

Engaging Families in the IEP Process



A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS



Why You Need This Document

Decades of research tell us that family engagement is an important means of maximizing student potential. When families are not just involved but actively engaged, students achieve better grades, higher test scores, and increased graduation rates, as well as demonstrate more appropriate behaviors. Such engagement improves outcomes for all students, including students

who receive special education services. However, research also shows us that many families do not fully engage in the special education process, even when they faithfully and conscientiously attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The format of such meetings can make it difficult for families to engage. The subject matter is

complex, the vocabulary is confusing, and many meetings involve a lot of “talking at” families, instead of “talking with” families. It is the responsibility of the school to engage families, but it can be unclear how to do this. This document will explore how schools can reframe the IEP process and take active steps to include families as educational partners.

Guiding Ideas

EXPLANATION FOR FAMILIES

This is a suggested way for educators to explain each section to families. The sections follow the Annotated IEP.

CONSIDERATIONS

“Considerations” are questions that educators should ask themselves when preparing for IEP meetings.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

“Conversation starters” are questions that educators can ask families in order to facilitate conversations.

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How to Use this Document

The purpose of this document is to help local educational agencies (LEAs) engage families in the IEP process. This document is to be used by schools and educational staff. This document is not intended to be used by families; instead, it is meant to assist educational professionals in engaging families. Family engagement is the responsibility of school professionals, and this document provides guidance on how to facilitate that engagement.

This document is divided into the sections of the IEP, as reflected in the Annotated IEP document. It may be used in conjunction with other annotated IEP resources, such as the Annotated IEP Companion Checklist. What makes this document different is its specific focus on engaging families.

This document consists of three major components: Explanation for Families, Considerations, and Conversation Starters. The "Explanation for Families" uses family-friendly language to explain each section of the IEP, empowering families by increasing their knowledge of the IEP document. Each section also contains "Considerations." Considerations are reflective questions that educators can ask themselves to determine whether they are fully engaging families in each section of the IEP. "Conversation Starters" are questions that educators can ask in order to engage families in conversation that is pertinent to each IEP section.

General Considerations When Preparing for IEP Team Meetings

- Use flexible scheduling practices.
- Allow for meetings to be held in a variety of ways (in-person, digitally, on the phone, etc.).
- Send home a copy of the draft IEP for the family to review.
- Make sure that families know, and approve of, any team member absences. Otherwise, reschedule for when team members are available.
- Ensure that potentially absent team members provide information to the families ahead of time, so they can ask questions.
- Ask if the family wants to include anyone else in the meeting.
- Ensure that documents are translated professionally for families who need them.
- Schedule interpreters for meetings, as necessary.
- Schedule ample time for the meeting; inform the family that the team will hold an additional meeting, if more time is needed.
- Make sure that the family knows how to get to the meeting location, either in-person or virtual.
- Provide a quiet, private location for the meeting, where the team can sit in a collaborative configuration, instead of an "us vs. them" configuration.
- Make sure that families have the resources and know-how to log in to, and participate in, digital meetings.

Best Practices to Engage Families in Education

Before implementing the strategies in this document, ensure that you are using best practices to engage families in education:

- Creating a welcoming school environment
- Recognizing families as collaborative partners
- Communicating frequently with families throughout the school year
- Emphasizing two-way communication between school and home
- Using culturally responsive practices
- Increasing accessibility to educational materials

Engaging Students in IEPs

This document is focused on engaging families in IEP meetings. However, school teams must also remember that it is equally important to engage students in the IEP process. For more information on student-led IEPs and engaging students in the IEP process, please visit [PaTTAN's Student-Led IEP Resources](#).



Demographics and IEP Team Meeting Information

An Explanation for Families

This section of the IEP looks at logistical information, such as where you live and who is involved in your child's education. In this section, you will be asked to make sure that we have the right contact information for you. We'll also ask you to sign an IEP signature page to show that you attended this meeting. Only people who participate in the meeting should sign the IEP signature page. This signature doesn't mean that everyone agrees on the document; instead, it just means that those people were at the meeting.

You will be asked to sign that you were given or offered a copy of the Procedural Safeguards Notice, and possibly asked to sign consent for Medical Assistance Program Billing. The Procedural Safeguards Notice is an explanation of the rights of parents whose children receive special education services. The Medical Assistance Program Billing notice is a consent form stating that families understand that the school may access their child's Medicaid benefits for some services listed in the IEP. Providing this consent does not affect your insurance in any way.

Considerations for Demographics Section and IEP Team Meeting

- Did you welcome the families to the meeting, and did you or the student (if present) introduce them to the other team members?
- Have individuals who were invited by the family been recognized, introduced, and added to the IEP attendance page?
- Does the IEP include (or does the LEA have access to) accurate contact information for all parents and guardians who should receive school communications and copies of special education documents, particularly for students who live in multiple homes?
- Did you clearly explain the Procedural Safeguards Notice and Medical Assistance Program (if applicable)? Were family members given the opportunity to ask questions? Did you share the PaTTAN publication, "Parents' Rights: Understanding the Procedural Safeguards Notice"?



Conversation Starters

- Would you introduce who you have brought with you today?
- Do you have any general questions about what the IEP is and why we are having this meeting?
- Have there been any big changes over the past year, like a new home, or health or family changes?

IEP Section I: Special Considerations

An Explanation for Families

This section of the IEP is a chance for us to talk about a few items that must be discussed before moving on to the remainder of the IEP. These considerations are very important because they can impact how your child learns and participates in school. If we, as a team, answer “yes” to any of the questions on this page, we will have to make sure to address these in your child’s IEP. For instance, if we check “yes” on Deaf/Hard of Hearing as a Special Consideration, the team will also have to create a Communication Plan. If Behavior is considered to be a Special Consideration, a Positive Behavior Support Plan will need to be created that is based upon the findings of a Functional Behavior Assessment.

Conversation Starters

- Does your child have a difficult time seeing or hearing? How does your child’s vision or hearing impact how they learn?
- (If applicable) How is your child’s reading and writing affected by their vision?
- What supports do you think would help your child in school? (Provide examples of possible supports.)
- Describe how your child communicates with others. What does communication look like when it works well? How about when it doesn’t?
- Does your child use technology to help them with learning? How does it help? Think about all sorts of technology, including technology that is built into laptops, notebooks, and phones. What apps are your child’s favorite?
- Have you received any training in the technology used by your child? Would you like to?
- If applicable, what languages are spoken in the home, with friends, and in the neighborhood? What language supports have been helpful for your child as they learn English?
- Have you noticed any challenging behaviors at home? Can you describe what your child’s difficult behavior looks like? What things seem to really help your child’s behavior get back on track?

Considerations for Section I

- Have you engaged the family in meaningful discussions about each of the special considerations? (Avoid just checking a box.)
- Have you explained difficult-to-understand concepts, such as Assistive Technology? Have you explained the difference between Instructional Technology (technology all students have access to) and Assistive Technology (technology utilized by students with disabilities to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum)? Has the team brainstormed no- or low-tech options to assist the student in daily activities, if appropriate?
- Have you (or will you) include families in the development of necessary protocols, such as a Communication Plan or Positive Behavior Support Plan?
- Is the family able to ask questions from supportive team members with regard to special considerations, such as speaking with a Teacher of the Visually Impaired about vision concerns or talking about communication needs with a Speech-Language Pathologist?

IEP Section II: Present Levels

An Explanation for Families

This section of the IEP is very important. It looks at what your child knows and is able to do at school, as well as in other areas of their life. This may include extracurricular activities (like clubs and sports), or activities that happen at home or in the community. As a team, we need to gather information about how your child is doing in their classes and subject areas, what kind of activities they seem to really enjoy, and what areas in which they might be having difficulty. This is a time in the meeting when we can get an overall picture of how things are going, celebrate the success that your child has had over the last year, and then brainstorm ideas for how we can better support your child's progress. This section includes academic skills – skills for learning subjects like math or reading – and functional skills that are used in daily life, such as organizing things, communicating, and taking care of hygiene. We'll look at both of these types of skills in present levels.



Conversation Starters

- Tell me about a day in the life of your child.
- What is one thing we could change **now** that would make you and your child's life easier?
- What is the most **important** thing your child could learn this year to make them more independent?
- What would you like your child to learn this year in order to help them learn or do everyday activities?
- What questions do you have for the team regarding your child's current levels of performance?

Considerations for Section II

- Has the family had a chance to contribute their thoughts to this section? If not, try some conversation starters to get more info.
- Is information in this section explained in a way that is easy to understand?
- Is progress and assessment data clearly broken down into family-friendly language and digestible chunks that are meaningful? Did you explain what each assessment determines, why it is important to have this information, and what the scores mean? Did you explain how the skill described by the score is relevant in academics and in the real world?
- Is data supported with appropriate examples and visuals, such as student work samples, portfolios, etc.?
- How do you help families make connections between data, educational performance, and future goals?
- Have you ensured that multiple professionals are not repeating the same information (such as medical history) in several sections of the present levels?
- Will families be able to see that the information described here is relevant to their lives?

Note: This is a long section of the IEP. Did you include all required components of this section of the IEP?

IEP Section III: Transition Services

An Explanation for Families

In this section of the IEP we consider secondary transition, or the journey from school to adult life. This section is required for students who are 14 years and older, or who will be turning 14 during the IEP cycle. However, it is never too early to consider secondary transition! In this section, we will talk about your child's hopes and dreams and how to make them a reality. We will talk about possible post-secondary education (like college or trade school), career, and independent living. As a whole team, including students and families, we create measurable goals for your child's life after high school in any of these three areas. We call these measurable post-school goals. As a team, we will talk about what we can do in school to help your child reach these goals. This section will be discussed and revised as needed every year until your child leaves school.



<https://www.pasecondarytransition.com/>



Considerations for Section III

- Have you discussed aspirations for the future? Consider asking open-ended questions (see Conversation Starters below).
- Have you included not only families, but students, in all secondary transition discussions (and, indeed, the entire IEP team) as appropriate?
- How do you explain to families how important it is for students to be involved in their own transition planning?
- How do you engage families in completing the transition grid?
- How do you make connections between all sections of the IEP and secondary transition planning?
- What resources do you provide to families and students to help them engage in transition planning?
 - ✓ PA Secondary Transition
 - ✓ Planning for the Future Checklist
 - ✓ Transition Discoveries

Conversation Starters

- What would you like your child's life to be like when they graduate? Where will they live? What will they do?
- What skills and qualifications will your child need in order to have the life they want?
- What goals would you like your child to work on with regard to transition?

IEP Section IV: State and Local Assessments

An Explanation for Families

This part of the IEP talks about tests that your child might take and how we can support them during testing. The state of Pennsylvania requires all students to participate in statewide testing, including students with disabilities. The purpose of these tests is to figure out what your children know and what they need to learn. These tests may include the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), the PASA (Pennsylvania Alternative System of Assessment), or the Keystone Exams. All students take at least one PSSA or PASA test every year, from third to eighth grade, and then also in eleventh grade. Most children take the PSSA, but some students take the PASA, if they meet the required conditions. Only about one percent of the total number of students in the state participate in the PASA, which is designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

There are also other tests that your child might take. The Keystone tests are taken in high school and may be related to graduation. There are a total of five pathways to graduation, and the Keystones are one component within these pathways. Local assessments in your school, district, or intermediate unit (IU) may differ from school to school. Some examples of local assessment that your child might participate in include _____. (Include local assessments as necessary. These may include DIBELS, STAR testing, Achievement Tests, speech screenings, and many more. Explain acronyms when talking about other tests.)

Some students with disabilities are allowed to have certain accommodations to make it easier for them to participate in testing. Accommodations are changes in testing that help a student show us what they can do. Accommodations might change how a test is given, where it is given, when it is given, or how the student answers the questions. They might differ from test to test because of certain rules concerning what accommodations are allowed for specific tests. Any accommodation being written into the IEP for a state test should align with accommodations they need during day-to-day tests in school. In other words, we can't include an accommodation for a state test that isn't needed throughout the school year for testing.

Considerations for Section IV

- What can the family tell you about past testing experiences that will contribute to this section?
- How do you explain to families why certain accommodations are permitted in local testing but not state testing?
- If asked, are you able to explain the criteria necessary for the student to NOT participate in testing?



Conversation Starters

- What questions do you have about testing and how we will be supporting your child?
- How has your child done with standardized or general testing? Have there been any issues?
- What supports has your child had in the past to help them during testing? What has worked and what hasn't? What else do you think might help?

IEP Section V: Measurable Annual Goals

An Explanation for Families

Setting goals helps people create a road map for success. That's why we set goals in special education, too! This section contains information about your child's goals, which need to be updated at least once a year. These goals can relate to many different areas, such as academics, behavior, activities of daily living, and more. Measurable Annual Goals are based upon information from the Present Levels section of the IEP, as well as any Special Considerations. Every child's goals will be different because every child is different!

(Your child may have short-term objectives listed with each of their goals. Objectives are the steps toward reaching the goal and are required for students who take alternative assessments, like the PASA. These help keep track of your child's advancement towards their goals and can even help them track their own success.)

All of your child's goals (and objectives) should be measurable, meaning that you can count them or have a clear way to tell how much success has been made. Educators will keep track of your child's headway towards their goals and let you know about their progress at least as frequently as report cards are issued. This is called "progress monitoring," and you will receive a Report of Progress. This will help you see how far your child is coming with their goals.

Considerations for Section V

- Has the family been engaged in conversation about goals and contributed to the setting of goals?
- Has the family talked to their child about the child's goals? Do these goals differ from the family's goals?
- What can the family share about the goals that the student has worked on in the past?
- What information has the family provided about goals that the student is working on in therapies outside of school?
- Do the goals identified in this section relate to the student's hopes, dreams, and plans for the future?

Conversation Starters

- What do you think are the biggest priorities for your child with regard to _____ (math, communication, behavior, etc.)?
- Is your child working on goals with an outside provider? Could we communicate with them to determine how we can work together?
- What goals has your child identified as being important?
- What goals would you like to see your child working on this year?
- What skills could your child learn that would help them at home?



IEP Section VI: Special Education

An Explanation for Families

This can be a difficult part of the IEP to understand, and it has many different sections. We're going to talk about each section separately.

Special Education (Program Modifications and Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)):

Program modifications are changes that are made to your child's education to help them learn and participate in school. Specially Designed Instruction is a set of supports, personalized for your child, based on their needs. These supports can be special instruction specific to your child's needs (such as intensive reading instruction in phonics or instruction on self-regulation strategies) or accommodations or modifications. Accommodations change **how** a student learns or is assessed, while modifications change **what** a student learns or is assessed on. An example of an accommodation is a teacher or an assistant reading math test questions to your child, instead of the child reading them. This SDI changes **how** the child receives the information and is assessed, but not **what** information is received. An example of a modification would be if the student was provided with simplified information, instead of what is taught in the general curriculum. Both accommodations and modifications are okay to have in the IEP, but teams need to think things through before deciding what to provide. This is especially important when it comes to modifications, since modifications change what your child may learn and can impact the courses and programs they can take as they get older.

Related Services: Related services are any supportive services to assist your child to benefit from special education. Related services can be occupational therapy, speech-language services, nursing services, and much more. Your child receives (or may receive) _____. (Describe the current or proposed related services indicated in the student's IEP.) This section will talk about the type and location of related services, as well as how often your student will receive these services.

Supports to School Personnel: This section of the IEP also talks about supports for school personnel that might be necessary to best help your child. Perhaps your child's teachers or service providers need training or time to meet and collaborate. These supports are listed in this section of the IEP.

