

# School Counselor Contributions to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process

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50

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**ABSTRACT:** School counselors provide a variety of services to students with disabilities, and becoming involved in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process is an opportunity through which school counselors can demonstrate their unique contributions. The authors highlight specific skills (e.g., group facilitation, consultation) and developmental knowledge (e.g., career, psychosocial) of school counselors in relation to their roles in serving students with disabilities throughout the IEP process. The authors recommend ways in which educators can encourage school counselors to become involved in the provision of services to students with disabilities. **KEYWORDS:** collaboration, IEP, Individualized Education Program, school counselor, task group

SINCE THE EDUCATION FOR ALL HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ACT (1975) originally passed into law, federal disability legislation has mandated that school districts identify and provide special education and related services to students with disabilities. As the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 outlined them, those related services include support services that individuals such as school counselors and speech therapists provide. As part of their ethical responsibility to provide comprehensive counseling and guidance services to all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004a, 2005), school counselors perform a variety of activities for students with disabilities.

ASCA supports school counselor involvement with students with disabilities, as reflected in a position statement that ASCA developed to guide practitioners in determining appropriate roles and responsibilities related to their work with those students, *The Professional School Counselor and Students With Special Needs* (ASCA, 2004b). ASCA encourages school counselor involvement with students with disabilities as direct service providers, through activities including the use of individual and group counseling sessions to address a variety of social and emotional concerns and the assistance of students with postsecondary planning. ASCA recommends that school counselors engage in indirect services, such as participating on multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), to advocate for students with disabilities. However, they specify that school counselors should not participate in those teams in any supervisory capacity, such as replacing a school administrator as an official representative of the local educational agency or making decisions about a student's placement in special education. Rather, school counselors can collaborate with those administrators.

Schools may underuse the services of school counselors. Milsom (2002) found that although all participants in a national survey of school counselors reported providing some type of services to students with disabilities, nearly one third of high school counselors reported not being involved in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. In addition, only 80% of the survey participants indicated serving on MDTs. It is unclear why schools have not involved all school counselors, with their specialized knowledge and skills, in these activities.

Legislative mandates have made the need for collaboration between special educators and school counselors evident. For example, the implementation of the IDEA of 1990 has obligated the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to address students' transitions to postsecondary activities. The IDEA of 2004 indicated that the IEP team must identify students' future goals and the types of services, including course requirements, that would help students achieve their goals. Although school counselors do not need to attend IEP meetings, their expertise in career and lifespan development would complement special educators' disability expertise. Tarver-Behring, Spagna, and Sullivan (1998) suggested that because special educators work most closely with students with disabilities, school counselors may believe their own skills and knowledge are not necessary. Special educators who the law mandates must participate in IEP team meetings may consider actively seeking school counselors as collaborators in the provision of services to students with disabilities.

### IEP Team Composition

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (2000) described task groups as formed to accomplish some identified goal. IEP teams fall into this category: They are formed to generate a student's IEP. The success of task groups often depends on the interactions among group members (Gladding, 2003), making team composition an important consideration.

Burn (2004) described task groups as consisting of people with complementary skills and knowledge. According to Clark (2000), IEP teams should include individuals who can share knowledge of the student, availability of resources, and curriculum options. Accordingly, the IDEA 2004 mandates that a variety of individuals participate in the development of IEPs. Several researchers (Clark; Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002) have identified common problems that occur during the development of IEP teams. First, IEP teams may fail to involve the necessary professionals. For example, Clark suggested that failure to include a general education teacher on the IEP team may result in the team's overlooking of issues that are relevant to a student's successful participation in that teacher's class. Also, the absence of a general education teacher may result in a preconference determination that the student was not eligible to participate in regular education classes, resulting in no discussion on that topic.

Many IEP teams either fail to identify related services or fail to specify the duration and frequency of those services (Drasgow et al., 2001; Johns et al., 2002). School counselors are knowledgeable about specific related services and interventions. Without school counselors' participation on IEP teams, team members may overlook opportunities for students to access educational opportunities. Team members may also be unaware of realistic timeframes or availability of resources to address student needs in related services areas.

## IEP Team Effectiveness and School Counselor Roles

With a holistic view of a student obtained through diverse perspectives, IEP teams may be more effective in developing realistic and relevant goals for students with disabilities. Elliott and Sheridan (1992) outlined seven characteristics of effective teams: (a) leadership, (b) pregroup planning, (c) a clear agenda, (d) clear communication (verbal and nonverbal), (e) member participation, (f) management of conflict, and (g) reflection of group process. These characteristics become important during different phases of groups. The following is a review of the critical roles that school counselors can play in contributing to an effective IEP process by focusing on the seven characteristics during three distinct group phases: planning, leading, and evaluating.

### Planning for IEP Team Meetings

Leadership, pregroup planning, and clear agenda are three characteristics that Elliott and Sheridan (1992) identified and that should occur before an IEP meeting. Fleming and Monda-Amaya (2001) supported this view of important characteristics, emphasizing not only that one critical variable in team effectiveness was the team's having a leader but also that teams are effective when goals are clear, procedures are understood, and each member understands his or her role on the team. Burn (2004) indicated it is often the team leader who ensures that team members are adequately trained, and IEP team leaders may also play critical roles in preparing team members for meetings.

Special educators and school psychologists typically do not need to complete courses in group work as part of their initial training (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006), although they may choose to complete elective coursework in that area. Thus, school counselors may be the only school personnel who have formal training in group work. This training includes analysis of group dynamics and development to determine what is necessary from leaders and members for groups to function effectively. With this knowledge, school counselors could conduct in-service activities or smaller scale trainings for educators on group dynamics. They can also prepare IEP team members to participate actively and effectively in team meetings. Because school counselors often receive limited training that is specific to special education in general and IEP teams in particular (Milsom, 2002), they could collaborate with special education directors or administrators in designing and conducting these training sessions.

School counselors also possess skills to facilitate task groups. Task group (team) leaders often focus on group content while ignoring the behavior of group members (Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, & Donigian, 2001). Group process refers to what happens in a group in relation to the interactions among its members (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2001). Kraus and Hulse-Killacky (1996) believed leaders often feel that they must choose to focus on either the content or the process, but not both. However, attending to both the process and the content of groups is equally important to the overall success of the group (Hulse-Killacky, Kraus, & Schumacher, 1999). D. W. W. Johnson and Johnson (2002) indicated that teams often have shared leadership, and school counselors and special educators can share IEP team leadership to focus on both the content and process of IEP team meetings. With expertise in disabilities, special educators can focus on the

content of meetings. Then, school counselors can focus on group dynamics and the process of the meeting. Leading IEP Meetings

The next three characteristics that Elliott and Sheridan (1992) described-clear communication, member participation, and management of conflict-are important in the implementation phase of a group. Fleming and Monda-Amaya (2001) believed that team functioning affects the type and quality of goals and services that educators provide to students with disabilities. Burn (2004) indicated that it is team leaders who help to foster positive interactions among members.

Fleming and Monda-Amaya (2001) and Lytle and Bordin (2001) have cited feelings of cohesion and effective communication as important components of effective groups. Also, cooperation and mutual trust characterize effective teams, and members feel free to share feedback and deal with conflict openly (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2001). IEP team leaders who can attend to the process of the meeting by creating an atmosphere of support and trust among team members, facilitating effective verbal and nonverbal communication, and managing conflict will likely have successful team meetings. Furthermore, researchers have emphasized the importance of making parents feel welcome at IEP team meetings (Clark, 2000; Fleming & Monda-Amaya; Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin) because parents often feel frustration during meetings when school personnel use but fail to explain special education jargon (Lytle & Bordin).

Clark (2000) believed it is the team leader's responsibility to encourage active participation of all members, particularly parents, and also emphasized the importance of making sure that parents understand the content that people discuss in meetings. Greer, Greer, and Woody (1995) suggested that school counselors possess skills to create an open and trusting atmosphere that will facilitate communication among all team members and help parents to feel that people value their input. Through questioning and probing statements, school counselors can encourage active participation by all team members, particularly parents. School counselors can use skills such as summarizing, clarifying, and paraphrasing to facilitate understanding of content and possibly clarify and help resolve conflicts. School counselors are skilled group coleaders, who in a nonauthoritarian manner, can help keep the IEP team focused. School counselors have received training to facilitate clear communication and to recognize and diffuse conflicting perspectives.

