**Module 2 Part 1 – Navigating the IEP Process**

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*This section corresponds with middle school classroom materials Module 2 Lesson* 1.

**Introduction**

**Objective:** The student will describe the different elements of his/her Individualized Education Program (IEP).

**Estimated time needed:** 45 – 60 minutes

**Additional materials needed:**

* Internet access
* Current copy of your IEP
* Printed copy of the My IEP sheet found at the end of this module

**Introductory Video**

*[](https://youtu.be/q2XlAWcMAUk)*

**Learn About It**

You’ve been hearing the term IEP for a long time now. You may know exactly what it an IEP is and why you have one. It’s also possible that you have some questions about this document and the way it is created. In this lesson, you’re going to take a closer look at IEP’s in general and get a chance to understand more about them, but you’ll also get to look at your own IEP. As you move toward high school, it’s important that you start taking ownership of your learning and your accommodations so that you can receive the best education possible. IEP formally stands for ***Individualized Education Plan***, but another way to describe it could be an “I Expect Progress” plan. You have a team of people who want to help you make steady progress in school, and you are the most important part of that process!

If you receive special education services in school, then you have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is an important legal document. It spells out your learning needs, the services the school will provide, and how your progress will be measured.

Individualized Education Plans are required by law and are managed by special education teams which help support students in their academic setting. School systems realize that not all students learn the same way; therefore, they put IEP’s in place to be sure all students make positive educational progress each year. For some students, the way teachers construct the general class environment fits with the way they learn, and an individualized plan is not needed. Other students learn in ways that are different from the general group. This doesn’t mean that these students can’t learn. Many students with IEPs are very smart, they just need different types of settings or structures in place to help them be successful. Teachers/parents need to ensure that what’s going on in the classroom fits their needs as well. IEP meetings give the teachers, students, and parents a time to sit together, reflect on what is the best approach for each student, and make plans for the upcoming school year. The IEP is simply a tool/paper that documents this plan.

Several people, including your parents or legal guardians and you, are involved in creating the document. The entire process can be a great way to sort out your strengths and challenges, and working on the IEP can help you figure out ways to be successful in school. The more you know about the process, the better. During elementary school, you were probably not an active part of this process every year. Middle school, however, is a great time for you to begin to become more involved in your educational planning process. At this age you are becoming more aware of how you learn best, what does and does not work for you in the classroom, and you can articulate this to the IEP team.

If you were to summarize the definition of an IEP, it would include these things

* IEP stands for Individualized Education Program
* It is a written document that is required for each student who is eligible to receive special education services
* It directs the provision of special education services to students with disabilities
* Among other things, your IEP talks about:
  + Your disability
  + Your current skill levels in specific areas
  + What skills you will learn over the year
  + Where you will learn this school year
  + The services your school will provide

**What is an IEP?**



**Required Components of an IEP**

IEPs are designed to meet your unique needs which means that every IEP will look different. However, by law, all IEPs must contain the same basic elements. Every IEP should include the following pieces:

1. **Annual educational goals:** These should be realistic, achievable and measurable. The IEP lists the academic and functional skills that the IEP team thinks you can achieve by the end of the year. These goals should help you participate in the general education classroom. These goals go beyond what will be happening in the classroom for all other students. Those goals apply to you as well (e.g. making steady progress on social studies competencies for your grade), but IEP goals document additional areas of focus you related to your particular learning profile.
2. **Present levels of educational performance (PLOP):** This is a thorough description of your current abilities, skills, weaknesses and strengths. It’s the part of the IEP that explains how your learning issues affect your ability to learn the general education curriculum. PLOP (also sometimes called PLP or PLAAFP) includes details on how you handle academic subjects and every day or “functional” activities, like socializing.

Information in this section of the IEP should be based on teacher observations *and* objective data, like test results. It’s important that PLOP is not simply copied “as is” from one year’s IEP to the next. Each year you mature and master skills. And each year the work becomes more challenging. So your performance and needs will change. If your teacher does some testing from time to time, or year to year with you, it is likely that he/she is collecting information to be able to make this description as accurate and through as possible.

