

Considering IEP Facilitation:

A School Administrator's Perspective



States and districts across the country are reporting favorable outcomes and increased demand for facilitated IEP meetings.

What is IEP Facilitation?



IEP Facilitation is an optional process, not required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that state education agencies (SEA) or school districts may provide to parents and schools.

If IEP Team members have difficulty communicating and collaboratively solving problems with each other, the development of a mutually agreeable and high-quality IEP is less likely. It may be helpful to bring in a neutral third party to facilitate the next IEP meeting. A facilitated IEP has the same objective as any IEP meeting, developing an IEP for the student. During a facilitated IEP meeting, a facilitator focuses on the process and assists the IEP Team with articulating the roles of each member and ensures the voices of all participants are included. Many administrators not only recognize the benefits of using state-sponsored facilitators for potentially contentious IEP meetings, but also see the advantages of developing their staffs' facilitation skills and utilizing facilitation procedures and practices more widely.

What Does a Facilitator Do?

A skilled and capable facilitator encourages collaboration and helps keep members of an IEP Team focused on the development of the IEP while addressing conflicts and disagreements that may emerge during the meeting.

This is often accomplished by ensuring that everyone at the meeting can participate fully. The facilitator guides the discussion by asking open-ended, student-focused questions, ensuring members have a shared understanding of the options being discussed. If disagreements arise during the meeting, the facilitator can help by asking questions to clarify points of disagreement, and assisting the team in identifying workable solutions and reaching consensus. In addition, the facilitator helps keep team members on task and the meeting within the scheduled time. The facilitator also helps ensure that the language in the IEP reflects decisions made during the meeting.

Recent research on facilitated IEP meetings suggests the following facilitation strategies encourage family-professional collaboration:

- ✓ Convening pre-meetings with families
- ✓ Creating and following meeting agendas
- ✓ Establishing and using meeting norms
- ✓ Utilizing a parking lot for off-topic issues
- ✓ Using visual charting for support during team discussion and problem solving

(Mueller and Vick, 2017)

Benefits of Facilitation

There are a number of reasons for IEP Teams to use a facilitator. Whether using a state-sponsored IEP facilitator or LEA staff trained in facilitation processes, there are many benefits, including:



The facilitation process empowers all IEP Team members.

Facilitation encourages all team members, including students, to share their perspectives and have input in the decision-making process. This can result in better and more durable IEPs.



Facilitation improves relationships.

Facilitation builds on everyone's shared interest in the student's success. The facilitator helps the team build small agreements throughout the process, shifting the focus from disagreement to agreement. Facilitation enhances the communication between parents and school personnel, improving relationships. Ultimately, parents and educators working well together leads to positive educational outcomes for students.



Families and schools are more satisfied.

Because the process aims to have everyone feel valued and heard, participants of facilitated meetings across the country report high levels of satisfaction with the process.



Facilitation is less costly than due process.

The financial and emotional costs of protracted conflict can be high. Facilitation can restore communication between educators and families, preventing disputes from escalating. Many SEAs offer state-sponsored facilitation at no cost to the LEA. SEAs may also offer IEP facilitation training to LEAs at no cost or an LEA may obtain training at a reduced cost by partnering with other LEAs. A typical due process complaint, even if it does not go to hearing, is far more expensive in staff time, stress, turnover and other expenses than facilitation.



Facilitators model communication and collaborative problem-solving skills.

As IEP Team members participate in a facilitated IEP meeting, they have an opportunity to observe the facilitator listening attentively, asking questions, responding respectfully, and focusing on the collective interests of the group. Noticing the strategies a skilled facilitator utilizes is a great introduction to, or reinforcer of, effective communication and collaborative problem-solving skills.



Frequently Asked Questions

Administrators play a vital role in encouraging the use of facilitated IEP meetings. Below are some frequently asked questions by administrators considering IEP facilitation.

? How do I request state-sponsored IEP facilitation?

Contact your SEA or parent center for information about the availability and use of IEP meeting facilitators in your area. It is important to note that state-sponsored IEP facilitation is a voluntary process. Sharing IEP facilitation resources (e.g., *IEP Facilitation: A Guide for Parents of Children and Youth (Ages 3-21)*) with families and encouraging them to contact their parent center to learn more can help them make informed decisions about requesting and/or participating in a facilitated IEP meeting.

? How are state-sponsored facilitators selected?

Sometimes facilitators are selected on a random, rotational, or other neutral basis. Other times, parents and schools choose a facilitator together. The facilitated IEP meeting is usually scheduled by the school district, in cooperation with the parent, and held at a time and place that is mutually agreed upon. As with any IEP meeting, a facilitated IEP meeting is provided at no cost.

? What are the likely outcomes of a facilitated IEP meeting?

A well-facilitated meeting has numerous benefits. While it may not always result in a mutually acceptable IEP, participants almost always report satisfaction with the facilitation process. At minimum, participants can walk away with a better understanding of the issues and each other.

? How much time does a facilitated IEP meeting take?

Just as with an IEP meeting, the time it takes to conduct a facilitated IEP meeting will vary. A facilitated IEP meeting may take longer than a typical IEP meeting; however, this is often time well-spent. The facilitation process can lay the groundwork for improved relationships and also prevent the escalation of disputes, sometimes eliminating the need for multiple IEP meetings. While facilitating a meeting may lengthen the time, unresolved disputes can become extremely time intensive later. The time devoted at the facilitated meeting may end up saving time in the long run.

? Who can request state-sponsored IEP facilitation?

Parents or school district staff may request facilitation.

? Will the facilitator be neutral?

Facilitators use strategies to promote the participation of all IEP Team members. Participants, as a result, often feel heard and valued. Neutrality may or may not be a concern when a district or school staff person facilitates a meeting. Perceptions of neutrality, however, may be greater when using an external facilitator from another district or a state-sponsored facilitator. An external facilitator can help an IEP Team remain focused on the process, while the IEP Team makes decisions about the student. Also, when relationships are strained and participants expect a contentious meeting, bringing in an external facilitator can have a positive impact on the process and relationships.

? How will my role change during a facilitated IEP meeting?

Most IEP Team members' roles will not change during a facilitated IEP meeting. The IEP Team is still responsible for making decisions and developing the IEP. Prior to a facilitated IEP meeting, the facilitator may collaborate with the person who typically runs the meeting to discuss their respective roles. The person who typically facilitates the meeting may co-facilitate or relinquish facilitation responsibilities completely to the neutral facilitator so that team members can actively participate in discussions and not worry about running the meeting.

? Should we have a facilitated IEP meeting if the parent will likely file for due process anyway?

Regardless of the outcome of a facilitated IEP meeting, IEP Team members who participate in the facilitation process have the opportunity to surface their concerns and leave feeling heard and valued. The facilitator will ensure a robust discussion takes place when a disagreement arises and will help the team build consensus when possible. Especially in times where a due process complaint may be the end result, using a facilitated process will help members of the IEP Team communicate effectively.



When Mediation May be More Appropriate

Like facilitation, mediation is a voluntary process that uses a neutral third party.



If the district and family have attempted to resolve a dispute but are at an impasse, it may be beneficial to try mediation prior to or instead of a facilitated IEP meeting.

For more information on mediation, see:

[Considering Mediation for Special Education Disputes: A School Administrator's Perspective](#)

[CADRE's Dispute Resolution Comparison Chart](#)

Mueller, T.G., & Vick, A.M. (2017). An investigation of facilitated Individualized Education Program meeting practice: Promising procedures that foster family-professional collaboration. [Teacher Education and Special Education](#), 1-15.



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