

Facilitated IEP Meetings: An Emerging Practice

Introduction to IEP Facilitation

To help special education planning teams reach agreements, several State Education Agencies (SEAs) provide the option of facilitated Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The use of externally facilitated IEP meetings is growing nationally. When relationships between parents and schools are strained, facilitated meetings may be beneficial.

This guide:

- 1) provides an introduction to IEP facilitation for parents and other family members to help orient them to this emerging practice, and
- 2) discusses the use of external IEP facilitators who are not directly affiliated with the team, or who may be independent of both the team and the school district.

Those states that use facilitated IEP meetings find that effective IEP meeting facilitation is essential to the IEP process. All IEP meetings benefit from skilled and capable facilitators who can assist the team in crafting agreements that lead to educational programs with beneficial outcomes for students with disabilities.

A facilitator helps keep members of the IEP team focused on the development of the IEP while addressing conflicts and disagreements that may arise during the meeting. At the meeting, the facilitator will use communication skills that create an environment in which the IEP team members can listen to each member's point of view and work together to complete the development of a high quality IEP.



IEP teams have a number of options in terms of who facilitates the meeting. Typically, a member of the team facilitates the meeting but sometimes, a district representative with expert facilitation skills may be called in to help the team complete the IEP process. In some cases, a parent, trained parent advocate, or support person may facilitate the meeting. Some students may lead their own IEP meetings. When IEP teams reach an impasse or meetings are expected to be contentious, an independent, trained facilitator not affiliated with the team or school district may help guide the process.

While the use of IEP facilitation is a growing trend and has proven useful when conflicts exist or relationships are strained, the availability of IEP facilitation is still limited. No Federal regulations related to IEP facilitation exist. All Federal and State laws and regulations related to the development of IEPs still apply. Also, considerable variability exists related to this practice and those who serve as external IEP facilitators.

IEP facilitation should not be confused with mediation. When Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), they added a requirement that SEAs must make mediation available whenever a request for a due process hearing has been filed.

Mediation may be used to deal with a broader range of issues in special education than in an IEP meeting. Mediation is typically used when there is a significant disagreement that the parties are otherwise unable to resolve. A trained impartial mediator brings the parties together to work with each other to resolve a variety of disagreements, often including those unrelated to the student's IEP. (For more information, see Special Education Mediation: A Guide for Parents available at www.directionservice.org/cadre.)

Since the reauthorization of the IDEA in 1997, families, school districts, parent training and information centers, community parent resource centers, disability groups and the U.S. Department of Education have fostered and supported the use of alternative dispute resolution to resolve issues in special education. The use of a facilitator at an IEP meeting is just one way to resolve conflicts that may arise.

Role of the External Facilitator

The Facilitator:

- Helps members of the IEP team focus on developing a satisfactory IEP. With the agreement of all team members, the facilitator may help create an overall agenda and assist in generating ground rules for the meeting.
- Guides the discussion by keeping the team's energy centered on student-focused questions such as "How is the student doing?", "Where does the student need to be a year from now?", and "In what ways can we help him or her to reach his/her goals and objectives?"
- Assists the team to resolve conflicts and disagreements that arise during the meeting. The facilitator, however, does not typically facilitate disputes unrelated to the IEP.
- Helps to maintain open communication among all members.
- Helps team members develop and ask clarifying questions about issues that may have come up in the past.
- Helps to keep team members on task and within the time allotted for the meeting.
- Maintains impartiality and does not take sides, place blame or determine if a particular decision is right or wrong.
- Does not impose a decision on the group.

"As a facilitator at facilitated IEP Meetings, it is my responsibility to help keep the lines of communication open among the IEP team members. Hopefully this will lead to the development of an appropriate Individualized Education Program for the student. At times this can be difficult because previous meetings may have been tense and stressful for all concerned. I use various facilitation skills in which I have been trained. I try to help the team establish ground rules for the meeting, aid participants in developing clarifying questions which often lead to mutual solutions and require members of the team to adhere to timelines for completion of the meeting. I do not make the final decisions; those are up to the IEP team and the family is always a key member of that team."

IEP Facilitator

Benefits of a Facilitated IEP Meeting

A Facilitated IEP Meeting:

- Builds and improves relationships among the IEP team members and between parents and schools.
- Insures that the meeting is student-focused.
- Models effective communication and listening.
- Clarifies points of agreement and disagreement.
- Provides opportunities for team members to resolve conflicts if they arise.
- Encourages parents and professionals to identify new options to address unresolved problems.
- Costs less than more formal proceedings such as due process hearings.
- Is typically less stressful than formal proceedings.
- Supports better follow through and follow-up. Roles and responsibilities can be discussed and planned.
- Is the IEP meeting, and does not require a separate IEP meeting to formalize agreements that are reached.
- Supports all parties in participating fully.

“Both sides were heard and a good plan was worked out for the child.”

