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IEPs as Tools for Advocacy: Where Relationships Meet Responsibility

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October 29, 2026
3:30 p.m. CST / 4:30 EST
TN CEC Presentation

University of Memphis College of Education
Special Education Program

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Roadmap of Presentation

1. **Setting the Stage:** *Understanding the IEP as More Than a Document*
2. **Relationships Matter:** *Building Trust, Collaboration, and Meaningful Family Partnerships*
3. **Where Relationships Meet Responsibility:** *Balancing Advocacy, Legal Obligations, and Accountability*
4. **Beyond Compliance:** *Centering Student and Family Voice, Educational Access, and Meaningful Progress*
5. **Advocacy in Action:** *Interactive Case Study and Audience Discussion*
6. **Closing Reflection:** *Turning Relationships and Responsibilities into Meaningful Action*



LH Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

1. **Strengthen Meaningful Family Participation**
   Identify practical strategies that promote shared understanding, family influence, and student voice throughout the IEP process.
2. **Connect Advocacy with Legal and Professional Responsibility**
   Examine how educators can navigate competing perspectives, uphold educational rights, and address barriers to meaningful participation.
3. **Move from Compliance to Action**
   Apply strategies for collaborative decision-making, effective IEP implementation, and responding when students are not making expected progress.

Remember: An effective IEP is not just about what we put on paper. It is about the relation
responsibilities we uphold, and the actions we take to help every student succe

LH Guiding Question

How can we move beyond simply *including* families in the IEP process to ensuring they understand and meaningfully influence decisions that affect their children??

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Whose in the “Room”

- **Share your role and location. Then, in one word, describe what you think families most want from the IEP process.**



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The IEP Is More Than a Document

- **An IEP represents a student's individualized educational strength, needs, goals, and supports.**
- **It establishes schools' legal responsibilities while ensuring families have meaningful opportunities to understand, participate in, and influence educational decisions.**
- **It should guide daily instruction, services, and progress monitoring-not simply annual meetings.**
- **Effective implementation requires collaboration, communication, and shared accountability.**



Remember: Compliance establishes the foundation. Collaboration and implementation help turn meaningful opportunities.

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Who Is at the Table,and Whose Voice Is Missing?

The IEP team brings together multiple perspectives:

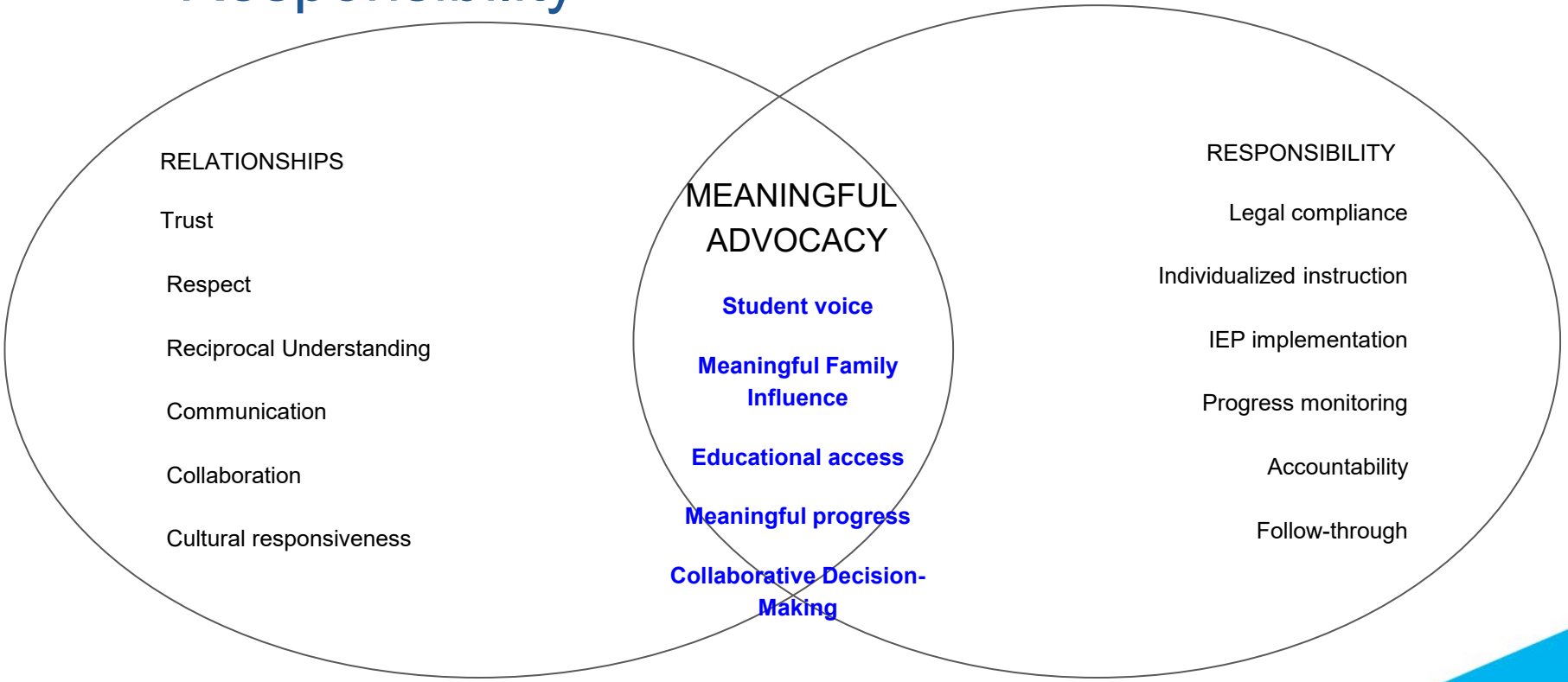
Students	Strengths, preferences, interests, and goals.
Families	Love for their child and their knowledge of the child's experiences, history, needs, and aspirations.
Special Educators	Expertise in specially designed instruction and individualized supports.
General Educators	Knowledge of grade-level expectations, classroom participation, and curriculum access
Related Service Providers	Expertise in addressing functional and educational needs.
Administrators/LEA representatives	Their responsibility for ensuring appropriate resources and services.