### Evaluating an IEP Team

The final characteristic that Elliott and Sheridan (1992) outlined, reflection of the group process, relates to evaluation. By providing valuable feedback for team members, formal evaluation can lead to increased effectiveness. Fleming and Monda-Amaya (2001) recommended that team members evaluate not only whether the team accomplished its goals but also whether students achieved their outcomes. Fleming and Monda-Amaya suggested that an effective team would create realistic and manageable student goals and objectives. Hulse-Killacky et al. (1999) recommended that leaders be responsible for helping team members reflect on their accomplishments.

School counselors receive training in evaluation and accountability, making them natural coleaders in this postgroup stage. Although scheduling a formal meeting to evaluate the success of each individual IEP meeting may not be feasible because of the limited time availability of

school personnel, meetings that occur once or twice per year with frequent team members may prove helpful. The purpose of these meetings would be to assess strengths and weaknesses of the IEP team process, individual members, or group dynamics in general (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992). School counselors could also survey a sample of parents regarding their perspectives of the IEP process and share their findings with the team.

### School Counselor Contributions Through Service Delivery

School counselor contributions to the IEP process are not limited to shared group leadership. More than 20 years ago, Fairchild (1985) indicated that because multidisciplinary team members tend to focus mainly on the academic needs of students with disabilities, school counselors can play a critical role in helping to bring focus to students' nonacademic needs. Kameen and McIntosh (1979) also suggested that the most important way in which school counselors can contribute to IEPs is by bringing attention to students' affective concerns. With IDEA's current emphasis on transition planning and the continued expectation that a team of individuals is responsible for developing a student's IEP, school counselor contributions to the IEP process extend beyond a focus on nonacademic and affective concerns.

School counselors may be responsible for implementing interventions that the IEP team determines. ASCA (2005) encouraged school counselors to be prepared to assist students in academic, career, and transition planning and personal and social areas. With knowledge and training in interventions addressing these three domains, school counselors can assist IEP teams in developing relevant goals and identifying realistic individual or group counseling interventions to assist students in meeting those goals.

### Academic Concerns

Although special education teachers are more qualified than school counselors to develop and implement academic interventions for students with disabilities, school counselors can help IEP teams understand the connection between certain personal and social factors related to academic success. Coster and Haltiwanger (2004) identified one such connection, indicating that students who lack social skills may experience academic difficulties as a result of not being able to work in cooperative learning groups or appropriately participate in class discussions. Thus, schoolcounseling interventions to address social skills could also positively affect students' academics.

With input from special educators, school counselors can provide interventions directly targeting the academic needs of students with disabilities. Little empirical evidence is available regarding the effects of school-counseling interventions on academic outcomes of students with disabilities specifically. Most available research pertains to students with disabilities as part of the general school population without providing comparisons between students with and without disabilities. Those studies have revealed that schoolcounseling interventions can help all students increase their achievement test scores (Sink & Stroh, 2003) and increase their achievement in math (Lee, 1993) and reading (Hadley, 1988). Thompson and Littrell (1998) examined the effects of school-counseling interventions specifically on high school students with learning disabilities. All

participants in their study showed significant improvement in time management and homework completion.

### Career Concerns

Career development is another area in which school counselors are likely to be the only school personnel with formal training. They possess an understanding of career development concerns and knowledge of effective and developmentally appropriate school-based interventions to enhance students' career development. In addition to helping students decide on future careers, school counselors can be resources to students through their connections with college admissions representatives. School counselors learn information about college admissions through graduate school experiences and on the job. Regular contact with college representatives provides school counselors with information about admissions requirements and the availability of disability services. School counselors are trained to administer and interpret career assessment instruments to assist students in understanding their abilities, interests, and values that may affect future success and satisfaction in a particular career. They are also responsible for helping students with disabilities request accommodations for college entrance exams (Quigney & Studer, 1998).

