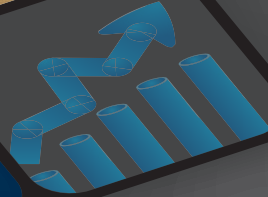




Each and Every Child



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There is nothing puzzling about the IEP

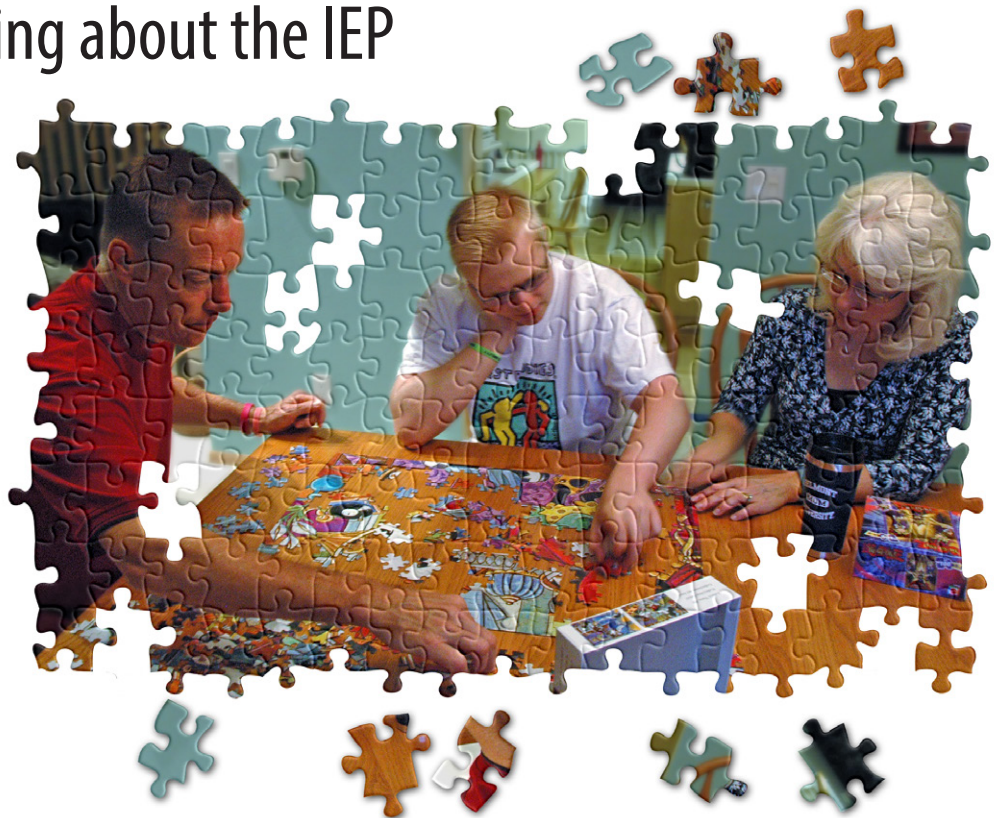
If you've ever tackled a 1,000-piece jigsaw, you know the feeling: Where to start? But your goal, piece by piece, is to make it whole. It takes patience. And a whole lot of determination.

That's not unlike the family who has a child on an Individualized Educational Program, or IEP. Particularly at the start of the child's education, it can be every bit as frustrating and intimidating as a 1,000-piece jigsaw.

As parent Mike Schneider of West Des Moines says of entering the world of IEPs, "You don't know what you don't know."

Mike knows of what he speaks. He and his wife Dawn have been working on IEPs for their son Cory for well over a decade – piece by piece.

It wasn't too long ago that a doctor said of infant Cory that he would never talk. But at five-and-a-half years of age, he formed his first full sentence: "I'm happy today."



The doctor also said that Cory would never learn or thrive. Today he reads at the seventh-grade level, sings in the choir and swims competitively at Valley High School in West Des Moines.

"We initially were told, 'Cory won't do this, won't do that,'" Dawn recounted.

"He wasn't supposed to be able to talk, he wasn't supposed to be able to learn. Now look at him."

Indeed, the strapping 11th grader is outgoing and personable, easily making friends with whomever he encounters.

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It might have never happened if the low expectations – which lead to self-fulfilling prophesy – weren't dismissed by Dawn and her husband Mike. They intuitively knew better. But intuition isn't enough when your child starts school for the first time.

Though the Schneiders wanted Cory to be in a private-school setting, educators said he needed to go to a public school – something that didn't make sense to the couple.

"The Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team felt everything Cory needed was in

the public school," Dawn said. "That meeting was not pretty.

"But I hadn't done as much homework as I needed to do to truly understand the IEP."

That was the changing point for the couple – and Cory. Immersing themselves into a world of IEPs helped the couple become proactive participants in Cory's IEPs.

"I think there could have been a lot more education on the front end side – this is what it is, this is what it's intended to do," Dawn said.

Still, even the best intentions and strong parental involvement in IEPs can result in backsliding. That happened in ninth grade when Cory was pulled out of the general education environment altogether. Though self-containment benefits some students, some students benefit the most in the general education room. Such was the case for Cory.

"I was anticipating that he would be with special education kids all day long," she said. "In addition to Cory not being challenged as much as he had been, he started mimicking the behavior of others in self-containment, which sometimes wasn't good. His behavior is far better in the general education setting where good behavior is

more the norm."

