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Checklist to Elevate Each IEP

by Carol Kosnitsky, author of IEP Goals that Make a Difference:
An Administrator's Guide to Improving the Process

The IEP is the seminal planning document for students with disabilities and the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) section should be its heart and soul. When done well, the PLAAFP describes a multi-dimensional student - one with strengths, interests, needs and aspirations.

Here are 6 best practices to help your team create compliant, individualized and relevant IEPs.

1

Use Multiple Sources of Data to Build a Comprehensive IEP

The foundation of a compliant and relevant IEP is built upon the analysis and synthesis of multiple sources of data. Information obtained in the initial and 3-year re-evaluations is essential, however, don't overlook the range of other data readily available or easily obtained on each student.

- Collect direct feedback from students, parents and teachers about the student's strengths and needs.
- Use progress monitoring data and progress reports to supplement present levels each year.
- Don't overlook the information on functional performance you can get during formal observations.

2

Focus on Student Strengths, Interests and Preferences

Framing student strengths, interests and preferences (S-I-P) sets a positive tone in the PLAAFP and acknowledges that a student is so much more than his or her disability. As important, S-I-Ps are essential to good instructional planning. Identifying each student's S-I-Ps should result in actionable information for educators.

EXAMPLE:

Ask yourself, "Now that I have this information about the student, how can I use it to improve instruction?" S-I-Ps, in essence, are instructional tools — they inform the selection of materials, strategies and reinforcers that result in engaging and accessible instruction.

3

Increase Parent Participation in the IEP Process

It's important for parents to feel confident that school personnel know their child as an individual. Prior to the IEP meeting, reach out to obtain parental insights about their child, and ideas they have for improving their child's school experience. Help parents prepare for the meeting by providing them with some sentence starters.

EXAMPLES OF SENTENCE STARTERS FOR PARENTS:

"My child is really good at _____."

"My child is easily frustrated when_____."

"This would be a successful school year if my child _____."

Seeing evidence of their input included in their child's IEP can go a long way to support parents and increase their participation in the process. Similarly, make sure parents have all the same information other team members have prior to the meeting. Prepared parents can be more engaged parents.

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4

Describe How the Student's Disability Affects Involvement and Progress in the General Education Curriculum

The essential question answered by the PLAAFP is, "How does the student's disability affect involvement and progress in the general education curriculum?" Special education eligibility is conditioned on the student's disability adversely affecting involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. The PLAAFP requires a description of HOW progress is affected.

EXAMPLE:

For each PLAAFP statement, ask yourself, **does this statement pass the "stranger test?"** Could someone who does not know the student visualize the disability-related characteristics this student manifests as they function in the demands of the school environment? When the student's characteristics are out of alignment with the demands, there will be an adverse impact on the student's involvement and progress. By aligning the student's disability-related characteristics with authentic school demands, the student's needs become apparent to the IEP Team.

5

Write Specific Statements on Academic and Functional Needs

This section of the IEP provides additional details to identify the student's academic and functional needs. Describe the skills and behaviors the student demonstrates ("can do") and compare them to the overall expectations ("expected to do") with the curriculum. This gap analysis helps prioritize the student's most urgent needs and provides the rationale for subsequent goals, supports and services.

- **Academic needs** are typically those associated with basic skill acquisition, reading, writing, oral communication and math.
- **Functional needs** are those that affect a student's ability to apply skills/knowledge to a range of domains, including communication, motor daily living, organization and more.

6

Establish Baseline Data to Take a Student's Performance Temperature

With the student's most urgent needs identified, the stage is set to select goals. Goals must be measurable and targeted — stating a specific and observable skill or behavior the student will do by the end of the IEP cycle. In other words, you're asking yourself, "If the proposed interventions are successful, what will I see the student do in a year?"

Baseline data is important because it measures how well the student currently performs that skill before the intervention. Not to be confused with the most recent evaluations, think of baseline data as the "present tense" of the subsequent goals.

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EXAMPLE:

If the goal is to increase a student's time on task during independent seatwork, the baseline is how long the student currently is able to remain on task during independent seatwork. With this information, the team can determine the degree of change necessary for the student to reach a challenging and attainable goal.

Connecting the dots for each IEP

Teachers get to know their students well over time — but a well-written PLAAFP accelerates basic knowledge of a student on day 1. The IEP is the baton that gets passed from year to year; teacher to teacher. The PLAAFP paints a picture of the student so anyone receiving the baton can plan meaningful instruction for the student. It will provide teachers with the vital information they need to begin instruction and implement accommodations. Additionally, a well written PLAAFP will show parents their child is known and valued as an individual.

Through a collaborative process, each student's PLAAFP can elevate the IEP document from a compliant document to one that tells the right story — who they are and what they need to have a successful school year.

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