

# New Story School

## Resources for Navigating your Child's First Individualized Education Program



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# Special Education Organizational Tips

Welcome to the world of special education! It may have taken you some time to get to this point in your child's educational journey, or the path may have been short, but either way, this is a very new experience for many. As you prepare for, or follow up on, that very first Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, you might feel a bit overwhelmed with all the information you have received. So, what do you do now?

Take a breath and let us help! Here is an easy, practical tip that can make your journey as a special education parent a little smoother.

## **Organize. Get a Binder.**

When you have all your materials in one place, you will be more organized and able to provide full and accurate information about your child's progress. As you go, and as your child grows, you may need to expand to a new binder, or organize all your information in a larger way. Give yourself the time to organize all your materials so that you're less stressed when it really counts.



Special education comes with a lot of paperwork and finding a way to organize all the information can be a lifesaver. Find a binder with pockets and add sectional dividers. In this binder, with appropriate sectional dividers, place:

### **Current and past IEPs**

Next year, when you get a new IEP, you will want to be able to compare the two documents to see what has been accomplished and what still needs work.

### **Copies of letters or communications**

Saving copies of your communications with the public school, the district, doctors, or other entities can be helpful so that you have one place to house all the details you get. Save any replies you get. If the communication happens in email, either print out those emails and save them in the binder or create a folder in your email for all those communications.

### **Copies of any testing or recommendations**

Keep all documents explaining your child's needs in one place. Your child may be working with different professionals during the year—doctors and therapists, as well as the school with teachers and support staff. When the next IEP meeting occurs, you will want to bring information and updates to help inform your IEP team.

### **Brochures**

There are lots of community resources you may encounter or hear about. Grab a brochure and keep them in your binder to refer should your child ever qualify for such services.

### **Educational contacts**

A list of phone numbers and email addresses. You will want contact information for all of the professionals and agencies involved in your child's education and treatment.



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## What to Expect When You're Expecting an IEP Meeting

Let's be honest, the idea of sitting around with a group of professionals and a dense stack of documents placed in front of you, outlining your child's academic abilities and behaviors, is rather intimidating. If you're stressed, allow me to put you at ease – you do not need to fret about an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meeting. These meetings are tailored to be a conversation about your child's strengths and needs, while providing the opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have regarding your child's educational programming.

But, in case it is helpful, here's some answers to questions you might have.

### What should I wear?

Whatever makes you comfortable! Your child's teacher will likely come in their normal classroom attire, and even might be sporting some paint-stained hands from an art project they just taught minutes before the meeting.

### How do I get ready?

A helpful tip for some parents or guardians is to review the IEP draft prior to the meeting so you can highlight or jot down any questions you would like to ask during the meeting. Sometimes it is easier to gather your thoughts in advance. The document in front of you is simply a draft., meaning changes can be made. Therefore, it is important for you to point out any errors or request anything you'd like worded differently. As a guardian, your voice and input is super important to your child's education.

### Who comes to these meetings?

An IEP Team will consist of the LEA from the district, an administrator from the alternative school, your student's teacher, any related service providers your child works with, and any advocates you invite to join you. Many parents invite their child's advocates or representatives from home-based therapy services to participate in the meeting as well. No matter how many or few people are on your child's team, the goal remains the same: to work together to provide the best quality of care for your child and to meet their individual needs.

### What will we talk about?

The meeting will often begin with some small talk about the weather or holiday plans while waiting for all of the team members to arrive – because you are all people with a common goal of helping your child. Once everyone has arrived, you'll get into the bulk of the discussion. Throughout the meeting, the presenter will frequently ask if anyone has any questions or concerns. Do not feel intimidated to ask for further explanation or share your thoughts or feelings – that is why the team is gathered together!

The IEP team will work through the document discussing your student's present levels of academics and behavior, as well as their progress in any related services they may receive. The team will also discuss the individualized goals and objects they have developed for your child to work on throughout the duration of the IEP year. The school personnel will share the modifications provided to your child, necessary for their success in the educational placement. These are the important pieces that help your child be successful in the school environment.

Some of these modifications include preferential seating, extended time on assignments, the ability to retake tests, and small group settings, among others. These modifications will also be discussed when talking about standardized testing, state assessments, and Extended School Year (ESY). If your child is 14 years or older, the team will discuss Transition Services that will provide your child with support in getting a job, independent living, and post-secondary education goals.

Not so bad, huh? IEP Meetings aren't so intimidating when you know what to expect. They are designed to be a meeting platform for your child's caregivers to converse and explore options for your child's educational experience. The IEP Team works collaboratively to design the best individualized education program for your child.



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# Getting the Most out of an IEP Meeting

The meeting to map out your child's plan for success in a special education setting, known as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, may seem daunting. But it is an integral part of planning for, recording and setting your child up for progress academically, emotionally and behaviorally. While the process may seem overwhelming, it is actually usually a very productive meeting. You'll be meeting with professionals who care about your child's success like you do, and hopefully that puts you at ease. Additionally, the following pointers will help prepare you to get the most out of these meetings.

These tips should help prepare you for your child's next IEP meeting, and should make sure you get the most out of these meetings. Once you go through the first few meetings, you might even come up with some helpful pointers of your own. Just remember, the point of these meetings is to set your child up for success, and there is nothing to worry about!



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**Take Notes:** You will cover a lot of information during an IEP meeting, so take notes. This way, after the person (therapist, teacher, etc.) discussing your child's plan is finished speaking, you can circle back and ask questions for clarification. Additionally, you'll have reference for any future meetings.

**Ask Questions:** There will probably be some tests administered to assess your child's progress over the past year. Some of these tests can be confusing when brought up at an IEP meeting. Don't be afraid to ask questions. You'll want to fully understand your child's progress and what next steps they are planning to take and why.

**Ask what can be done at home:** If you notice your child is having problems at home with items discussed at the IEP meeting (example: writing), find out if there are ways to carry over skills taught in class to home. Reinforcing learning at home can help to solidify skills and possibly prevent any regression in your child's progress.

Ask yourself what you are seeing at home. If some of those behaviors are less desirable, find out if the professionals have any ideas to help mitigate them. What is taught in the classroom extends into the home and vice versa.

**Don't rush through the meeting:** Teachers and professionals like to know that you are participating. Also, you don't want to miss any information, as all of it is likely vital. Your child's progress and the plan for future progressions are important parts of your child's success, both academically and behaviorally. Taking your time allows you to truly understand what is going on in your child's life. Be prepared to spend more than an hour in the meeting.





While the process of developing your child's IEP may seem daunting, there are many resources available to help guide you. We've included a few helpful organizations that might provide you some additional support.

1. The U.S. Department of Education has extensive online resources explaining your rights and responsibilities in securing additional support for your student through an IEP. Visit <https://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/sepced/iepguide/index.html> to learn more.
2. Your state's department of education will likely offer additional information on processes within your area. Here is a list of the sites for some of the states we serve.
  - New Jersey: [www.nj.gov/education/](http://www.nj.gov/education/)
  - Ohio: [education.ohio.gov](http://education.ohio.gov)
  - Pennsylvania: [www.education.pa.gov](http://www.education.pa.gov)
  - Virginia: [www.doe.virginia.gov](http://www.doe.virginia.gov)
3. Several national organizations provide resources and support to the special education community. Some of these include...
  - The Council for Exceptional Children: <https://exceptionalchildren.org/>
  - Autism Society: [www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)
  - Learning Disabilities Association of America: [ldaamerica.org](http://ldaamerica.org)