

IEP Essentials

8 tips for parents.

BY RUTH STRUNZ

As we ease toward the structure and routines of fall, it's time to think about the coming school year. If your child needs more support than their peers to navigate the demands of the school day – for physical, psychological, neurological, emotional or other reasons – you probably participated in developing their IEP (Individual Education Plan) last spring. If not, you'll want to engage with this process right away; your child's IEP helps educators understand their needs, sets directions for their learning, and helps them navigate the journey successfully.

IEPs are created collaboratively by parents, teachers, the principal, and any other professionals who meet the child at school – Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT), Educational Assistant, Speech Language Pathologist, etc. Ideally, the student also contributes to their IEP – we want their buy-in, and including them is the way to get it!

Setting goals

Your child's IEP outlines their individual goals for the year, and describes how their teachers will help them succeed. It is their “contract” with the Ministry of Education, the details of which are as important to their success as the details of your job contract are to yours!

Since teachers' priority is to help kids learn, collaborating with parents to develop a robust IEP is a critical piece of the success puzzle for kids who learn differently. Parents sometimes wonder what kind of information they should contribute to the IEP. Anything you know about how your child learns, or what hinders their learning, is key information!

The IEP process is Ministry mandated, so it is similar among boards and schools. It involves examining the child's strengths and challenges, identifying individualized goals and strategies, and creating a document that records what was decided and who will carry it out. The document can be produced during

the meeting, using customized school-board software.

Educators are familiar with the process, and are therefore often ready to sign the IEP at first draft. Parents should always bring the printed document home and review it carefully – your child's education plan deserves close examination before signing. Your signature indicates your agreement that the goals, and the proposed ways to help your child achieve them, are appropriate.

Take the time you need to fully understand the IEP. Although principals have a specific timeframe to finalize their school's IEPs, most build in time for parents to review the document. This is time well-invested for everybody involved!

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Parents need to know what to expect in the IEP process. Experienced parents, the school, the Ministry of Education, and the school-board office are good sources of information – allow yourself several weeks before the meeting to research.

Here are 8 tips to help you at the IEP meeting and beyond:

1. Bring another adult to the IEP meeting. Ensure they know what you need – should they take notes, make suggestions, ask questions, or just smile encouragingly?
2. IEP meetings can be challenging emotionally because they focus on your child's struggles. For self-care, parents can write a “Strengths Statement” about their child before the meeting. What is your child good at? What are you proud of? What is your long-term vision for your child?
3. Your child's IEP goals should make sense to you. They should specify what your child will do and when, and how it will be measured. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification of a goal, or to propose a goal, for your child.
4. Understand the language. Accommoda-



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tions are changes to the environment or teaching methods that help students learn at their grade level. **Modifications** are changes to the amount or complexity of your child's work. **Alternate curriculum** means your child works from a different curriculum, which might feature healthy life skills, basic literacy or numeracy, social skills, etc.

5. The IEP is reviewed with each report card, so you should expect to be consulted about changes as your child progresses this year.
6. The IEP documents dates and findings from your child's assessments, and lists their strengths and learning needs. It states which subjects it applies to, and where and when in the day (or year) it applies.
7. A final note - last year's IEP is out of date, so quickly re-signing it in September implies that you believe your child met none of their goals last year! If that is true either the goals were inappropriate, or the supports didn't work. Either way, a meeting to review the IEP is your next step!
8. The IEP process is intended to help your child. Don't let it overwhelm you – help is available!

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