

Dyslexia: When the IEP is a Dictatorship

by Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley, Dyslexia Training Institute

Today the school psychologist walked into the room where we were having our IEP meeting, saw me sitting at the table, let out an audible sigh and turned around and walked out. I am not kidding, this really happened. Of course, we have a history and that history includes him not wanting to hear anything anyone has to say about scores, eligibility, goals or dyslexia. He is the fast-talking wordsmith (used car salesman?) in an IEP meeting. He is the kind of guy that talks in circles so most parents, who don't have support at IEP meetings, are given very little opportunity to question his decisions because he won't allow it. He is unable to think flexibly and does not like it when there is someone in the room who knows more than he does – he is the expert, no wait, he is the dictator.

I have been to all kinds of IEPs. There are the super liberal, hippy-dippy, warm and fuzzy IEPs where everyone brings food, works together, respects each other and does what it takes to provide the appropriate services. At the end we all hold hands and sing Kumbaya. Then there are very democratic, polite meetings that are measured but productive where there might only be bottles of water on the table and friendly handshakes, but not a lot of socializing. Then there are the dictatorships. These are the tough, uncomfortable meetings where the school is making it clear that they are in charge, they are the experts and quite frankly, they have already determined the outcome of the meeting. This is when you need to be tough, not rude, but tough. Here are some tips on how to handle the IEP meeting where your voice is not being heard or you are not being permitted to contribute to the meeting in a meaningful way.

You're handed the testing and the IEP and as you flip through it, you notice that it states. "child does not qualify for services at this time."

This is just flat-out, not okay. Any predetermination of services or eligibility is eliminating the parent participation that is not only imperative, but not allowed by IDEA. There can be preplanning but not predetermination and if the school seems unwilling to listen to ideas alternative to theirs, then predetermination may be in effect. Any eligibility determination is to be made by the team, and that cannot happen without parent input, because the parent is part of the team. When this happens, kindly remind the team that there is supposed be a discussion regarding qualification, any predetermination is contradictory to IDEA regulations regarding participation. But beware of the superficial effort by the IEP team to include you, if you do not feel like your opinions are really being considered, do not sign the IEP and if the IEP has a line that says "parents were given the opportunity to participate" do not sign it.

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They read through the testing at a breakneck pace and seldom stop for your questions and clarifications.

It is important to remember that IEP teams hold these meetings all the time, so the language and scoring is second nature to them. But sometimes, I think they do it to prevent any questions or clarifications. For example, today a CTOPP-2 score was presented at 89 and listed at Average. When I politely pointed out that the a score of 89 on the CTOPP-2 was actually Below Average he scoffed and said, “I will change it, but it really isn’t that important. Will it make you happy if I change it?” Well, yes, yes it would. Because it does matter and if there are more careless mistakes like that, I will continue to point them out. There is a child on the other end of this IEP, so the details matter. He also added that he was just using the general index of 80-115 being in the Average range, you should know that anyone conducting testing is required to use the labels set forth in the testing manual and they cannot change them, ever.

As you sit down to the meeting, you are informed that you have one hour to complete the meeting and it needs to be completed by the end of that time frame.

Never, ever feel rushed. This is a legal document that has great implications for your child. You might empathize with the IEP team and their large, unmanageable caseloads, but not at the expense of your child. So, take your time. Ask questions. When the time is up, sign for attendance only, and schedule a second or even a third meeting until everything is right. *A few states do not require a parent signature to initiate the IEP, so make sure to check your state’s regulations.

There is no doubt that it can be really difficult to stand up for your rights in situations like these, but it imperative that you stand your ground and keep everyone honest.