

In the Know About



Principals must be conversant in special education terminology to collaborate with parents

By Amanda Morin

Consider this scenario: You're sitting in a meeting concerning an individualized education program (IEP), and the discussion over placement or programming gets heated. You know it's up to you to get things back on track. But where and how do you begin?

If you're asking yourself that, you're likely in good company. Principals who didn't begin their career in special education might have limited training with IEPs.

An IEP lays out the program of special education instruction, supports, and services that students with disabilities will receive to make progress in school, and there's a written legal document that outlines that program.

Creating an IEP is a collaborative process between the student's parents or guardians and the school. It can also be an intimidating and emotionally fraught experience for families who are probably already worried about their child.

As a school leader, facilitating a positive experience between parents and the



school begins with you having a clearer understanding of the process. Here are four ways to begin:

1. Be familiar with the language of special education. Familiarizing yourself with common terminology and basic principles can help you work confidently with staff and parents. Brush up on these key terms:

- **IDEA:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—the federal law that governs special education—is vast. In addition to outlining the processes for identifying, evaluating, and serving students with disabilities, it also outlines the legal obligations of schools and details the rights of parents in a section known as “procedural safeguards.”
Every parent whose child is evaluated for special education is provided a copy of their rights and procedural safeguards. You and your staff are obligated to make

sure parents understand them, which means you need to not only be familiar with the rights and safeguards, but also be able to translate them into parent-friendly terms.

- **FAPE:** Every student in your school is entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). For most students, that’s provided through the general education curriculum. For students with disabilities to benefit from, and make reasonable progress in, the general education curriculum, FAPE may include specialized instruction, related services, accommodations, modifications, and/or assistive technologies.
- **LRE:** IDEA states that students who receive special education should be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) “to the maximum extent that is appropriate.” Put more simply, they should spend as much time as possible in general education settings with students who are not receiving special education.

Special classes, separate schools, or removal from the general education class should be considered only when a student's disability is so severe that supplementary aids and services can't provide an appropriate education. All administrators need to understand LRE because it impacts placement, programming, and resource-allocation decisions.

2. Know your role and responsibilities.

Understanding your role and responsibilities in IEP meetings and the special education process can set the stage for success. It allows parents to understand that each person plays a different role in their child's education, and it conveys to the team that you know each person's role plays a part in helping a student thrive.

An IEP team typically includes a student's parents, the student's general education teacher(s), a special education teacher, related service providers, the student (as appropriate), and an administrator. The administrator needs to be able to oversee the provision of special education, know the general education curriculum, be aware of the resources available, and have the power to allocate those resources. In many cases, that administrator is the building principal.

In that role, you are responsible for:

- Answering any questions parents have about general education and special education;
- Knowing and being able to speak about the services, supports, and programs in your school, as well as what's available at the district level;
- Helping to oversee services the team puts into place for a student; and
- Authorizing the services a student needs to get a FAPE.

3. Invest time learning about students and their needs before a meeting. Communicating to parents that you respect their expertise regarding their child is crucial to making the IEP meeting run smoothly. Knowing and being able to speak specifically about a student's strengths and challenges before walking into a meeting further aids in building trust. It shows parents not only that you're invested in getting to know their child, but also that you're dedicated to overseeing the implementation of special education services in your school.

Before a meeting, read the student's IEP goals (or go over the evaluations the team



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reviews), look over progress monitoring data and test scores, and (if possible) observe the student. Also take the time to talk with general education teachers, special education teachers, and related service providers to confirm that all services and supports have been implemented appropriately. If they haven't, find out why and what needs to happen to implement the plan.

4. Be prepared to lead IEP meetings using clear communication. Although it's often the special education case manager who runs IEP meetings, there are times when principals need to ensure all participants are heard and having a productive conversation.

To better facilitate these meetings, speak with the special education team prior to the meeting. When you do, gather information about the relationship between the parent and the rest of the team, as well as any challenges that need to be solved.

If there has been conflict in the past, principals can play a critical role not only in supporting their staff, but also in supporting the parent voice. You might need to ask participants to clarify their concerns, explain their reasoning (and the data that supports it), and provide suggestions and solutions. It also means being prepared to respectfully suggest that the IEP team reconvene at another time if it can't reach a consensus about what an appropriate program for the student looks like.

These four suggestions are just the beginning of the collaborative relationships you can build between your school and the families of children needing IEPs. 

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