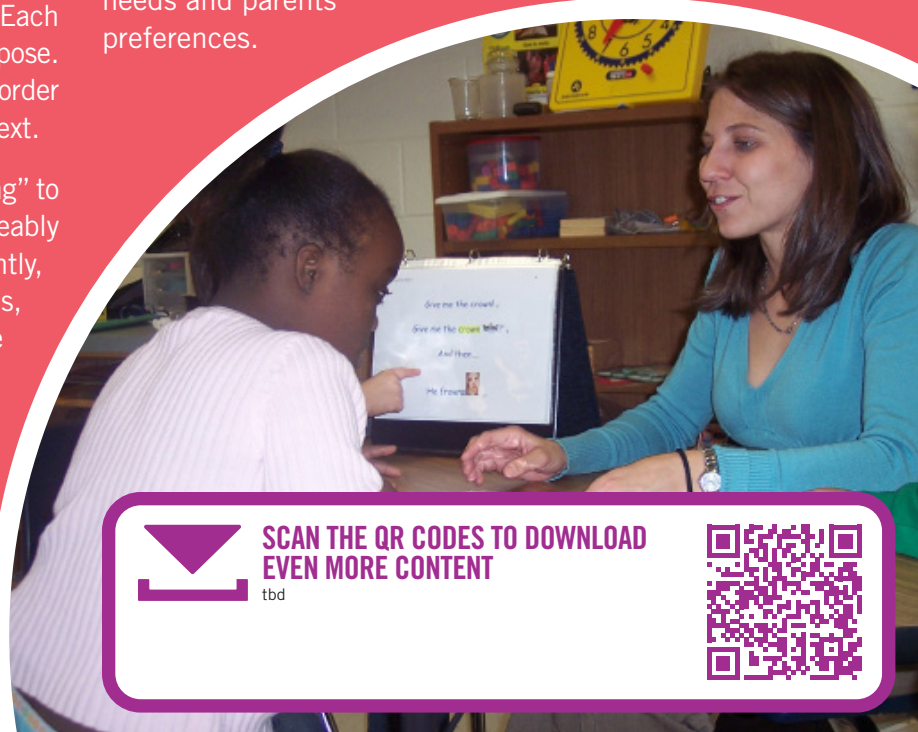
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In addition to regulating special education law in the United States, IDEA standardizes individualized education program (IEP) meetings; they have a specific structure that must be respected and followed. Each element of the meeting serves a specific and vital purpose. There is also intention in following the prescribed order to the elements, as each prepares the way for the next.

To clarify terms, an “IEP team” holds an “IEP meeting” to develop an “IEP”. The term IEP applies interchangeably to describe the team, the meeting, and most importantly, the legal IDEA document laying out the needs, goals, accommodations, and special considerations of the student with a disability.

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING?

Although meetings may vary depending on specific topics, there is only one overarching purpose of an IEP meeting. That is to develop (initial IEP) or review (existing IEP) the IEP document for a specific student and his or her needs, according to the prescribed sections required by IDEA. Some states utilize a different IEP format, but all IEPs contain the same essential elements to be considered by the team at an IEP meeting. In this brochure, each major segment of the IEP meeting will be reviewed. The meeting brings together the individuals whom IDEA requires to be present, as well as some potential additional attendees, dependent on student needs and parents’ preferences.



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Guide to the Individualized  
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### Module 3:

## SUPPORTING PARENTS AS PARTNERS

### EXPERTS *in the Field*



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*Kirsten drove around the elementary school parking lot, unwilling to commit to a parking space. If she parked her car, she would have to get out and walk to the office to sign in as a visitor for her daughter's IEP meeting. She had not slept well the night before and had wakened early, her heart pounding with anxiety about the meeting. She looked at her watch and knew she had to park now to be on time, but questions were flying through her mind. Would they let her ask questions? What if she didn't understand all the terms they used? Who was coming and how many would be there? Would she know anyone? Was she dressed appropriately for the meeting? What if she disagreed with something the staff said? What if she cried? Her stomach was churning and she could feel a headache coming on as she headed toward the office.*