Reflection question: Does every person at the IEP table have a meaningful opportunity to contribute? Whose perspectives are most influential in IEP decisions, and whose knowledge might be overlooked or undervalued?

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The Intersection of Relationships and Responsibility



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Parent Participation Is a Right, Not a Courtesy

- **Parents are essential members of the IEP team.**
- **Families must have meaningful opportunities to understand, contribute to, and influence educational decisions.**
- **Schools must take steps to support parent participation, including appropriate meeting scheduling and communication access.**
- **Parent concerns and knowledge of the student must be considered when developing the IEP.**
- **Meaningful participation requires more than attendance or signatures. Families need access to information, opportunities to ask questions, and genuine consideration of their perspectives.**

Are we simply inviting families to participate, or are we removing the barriers that prevent them from?par

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Building Trust **BEFORE** the IEP Meeting

- **Establish ongoing communication with families beyond required meetings.**
- **Ask families about their priorities, concerns, and goals for their child before developing proposed IEP content.**
- **Offer a pre -meeting conversation to walk families through the proposed IEP, explain recommendations, answer questions, and invite feedback.**
- **Share relevant student progress data and proposed goals in accessible language.**
- **Identify and address barriers to participation, including scheduling, language, and access to information**

Strong family-school partnerships depend on meaningful communication, mutual understanding, and collaboration. Research highlights the importance of examining how families and educators experience these partnerships, (Santiago et al., 2022).

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Building Trust **BEFORE** the IEP Meeting

If we know families may be encountering unfamiliar information during IEP meetings, why do we wait until the meeting to explain it?

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Building Trust **DURING** the IEP Meeting

During the meeting:

- **Begin by inviting families and students to share their *perspectives, priorities, and concerns.***
- **Use *accessible language* and explain unfamiliar terminology without making assumptions about families' knowledge.**
- **Create space for questions, disagreements, and perspectives that differ from school recommendations.**
- **Present student data in understandable ways and explain how the data inform proposed goals and services.**
- **Check for understanding throughout the meeting and ensure family input is considered before decisions are finalized.**

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Building Trust **DURING** the IEP Meeting

ARE YOU ABLE TO BRAG ON THE STUDENT?

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Building Trust **AFTER** the IEP Meeting

After the meeting:

- **Ensure that all educators and service providers understand their responsibilities for implementing the IEP.**
- **Provide families with a clear summary of decisions, next steps, and points of contact.**
- **Communicate regularly about student progress, successes, and emerging concerns.**
- **Invite ongoing family feedback about how supports are working across school and home.**
- **Revisit IEP decisions when student needs change or progress data indicate that adjustments may be necessary.**

Who is responsible for noticing when an IEP isn't working, and what happens when

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When Advocacy and Disagreement Meet

Disagreement does not have to mean the end of collaboration.

Instead of: “We’ve always done it this way.”

Try: “Let's examine whether this approach is meeting this student's individual needs.”

Instead of: “That service isn’t available.”

Try: “Let's discuss what the student needs to receive FAPE and how we can provide it"

Instead of: “The parent doesn’t understand."

Try: “What can we do to ensure we have a shared understanding of the information and concerns?”

Disagreement is not evidence of a failed partnership. How we respond to disagreement reveals w
perspectives we value.

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Interactive Activity: Reframe the Conversation

During an IEP meeting, a parent listens quietly as the team reviews proposed goals, accommodations, and services. When the teacher asks, "Does everyone understand?" the parent nods. After the meeting, the parent contacts the teacher and says, "I didn't really understand what I was agreeing to."

Reflection Questions: Place responses in chat or unmute to share.

