WE NEED YOU!

The Importance of Student Involvement in IEP and 504 Plan Meetings

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WHEN MY SON WAS A FRESHMAN in college, he was invited to speak on a panel of experts to a group of professionals about what it's like to have ADHD. One of the questions was "What would you do differently?" He responded that if he had realized how valuable they were, he would have taken more advantage of his accommodations in high school. Apparently, like many students, he was too self-conscious to admit he might learn differently from neurotypical students.

As a professional, for me, this set off an alarm. What went wrong? How could I have given my son more encouragement? How could I have helped him make full use of the resources available to him? When we choose goals and accommodations for students without their input, they may not use them for a variety of reasons, including:

- They may be embarrassed about being "different."
- They feel they may have an unfair advantage. For example, some students may question why they should have more time to complete an assignment when no one else does.
- They prefer not to bring attention to themselves by asking for help.
- The accommodation is not working for them or they don't need it.
- They may be in denial about their need for an individualized approach in the classroom.

How can student-led meetings help?

Unfortunately, this isn't an uncommon scenario. As educators and parents, we see the importance of developing self-determination and advocacy skills in our students as they prepare to transition into life after high school, though we may struggle to explicitly teach these skills through authentic "real-life" situations. For students who receive support through an IEP or 504 plan, this can be a prime opportunity to build self-determination and advocacy skills while maximizing the use of accommodations needed for individual students.

Self-advocacy, particularly in regards to IEP and 504 plan accommodations, is essential for student engagement in the instructional process. Though it can be a challenge to find ways to incorporate self-advocacy into meaningful instructional practices due to a lack of curricular materials available to support self-determination and advocacy development, it can be achieved. IEP and 504 plan meetings are an opportune time to build self-advocacy skills, as they are authentic, real-life ways to instructionally support skill development, incorporated within the framework of a student-led IEP or 504 plan meeting.

Several tools, both formal and informal, are available that can help to guide pre-meeting preparations with students that will assist them in the leadership of their own meetings. This can be a valuable process to encourage a student's ongoing buy-in in the accommodations process.

## Steps to student-led IEP and accommodations meetings

Student management of their IEP is a complex task that needs to begin early in a student's academic career, in order to be successful and proceed in a series of steps. Beginning in early elementary school, students can develop self-awareness of strengths and barriers to learning. The process can culminate in full or partial leadership of the IEP or Section 504 plan meeting in secondary school.

■ *Awareness*
Begin early by making educational goals relevant to student interests. Students with ADHD perform best when academics are related to their passions. Teachers and parents can start by asking students open-ended questions through an interview or a simple written

HOW FERNANDO'S DRAWING INFORMED ACCOMMODATIONS

What Fernando said about his drawing and assessor's observations	What the 504 team inferred	Some example suggested accommodations
Fernando, a seventh grader with ADHD, carefully drew this schematic drawing of a classroom	Drawing tends to help Fernando focus	Artwork may serve as an alternative to a written response
"This is a science class"	Fernando likes science	Incorporate Fernando's interest in science into instruction in other subjects
" operates the remote control"	Fernando benefits from hands-on participation	Provide opportunities for Fernando to use manipulatives during instruction, particularly lectures
"Images remain on the screen for as long as it takes the students to learn or copy the information"	In his current classroom, Fernando may have difficulty keeping up with the speed of lecture presentation.	Present information slowly, periodically check in with Fernando for comprehension
"Put images back up on the monitor"	Fernando may have working memory weaknesses that interfere with retention	Provide Fernando with a visual to which he can refer during lectures and class discussions
"Because there are not too many students, the teacher has plenty of time to help them..."	Fernando benefits from individualized attention	Use small groups and paraprofessional support to provide Fernando with the opportunity to dialogue about information and to ask questions
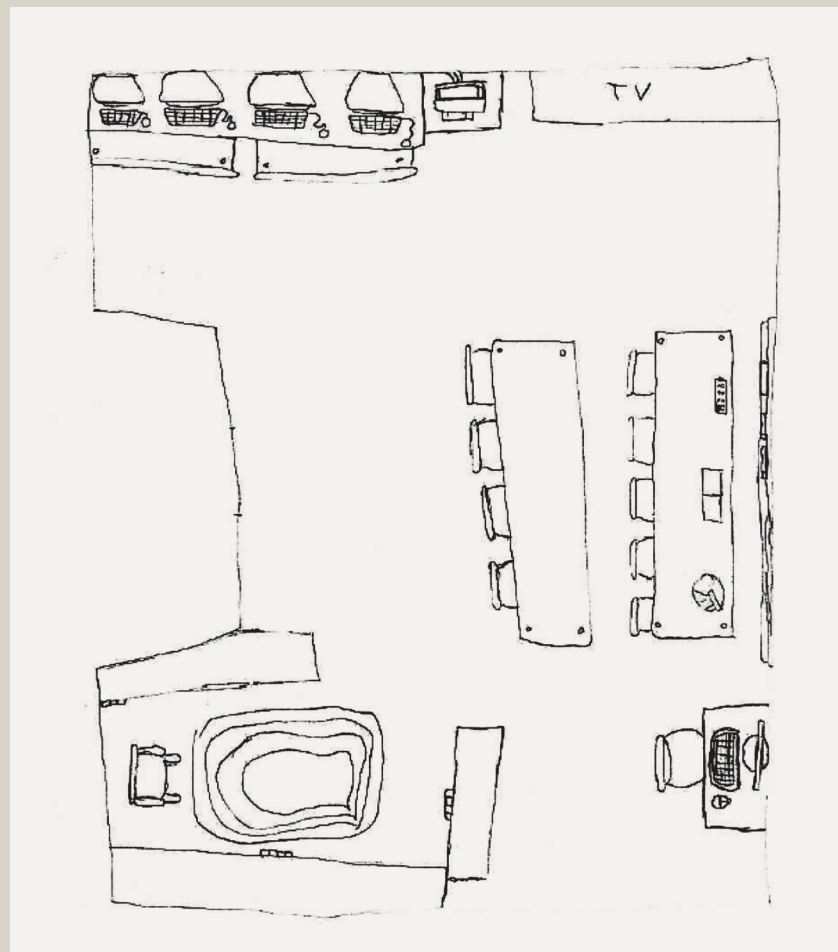
Fernando's description of his ideal classroom

This is a science class with 9-10 students. At the beginning of class, the students are seated facing their teacher. On the front table is a globe, a book of notes on the lesson, and a remote control. The teacher begins with a presentation on the concepts they are learning about that day. The teacher uses the chalkboard in front of the class and the computer with the flat-screen monitor. Images on the computer monitor can be projected onto the large TV screen to the left of the students. Fernando sits at the left end of the front row and operates the remote control for the large screen. Images remain on the screen for as long as it takes the students to learn or copy the information.

After the teacher presents the concepts, the students work independently or in pairs. They can work at the computers (in the back of the classroom on the left) and print their work or they can study the material in the library (in the back of the classroom to the right). They can also look at the globe, the lesson book on the front table or put images back up on the monitor. Because there are not too many students, the teacher has plenty of time to help them by answering their questions and going over the material.

survey. Have students describe or draw a picture of their ideal or "dream" classroom. Help the student develop self-awareness about her learning differences through reading children's literature. A few references for books about ADHD are listed at the end of this article. Students begin to identify any barriers they have to learning. They also learn to formulate a general SMART goal for themselves.

■ *Observation*
The student participates in the IEP and/or 504 plan meeting by being present at all or part of the meeting depending on their age and attention span. Students sitting in on a meeting for the first time will need some orientation beforehand to know who will be participating and the topics to be discussed. Be sure to tie these in with the student interests identified in the first step. At this stage, the student can identify an accommodation and a goal and talk about how they will use it.

■ *Early Participation*
The student presents some information—their strengths, for example—and begins to provide feedback about accommodations to address those strengths and/or relevant IEP goals. For instance, the student could share about their hobbies and interests, what they feel they do well, a project they have enjoyed or their ideal classroom.

■ *Active Participation*
As students mature in middle school and early high school, they are more able to begin to take a leadership role in their own program. Active participation may involve sharing about their strengths and barriers, reviewing a list of potential accommodations, and talking about their progress and experience in achieving a specific goal. The student will also become acquainted with data and how this can complement information about their subjective experience. At this point, the student may learn to monitor their progress toward goals. In addition, the student may assist with procedural issues during the meeting, such as inviting participants to the meeting, or leading a part of the meeting.

■ *Leadership*
This phase, which may occur in secondary school, provides excellent training for postsecondary self-advocacy, when a student may need to request support. At this point, the student may provide input about present levels of performance, goals, and needed supports, and may assist in writing these. The student may facilitate some or all of the meeting independently or from a prepared script. Possible areas for facilitation

include introducing team members, discussing goals and supports, and answering questions. Students will need to practice before leading a meeting independently.

In addition to the positive changes seen by educators from students who are more involved in their own educational processes—such as goal-setting, academic effort, and an overall sense of awareness and pride—why are student-led IEP and 504 plan meetings a good idea? What are the benefits? Here are just a few:

- Research shows better adult outcomes for students with self-advocacy skills
- Increased knowledge and understanding about their disability and supports needed
- Increased knowledge about their legal rights
- Increased self-confidence and self-determination skills
- Increased ability to articulate their needs and advocate for themselves
- Increased knowledge about the purpose of the IEP/504 and the IEP/504 process
- Increased knowledge about appropriate accommodations and modifications
- Increased awareness about the resources available to them
- Interacted more positively with adults—improved communication
- Increased awareness and attention to remain student centered and student focused throughout the meeting process

Ways to increase support for student-led meetings
With so many benefits to utilizing student-led IEP or 504 plan meetings, why is this not a more common practice? Well, preparing for student-led IEP or a 504 plan meeting is certainly not easy and does require ample time for preparation and practice for them to be effective. Parent support and participation are essential.

Here are some challenges and suggestions to take into account when preparing for student-led IEP meetings:

■ *Budgeting time for the process*
Good things take time, but teamwork makes the dream work! IEP and 504 plan meetings are designed to be a collaborative team process that is student-focused and driven. Preparations for scaffolded student involvement can be a collaborative endeavor with highly successful outcomes. Having said that, collaboration and preparation prior to the meeting is important to ensure that we are efficient and effective during the meeting. Open dialogue between home and school can help the team determine who, what, and how to support the student in the process.

■ *Making use of resources*

Divide and conquer! The resources listed below (such as interviews, surveys, meeting templates, etc.) are just a few of the tools that can be parsed out for parents or teachers to use and build student capacity to successfully participate in their meetings. Instructionally speaking, the vertical alignment and integration of a transition curriculum throughout the academic day assists in scaffolding the instruction of self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-determination skills. In addition, the development of specific goals within a student's plan can focus the team in building off of the student's foundational strengths in these skill areas to gradually expand their skill set can be valuable. Progress then can be analyzed and measured through the data collected during the progress monitoring process, which can be continually utilized to determine next steps.

THESE BARRIERS can be overcome by having a scaffolded approach to gradually involve students to play a more active role in their meetings beginning with self-awareness in elementary school. Throughout this process we are preparing students to successfully utilize student-led meetings and giving them a voice in the development of their plan to support their successful access to their learning environment and curriculum. These skills will have far-reaching benefits in life well beyond high school that can be supported collaboratively by parents and teachers working together to prepare students to participate in their own student-led meetings. Ⓐ

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RESOURCES

Resources for self-awareness:
- Sample student surveys: **https://blog.brookespublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/kluth_surveys.pdf**
- Understood's self-awareness worksheets for kids: **https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-awareness/download-self-awareness-worksheet-for-kids**
- Books for children with ADHD—titles to inspire and teach kids and parents alike: **https://www.verywellmind.com/books-for-children-with-adhd-20450**

Resource for self-advocacy:
- KU Center for Research and Learning: **http://kucrl.ku.edu/self-advocacy**

Resources for student-led meetings:
- Learn with Two Rivers: **https://www.learnwithtworivers.org/student-led-ieps.html**
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (Bridges4Kids): **https://www.bridges4kids.org/StudentGuideIEP.pdf**

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