

CHAPTER 6

KNOW ME



The school team and families all work together to understand the needs of every student from the student's first day and track the student's progress over time.

► **THE PROBLEM: THERE'S NOTHING INDIVIDUALIZED ABOUT MOST INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS (IEPS)**

A school cannot serve students with disabilities well unless they also know them well. When schools invest the time to understand their students well, interventions are more likely to succeed.

Schools are required by law to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students if their disability affects their access to a "free and appropriate education." This plan should be co-created by the parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, the school/district psychologist, and any other relevant members of the IEP team. Depending on age and severity of their disability, students may also be involved in the process. An IEP keeps everyone on the same page about students' goals, as well as the best ways to support them in the classroom and at home.

But in many schools, this isn't what the process or plan looks like. That isn't because school leaders and teachers don't care. Too often, they aren't given enough time, training or support. School staff have little time to consider the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student, and instead "copy and paste" one intervention plan for every student that comes afterwards.

► **THE SOLUTION: CREATE SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEMS THAT HELP TEACHERS LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH STUDENT'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND GET AHEAD OF CHALLENGES**

At the most effective schools for students with disabilities, educators use the school-wide systems and tools to communicate with each other about student needs. They use the same data-tracking tools and assessments to document the patterns and trends of each student. In these schools, general education and special education teachers also have time each week to reflect on data, collaboratively plan supports that students need, and work together to ensure that a student's IEP reflects the specific needs of the student.

At KIPP Raíces, the principal sends out a monthly survey to teachers, asking which students need help. Teachers are required to identify at least three students. The school team then develops intervention plans that they monitor on a weekly and monthly basis. Teachers also list what interventions they have already tried, and current teachers can also review past year comments at the beginning of the new school year. The school team learns all this information before they

have a “Student Support Team” (SST) meeting, where they determine an action plan for struggling students. “That way, we don’t waste time trying things others have already tried and that haven’t worked, or we know to keep going with strategies that have worked before,” said Principal Yesenia Castro.

Engage parents to get valuable insight into student needs

Research has shown that parents play an important role in driving student achievement. But family engagement is even more critical for students with disabilities. A 2012 Harvard Family Research Project brief noted that for children with disabilities, families are not only advocates for their children. They also have insight into their children’s specific needs that teachers may not have.⁸² Research from the University of Florida found many ways in which this insight helps parents support schools. In some examples, parents helped ensure teachers placed students in appropriate classrooms. Other times, parents helped teachers monitor student progress. Parents also provided teachers with ideas for adapting instruction to meet the needs of their children.⁸³

A 2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association highlighted several parent engagement strategies from effective schools. Some facilitated parent trainings on how to support students with disabilities. Others had all general education teachers meet with students in small groups outside of the school setting. This helped teachers get to know them better and determine the best ways in which to support them. One school expected each of its general education teachers to do twenty of these check-ins with parents per year. At other schools, all teachers could request home visits when they noticed a student struggling academically, socially or emotionally.⁸⁴

Make data guide the conversation

When making decisions about students with disabilities, many schools only look at a student’s annual test results. But the most successful schools use multiple data points to track progress all year long, and adjust instruction. As discussed in Chapter 4 “Catch Me When (Or Before) I Fall,” the most effective schools have an organized system for tracking data about their students. That helps schools understand each student’s strengths and weaknesses more clearly and track interventions and progress over time.

At KIPP Raíces, the SST process described above doesn’t just rely on teachers’ observations. Teachers base their meetings on concrete data they’ve collected on each student over time. Before an SST meeting happens, teachers fill out a form with students’ areas of strength and challenge, as well as the interventions they’ve tried. They also include each student’s results on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment of students’ growth in learning, data from their “running records” that teachers use to measure reading levels, writing samples, and any other information that helps illustrate the challenge and lack of progress. Teachers gather these same types of data every three to six weeks for follow-up SST meetings with the school and family to determine if things have improved.

“We’re constantly looking at data,” said Castro. “Parents are rarely surprised by student needs, because they are steeped in their own student’s data all year long.”

The most effective schools for students with disabilities also assess students multiple times throughout the school year, according to a 2016 California Charter Schools Association report on special education.⁸⁵ Some schools also encouraged teachers to give students daily “exit tickets” - a quick assessment question students have to answer before leaving class. This helps teachers check how much students have progressed each day.

At Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, school leaders and staff share data on student performance and academic objectives across the school, and make school-wide decisions based on what they find.

Data helps the school team make decisions about how to use resources, make interventions in behavior and instruction, and when to move students from one area to the next. The crucial part: it's not just one teacher doing this on her own. The entire school team works with data together in order to make better systematic decisions across the whole school.

Invest time in creating strong IEPs

An IEP should not be a vague summary of a student's disability and a generic set of interventions. It should reflect the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student. At Two Rivers in Washington, D.C., the school focuses on making sure that IEPs are "tailored to the specific needs of the student, goals are tied to clear standards and data, and goals allow tracking of progress and adjustment of instruction to meet their needs."⁸⁶ Though this may sound like it's just meeting the basic expectations for an IEP, very often most IEP goals are not tied to grade-level academic standards or any concrete measures of student performance at all. When school teams use grade-level expectations or other concrete measures as reference points within the IEP, they can help teachers, parents, and students develop a clear picture of what the student needs to work on to demonstrate growth.

The most effective schools prioritize getting to know their students early. They work together with families to get as much insight on a student as possible. Then they use data to help determine what kinds of support work best. That goes beyond creating a strong IEP. It means taking a holistic view of each student that includes data, as well as personal insight into their strengths and weaknesses.



WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



KNOW ME

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WHAT TO ASK

- Do school teams build strong, trusting relationships with students with disabilities that help them to strengthen instruction and support?
- How do they use data to regularly track students' progress and understand their unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs?
- Does the school team authentically engage a wide range of school staff and the parents in the IEP process to ensure the IEP is a meaningful tool that guides the instruction for that student?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network leaders set policies that encourage school staff to frequently communicate with parents about student progress and provides technology that makes it easy to do so.
- The district / charter school network leaders have regular town hall or open forum meetings with families to hear concerns regarding special education issues at the district level.
- The district / charter school network leaders have an easy-to-use system that allows all teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and the family to easily access a student's IEP online and obtain a hard copy.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school and family communicate weekly about student progress and challenges, and at least quarterly about whether or not the student is accomplishing academic goals.
- Teachers know and can articulate each student's strengths, interests and goals, beyond what's written in the IEP.
- Students know their data and can talk about where they are succeeding and where they need help.
- The school is welcoming to students, and students feel connected to the staff. Students can identify several adults on campus whom they can go to for support - people whom they can seek out if they have a problem.



WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team builds strong and lasting relationships with students and families.
- Educators use data regularly to measure the academic progress and social-emotional/behavioral development of all students, including students with disabilities, and track whether interventions are working.
- The school team communicates regularly with parents and students about interventions and progress, both inside and outside of school.