### PARENTS & THE IEP MEETING

Many parents are easily and understandably intimidated at the prospect of attending their children's IEP meetings, let alone strongly advocating for their children at the meetings. Everything is new; they are meeting specialized staff, learning countless new terms and dozens of acronyms, encountering a world of special education law that they had never heard of before, and thinking about their children in new and challenging ways. Most parents are not lawyers, nor are they licensed special education teachers. They must learn a tremendous amount of new information quickly, all while working with their own emotions and, in some cases, shock and anxiety about their children's disabilities and needs. Remember, too, that while schools have many children with special needs to provide for and instruct, to Kirsten, her daughter is all that exists in the world. She will do everything in her power to obtain all the services she believes are necessary to support and advance her child.

There are many practical steps IEP school staff members can take, however, to help parents feel supported in IEP meetings, or at least a little less anxious. Staff can take steps before, during, and after the meeting to reassure the parent and help him or her understand the proceedings more clearly.



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### Module 4:

## WRITING MEASURABLE GOALS & OBJECTIVES

### EXPERTS *in the Field*



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## IDEA, IEPs, AND ANNUAL GOALS AND SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Since 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) has served as the guideline for providing educational services to children with disabilities within our public schools. IDEA requires schools and parents to develop individualized education programs (IEPs) for all children eligible for special education services. Every IEP must include the following elements related to annual goals and objectives:

- A statement of the child's present levels of performance
- Measurable annual goals
- Short-term objectives for children with alternate assessments
- Periodic reports of progress toward annual goals

Module 1 detailed the purposes for IEPs and the requirements for writing legally useful IEPs. This module explains how to write measurable annual goals and objectives.

## WHAT DOES MEASURABLE MEAN?

IDEA makes it clear that measurable annual goals are essential and required. Without measurability, a child's progress toward annual goals cannot be monitored. So, what does measurable mean?

### Four conditions are necessary for measurability:

1. It must state what the child must do.
2. Different observers must be able to agree on whether the goal or objective was met by the child.
3. It must be clear how much progress has been made.
4. Observers must be able to measure the child's progress on the goal or objective as it is written without referring to additional, external information.

In addition, a measurable goal or objective contains **(a) important conditions/givens** (*Given a page of 20 single digit addition problems*), **(b) an observable learner performance** (*Anita will add the digits and write the answers*), and **(c) measurable criteria** (*in less than 1 minute with no more than one error*). Putting these elements together, we have the goal, **"Given a page of 20 single digit addition problems, Anita will add the digits and write the answers in less than 1 minute with no more than one error."**



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### Module 5:

## WRITING MEASURABLE FUNCTIONAL & TRANSITION GOALS

### EXPERTS *in the Field*



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## FUNCTIONAL & TRANSITION GOALS

While it's true that all goals could be considered **FUNCTIONAL** (they serve a function), in the field of special education, we typically talk about functional skills as those we use in our daily activities, such as dressing, feeding ourselves, moving around the community, and so on. This is in contrast to academic skills that typically encompass reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and other subjects taught in general education. Direct and systematic teaching of basic functional skills is essential for many students with disabilities but rarely is needed for those who do not have disabilities. Wolfe and Harriott (1997) defined functional as: "... *those skills that can be used in natural environments and focus on concepts and skills needed in areas such as employment/education, home and family, leisure pursuits, community involvement, physical/emotional health, and personal responsibility/relationships*" (p. 71). Since IDEA requires that all

a child's unique needs must be addressed through IEP goals, we must include functional goals for those students who need instruction in functional skills.

**TRANSITION GOALS** (which are also functional goals) relate to the IDEA requirement that transition planning must be addressed in the IEPs of all children with disabilities no later than when a child turns 16 (and earlier, if appropriate). IEP transition goals must be based on age-appropriate assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills. The services necessary to help a child reach these goals must be designated on the child's IEP and provided under the direction of the school district.

Most transition goals for students with moderate and severe disabilities are functional and deal primarily with employment and independent living skills. Any functional goal that is appropriate for a given 16-year old can also be a transition goal. Therefore, there is no real need to distinguish transition goals from other functional goals. The transition component of an IEP requires the IEP team to focus squarely on a student's departure from school and entrance into the post-high school world. This focus underlines the importance of transition goals being highly functional.



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