



Vulnerable Decision Point 1: Forming IEP Team Communication Norms

According to Salas, Cooke, and Rosen (2008), there are two types of IEP team compositions:

- 1) intact teams that have long standing participants and,
- 2) ad hoc teams that have temporary participants and are continually changing.

IEP teams reflect characteristics of both types of team composition because IEP teams within a school are continually being formed and reformed based on the student who is undergoing the evaluation process. Although some IEP team participants may remain the same across multiple teams, many participants change with the student or with the purpose of the meeting. Importantly, parents are required participants of IEP teams because they can provide voice and perspective to support the student. Students at any age can also provide voice and perspective to the information discussed at IEP team meetings and must be invited whenever appropriate [Wis. Stat. §115.78(1m)(g); 34 CFR §300.321(a)(7)]. In Wisconsin, local educational agencies must invite a student to attend their IEP team meeting when considering postsecondary goals and transition services starting at age 14 [Wis. Stat. §115.7(2)(g)(1)]. Thus, parents and students are often the only constant participants of IEP teams.

Because IEP team participants are continually rotating on and off the team, it is sometimes difficult to establish trust and effective communication. When team participants have difficulty being open and honest about biases and stereotypes it can make trust and communication challenging. A team that lacks trust and effective communication is vulnerable to making decisions based on bias. Therefore, the first vulnerable decision point for IEP teams is forming IEP team communication norms at the outset of the evaluation process.

How Implicit Bias Shows Up

When an IEP team participant makes statements that reflect stereotypes, prejudices, or assumptions without evidence, then bias can influence the communication as well as the decision-making process. For example, school staff who have been assigned to a particular student's IEP team states the following, "I was on the IEP team for the student's sibling last year, and I know that family has problems; this one is probably the same." This statement reflects a bias against the student based on a sibling. If this statement goes unaddressed, then this thinking might influence how the IEP team conducts the evaluation (e.g. looking for evidence to confirm a disability rather than conducting a more objective evaluation based on educationally relevant questions about student strengths and needs). So that bias does not influence the team process and decision-making, IEP team participants must be able to identify the bias in statements such as this and directly counter them.

Strategies to Reduce Bias

Forming communication norms refers to establishing rules and procedures for how IEP team participants will communicate with each other in an honest, open and respectful manner. Three high-impact strategies are recommended to help guide IEP teams in establishing communication norms.

Strategy 1: Engage in Critical Self-Reflection

Educators who participate on IEP teams must engage in deep, ongoing self-reflection to identify the biases they hold and how they might impact their decision-making during the special education evaluation process. To aid in this self-reflection, educators on IEP teams may find it helpful to take the [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#) to identify their biases. It is recommended that all educational staff of the IEP team take the IAT before starting a special education evaluation. School staff IEP team participants should then meet to discuss what was learned so that school staff IEP team participants can help each other recognize their biases and reduce the likelihood that bias will interfere in the decision-making process.

For example, if a school staff IEP team participant has a white preference, then other school staff IEP team participants can help to ensure white students are not evaluated in a more favorable manner compared to Black students during the eligibility process. Moreover, school staff IEP team participants who are aware of their biases can more effectively engage with parents and students because they will know that they hold a bias (for example, bias against Black people) and take active steps (e.g., I need to make sure I am respectful of the perspective of Black

parents because I am aware of my bias) to prevent that bias from adversely influencing their engagement with students and parents. To engage in this form of self-reflection and disclosure, educators participating on IEP teams must build trust with each other so that there is no judgement. In addition, educators must support each other as professional colleagues because we all hold biases.

Strategy 2: Establish Shared Agreements for Communication

Shared agreements are the values about communication that all team IEP team participants agree to uphold during IEP team meetings. To establish shared agreements for communication, on a sheet of paper, each IEP team participant should write three communication values they hold and a brief explanation of why they hold that value. For example, IEP team participants may value honest communication, direct communication, genuine communication, constructive communication, and so on. Each IEP team participant should then share their communication values with each other and identify areas of overlap or agreement. These areas of overlap or agreement become the shared communication agreements that all IEP team participants will uphold during all IEP meetings. IEP team participants should identify observable examples of each value as well as examples of communication that violate the shared agreements. All IEP team participants also agree to identify when communication violates one of the norms and discuss it to address the concern.

Parents, students, and family members who are on the IEP team can also be provided an opportunity to share their communication values. Keep in mind that students or families should be provided different kinds of opportunities based on their unique circumstances. When engaging families about communication values, the goal is to better understand their communication preferences and past experiences so the school staff on the IEP team can better engage with the family. At times, a lot can be learned about a families' communication values by asking questions about their hopes and dreams, fears for their children, and what types of communication has worked best for the student and family in the past. When done respectfully and authentically, engaging the family in a discussion of shared communication values at the onset of an IEP meeting may help build trust with the family, as well as provide an opportunity for identifying an individual families' ethnic or cultural differences and coming to consensus on shared values early in the evaluation or IEP development process. If it is known or suspected that communication between parents and school staff requires additional support, IEP teams are encouraged to seek assistance from the [Wisconsin Special Education Mediation System](#) (WSEMS). WSEMS staff provide free support for IEP facilitation and mediation.

To further aid in the development of communication norms, IEP team participants are also referred to the [Culturally Responsive Problem Solving Guide](#) (Newell 2017) to review strategies on how to identify and address microaggressions when they occur on teams. These strategies are also especially important to reduce harm and improve the team's trust and cohesion.