With their background in career development, school counselors can be valuable contributors to the development of the transition services component of the IEP. They can identify a student's deficits in skill or knowledge and appropriate resources and interventions to help the student prepare for the transition to work, postsecondary school, or a supported living environment after high school. School counselors can collaborate with special education teachers to develop appropriate transition interventions and help connect students and their families to appropriate community resources.

Effectiveness data have suggested that interventions by school counselors can assist students in career development and transition. As IEP team members, school counselors can recommend relevant interventions in these areas. Again, most researchers have not examined career outcomes of students with disabilities specifically but, rather, have included those students in studies of entire classrooms or grade levels. Peterson, Long, and Billups (1999) discussed the effectiveness of school-counseling interventions on eighthgrade students' abilities to plan accurately and thoughtfully a course of study that would enable them to pursue their desired career goals. They found that providing students with written information on course options in combination with verbal discussion and support from a school counselor was more effective than providing students only with written information. Milsom, Akos, and Thompson (2004) implemented a small-group intervention with high school students who had learning disabilities. Those researchers were successful in efforts to help those students increase knowledge of disability legislation, postsecondary school options, and self- advocacy skills. Personal or Social Concerns

School counselors' knowledge of developmental theories enables them to identify characteristics of resilient students, life events that place students at risk or cause stress, and common developmental tasks of students from kindergarten through Grade 12. In general, school counselors possess both knowledge of students' psychosocial needs at various levels of

development and knowledge of school- and community- based interventions that are effective at addressing those needs.

Bowen and Glenn (1998) suggested that many students with disabilities could benefit from counseling interventions targeting issues such as self-esteem, social skills, and anger management. School counselors possess the knowledge and skills necessary to develop interventions in these areas. Unlike research addressing academic and career outcomes, empirical studies examining personal and social outcomes have specifically focused on students with disabilities. In fact, individual and small-group school-counseling interventions have helped students cope with and manage attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Myrick, 2003); facilitated social interactions between students with and without disabilities (Ciechalski & Schmidt, 1995); and helped elementary school students with disabilities including autism, cerebral palsy, and mental retardation to express feelings (L. Johnson, McLeod, & Fall, 1997).

By themselves, school-counseling interventions would not be sufficient to address the complex needs of many students with disabilities. However, implemented as part of the services that the IEP team develops, school-counseling interventions can contribute to a systemic and holistic plan for student success.

#### Recommendations for Special Education Personnel

Special educators may find it necessary to recruit school counselors to become involved in the IEP process. Like most school personnel, school counselors have many responsibilities. They may indicate lack of time or knowledge as reasons for not becoming involved. Encouragement from special educators and acknowledgement of the importance of and need for their expertise may help school counselors feel more comfortable in joining IEP teams. School counselors will be able to offer greater contributions for students with whom they are familiar. When more than one counselor works in a building, it is most beneficial for the IEP team leader to request involvement from the pertinent student's assigned counselor. This is particularly critical and sometimes difficult when a student is transitioning to another building. For example, if the related services of a middle school counselor are going to be written into the IEP for an incoming fifth-grade student, that counselor should be invited to the IEP meeting in addition to the current elementary school counselor in an effort to ensure clarity and continuity of services.

We encourage special educators to consult with school counselors with regard to transition planning and personal and social concerns. The IEP team may view student needs more comprehensively if the special educators consider school counselor perspectives. Just as general education teachers should have input into classroom interventions for students with disabilities, school counselors should have input into related service interventions that special educators would ask them to implement.

School counselors' training in group work can benefit special educators and students with disabilities. Special educators can ask school counselors to become involved as cofacilitators of IEP meetings. Also, administrators can provide the opportunity for school counselors to conduct inservice programs about task-group work for all faculty, particularly in relation to IEP and other multidisciplinary team meetings. Finally, students with disabilities can benefit from group

counseling sessions with school counselors. School counselors bring to IEP teams a wealth of knowledge and skills that complements that of other school personnel.

School counselors can help an IEP team to focus content in academic, career, and personal and social areas and can implement specific interventions in those areas. Students with disabilities can benefit directly from the expertise that school counselors can bring to the career and personal and social areas. Also, students with disabilities can benefit indirectly from school counselors' consultation, collaboration, and group leadership skills. School counselors' training and experience make them integral members of effective IEP teams.

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