School Administrator

Family Preparation for a Facilitated IEP Meeting

Families Can:

- Prepare a written list of issues you want to discuss and questions you want to ask.
- Ask yourself three important questions:
 - (1) Where is my son or daughter now in his/her educational performance?
 - (2) Where do I want my son or daughter to be a year from now and how can those expectations be measured?
 - (3) In what ways can the team help her or him to meet those expectations?
- Organize your documents. Record dates and notes on them. You may want to make copies of some of the information to share with the team and the facilitator.
- Be willing to listen carefully and consider possible solutions and options.
- Attend a workshop or training conducted by a parent center to learn about your role and responsibilities as a member of the IEP team.
- Call your parent training and information center or community parent resource center to talk with an information specialist. A staff member can answer your questions and help you prepare for the meeting. In some cases, a parent center staff member may attend the IEP meeting with you.

(Contact information for reaching a parent center in your state can be found at the website for the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers: www.taalliance.org.)

Frequently Asked Questions about Facilitated IEPs

It is important to remember that facilitated IEPs are the same as any other IEP meeting. The same expectations exist for compliance with legal regulations and any other requirements that govern the IEP process in your state. The only significant difference is the presence of a facilitator.

Is there any type of procedural notice that I will receive regarding a facilitated IEP meeting?

Yes, as in any IEP meeting, the notification procedures found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act apply. Districts must give parents proper notice including the place and time where the meeting will occur, who will attend, and the purpose of the meeting. Beginning when the student is age 14, or younger, the notice should reflect that the meeting will include the development of a transition plan. Parents and the school district may bring an advocate or other people who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child to the meeting.

Who attends a facilitated IEP meeting?

Members of the IEP team attend the facilitated IEP meeting.

What happens if we don't finish the IEP at the first meeting?

If an agreement about the IEP is not reached at the first meeting, another IEP meeting may be scheduled.

Where and when is a facilitated IEP meeting held?

The facilitated IEP meeting is usually scheduled by the school district and is held at a time and place that is mutually satisfactory for all required IEP team members.

“The facilitator helped establish guidelines for the meeting which helped to relieve the tension, allowing people to be open and honest.”

School Psychologist

Frequently Asked Questions about Facilitated IEPs

How do I request a facilitated IEP meeting?

While access to IEP facilitators is increasing, not all states or districts make IEP facilitation available to parents and educators. Parents interested in having an externally facilitated IEP meeting should begin by contacting their school district to explore their options and inquire about availability. Parents can also contact their state education agency or parent center for information about the availability and use of IEP meeting facilitators.

Does the facilitator make decisions?

No, the role of the facilitator is to facilitate communication among the IEP team members and assist them to develop an effective IEP for the student. The facilitator models effective communication skills and offers ways to address and resolve conflicts in the development of the IEP. Facilitators are trained in effective communication and ways to address and resolve conflicts. The members of the IEP team are the decision-makers.

As a parent, do I pay for the facilitated IEP meeting?

IEP facilitation is provided with no cost to parents. One of the objectives in using the facilitated IEP meeting is to reduce costs and avoid more adversarial procedures such as due process hearings.

Is there a guaranteed right for families to have access to an outside IEP facilitator?

No, external IEP facilitation is not required by IDEA. While many states are exploring the use of different appropriate dispute resolution procedures (including facilitated IEPs), not all states or school districts have a process in place for using external IEP facilitators.

What if the facilitated IEP meeting does not result in an acceptable IEP?

You have not forfeited your rights to other forms of dispute resolution. At times, the issues, disagreements and problems may not be resolved through a facilitated IEP meeting. You may want to consider mediation or another form of appropriate dispute resolution.

“With an impartial facilitator conducting the meeting, she kept us moving forward so we did not become stuck on personal issues.

Parent

I want to continue to be an advocate for my child. What organizations can I contact to remain current on my roles and responsibilities as a parent?

The following is a list of organizations you can contact to learn more about appropriate dispute resolution strategies and ways to advocate more effectively for your son or daughter with a disability. Parents need to be knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities. These organizations can provide you with helpful information on assisting your child with their educational programs.

The Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) serves as the National Center on Dispute Resolution and is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education. CADRE supports parents, educators and administrators to benefit from the full continuum of conflict resolution options and to solve problems and disputes in less adversarial ways. You can reach CADRE at www.directionservice.org/cadre or call (541) 686-5060.

The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers serves as the National Technical Assistance Program for parent projects funded by OSEP at the U.S. Department of Education. The Alliance provides assistance for establishing, developing, and coordinating parent centers and connects families of children and youth with disabilities to the parent centers. You can reach the Alliance Project at www.taalliance.org or call toll-free 1-888-248-0822 for information about the parent center in your state.

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) is the national information center that provides information on disabilities and disability related issues to families. NICHCY serves as the central repository of products developed by projects funded through OSEP. Anyone can use NICHCY services including families, educators, administrators, and students. NICHCY's special focus is on children and youth with disabilities, birth to 22 years. You can reach NICHCY at www.nichcy.org or call toll-free 1-800-695-0285.

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Contact Your Local Parent Center: