

Let's Put the Planning back in Individual Educational Programs by Penny Reed

We have been struggling to develop and write Individual Educational Programs or IEPs for 26 years. It should have gotten easier by now, don't you agree? But, it really hasn't. Many of us still find IEPs to be a real (and often unpleasant) challenge. In reflecting on more than two decades of IEPs it seems to me that one of our major problems is that we focus so strongly on writing the document, that we often lose the focus on the purpose of the IEP in the first place. The purpose of the written IEP is to *document and describe the plan* that was agreed upon at the IEP meeting. The purpose of the meeting itself is to *discuss a student's unique needs and plan a program of intervention* that will meet those unique needs. The key word here is **plan**. Unfortunately all too often the primary activity that takes place at an IEP meeting is **reading** rather than **planning**. Think about some of the IEP meetings in which you have been a participant. How many times have the various service providers come to the meeting with goals either partially or completely written? How many times do some of those teachers or therapists send a piece of paper with their goals completely written, because they cannot attend the meeting? When goals are already written, what happens? They are read.

When goals are written prior to an IEP meeting, for whatever reason, it severely limits the potential for true planning to take place. Too often an Individual Educational Program meeting consists of each service provider, in turn, reading the goals they have individually written prior to the meeting. The parent is then asked if there is anything they would like to "add" or "change". The parent says, "no" and then they staple the pages together, discuss the amount of related services and the special factors, sign the cover sheet, and the meeting is over. If that describes your IEP meetings, you may be fulfilling the letter of the law, but you are significantly missing the opportunity to fulfill the spirit of the law. The IEP meeting was intended to be a time when all of those concerned about a specific child with a disability, the parents and those who are paid to provide various services, would spend time discussing and planning to meet that child's needs. Our focus on the written document rather than on the planning process has robbed us of the opportunity for rich and productive planning.

Focus on Planning

There is a way, however, to change the focus back to planning. To do so is simple....*do not write goals until after the planning has taken place*. That means exactly what it says. Everyone comes to the IEP meeting without any written goals or objectives. The planning takes place first and then the goals are written. I have seen this done very effectively and find the results extremely exciting. Here are the steps you can use to put the Planning back in your IEP meetings.

- 1. All IEP Committee members, including parents, come to the IEP meeting prepared to discuss the child, but without having written any goals.** They may bring test scores, samples of work, ideas, or observational data that they think may prove useful.

2. One of the members who is a school district employee, serves as the facilitator/recorder. That person focuses the discussion sequentially on each of the following four topics:

- ♦ **Long term goals for the child**
- ♦ **What the child is able to do right now** (in relation to those goals)
- ♦ **What we think the child can do one year from now** (in relation to those goals)
- ♦ **What we need to provide** (so that the child has a good chance to accomplish those things in one year)

Make sure each topic is written across the top of a flip chart, butcher paper, overhead projector transparency, or computer screen that is projected where all participants in the meeting can see it.

3. The IEP meeting begins by asking the parent(s) to describe their long term goals for their child. (How long in the future those long term goals extend will depend upon the age of the child. For a very young child, it may be only 3-5 years. For a child in the primary grades, it may be 5-10 years. For a child 10 or older, it should be about what the parent hopes for them as an adult.) The facilitator writes what is said on the chart under “Long Term Goals”. No one can contradict what the parent says. If someone feels the parent’s long term goals are not realistic, they need to just keep that thought to themselves. Over time, goals become more realistic. It doesn’t matter that a parent holds higher goals for their five year old or 10 year old than you think are possible. They simply give us a starting point from which to plan.

4. After the parent has spoken, other IEP Committee members may add some additional items, asking the parent if they agree that those are appropriate goals. The staff may want to think about the general education curriculum and standards and add one or more long term goals necessary to insure that all areas of the curriculum are addressed.

5. Using each of the long term goals as a focus, the committee members then describe what the child can do now that relates to each of the long term goals. Parents and service providers contribute equally to this discussion. The facilitator writes the information up on the second chart, making sure that something relevant is listed for each of the long term goals.

6. Next, the committee members discuss what they think it would be possible for the child to be able to do one year from now in each of these areas. That is written on the third sheet or column for all to see. Again parents and service providers all have ideas to contribute.

7. Finally, the committee members discuss what the school needs to provide during the year. This may include assistive technology, related services, supplementary aids and services, adaptations in instruction or accommodations the child might need in order to accomplish those goals in the next year. It might also include training for the teacher or

other staff members. These things are written on the fourth sheet or column. The formal consideration of the special factors, including assistive technology, is done at this point.

Throughout the discussion, IEP committee members may think of something that needs to be added or changed in one of the earlier sections. That can occur as long as everyone is aware of it and agrees with the addition or change. When this is finished, the information in column two becomes the **Present Level of Performance** for each of the annual goals. The information in column three becomes the **Annual Goals**. The information in column four is a **compilation** of items that will need to be written on the IEP form under Related Services, Supplementary Aids and Services, Supports for staff or as part of the methods and materials under specific goals.

