Key points:
• Be cautious when typing information into IEP forms prior to meeting
• Make changes to electronic version from hardcopy
• Check that network, printers are compatible with IEP program

Avoid electronic snafus that can wreck computerized IEPs

A hearing officer notices something is not quite right when she opens a student's documents from the district's computerized IEP program.

There are multiple versions of the IEP and meeting minutes. One version contains two sets of minutes that recommend different services for the student. Two versions of the minutes include dates when no meetings actually took place.

What's more, there are four versions of the student's evaluation -- two versions classify the student's articulation deficits as moderate, but the other versions classify them as mild.

In short, neither a hearing officer nor the parent can make heads or tails of which documents are correct.

Although technology can benefit the IEP process in many ways, "this is an example of misusing a computerized IEP program to such an extent that it destroys the integrity of any [IEP] documents created," the hearing officer wrote in Beaumont Indep. Sch. Dist., 114 LRP 5846 (SEA TX 10/16/13).

Without training on how to correctly use computerized IEP programs, staff can run into technological issues that can deny a student FAPE.

Share these tips with IEP team members on how to avoid similar problems:

Avoid pre-meeting mistakes.

Aside from noting the student's identifying information, the IHO in the Beaumont hearing recommended that staff avoid typing meeting minutes or filling in sections of the IEP prior to the meeting. Elsewhere, the Ventura County (Calif.) SELPA recently revised its guidance on what sections of the electronic IEP staff can prepare ahead of the meeting, said Fran Arner-Costello, director of Programs and Services and co-author of a user manual for the SELPA's IEP software program.

"Present levels of performance are almost always typed in before [the meeting], even though that is still subject to change by any member of the team," Arner-Costello said. Also, teams can prepare a first draft of goals under the guidance, she said, which can help reduce the amount of typing performed during the meeting and give team members time to ensure that the goals they draft are in the correct format, she said.
She advises against detailing the offer of FAPE, placement, or proposed services before the meeting. These should be determined only after the team deliberates, she said. "This helps avoid predetermination or an offer of FAPE appearing in a draft that isn't the district's ultimate offer," she said.

**Customize options with programmer.**

Try to choose an IEP program that allows for flexibility, said Sherry Culves, school attorney with Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP in Atlanta. "A lot of these programs have restrictions that are spirited in the direction of trying to ensure compliance, but can actually inhibit the team's ability," she said. For example, a box may have a finite number of characters, but the team should be able to use more space if needed. A progress-monitoring tab might allow teams to input only percentages. If a team needs to include text or a narrative, they should have override power to do so, Culves said.

Work with your programmer to customize the program, Arner-Costello said. At one time the program she uses would self-populate or save alternative options that other users could see when they accessed pull-down menus. "We realized that the self-populating wasn't a good idea because people might be able to add something that's not in compliance, so we had our programmer remove that feature," she said.

**Match electronic version with hardcopy.**

Lock the document so that only assigned users can edit it, Arner-Costello said. If team members handwrite changes on a hardcopy of the IEP document, the case manager should be responsible for making those changes to the electronic version, she said. Remind staff that the final version has all the team members' signatures, she said. Scan the signed version and upload it to the program, she said. "Clerks check that the finalized hardcopy of the IEP matches the electronic version," she said.

**Double-check your work.**

Don't promise participants a completed copy of the IEP at the end of the meeting, Culves said. Rather than risk an error going in the final version, have members who took notes come together after the meeting to check the document, she said. "You're not making substantive changes, but making sure typos or errors are corrected so you have an accurate document with everything the team agreed upon," she said.

Warn staff to double-check that they are not misusing electronic shortcuts, Culves said. For example, some IEP programs allow you to open the student's existing IEP and use that document as the form for the new IEP. Avoid blindly copying and pasting old sections into a new IEP out of convenience, she said. "It can be a time-saving avenue to not have to type all that again, but it's a word of caution that IEP teams need to be careful and not fall back on what is already in the system," she said.
Check device, network compatibility.

Problems with the computer platform and printer are the most common tech issues that teams have during the meeting, Arner-Costello said. Use the Internet server that the programmer recommends, she said, and check that you have a working printer nearby prior to the meeting. Also, choose whether to project the IEP on a wall, Culves said. In some cases, projecting can be helpful, but other times it's harder to have a natural conversation when people are focused on the screen, she said.

"Remember that the team [not the technology] deserves everyone's attention during the meeting," she said.

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