1. **Results of evaluations and tests:** This should include recent district-wide and state assessments as well as any other standardized tests you took
2. **Special education and related services to be provided:** The IEP spells out what kinds of support and services you will receive. If you’re going to have speech therapy, for instance, it will say how many minutes a week you will receive this therapy. This is the place where services like curriculum assistance will also be determined and documented.
3. **Accommodations and modifications:** These help you learn the general education curriculum. Accommodations are changes in *how* you show what you have learned. They can help you work around your learning issues. For example, you may be given extra time on tests.
4. **Supplementary aids and services:** These are supports to help you learn in the general education classroom. They might include a one-on-one aide, highlighted classroom notes, equipment or assistive technology such as software.
5. **An explanation of how much time you will participate in general education classes and extracurricular activities:** Participation at the fullest level possible is required by law. This is called the least restrictive environment.
6. **The date the IEP will go into effect:** Many states have formal timelines for this. Depending on your age and situation, your IEP might also include a transition plan.
7. **Participation in state or district-wide academic assessments, and a description of accommodations that are needed.**
8. **Transition services/plan:** This part is required to start when you turn 16, but most schools begin when you turn 14. Transition planning includes services and support to help a student graduate from high school and achieve post-high school goals.
9. **A description of how your progress will be measured and reported to your parents or legal guardians:** By law, the IEP must explain how the school will track your progress toward goals. And it must describe how the school will share those results with you. For instance, one goal might be that you be able to read at a sixth-grade level. The IEP will specify how that will be tracked—informal and formal assessments, for instance—and how often those results will be reported to you. If these interim reports show that your progress has stalled, you and the IEP team may discuss new interventions.

**Parents Chime In**

By this point, you’ve been to many IEP meetings, but it may have been something that you’ve just always done for your child. Early on it’s natural to take over these meetings for your child and not expect him/her to take an active role. You might have even assumed that he/she wouldn’t understand the nature of the discussion or the background support that is available. While that might have been true in elementary school, your child is entering into a different developmental stage now. Take a leap of faith and begin to explain the parts of the IEP process to your child. You may be surprised by what happens!

The IEP is created by a team of people who know you best and are aware of the goals and resources of the school each year. Everyone on that team has one main goal – to help you have the best possible school year. Each person on the team plays an important role. (Check out the “Who Comes to an IEP Meeting?” section below to learn more about the people on your team.)



**Where is the IEP developed?**



The law requires the IEP team to review the IEP **at least once a year**, but the IEP team can meet any time you or the school want a meeting. Many teams meet more often than once a year. These meetings take place at school with people who are concerned with your education so that they can meet, discuss, and develop IEP goals for the calendar year.

This means that you attend at least one IEP meeting each year. These meetings are called **Annual Reviews.** You, your parents/guardians, or the school can request and IEP meeting outside of the Annual Review if a review of the current IEP is necessary. The meetings can last anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours, depending on the purpose of the meeting and the team’s discussion.

There are several people involved in helping develop your IEP, and this group of people is considered your IEP team. Some participants are required by law to come to the meeting. Others, such as you and your parents, must be *invited* to take part in the meeting.

By the law, the team can include:

* **Your parents or legal guardians:** IDEA gives parents the legal right to participate in all of their child’s IEP meetings. After all, your parents or guardians know your strengths and struggles better than anyone else.
* At least one of your **general education teachers.**
* At least one **special education teacher** or other special education provider.
* A **school district representative** knowledgeable about both general education and special education. This person also should have the power to make decisions that involve school resources. In other words, if the school rep thinks you should be given speech therapy, she should have the power to make that happen. This is called the LEA (Local Education Agency) Representative
* A **school psychologist or other specialist** who can interpret your evaluation and test results. Other specialists might include speech/language pathologist, occupational or physical therapist, etc.

When you turn 16, you will be expected to participate as a member of your IEP team and help develop a transition plan. A representative from an outside agency, such as a post–high school vocational program or a disability support specialist from a college, may join meetings. You also have the right to invite others to attend your IEP meeting. Be sure to send the school advance written notice of additional attendees.

**Who Comes to an IEP Meeting?**

**How often are meetings held? How long do they last?**

**Continued…**

You may also find it helpful to invite:

* **A professional you’ve hired**, who has knowledge or expertise about you. Examples: a private tutor or health-care professional (such as a speech-language pathologist).
* A **friend** to serve as an “extra pair of ears” or to take notes for you.
* A **translator**, if you’re deaf or don’t speak or read English fluently. You may ask the school to provide a translator. IDEA requires that school districts do their best to accommodate parents who need this service.

