

5 Things to Know about Your Child's IEP

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1 You Cannot Simply Trust the School to Do What is Best

It pains me to have to say this right up front, but I think it's true. I'm not saying that the people at your child's school are bad people or have bad intentions. But systems can go wrong even when the people involved are good. There are at least three reasons why schools and districts don't always do what is best for children on IEPs:

1. ignorance
2. ease
3. funding

A few brief words about each in turn.

I was at an IEP meeting for our son and took a copy of the state's Special Education Manual (more on this below). Multiple members of the IEP had never seen a copy of it before, and at least one didn't even *know that it existed*. If people whose job is to construct and implement an IEP don't know the state's guidelines for doing so, it's not surprising that sometimes they don't know what they need to do in the best interest of our children. And why don't teachers and aids know about the relevant guidelines? In my experience, because the district doesn't give them the support they need. I don't think the school, the teachers, the aids, the principles are the enemy. But often they don't know what is in the best interest of your child. You do. You're going to have to work to help educate them.

The second item, ease, is probably not too surprising. Left to their own devices, systems will often do what is easiest, rather than what is best. Integrating special needs students into the classroom is hard. Another story. When we first got involved in advocacy for our son in his school, the special education teacher told us that she had up to 16 special needs students in her classroom, and only

one aid. She said she often felt “like a glorified baby-sitter not a teacher” since she couldn’t focus on education while attending to so many basic needs. She simply did what she could do to survive. And given the little support the school and the district gave her, that’s not surprising. So why don’t schools and districts give special education the support that it needs?

Enter the last item on our list, finances. Specialized instruction, aids, modifications—all of this is expensive. And most schools don’t have extra funding just laying around. While the issues here are complex, the short answer is that, according to federal law, a district cannot fail to provide what is required by an IEP because of finances. But sometimes they aren’t going to want to pay for things that they can get away with not paying for. So you must do your research.

2 Make Sure You Do Your Research

Because the school (and district) cannot be trusted to always do what is best for your child, you’re going to have to help them. And in some cases make them. But you can’t do this if you’re not any more informed than they are. So you’re going to have to do your homework. As I learned from *Schoolhouse Rocks* as a child, “Knowledge is Power.”

Here things get complicated, because what you need to read will depend on where you live. Suppose you live in Idaho. Then you need to read the Idaho Department of Education’s *Special Education Manual*. Fortunately, it’s available online, [here](#). Trying to wade through such a document can be overwhelming. But start with those parts that are most relevant. Again, using Idaho as an example, here’s where we suggest starting:

- Chapter 1, which is an overview of crucial concepts like FAPE, IEP, LRE, etc...;
- Chapter 2, which is further information on FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education), which is what the school is legally required to provide for your child;
- Chapter 5, which details IEPs; and
- Chapter 6, which outlines what the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) is—this is crucial, since it will deal with your child’s placement.

If you live in another state, the details of the above will vary. But start with a Google search for the special education manual in your state and go from there. (And don’t be afraid to email *22 Advocacy* if you have questions. While we’re not specialists in all states, we’re certainly willing to learn and help!)

3 You are an Equal Member of the IEP Team

As a parent or legal guardian, you are an equal member of the IEP, with just as much input and say as anyone else (again, I'm writing within the context of Idaho; this may vary state to state). And the parent is often the person who best knows the student. You are not at IEP meetings just to listen; you're there to contribute. So don't be afraid to speak up and be insistent on what you think is best for your child. If you disagree with what the rest of the team decides, there is a formal process for dispute resolution. If you disagree with what the IEP team comes up with, **DO NOT SIGN IT**.

4 You Have the Right to an Advocate

Some people are more uncomfortable by conflict than others. And while conflict should be avoided when possible, sometimes conflict is necessary in order to do what is best for our children. (See #1 above for a reminder!) If you are averse to conflict, or have a hard time speaking up in group settings for any reason, or think that you might be intimidated or outnumbered by the number of individuals the school has present at the meeting—if any of these apply to you, then take someone with you to advocate with you for what is in your child's best interest.

I've also, unfortunately, seen IEP meetings go very different from the very beginning as soon as someone introduces themselves as an 'advocate'. I've also, again unfortunately, seen IEP teams treat mothers very differently than I've seen them treat fathers. It shouldn't be like this, but in many cases, simply having a male parent or advocate present makes the school much more willing to 'listen'. Bias against women is no more acceptable than bias against the disabled; but it's real and you may need to take steps to work against it.

5 Pay Particular Attention to the Service Minutes Page

In many ways, the page that says where your child will be during the school day, and for how long, is the single most important page of an IEP. It's the page that dictates your child's schedule and must be followed by the school because of federal reporting requirements. It's often referred to as the 'service minutes page', but its official name may be slightly different—e.g., 'Services & Other Considerations'. In our experience, this is where many schools and districts default to a 'pull out' model, rather than striving for integration. There are times when your child may need to be in a resource room or extended resource room. But because of the 'ease' mentioned in section 1, many times the tendency is to pull out from the regular classroom (the General Education Classroom, or

GEC) more than is needed.

In Idaho, for example, state laws requires that all “aids, services, and other supports that are provided in general education classes . . . to enable students with disabilities to be educated with students without disabilities *to the maximum extent appropriate.*” Furthermore, “removal of a student with a disability from the general education environment may occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the general education class, even with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” (These quotations are taken directly from the state special education manual—see, it helps to know the relevant guidelines!). When the child will be pulled from the GEC, for how long, and for what reason, will be indicated on the Service Minutes Page. Given the above guidelines, a student can *only* be pulled when she *cannot* be working on an IEP goal or accessing her education in the GEC with the appropriate supports (which includes an aid). So pay very close attention to this page, and, for every block of time that the school wants to pull your child from the GEC, ask the following questions:

- What specific goals will the child be working on during that time?
- Why can’t those goals be worked on in the GEC?
- What kinds of accommodations or supports have they tried for that goal in the GEC?
- Will they share with the parents, in writing, the documentation of how they’ve tried to approach that goal in the GEC?

Simply asking these questions indicates to the school that you are informed and know your child’s basic rights.

Congratulations, you’re now prepared to begin advocating for your child.