1. ***What assumptions might the team have made about the parent's participation?***
2. ***What could the teacher have done differently before and during the meeting?***
3. ***How can educators check for understanding without putting parents on the spot?***

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From Compliance to Meaningful Implementation

Compliance-focused approach

- Completing required IEP sections
- Holding the annual meeting
- Reporting progress
- Listing accommodations
- Documenting parent participation
- Establishing annual goals

Advocacy-centered approach

- Connecting IEP decisions to student needs
- Maintaining ongoing collaboration
- Using progress data to adjust instruction
- Ensuring accommodations are consistently provided
- Actively incorporating family perspectives
- Monitoring whether goals support meaningful progress

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Check-in: Guiding Question

How can we move beyond simply including families in the IEP process to ensuring they understand and meaningfully influence decisions, making IEPs powerful tools for advocacy?

What is one practice we've discussed that could make IEPs more effective tools for advocacy?

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Five Questions Every IEP Team Should Ask

01 What does the student need to access and participate in learning?

02 What do current data, family perspectives, and student experiences tell us about strengths and barriers?

03 Are the goals ambitious, measurable, and individualized?

04 What services and supports are needed to make progress?

05 How will we know whether the IEP is working, and what will we do if it isn't?

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Student Voice: Advocacy With Students

Students should have meaningful opportunities to:

- **Share their strengths, interests, preferences, concerns, and goals.**
- **Understand their learning needs, educational rights, and available supports in developmentally appropriate ways.**
- **Express preferences and participate in decisions about their education.**
- **Contribute to IEP discussions through accessible communication methods, including AAC and other individualized supports.**
- **Develop self-advocacy and decision-making skills with appropriate support.**

According to Sanderson & Goldman (2022), student participation in IEP meetings remains limited. In a national survey involving 1,183 parents, researchers found that only approximately one-third of students attended their most recent IEP meeting, and many attendees did not actively participate.

LH Student Voice: Advocacy With Students

Are we creating opportunities for students to influence their IEPs, or simply expecting them to participate in a process designed by adults?

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Advocacy Across the Student's Educational Journey



- **Early childhood**
  - Center family priorities, communication, developmental growth, and successful transitions.
  - Recognize families as essential sources of knowledge about their children's needs.

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Advocacy Across the Student's Educational Journey



- **Early Childhood:**
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  - Recognize families as essential sources of knowledge about their children's needs.
- **Elementary School:**
  - Promote foundational skills, belonging, inclusive participation, and emerging self-advocacy.
  - Help students begin understanding their strengths, needs, and available supports.

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- **Middle school:**
  - Strengthen self-awareness, decision-making, and participation in educational planning.
  - Create opportunities for students to express preferences and influence their IEP goals.

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- **Middle school:**
  - Strengthen self-awareness, decision-making, and participation in educational planning.
  - Create opportunities for students to express preferences and influence their IEP goals.
- **High school and transition:**
  - Center student aspirations, postsecondary goals, employment, education, and independent living needs.
  - Support meaningful student involvement in transition planning and decision-making.

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Five Commitments to Strengthen IEP Advocacy

1. **Can you interrogate whose knowledge counts?**
2. **Will you challenge when there is compliance without meaningful outcomes?**
3. **How will you disrupt institutional routines that limit participation?**
4. **When will you advocate even when it is uncomfortable?**
5. **Is it possible to proactively prepare families and students to understand, question, and meaningfully shape IEP decisions?**

Student-led IEP practices can create opportunities for students to understand their educational needs, communicate preferences, and develop self-advocacy skills, (McNaught et al., 2024).

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The Case of Jordan — Advocacy or Compliance?

Meet Jackson: Jackson is a sixth-grade student with a learning disability who receives specialized reading instruction. His IEP includes small-group reading instruction, accommodations, and measurable reading goals. Despite receiving all documented services, progress-monitoring data show minimal improvement over the past three months. During an IEP meeting, Jackson's mother expresses concern about his continued reading difficulties and growing frustration with school. The special education teacher explains that all services are being implemented as written but acknowledges that Jackson may need more intensive instruction. However, the school's intervention schedule is already full, and the administrator recommends continuing the current services until the next annual review.

The dilemma: The school is providing the documented services, but Jackson is not making expected progress. The parent feels unheard, and the teacher feels that their efforts are being questioned.

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The Case of Jackson — Advocacy or Compliance? What would you do?

What is the most appropriate response from the IEP team?

A. Reassure the parent that all IEP services are being provided.

B. Listen to the parent's concerns, review progress data, and collaboratively determine next steps.

C. Wait until the next annual IEP meeting to consider changes.

D. Recommend additional services without first reviewing the student's current needs.

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What would you do?

What is the most appropriate response from the IEP team?

A. Reassure the parent that all IEP services are being provided.

B. Listen to the parent's concerns, review progress data, and collaboratively determine next steps.

C. Wait until the next annual IEP meeting to consider changes.

D. Recommend additional services without first reviewing the student's current needs.

Best response: B

This approach combines relationship-building with professional responsibility.

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Closing Reflection: From Relationships to Responsibility and Action

What is one practice you will *challenge* , *change* , or *introduce* to make IEPs more meaningful tools for advocacy?

Share your commitment in the chat.

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The Work Ahead

IEPs only become meaningful tools for advocacy when we are willing to question whose voices are heard, whose knowledge is valued, and whether our decisions are truly meeting students' needs.

Q & A

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