Click [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5EycC7o_DI) to watch a video for more information about who attends an IEP meeting.



This meeting is all about you! It’s ***your*** educational program that everyone will be discussing in the meetings. Your opinions are an important part of this discussion. It’s important to share your strengths, concerns, suggestions, modifications and/or accommodations you need to help you be successful in school. Use your positive self-advocacy skills to share the following information.

* **Your strengths.** Share any success you have had outside of school. Let’s say you struggle with attention issues and social skills. Your IEP team will want to know that you find it easier to follow directions from your soccer coach and are better at cooperating with teammates. You may be able to apply some of what you learn about staying on track in those environments to academic settings.
* **Your concerns and suggestions for improving your education.** The meeting is a good time to share where you are still struggling. This may be hard to voice, but make sure you are heard. For example, if you are having a tough time spelling or you are constantly losing assignments, the people in the room will be able to help you by providing ideas and strategies. It is important that they know where you are struggling so they can help.
* **How well modifications and accommodations (such as assistive technology) are helping.** If they aren’t helping you as expected, the team can discuss upgrading, discontinuing or replacing them. The team can also consider any new instruction and technology tools that might be right for you.

If you are already familiar with the IEP process and your IEP goals, you may want to take the next step and actually help develop your IEP. If you want to do this, you’ll want to try these five steps:

1. **Talk to your parents and teachers**: Ask when your next IEP meeting will be. Tell them you want to learn how to take a more active role in the process.
2. **Review last year's IEP**: Both your parents and special education teacher should have a copy. Schedule a time to sit with each and talk about the last IEP meeting. If you were not there, ask them to share with you some of the conversation and explain the different elements of the current IEP that was created during that meeting. This will be important context for you, but it will also refresh their memory about the last meeting. This is something that will be helpful for them too in preparation for the next one.
3. **Think about your strengths and needs in school**: Is the current IEP designed in such a way that lets you capitalize on your strengths? Does it enable you to both improve on and work around your challenges?
4. **Write your goals for this school year**: Make sure you include both academic and nonacademic goals. Share them with your parents and teachers, and talk about how those can be reflected in your upcoming IEP.
5. **Practice what you want to say at the meeting**: Your first IEP meeting (or the first one where you are taking a more direct role) might be a little intimidating. Practice in advance how you want to talk about your strengths, needs, goals, etc. If you don’t have a person to practice with, just practice in front of a mirror or during a time when you can walk through your thoughts out-loud.



**What should I do if I want to help develop my IEP?**

The IEP meeting is key to making sure your IEP is working for you. It gives you a chance to discuss with teachers your weaknesses and strengths. If you didn’t meet any or all of your goals that quarter, that’s ok! This meeting will give you an opportunity to talk about new ways for you to receive help. That may mean modifying the goal and adjusting expectations. Or it could mean giving you more or different kinds of services and support.

The IEP meeting is when you, teachers and the school give and get input on how you’re doing. You’ll discuss what’s working, what needs to change, and whether you are catching up or falling behind. Your feelings and motivations should be included in the conversation, so don’t shy away from telling the people at the meeting how you are feeling.

Remember these things:

* You should be attending your IEP meetings
* This is your time to shine…tell them what you are thinking!
* The IEP team should want to know how your feel about your level of performance, your goals, and your accommodations
* Are you using your accommodations? Do they work? Speak up!

Click [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTTC3ShblCQ) to view a video about a student’s role in their IEP meeting.

**Parents Chime In**

This can be a really big step for your child. Not only will it provide ownership for your child’s learning, but it is also a step toward independence and advocacy in his/her life. You will play a vital role in supporting your child to be able to help develop an IEP. You can help by doing the following things:

* Reviewing the IEP for yourself and becoming familiar with it
* Sharing some of the strategies and components that have been implemented throughout his/her school career
* Giving the student a realistic idea about what to expect at an IEP meeting, based on your previous experience with his/her current school.
* Being patient and allowing your child to work through some of the ideas independently
* Being a sounding board while your child practices what he/she will say in the meeting
* Encouraging your child to have perseverance even when it is hard.

