Empowerment through Engagement: Implementing Student-led IEPs
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The development of 21st century learners through guided instruction, critical thinking, collaborative processes and technology production is paramount in education. Subsequently, special education teachers are focused on closing the achievement gap that exists between their students and their non-disabled peers.

The implementation of student-led individual education plan (IEP) meetings is a journey my students have traveled to develop 21st century skills and become empowered, self-motivated learners. This process to engage students in their learning and develop the IEP starts at the beginning of each school year.

Student-led IEPs are a vehicle for promoting self-determination in students with special needs. With the guidance of special education teachers, students document their progress toward individualized goals, engage in activities to gain an understanding of the purpose and components of the IEP document, and present at annual IEP meetings. Students practice multiple higher-order thinking skills when preparing for their student-led IEPs.

In an article on the subject, Becky Wilson Hawbaker lists categories in which students can document working toward goals:[1]

- Reading and writing in context.
- Goal setting.
- Advocating.
- Using presentation skills.
- Listening and responding.
- Compromising.
- Summarizing.

Additional benefits of implementing student-led IEPs include increased involvement of families and general education staff in planning developments. Increased collaboration occurs when the student, staff and families work together to develop a plan. Thus, the IEP meeting is a reflection of each individual student and is focused on his or her abilities. Furthermore, the ongoing planning provides the opportunity for frequent feedback from all stakeholders.

It's like driving a car

Implementing student-led IEPs is a journey in which special education staff are vital in setting the course and providing opportunities for student success. The implementation journey is similar to the activities involved in buying a new car:

Take a test drive. Implementing student-led IEPs requires the teacher to understand what their students know about their disability, services and IEPs. Thus, it is paramount that a teacher solicits student feedback. A survey asking students to rate their level of knowledge about the IEP process, meeting and services will inform the teacher's instruction regarding the IEP.

After each student with an IEP completes a survey, the special education teacher averages the classroom data and includes the baseline data on a graph in the classroom data center. The teacher tracks progress throughout the planning process and plots the data on the chart. The classroom data center is an interactive display the teacher and students use to monitor classroom progress toward common goals on charts and graphs. Information from the data center is used in conversations with the special education teacher and students to encourage continuous improvement and focus instruction and learning on the most important concepts.

Read the owner's manual. All too often, IEPs are locked and safeguarded in a teacher's file cabinet, and students have limited to no access to these documents. In an effort to increase an understanding of the IEP document, teachers should allow students to access these documents. Creating an IEP scavenger hunt in which students search for the IEP's key elements is one way to teach them about the document's key components.

During this process, students work with the special education teacher to locate portions of the IEP. Students are asked to locate signatures of individuals who have previously attended conferences, their goals and objectives, accommodations and services. Conversations are conducted in an environment that is conducive to honest and age-appropriate dialogue with students.

Set direction. Following the IEP scavenger hunt, students are presented with a slideshow called "An Introduction to Your IEP." In student-friendly language, this presentation details the components of their IEP. At the end, students are given a checklist of tasks to complete prior to the student-led IEP meeting. This checklist includes a PowerPoint or Prezi

presentation template students will create for the meeting.

The template includes slides that address:

- Student strengths.
- Progress toward current goals.
- Current accommodations and necessary accommodations moving forward.
- Feedback from parents.
- Feedback from general education teachers and related services providers.
- Goals for the following year.
- A plan for services and placement.

Students also are required to write a statement regarding their present levels of performance, compose business letters and address envelopes inviting IEP members to the meeting, and conduct a self-assessment regarding their learning styles. Through these activities, students become more aware of their abilities, develop key communication skills and reinforce 21st century skills.

Follow the map. As the school year progresses, students monitor their performance in data binders, which allow students to track their individual progress in each goal area. They are routinely shared with their classroom teachers and parents as an avenue for collaboration and communication. The data binders also include a list of their classroom accommodations in which the students monitor the frequency they use the accommodation. This is discussed during IEP planning to determine the accommodations that are needed for the student.

Specific, measurable, attainable, resources and time-bound (SMART) goals are also set. They are related to the results of the pre-IEP survey and the students' progress toward their individual goals. Students and the special education teacher determine the level of understanding in each of the survey areas they want to achieve at the end of the school year, and they monitor their progress throughout the planning process.

In monitoring individual goals, a scatter diagram was created to allow students to indicate, with an anonymous sticker, their progress toward the individual goals in their goal passports in the classroom data center. Students soon recognize trends on the charts and begin posing questions regarding their progress and seeking solutions to improve.

Maneuver the obstacles. Implementing student-led IEPs is not done without some

roadblocks. Students may be hesitant to present in front of a group of professional adults. It is vital to give students the opportunity to refine their presentation skills within the context of the curriculum and interventions, as well as with their IEPs.

Furthermore, some students' disabilities may warrant a modified format for an IEP meeting in which the special education teacher or parent prompts or models appropriate communication strategies. In one instance, a student was videotaped giving the presentation prior to the meeting. This video was embedded into a presentation and shared at the meeting in the student's presence to alleviate the stress of the meeting's formality.

Parents may wish to discuss with teachers any issue they feel are not appropriate to have with the students at the time of the student-led IEP. Throughout the IEP planning process, the special education teacher needs to facilitate collaboration so any concerns are addressed prior to the meeting. If a lingering concern exists, parents are encouraged to set up an appointment to meet at the end of the student's presentation.

Start their engines. The special education teacher develops a schedule of IEP meetings. Students generate letters to participants in the IEP that are sent two weeks prior to the IEP meeting. These meetings are allotted 45 minutes, which covers the time needed for the formal presentation, follow-up questions and completion of the IEP document.

On the day of the IEP, students should be prepared to greet the IEP team members at the door. When all members are present, students are prepared to facilitate introductions of all team members and begin the IEP meeting following their prepared presentation. As students integrate technology into their presentation through PowerPoint, they also are prompted to engage team members in conversations regarding the presented information. All members of the IEP have an opportunity to ask questions or provide feedback.

Provide opportunity for feedback. A key element to the IEP process is general education staff and parent involvement. Using a quality tool such as a lotus diagram, parents and general education staff provide feedback on multiple areas of the student's performance, including:

- Academic strengths and areas for growth.
- Behavioral and social emotional strengths, and areas for growth.
- Effectiveness of accommodations.

- Goals for the student.

- General comments regarding their services.

The student collects this feedback, which is shared in the context of the IEP planning with the special education teacher. This feedback is then included in the student's IEP presentation, during which the teacher or parent can elaborate on the feedback to be used to develop a more comprehensive IEP for the student. Furthermore, parents and teachers are encouraged to complete a follow-up survey regarding their experiences at the IEP meeting. The special education teacher uses this opportunity for feedback to refine the process or respond to lingering questions or comments regarding the IEP.

The finish line. As students complete their presentations, a follow-up celebration is organized to congratulate them on their successes and reflect on their experiences.

Student-led IEPs are the vehicles for driving continuous improvement and developing 21st century skills in special education students. The skills developed through the student-led IEP process are grounded in the desire to create critical thinkers, technology-capable producers and skilled collaborators. As a special education teacher, there is no greater victory than seeing a child empowered through engagement in their learning.

For electronic resources created and used to implement student-led IEPs, visit http://wilderwaiteresourceroom.wikispaces.com/individualized+education+planning. For more information about Dunlap School District #323, visit www.dunlapcusd.net/pages/splash.aspx

Reference

1. Becky Wilson Hawbaker, "Student-led IEP meetings: Planning and Implementation Strategies," *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2007, http://journals.cec.sped.org/tecplus/vol3/iss5/art4.

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