Then the Schneiders had a "Cloud 9 meeting" with school officials when Cory entered 10th grade.

"They dug into 'Who is Cory? What are his gifts? His weaknesses? Let's get him back in the general education classroom,'" Dawn said.

And Cory began to thrive again.

"It goes beyond the classroom," Mike said. "When Cory is seen in public, he's got kids coming up to him and treating him no differently than anyone else. Back in our day, you didn't know the person and it was a matter of avoidance. I am sure I saw many Corys growing up, but I didn't know them. Inclusion benefits Cory, but society also is benefitting."

The progress comes down to an effective IEP – something all parents should clamor to participate in, the Schneiders said.

"From a parent perspective, this is the opportunity to advocate for your child – ensuring your children learn the most in the best possible setting," Dawn said. "Every time the IEP team meets, my perspective is for educating Cory. He's not here to learn how to dump trash, he's here to be educated academically."

Dawn said this is an opportunity for an educator, as well.

"This is your opportunity to be wildly successful," she said. "Cory wants to learn, he wants to learn everything he can. You can be the star and teach him things he would not otherwise know.

"I think the one thing that I get on my soapbox the most is 'don't settle.' If you raise the bar, they will meet it. Today





Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge;
Graphic design by Derek O'Riley

Dawn, Cory and Mike Schneider

he's reading at seventh grade level. Sure, he definitely has his struggles, but there are all different kinds of things he will be able to do."

For Cory's part, he is eager to get back into the school groove, seeing friends, rejoining the choir singing bass, and taking to the water with his favorite stroke, freestyle. And then there are the academics, which Cory enjoys.

His favorite topic? Math. Why math?

"Because I'm good at it," Cory said.

Patience. Perseverance. Determination. Until the last piece of the puzzle makes it whole.

Putting the *individual* into the IEP

Sharon Hawthorne will put a good teacher ahead of a good Individualized Educational Program any day. But there's a catch.

"A good teacher will have a good Individualized Educational Program," said Hawthorne, a 20-year special education veteran and consultant for the Iowa Department of Education for the last 19 years.

Hawthorne knows a thing or two about IEPs. In addition to her extensive classroom experience, she was one of the lead educators to develop the statewide IEP.

So while she says the teaching dynamic is the most important tool in the classroom, the IEP cannot be an afterthought.

"IEPs are important," she said. "The IEP is a guide – it's a contract between the

parents and the school. But vibrancy doesn't happen on paper, it happens in the classroom. The tool itself won't improve the student, what happens in the classroom will take care of that.

"But the IEP is important because it is the basis for identifying the child's needs, and determining what kind of services the child needs so that he or she can have access to the general education program and make progress."

At the very base level, an IEP needs to be updated at least once a year, and have input from the IEP team – parents, teachers, administrators and anyone who has assessed the child. Questions that must be addressed include:

- What is the effect of the child's disability on the curriculum?
- How does the child best learn?



Sharon Hawthorne, consultant
Iowa Department of Education

An IEP is not done in cookie-cutter fashion; it is specifically designed for the individual child. The wording of the IEP is important, as well. Goals must focus on skill building, and should avoid general statements such as "will improve in reading."

But good IEPs focus on student interest, as well.

“What are they interested in?”

Hawthorne said. “Cars, dinosaurs? If a teacher can tap into a student’s interest level, the student probably will be more motivated to work on the skills.”

The IEP should also directly state how a student best learns, whether it’s working alone, one-on-one or in groups. And it should list what the student is strong in – whether it is reading, math or even baseball – so that the teacher can combine those topics with areas that the student needs to improve upon.

Other areas of an IEP should include

parental concerns as well as other considerations that may impact the IEP, whether it is medications or home concerns.

And, of course, all IEPs should have goals and progress monitoring.

“The goals should be measurable, monitorable and realistic,” Hawthorne said. “And this is important: You want the goals to include high expectations. I think we can underestimate what a child can do. If you expect them to do poorly, they will do poorly, and if you expect good things, good things will happen. The goal should include

more than a year’s growth within a year—we need to do that in order to close the achievement gap.”

Progress monitoring not only ensures that the student is meeting the goals, it also enables the teacher to change strategies if the child is struggling with the expectation.

“Progress monitoring should be conducted at least once every two weeks for a daily teacher,” Hawthorne said. “But then you need to use that information to ascertain if you’re on the right track, or if it’s necessary to make a change in your instructional approach because the child isn’t making progress that was expected.”

The IEP also needs to include any services the child may require, as well as whether the student will participate in district-wide assessments or need to take an alternate assessment. IEPs also need to address any physical or behavioral issues.

Pull-out time should also be examined in the IEP.

“The first choice is always the general education classroom, but on occasion, that may not be the right place,” Hawthorne said.

And finally, the IEP should list exiting special education.

“We need to remember that special education is a service, not a destination,” Hawthorne said. “We need to talk about exiting. What is John going to need to exit these services? The team should always be thinking about this. Special education is not a life sentence.”

Are these on your IEP?*

-  Updated at least annually
-  States specific goals, including more than one year’s growth
-  Indicates high expectations
-  Specifies how child learns best
-  States student’s interests
-  Includes parental concerns
-  Determines what assessment will be taken
-  Mentions physical and/or behavioral issues
-  States whether pull-out is necessary, and how much
-  Exit strategy

**These are in addition to other required items on IEPs.*