

\*This TelAbility handout provides an overview of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and the process involved in its development and implementation.

### What is the Individualized Education Plan?

The IEP is the written statement of an educational plan designed to meet a child's individual needs (ages 3 to 21). It is required under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which ensures each child a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), within the least restrictive environment. It is the **hallmark of special education**, and if done right it improves both teaching and learning. Under current law it should be reviewed *at least* one time per year, and parents *should* receive periodic progress reports. For more information on IDEA and special education, go to <http://www.ideapractices.org>

### Who are the Key Participants?

An IEP is developed by a **team**, which should include **parents**, their child's **regular classroom teacher** (if the child is in a classroom setting), the **special education/resource teacher**, a **school representative**, a **representative from a transition agency** (if applicable), **someone who is able to interpret evaluation(s)** (if applicable), and **anyone else with pertinent insight into the child** (i.e., therapist, inclusion facilitator). Parents may also bring along **someone to help advocate** for them/their child. If the child is older, it is common for him/her to be included as well. Typically the meeting is facilitated by a representative from the school's Exceptional Children's Program. Generally an IEP meeting is held once a year, but can be requested at any time by anyone on the IEP team, including the child's parent(s). Once a meeting is requested, a formal invitation from the school must be sent to everyone on the IEP team.

### What Happens at the Meeting?

The focus of the IEP team's meeting should be to discuss the child's strengths and needs, ideas about how to best meet their child's needs, and any evaluation/testing results. To see a reprint of the federal IDEA regulations as they pertain to IEP's, as well as answers to questions about special education commonly asked by parents, go to <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/ideapubs/lq2.pdf> (Spanish version available). You will find current information on these topics, in the form of "briefing papers", maintained by the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities.

### What Should it Look Like?

The IEP must include the child's current level of performance and any evaluation or testing results. Annual goals should be established, with short term, **measurable** objectives (also called benchmarks) agreed upon by the team. A mechanism should also be established to inform parents of their child's progress. All school and related services (i.e., occupational therapy, mobility services, counseling), environmental modifications (i.e., ramps, resurfacing), and accommodations (i.e., use of a word processor instead of handwriting) to be supplied by the school must be listed on the IEP, as well any plans for inclusion and/or transition. References should be made to testing needs/accommodations (i.e., additional time, oral testing). Also, a specific timeline must be agreed upon and spelled out regarding when services will begin and end, frequency of services, and location of services. To take a look at the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services' Guide to the IEP, go to

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html?src=mr>

### How Do You Prepare and Get What Your Child Needs?

You want to know ahead of time who will be attending your child's IEP meeting. You also want to lobby for enough time to have the meeting without feeling rushed. It is helpful to get copies of all written reports/evaluations prior to the meeting, so you can familiarize yourself with them and get any questions answered before discussing them with the full team. You may want to talk to other parents whose children have IEP's, visit your child's class(es), talk with your child's teachers/therapists, and perhaps talk with your child about his/her feelings about school. It is also helpful to prepare a list of your child's strengths and needs, as you see them, your priorities, and your overall vision for his/her education. You can then bring this list with you to the meeting. Some parents even draft their own version of what they think their child's IEP should look like and bring it with them to the meeting to share with the team. For additional tips on how to get what your child needs, go to <http://www.kidstogether.org>

### How do You Follow Up and Keep the Lines of Communication Open?

Even after developing the best possible IEP, what really matters is if it is functioning for your child. Communication with the rest of the team is crucial for making sure that the IEP is being fully implemented and functioning well. Maintaining a list of the team members and their **contact information** is always a good idea; bring it with you to the IEP meeting and make sure everyone's information is current before you leave. This will help you keep the lines of communication open and efficient as the IEP is implemented and you and the other team members monitor your child's progress. Always remember, **you** are the **expert** on your child! In the best of cases, the school staff will have valuable insights and information about your child. **You know your child best**, though, so if you

disagree with a perception, speak up and share your reasons. **Communication is key** to making this process work and feel good to everyone on the team. Meeting your child's needs is the common goal here! If things don't seem to be working for your child, try to figure out what is at the root of the problem. It might be that an approach that you thought would work for your child just isn't the right approach, or it might be that the specified approach isn't being followed through on. Ask questions, try not to make assumptions, and keep the dialogue going.

### **What if it just isn't Working, and You Need More Help?**

There are various resources and options to help guide you through the IEP process and its aftermath. In some cases mediation is necessary to meet everyone's needs. If that doesn't work, parents have the right to request a due process hearing with the school district. If things still aren't satisfactory, a parent may file a complaint with their state educational agency. Parents and professionals in North Carolina can utilize the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (ECAC) for guidance and supports. They have an IEP packet available, free to parents of children with disabilities, and they conduct "Writing Effective IEP's" workshops across the state. Go to <http://www.telability.org> and click on the "calendar" at the top of the web page, to find a date this workshop is being offered near you. Additionally, the ECAC has an extensive lending library, among other things. To check them out, go to <http://www.ecac-parentcenter.org>

You can also search the TelAbility website using the keywords: Individualized Education Plan, IEP, School *and/or* IDEA

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