

Involving Students in the Planning Process

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He knows how to tell what he likes and doesn't like and what he wants to do. It does no good to decide something for someone else. If he decided, maybe he would be more eager to do it.

—Mother of a 12-year-old physically handicapped student

If she were told it was to help her, it would give her a sense of importance in planning her own life. She is maturing and she needs to feel some responsibility for her education and her life.

—Guardian of a 17-year-old emotionally handicapped student

W. could get ready to explain his past history and his feelings about how he has not been able to learn and has tried to keep up. It would help him know how far he has come.

—Mother of a 17-year-old learning disabled student

LOOKING AT THE LAW

Public Law 94-142 provides for the participation of the student, "whenever appropriate," in meetings to develop the individualized education program (IEP). Although a great deal of progress has been made by education agencies in implementing parent participation in educational planning, very little has been done to include students with special needs in planning their own programs. The potential of this involvement for furthering students' growth, maturity, and the exercise of appropriate power over their own lives is tremendous.

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P.L. 94-142 regulations specify those persons who should be involved in the IEP meeting. They include a representative of the school other than the child's teacher who is responsible for providing or supervising special education, the teacher, the parents, and the child, "whenever appropriate." While most persons are aware that school officials and parents are involved in IEP planning, many are not aware that the student may be included in helping to develop the IEP.

CRITERIA FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION

The words "whenever appropriate" have seldom been defined by policymakers. Only a few articles have suggested criteria for deciding when it is appropriate to include students. The student's age, severity of handicap, and ability to handle the situation have been suggested as possible considerations (Winslow, 1977).

More recently, student interest in participating has been recommended as an important criterion. In a study designed to elicit ideas from those who are most affected by the IEP, 47 special education students (12 years of age and older) and their parents were asked to cite considerations in deciding when to include a student (Gillespie, 1981). Respondents were classified by their schools as learning disabled, educable mentally handicapped, seriously emotionally handicapped, or physically handicapped.

More than 75% of the students and 90% of the parents said that they were unaware of the possibility of involving students in IEP meetings. When asked about their attitude toward student participation, both parents and students expressed positive feelings. Over 90% of the parents and over 75% of the students reported that they either completely agreed or mostly agreed with the idea of student involvement.

