

CHAPTER 7

INVOLVE ME AND MY FAMILY



The school team engages students in decisions about their own learning and engages parents and guardians as equal and important partners in a child's education.

► **THE PROBLEM: AT MANY SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS AREN'T AS INVOLVED IN THE LEARNING PROCESS AS THEY SHOULD BE**

Research has found that student and parent engagement is critical for students with disabilities. But it's also time-consuming and difficult for teachers who are already strapped for time. As a result, special education interventions often happen to students, not with them. A former high school special education teacher, Toni R. Van Laarhoven, told Education Week that often students in IEP meetings "just sit silently, or people would ask them yes-or-no questions."⁸⁷ Education Week also reported that a 2004 federal longitudinal study found that about seven in 10 students with disabilities said they understood what services they would need to deal with their disability. However, less than one-third of these students said they gave their opinions on services to the professionals they worked with.⁸⁸

► **THE SOLUTION: STUDENTS DO BETTER WHEN THEY'RE INVOLVED IN THEIR OWN LEARNING**

School teams need to invest their resources and energy in engaging students and their families. Support is crucial. But ultimately, the goal should be that students with disabilities learn how to ask for what they need. Research has shown that for students with disabilities, a student's sense of self-determination is a particularly important predictor of future academic success.⁸⁹ The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center also identified self-advocacy as an important predictor of future education and employment.⁹⁰

The most effective schools for students with disabilities help build these skills early. For example, at Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, staff and school leaders begin conversations with students about self-advocacy around fourth and fifth grade. "We talk with parents about finding ways that a student can cope with their disability even without these supports," said Principal Heath Caceres. "Instead of only saying, 'They need this extra thing' or 'We need to modify this more,' I also want to ask, 'How can they take control of their own learning?'"

This isn't necessarily specific to students with disabilities. All students benefit from taking ownership of their own academic goals and progress. As discussed in Chapter 4, many schools can use "Tier 1" interventions to help promote self-advocacy among all students. For example, teachers can create charts where students color in their reading levels as they advance.

When teachers expect all students to take responsibility for their own learning, it makes it easier for students with disabilities to also have a voice and ask for what they need.

Involve students in developing and revising their Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Perhaps one of the most important ways to promote self-advocacy is to involve students in their own Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan (another plan guaranteed under civil rights law that protects students with disabilities from discrimination and requires schools to meet their needs). “Student Voices,” a recent report by the National Center for Learning Disabilities, researched students with learning and attention issues. They found that students who took an active role in their IEP, 504 plan, and transition planning meetings were more likely to self-advocate for their needs. They were more likely to take initiative in planning for their future after high school in general. They were also more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

At Two Rivers Charter School in Washington, D.C., which serves students from pre-K to eighth grade, some students lead their own IEP meetings. Beforehand, the student picks assignments from school to put in a portfolio.

According to the school’s website: “Whenever possible, the portfolio also documents the process the student went through to produce each piece of work, meaning that a portfolio includes multiple drafts and the feedback the student received from peers and teachers. Finally, each piece includes a written reflection about the process of creating the work.”⁹¹

At the meeting, the student speaks for the majority of the time. They present their work, reflect on data and feedback, and set their own goals for how to grow in the future. Particularly for students with IEPs, Two Rivers staff believe this helps these students “understand the nature of their abilities and individual challenges” and “develop a clear picture of what they need to work on to demonstrate growth.”⁹²

Of course, student-led conferences and IEP meetings look different depending on the age and readiness of each student. For example, young students can start by simply sitting at the table. Then they can begin generally identifying their likes and dislikes of different classroom settings. Teachers can help students gather materials before their meeting, analyze their work, and set goals. Over time and as students get older, students can gain more ownership over the process. The ultimate goal is that each student learns self-awareness and self-advocacy. Planning these conferences takes time. But Two Rivers believes “student-led IEPs are so powerful that committing to this time is worthwhile.”⁹³

Inform families throughout the year

For students with disabilities, parents bring valuable information and support to the table. However, communication needs to run in both directions. Schools should also inform and consult parents about any incidents that happen at school. At the very least, this means involving parents in the Response to Intervention (RtI) process. Chapter 4 “Catch Me When (or Before) I Fall” describes RtI/MTSS processes in more detail. Schools must keep parents informed when their child is struggling and in need of an intervention. Schools should also involve parents when setting IEP goals for their child and in monitoring their progress.

The Mary Lyon School in Boston, Massachusetts creates “individual student communication plans to manage its connections with every family.” The K-8 school serves around 120 students, and 41% of its students have disabilities. Parents receive daily “logbooks” explaining their child’s progress. According to one Mary Lyon parent, “The school is just as committed to the success and achievement of the special needs students as to any other children in the school. As a parent, it’s reassuring that home and school are working together toward common goals.”⁹⁴ Students feel a stronger sense of support when all stakeholders are on the same page. To do this, schools must commit to spending more time on supporting students and families.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



**INVOLVE ME
AND MY FAMILY**

The school team engages students in decisions about their own learning and engages parents and guardians as equal and important partners in a child's education.

WHAT TO ASK

- How do the school and district communicate with parents/guardians?
- How are students involved in their own IEP process, and are they learning to independently advocate for themselves within and beyond the education system?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network provides training for psychologists and special education teachers on how to communicate complex topics in an accessible way so that all stakeholders -- teachers, student, family -- truly understand the student's disability, strengths and goals.
- The district requires that each IEP meeting concludes with a short survey to ask families if they felt heard and supported during the process.
- The district trains its special education staff how to run IEP meetings effectively and respectfully to gather family input.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- Students share their strengths and interests at the IEP meeting. And in later elementary grades and beyond, they play a more active role in setting their own IEP goals.
- The school recognizes that parents know their children best and asks for their input on how to better understand and support their students at school. Parent surveys indicate that parents feel they have a clear voice in shaping the goals at the IEP meeting.
- The school provides native language translation to families who need it, as required by law. The school proactively offers these services to families.
- The school team discusses student goals and needs with the family in a straightforward, candid and accessible way. They avoid confusing jargon or acronyms and take the time to explain the diagnosis and approach. During the initial meeting, the school psychologist explains the disability so clearly that everyone understands, has an opportunity to ask questions, and can explain it themselves.
- Parents and other family members work with educators to use the same strategies at home and school.



WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team supports students to understand their learning goals and needs. Students are supported to track their own progress and have a voice in developing and monitoring their own IEP.
- The school team and parents work together to holistically understand student strengths and challenges, both in the classroom and at home. Parents participate in developing the IEP, monitoring their child's progress, and adjusting the plan for support.