The result is that the meeting has been used to plan, instead of read. The parents are equal and full participants. Everything that gets written in the IEP is directed at achieving long term goals. And everyone knows what exactly what the long term goals are for this child. All of this can take place in about the same amount of time that has previously been spent in an IEP meeting for this child.

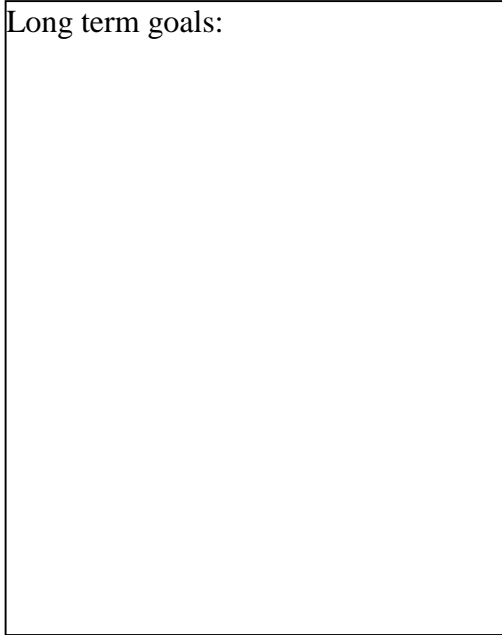
The one thing that remains to be done is write the short term objectives with specific criteria for each of the annual goals. It works fine to divide up and assign that responsibility to one or more of the members of the IEP committee. Everyone present signs the IEP to indicate that they participated in the planning and the meeting is over.

Within a few minutes, hours, or days after the meeting, the assigned service providers write up the short term objectives and turn them in to be included in the document. I have seen some IEP committees who sit right there and finish the short term objectives within a few minutes. I have seen others complete them up to a week following the meeting. If they are completed after the meeting, the document is then sent home so the parents can review this additional information. If they feel that something has been omitted or changed in the development of the short term objectives, they can request a new IEP meeting. However, I have never seen this happen. And, of course, parents have always had the right to request a new IEP meeting any time they were not happy with the IEP any way.

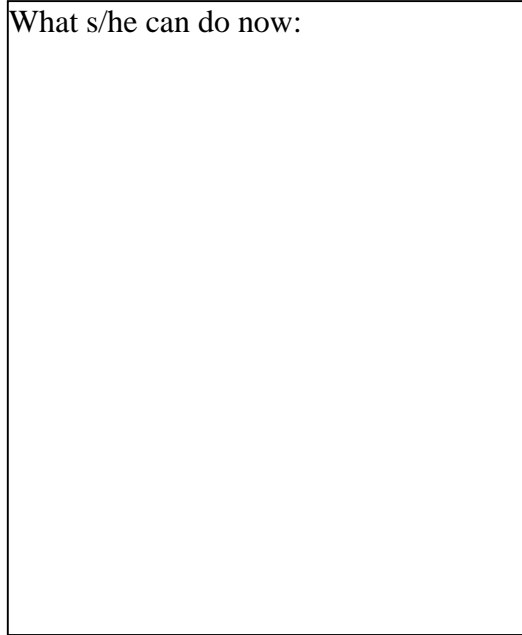
The thing that I have noticed in using and observing this process is that the ownership of the IEP changes dramatically. Parents become significant contributors to the planning, to the resultant document, and also to the implementation. Everyone has a shared focus which results in more integrated, seamless service delivery. Every aspect of the child's instruction is working toward long term goals, so splinter skills are eliminated. In using this process, I have had parents tell me they actually look forward to their child's IEP meetings, which they had dreaded in the past. Other parents have commented that it is the first time they felt "heard." With the emphasis in IDEA '97 on accessing and progressing in the general education curriculum and the need to include consideration of assistive technology in every IEP, it seems like a good time to put the **PLANNING** back in the IEP process.

Give it a try! Here is what your sections should look like. Remember that writing where **everyone** sees it, as it is being written is a key component.

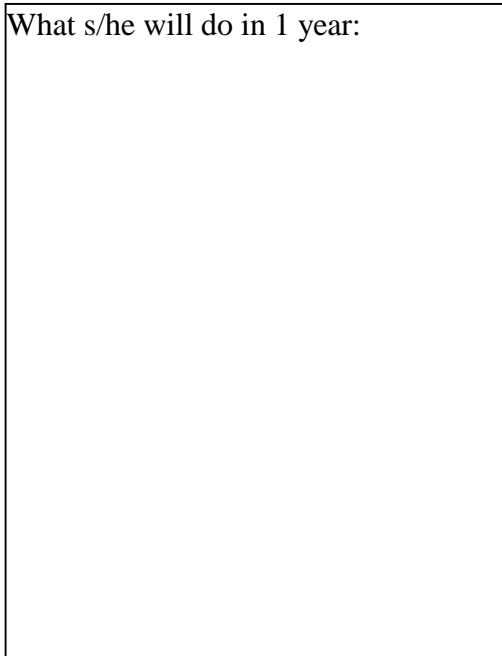
Long term goals:



What s/he can do now:



What s/he will do in 1 year:



What we need to Provide:

