



Putting Perspective Into the IEP: A Parent-Turned-Professional's View

*“Walk a mile
in my shoes...”*

-Neil Kurshan

Remember how you viewed parenting BC (before children)? And then you had kids (or started working with them). For most of us, our perspective changed drastically.

And then some of our children entered the world of special education. Suddenly, the role in our kid's education that many of us had anticipated—helping with their homework and attending the occasional parent/teacher conference—became a fantasy. Our reality was learning federal law and sitting down with a team of “experts” to write a document, the Individualized Education Program (IEP), that determines the very essence of our child's education. Another big change in perspective.

Different perspectives give us new knowledge that we might not otherwise attain. This is true with special education. By learning how other members of the IEP team experience the process, we can come to a new level of understanding that will help us more effectively obtain the appropriate services our children deserve.

Like many other parents, I became an active player on my child's IEP team. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A.) gives parents of children receiving special education specific rights to participate in the process. But my initial experiences upon entering the maze of special education were, shall we say, less than ideal—confusing forms, complicated processes, mysterious terminology.

I did have the benefit of an 18-year career designing, building, and supporting marketing databases for organizations. These databases helped people make sense out of large amounts of complicated information and thus make better decisions. The perspective I gained from my professional career (helping people understand and use information to make better decisions), combined with the perspective from my special education

experiences (a crummy IEP and the conviction that there must be a better way), became the catalyst for starting Fape Solutions, a business that helps parents and advocates make sense out of the jumble of information contained in a typical IEP. Our approach gives our customers the knowledge that empowers them to be more effective advocates for their kids.

Sometimes we learn different perspectives just in the course of living our lives (e.g., if your child participated in Special Olympics, now you know more about Special Olympics). But at other times, we must take it upon ourselves to gain the knowledge that comes from different points of view. In the case of our children's special education, most of us are not teachers, administrators, or professional advocates. Yet it is as important for us to understand their perspectives as it is for us to know the laws (I.D.E.A., state regulations) and the process (school policies, IEP forms). The school professionals on each child's IEP team are ultimately responsible for delivering the services that are meant to make special education truly special. We may often disagree with the perspectives they have, but if we understand “where they are coming from,” we have more knowledge to advocate for our kids. This knowledge is important, because the stakes are very high.

*“Knowledge
is power.”*

-Francis Bacon

*“The problem
with special
education is that it
is neither special
nor education.”*


-B. Blatt

Here is a simple suggestion for gaining invaluable perspective into the IEP process. Go to someone else's IEP meeting—of a friend, peer, or perhaps someone in your local support group. It's the best training you'll get for the price, which is only an hour or two of your time. Try to

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understand how each person in the meeting participates (or does not), and why. You'll be amazed at the fresh perspective you'll have when you attend an IEP meeting that's not about your child. You'll be able to help another parent see things they otherwise might not. And, perhaps most important, you'll appreciate the value that an objective IEP team member can bring to the process, and you'll make sure you always have such a person attend IEP meetings that are focused on your child.

In subsequent NFXF Quarterly articles, I'll take a close look at the perspective of three groups that work hand-in-hand with parents to deliver effective special education for their children:

1) Teachers and other professionals who work directly with our kids, 2) school administrators, and finally 3) advocates and attorneys. I hope to shed some light on how other participants view the IEP process, and in doing so, improve our collective ability to obtain the best possible educational outcomes for all children receiving special education services. 

Editor's note: This article series originally ran in Arc InSight, a magazine focused on children and adults with special needs. Steve McKee currently serves as vice-president of the NFXF and as chair of its Awareness Committee.