**Why should I participate in the IEP meeting?**



There may be a time when you and the school don’t see eye to eye. Be sure to calmly and professionally try to talk through your differences. If that does not result in an agreement, IDEA gives your parents/guardians several options:

* **Ask for a mediation session.** If the school doesn’t automatically offer a mediation session, you can request one. (Be sure to have your parents do so in writing.) In this meeting, a mediator helps each party express their positions and understand those of the other parties. The mediator manages the discussion and helps the group reach an agreement. The mediator does not recommend solutions or take sides.
* **Talk to your parents about a due process complaint.** If you’re not satisfied with the results of the mediation, you can request a due process hearing by writing an official letter, also called a “complaint.” A due process hearing is a formal meeting where parents and school officials present arguments and evidence to a hearing officer or administrative law judge. This person is *not* an employee of the school district.

The parents and the district are allowed to bring attorneys and present evidence. Each state has different procedures. Consult your state department of education to find out how to file this complaint and what to include in it.

* **Hold a resolution session.** Before the due process hearing, the school district is required to hold what’s called a resolution session. This is a meeting between you, your parents, key members of the IEP team and someone authorized to make decisions for the district. You parents may bring an attorney, but you’re not required to. The school district can only bring an attorney if you do.
* **File a civil lawsuit.** This is the next option if you aren’t satisfied with the result of the due process hearing. It’s the most extreme option available. It requires that parents hire an attorney and go through extensive legal proceedings.
* **When an agreement is reached, get it in writing.** When you reach an agreement, whether during mediation, a resolution session or civil suit, your parents will need a copy of it in writing. In fact, any changes made to your IEP and the steps the school will take need to be documented.

**What happens if I disagree with the rest of my IEP team?**

**Parents Chime In**

In an ideal world, everyone will work as a team all of the time and agree on the best course of action for your child’s education. However, this does not always happen. We recommend that you try every means possible to collaborate with the school for the best interests of your student and not jump too quickly to due-process procedures. The hope is that you don’t have to take extreme measures, but you need to know that there are steps in place to help you through the process if you aren’t comfortable with the IEP team’s decisions.

The decisions that you make now actually can impact your options after high school. For example, in 8th grade you will be signing up for classes in high school. Some of the academic tracks in high school could lead to going to college while some will not. If you feel like you want to one day be in a career that requires college, you will need to pursue the college-track courses. Even if you are not sure right now that you could make it in college, you will grow a lot in high school. It is easier to start on a college-bound track and later move to a different one, than to start on a non-college track and move on to one later.

It is also important to remember that the 9th and 10th grade years are when you build an academic record that colleges look for. It’s important that these early years are strong. While you won’t start applying to college until 11th grade, colleges look at the high school record and that starts in 9th grade.

While college is expensive, grades, experiences, and volunteer efforts that begin in 9th grade might actually help with things like scholarships. Think about how you can hit the ground running in high school in these areas.

High school passes quickly. You will need to be confident enough to ask for help, and even seek revisions to your IEP, if you find yourself struggling in a particular class. You need to build the confidence to do this as well as an understanding about how to do it during your middle school years so that you will be ready to be a self-advocate in high school!



**Where does Transition fit in?**

**Get to know your own IEP!**



Give yourself a chance to become familiar with your IEP! If you don’t already have one at home, ask your teacher for a copy of your current IEP. Then complete the page that is linked below in order to see all of the components of your IEP. This is the first step to taking an active role in your educational program.

Click [here](file:///C:\Users\jamesmo\Downloads\MSM2_Lesson_1_My_IEP_handout_6.13.16.docx) to access the document.

***Follow Up***

Review the My IEP sheet with your parent or guardian. See if you can explain the sheet and the components of your IEP clearly. Don’t forget to tell them all you know about the IEP process now!

**Have you accomplished today’s objective?**

**Objective:** The student will describe the different elements of his/her Individualized Education Program (IEP).

*If so, congratulations!*

*If not, review the High School vs. College examples again and discuss the questions at the end of this lesson. Have your parent review this with you.*

**For more information…Digging Deeper:**

Steps in the IEP process

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/steps-ndividualized-education-program-IEP/> (May 24, 2016)

The IEP Process Explained

<http://www.specialeducationguide.com/pre-k-12/individualized-education-programs-iep/the-iep-process-explained/> (May 24, 2016)

Contents of the IEP

<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/iepcontents/> (May 24, 2016)