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Important Dates

- **March 11:** Field Advisory Meeting, 4:00 - 4:50
- **March 17-21:** CPS Spring Break
- **March 24-28:** UIC Spring Break
- **April 15:** Field Advisory Meeting 4:00 - 4:50

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Understanding the Possibilities and Challenges of IEPs

The IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is at the heart of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Gartin and Murdick, 2005). The IEP created opportunities for increased collaboration, which concurrently poses new challenges for special and general educators, such as mandatory involvement of general educators, student participation in state- and district- wide testing, measurable annual goals, and regular progress reports to parents. In this piece we bring together what we learned most recently from conversations with special educators across the career continuum and investigations of scholarly research.

Beginning special education teachers face the reality that schools have different systems for developing IEPs (e.g., who writes it, who oversees the process.) As special educators, we need to be knowledgeable of the law, general curricular goals, and student strengths and challenges. Huefner (2000) outlines key requirements in writing the IEP: IEP content, special factors integral to designing the IEP, and personnel collaboration.

Toni Gonzales, a current high school inclusion special educator, provides a real-world perspective. While writing IEP benchmark goals she focuses on students' current levels of performance while being as specific as possible in terms of identification of goals and benchmarks related to the general education curriculum. As one gets to know the student, Gonzalez reminds us, the goals can become more specific. For children with lower cognitive abilities, she usually keeps the same benchmark but increases their percentage of attaining it. For example, she might say that the student will be able to recognize the words 25%, 50% or 100% of the time. Toni draws upon words and phrases emerging from Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy.

For science goals she might state: "Describe and observe an event, create a question about an event, compare events." While making accommodations or modifications, she looks at students' psychological strengths and their specific learning styles. Gonzalez seems to take into account students' needs as well as alignment to general curriculum. She also looks at strengths that each student has and how to build upon those strengths. Hearing about strengths, and not just challenges, at an IEP meeting must be supportive and hopeful to family members as well as the students who attend.

New special educators have also told us that while conscious of preparing appropriate and meaningful IEPs, they also must bear in mind their students and families in terms of native language, reporting mechanisms, and accountability. One of the teachers highlighted her challenge of how to teach adults with low incidence disabilities to self advocate at the IEP meetings. Writing an IEP together during professional development meetings might be a meaningful activity to collectively address such questions, review the process of writing IEPs, and to learn from peers (as is happening in a some Chicago public schools where departments review IEP processes.)

Important to the IEP process is access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities and alignment of IEP goals with general education curriculum. Many special educators wonder: How can teachers at the high school level align the IEP of a 9th grade student, reading at a 4th grade level, with the general education curriculum? Walsh (2001) suggests developing an "IEP alignment binder." The binder includes aligning the curriculum benchmarks and a "big picture matrix" in which the major concepts -- the big picture of what we

want students to grasp and construct - can be planned. The matrix can provide a visual summary of the instructional needs of students. Other material in the IEP alignment binder are state content standards for various subjects, modified student outcomes for alternative assessment program, and detailed directions and examples to develop IEP goals aligned with general education curriculum.

Gonzalez shared some of the ways she modified content and instruction to include state goals. In one example, she used the text from the novel students were required to read, removed all the commas, and then asked students to insert commas in appropriate places. This met the required state goals around learning punctuation concurrently while students read and learned content. At UIC and in Chicago Public Schools we talk about the "IEP At-a-Glance." Such a document provides a one-page concise version of key information that general and special

educators can use to align curriculum with the IEP goals.

For more ideas on how experienced special educators think about IEPs visit the Transition to Teaching Module at www.uic.edu/orgs/stepup. Additional resources are also available at www.cec.sped.org and www.idea.ed.gov.

References:

Gartin, B.C. and Murdick, N.L., (2005). IDEA 2004: The IEP. Remedial and Special Education, 26(6), p327-331

Huefner, D.S. (2000). The risks and opportunities of the IEP requirements under IDEA '97. The Journal of Special Education. 33(4), p195-204.

Walsh, J.M. (2001). Getting the "Big Picture" of IEP Goals and State Standards. Teaching Exceptional Children, 33(5), p18-26.

Book Corner

We feature a two books that provide practical suggestions for teachers in the preparation of IEPs that are legally correct and educationally useful while reflecting the needs of students and parents in IEPs and collaboration personnel.

Better IEPs: How To Develop Legally Correct and Educationally Useful Programs
By Barbara Bateman & Mary Anne Linden

This book is designed to give special educators, regular educators, and parents the confidence and know-how to develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are both legally correct and educationally useful. Chapter titles include The IEP in Perspective, The Legally Correct IEP, The Not-So-Correct IEP and Educationally Useful IEPs

Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards
By Ginevra Courtade-Little and Diane Browder

With increased emphasis on students meeting state academic standards, it has become imperative to align students' IEPs to state standards consistent with students' grade and ability levels. This book suggests ways in which students with significant disabilities can participate in parallel activities directly related to the general curriculum. It shows ways in which student IEPs can be constructed with goals aligned to each state's academic content standards for each student's assigned grade and ability level.

Digital Corner

We feature two websites useful as you make modifications for IEP work as well as instruction.

Learner.org:

www.learner.org has teacher resources and teacher professional development programming across the curriculum from Annenberg Media which uses media, telecommunications and video programs with coordinated web and print materials to advance excellent teaching. The multimedia resources help teachers increase their expertise in their fields and assist them in improving their teaching methods by exemplifying excellent teaching. Many programs are also intended for students in the classroom and viewers at home. After a free sign up users can access streaming videos across

various disciplines and download support materials for courses and workshops. The videos are categorized across disciplines (arts, mathematics, social sciences, literature and language arts, foreign language, and science) and grade levels.

Librivox: Online Audio Books:

<http://librivox.org/> Librivox is a non-commercial, non-profit project powered by volunteers with the objective of making all books in the public domain available, for free, in audio format on the internet. Started in 2005, LibriVox's catalog now contains more than 400 completed works, including novels, poems, histories, travel books, and plays, making it one of the largest audiobook publishers. LibriVox volunteers record chapters of books in the public domain and release the audio files back onto the internet.

CEC 2008 Convention and Expo
April, 2-5, 2008, Boston MA
More Info at www.cec.sped.org