



Kids As Self Advocates

How to Get the most out of your IEP

By Tyler Feist

Tyler Feist, a ninth grader in North Dakota, tells his story about getting his IEP followed

A special greeting from the Midwest. My name is Tyler Feist; I am 14 years old and live in rural North Dakota. I am a freshman at Edgeley High School. This fall I played Varsity football and my position was flanker and line backer. I like to hunt and fish, which we do a lot of. This summer I had a job working on a farm, which was an awesome learning experience, and will work there again next summer. We have a spot out at one of the nearby lakes, so that is our place of retreat, where I also like to go tubing and skiing.

I'm writing today about how to get the most out of your IEP as a youth. My diagnosis is ADHD/Visual Perception Learning Disability. School is most difficult as it is very hard for me to concentrate. It takes every ounce of energy I have to focus sometimes. Areas of reading and written language are the most difficult. One of the hardest things for me is to be able to express myself when I am overwhelmed during the school day.

I receive assistance in school through an IEP *, which is an Individual Education Plan. With certain disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a student can receive services to meet their unique needs and goals. In my case, there was a meeting to identify that I was having difficulty in certain areas. It was decided at that time, to do an assessment. This assessment was done to identify my areas of difficulty. Following the assessment, the team met, which included; me, parents, teachers, principle and others to identify how to make changes to the curriculum to meet the needs necessary for me to achieve and learn. All IEP's will look differently, depending upon our unique needs. At first I was not thrilled about any of it. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensures that children with disabilities will receive a quality education, equal to kids who do not have a disability. To that I sayThank goodness we have this great federal law to help us reach our dreams.

A couple years ago, I went to a conference with my mom. Mike Auberger, from the group ADAPT* was presenting. He told me "you need to learn to advocate for yourself as your mom isn't always going to be able to do it". Those words ring in my ears a lot. Some of the accommodations that I need are:

1. Have tests read for me, outside of the classroom,
2. sit in a non-distracting area,
3. for reading books I have modified points and am able to use books on tape of which I can either test orally or on the computer,
4. classroom notes from the teacher are provided for me (my handwriting is difficult to read) and I can also use a laptop for taking notes because of my handwriting. I have a teacher for learning disabilities that assists me pull things together to make sure that I am getting

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everything done. We use a planner between home and school so there is consistency on what I have done and not done. She helps me to stay organized, when at times it is difficult for me to follow through. Darlene, my LD teacher is one of the most important keys to my success. She understands me very well. She knows for sure when I am pulling her leg and always has an understanding ear. I couldn't do it without her. If there is something that is working and I have some thoughts on what could work better, she always has an open heart and mind.

I think one of the very things that are a must in making your IEP work for you is understanding and communicating what is in it. That begins by being a part of the IEP team. I used to walk around outside, while the meeting went on inside and was very nervous about what they were saying. I think I was 10 or so at the time. My mom sensed that this bothered me and from that point on I attended the IEP's. I really think it is important to state your feelings on what works and what doesn't work. After all, this is a program designed for your uniqueness. It is a bit frightening sitting there with all of those people, but the one thing to remember is they are there for you.

There have been times when my mom has had to go into the school on my behalf, but that is becoming less frequent. Mom has always said that the key is communication, communication, communication. If they don't know, they can't help you. Short and long term goals are written for you. You have input. The new regulations of the law has made it very clear the importance of parental input and input of the student.

I have had to speak with the principle when I felt that my IEP wasn't being followed. The first time I was rather scared to talk to him, but it is important to do. I am sure that at times it is easy for teachers to forget, they are only human. But I also feel it is important for them to follow, as your success is dependent upon your program.

There have been times that I have gotten down and depressed because of school and feeling misunderstood. At those times it is very important to keep your head high, and don't let anybody distract you from your dreams. This hasn't come easy. I have had support from a couple older friends that have the same thing as myself. One is now a senior and the other has graduated but they have told me to **NEVER GIVE UP and NEVER GIVE IN!** You have to keep on pushing for your rights.

*For more on IEP's, see www.fape.org. FAPE is the Family & Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE) project. This is a project, which aims to inform and educate families and advocates about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and promising practices

***ADAPT** stands for the American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today. Attendant services are assistance with things like dressing, bathing eating, getting in and out of bed, helping with a check book or reminding someone to take a pill. Attendants work for a person with a disability, doing tasks that person can't do alone.

Nationally, ADAPT is a non-profit organization which focuses on promoting services in the community instead of warehousing people with disabilities in institutions and nursing homes. Attendant services (help with things like eating, dressing, toileting, moving from wheelchair to bed, etc.) are the cornerstone to community-based services for people with severe disabilities. ADAPT is working to get 25% of the Medicaid long term care funds redirected to pay for a national, mandated attendant services program. More on adapt, see www.adapt.org.

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