Strategy 3: Engage Parent, Family, and Student Voice

Unlike many other teams in schools, parents are legally required participants of their child's IEP team. In addition, students are encouraged to participate in their IEP team meeting, as appropriate, to support the development of self-determination skills, and, in Wisconsin, are required to be invited to IEP team meetings beginning at age 14 when postsecondary transition will be discussed. When a student reaches the age of 18, unless a legal guardian has been appointed for the student, all parental rights under state and federal special education law transfer to the adult student (WI Stat. 115.807). The student is now responsible for making decisions related to future educational services; however, parents continue to receive notices required by state and federal laws and rules regarding educational programming.

Students and other family members can actively participate in the special education evaluation process. For this reason, it is critical that educators who participate on IEP teams develop communication norms with each other to ensure parents, family members, and students are given the opportunity to authentically engage in the special education evaluation process.

Below are 2 ways educators can authentically include parents, family members, and students in the special education evaluation process:

- Explain special education, the special education evaluation process, and parent's rights in non-jargon language at the start of the evaluation process, before any IEP team meetings are held. School personnel can develop webinars, handouts, hold meetings at neighborhood centers and events to ensure that parents understand the special education evaluation process and their rights. This information can be disseminated broadly to proactively communicate, and it can be specifically targeted for parents of children who are undergoing a special education evaluation. Schools could also arrange time for one of the school staff IEP team participants to individually meet with the parent to explain the process, rights, and answer questions. Taking this time can ensure the parent will understand what is happening in the meeting.

Vulnerable Decision Point 1: Forming IEP Team Communication Norms

Prepared By Markeda Newell, PhD, Associate Professor, School Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, 2020

- It is important to keep in mind that for parents and students participating on teams, an IEP team meeting can be intimidating because there are so many educators sharing information about the student at one time. It can be difficult for the parent or student to meaningfully participate during these meetings. One strategy to assist is to ask parents to write their questions and concerns down before the meeting and send them to a school staff IEP team participant who will support the parent and student in communicating their questions and concerns. If possible, parents and students could be granted time after the meeting to process the information and formulate any new questions or concerns to share with the team. It is important to note that creating equity in this process means that the process may take more time; however, it is worth the additional time to ensure parent and student voice. In the end, this could save time in the future, as concerns and questions are timely addressed and fewer meetings to reconvene the team may be needed.

Additional information to support active participation of students, parents, and family members in the IEP process as well as additional family and student engagement resources can be found through the [Wisconsin Statewide Parent Educator Initiative](#) (WSPEI), [Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training, and Support](#) (WI FACETS), and the [Transition Improvement Grant](#) (TIG). The Wisconsin DPI also provides a [web page that lists statewide family support and advocacy organizations](#) that support families of students with IEPs.

Forming a cohesive IEP team with participants who trust each other is critical to ensuring the effectiveness of special education evaluations for all students, especially students who have been historically marginalized. When IEP team participants recognize their biases, can identify and discuss those biases, and collaboratively take steps to minimize the impact of biases on team decision-making then the context is more conducive for making data-based decisions that create opportunities for students rather than limit their opportunities.

Reflection and Application Activities

The following reflection and application activities were developed to build the knowledge, skills, and systems of adults so they can develop better systems for conducting comprehensive special education evaluations.

1. Review your school or district's process for establishing IEP team meeting norms or shared agreements during IEP team meetings. Discuss how these norms and agreements can best support students and families.
 - How do these norms provide a sense of belonging to each and every student and parent who participates in IEP team meetings?
 - What strategies are utilized to prepare students and families in advance of IEP team meetings so they can meaningfully participate?
 - What strategies are utilized during the meeting to support student and family voices in decision making?
 - How do these norms support IEP team participants when they disagree with each other?
 - What strategies for engaging families are utilized after or in-between IEP team meetings to engage students and families?
2. Review your school or district's process for establishing IEP team meeting norms or shared agreements at IEP team meetings. Discuss how these norms and agreements can best support collaboration and consistency amongst school staff.
 - What norms, expectations, or agreements prior to, during, and after IEP team meetings best ensure school staff are effectively communicating with each other?
 - What is the level of trust that school staff have with each other to address potential bias when it may show up in an IEP meeting? How might established norms, practice outside of IEP meetings, and additional training and support lead to more honest and effective communication in IEP meetings?
 - How does a strong culture of trust and established IEP team communication norms lead to more effective decision making and resource allocation when making decisions about a student's special education needs, IEP goals, and services?

Vulnerable Decision Point 1: Forming IEP Team Communication Norms

Prepared By Markeda Newell, PhD, Associate Professor, School Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, 2020

3. Take the [Implicit Association Test](#) (IAT). The IAT is an online test that identifies biases based on race, gender, religion, etc. The test is free and confidential, and it provides immediate results.



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Special Education Team
Daniel Parker, Assistant Director for Special Education

125 S. Webster Street, P.O. Box 7841
Madison, WI 53707-7841
(608) 266-1781
daniel.parker@dpi.wi.gov
dpi.wi.gov/sped/ccr-ieps/comp-eval

September 2021

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, creed, age, national origin, ancestry, pregnancy, marital status or parental status, sexual orientation, or ability and provides equal access to the Boy Scouts of America and other designated youth groups.