Gifted Support Services: If your child receives gifted supports, as well as supports for special education, they are listed in this section of the IEP.

Extended School Year: We're also going to talk about Extended School Year (ESY) in this section of the IEP. The purpose of ESY is to help children remember what they learned before a long break in schooling, such as summer vacation. The loss of things they already learned is called "regression of skills." Although most students might benefit from ESY, your child will receive ESY services only if they qualify. Being qualified for ESY and its services is an IEP team decision, based on seven factors listed in special education law. For more information on ESY, check out this [PaTTAN publication](#).

Considerations for Section VI

- Have you thoroughly explained SDIs to the family? Do they know the difference between accommodations and modifications?
- Have you discussed the timelines of ESY and what the family will need to do to prepare for ESY?
- As a team, have you discussed related services (if applicable) and the amounts provided? (Don't make it sound like it has been predetermined and is a "take it or leave it" situation.)
- Does the family understand the difference between assistive technology and other technology?

Conversation Starters

- What kind of supports do you think would help your child be more independent?
- What accommodations or modifications do you think would be helpful to your child?
- What has worked well for your child (or hasn't worked well) from their past IEPs?
- Can you share some tips you use at home or in the community that have been helpful to your child? How do you think we could use them at school?



IEP Section VII: Educational Placement

An Explanation for Families

We always want students to participate in the least restrictive environment, or the LRE. The least restrictive environment isn't a specific place; it means that your child should be with their same-age peers who do not have disabilities, as much as appropriate to your child's strengths and needs. In this section of the IEP, we're going to ask ourselves a few questions about your child's special education programming. This will include explaining any scenarios in which your child will not receive instruction in a general education environment, as well as scenarios in which your child's educational programming will differ from the general education curriculum. We'll also talk about the amount of special education supports your child will receive on a typical school day and the type(s) of special education supports your child will receive. These questions are important because they give us a chance to think about your child's placement with same-age peers, as well as what supplementary aids and services might help your child participate in environments with their peers as much as appropriate. Supplementary aids and services are aids, services, or other support that can help students with disabilities participate in class and other environments with nondisabled peers. We will also talk about the location of educational programming, such as whether or not the student will attend their neighborhood school. However, this section will focus more on the amount and type of support than where the student is physically located in the school during a typical school day. The next section will look more closely at where the student will be throughout the school day.

Conversation Starters

- What kind of questions do you have concerning least restrictive environment and educational placement?
- What would you consider an ideal place for your child to learn? Why?
- Think about your child's current skills. How will they learn in the environment based on current abilities?
- How will your child's educational placement help prepare them for future education and employment?
- In what environments does your child interact with students without disabilities?
- How will this placement increase your child's independence?
- Tell us about your child's self-advocacy skills. Do they ask for what they need? Are they able to make choices? Are they able to organize themselves and make plans? What do they know about their own abilities?

Considerations for Section VII

- Have you avoided predetermination of the student's placement?
- Have you engaged the family in discussion about each of the placement questions?
- Has the family had the opportunity to provide information on various learning environments, both in and outside school?
- Have you considered Natural Peer Supports in an inclusive placement?



IEP Section VIII: PennData

An Explanation for Families

Every state is required to report information (“data”) about where students with disabilities are educated, meaning the type of environments. In the state of Pennsylvania, the system that keeps track of this information is called the PennData system. We calculate the percentage of a typical school day that your child is in general education settings, which includes environments outside of the classroom, such as lunch, home-room and recess. Our goal is for most students to be in the general education classroom for 80 percent or more time.

Considerations for Section VIII

- Did you explain the reporting in as family-friendly terminology as possible?
- Have you allowed time for questions regarding PennData reporting?
- Did you show the family where to find the information online and, specifically, find your school/district?

Conversation Starters

- Do you have any questions about how your child’s educational environment will be calculated?
- Do you have any questions about why we take this data?

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

