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## **FACILITATED IEP TEAM MEETINGS IN MARYLAND**

### **An Introduction and Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Public Agency/School Personnel**

Introduction to Independent Facilitated IEP Team Meetings: Having IEP team meetings facilitated by an independent, trained “facilitator” is rapidly becoming a popular means for parents and school personnel to reach agreement in the educational decision making process for students needing or suspected of needing special education services. When the relationship between parents and school personnel become strained or better yet, before the relationship has the opportunity to fray, parents and school personnel are finding that using independent facilitators can assist the IEP team process.

An independent facilitator may help parents and school personnel avoid misunderstandings or disagreements when it is believed that discussions at the meeting may become challenging. Using a trained, independent facilitator has been found to be an effective means to keep IEP teams focused on the development of the educational program for the student while addressing some of the conflicts and disagreements that may arise from miscommunication. The independent facilitator will utilize skills that create an environment in which the IEP team members; school personnel and parents, can listen to each other and work together to develop high quality education programs for students suspected of, or identified as disabled.

#### **1. Who can request an IEP meeting be facilitated?**

An independent facilitator may be requested by either the parent or the school, in any of the participating school districts. However, both parties must agree to participate in this voluntary process.

#### **2. Who serves as an IEP meeting independent facilitator?**

The independent facilitator is a trained volunteer from a community mediation center, generally located in the jurisdiction where the student attends school, or in another community close to where the student attends school. The independent facilitator has completed a 50-hour training course in mediation skills, has experience mediating a variety of disputes, and has completed a 3-day training in IEP Team Meeting Facilitation. The independent facilitator is not a member of the IEP team and does not have a relationship with the school or the parents, other than to assist in the meeting. The independent facilitator remains neutral and focuses on the process while the team makes the decisions.

**3. How does independent facilitation differ from mediation under the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act )?**

Independent IEP facilitation should not be confused with mediation. The independent facilitation occurs at a regular IEP team meeting, which is generally run by the school system. There is no written agreement other than an IEP, which may be developed or revised.

While independently facilitated IEP team meetings are emerging as a means to avoid conflicts and/or to resolve conflicts prior to requesting mediation or filing a due process complaint, it is not required under the IDEA. States or local school systems are not required to offer the service.

Mediation is typically used when there is a significant disagreement that the parties are otherwise unable to resolve. Mediation may be used to deal with a broader range of issues in special education than in an IEP meeting. A trained impartial mediator brings the parties together to work with each other to resolve a variety of disagreements, often including those not directly related to the student's IEP.

**4. What does the independent facilitator do at the meeting?**

The independent facilitator can be expected to:

- Talk to parents and school staff in advance of the meeting
- Assist the team with establishing an agenda
- Guide the discussion and keep the focus on the student
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard
- Help resolve disagreements
- Use communication skills to help parents and school personnel to work together to make decisions about the program
- Help team members develop and ask clarifying questions about issues that may have occurred in the past
- Help keep the team on task and focused on the agenda topics
- Remain impartial, and not take sides, place blame, impose a decision on the group, nor offer an opinion on the appropriateness of a decision

**5. What are the benefits of an independent facilitated IEP team meeting?**

Parents and school personnel who have used independent facilitation at IEP team meetings report the following benefits:

- Focus remains on the student
- Parties are encouraged to fully participate
- Positive working relationships between parents and school staff are strengthened
- Opportunities are created for creative, win-win, solutions
- Facilitation services are free to the parties and non-confrontational
- Effective communication and listening skills are modeled
- Points of agreement and disagreement are clarified
- Parents and professionals are encouraged to identify new options to address unresolved problems
- Is part of the regular IEP meeting and, therefore, does not require a separate meeting
- All decisions are made by the team, rather than a mediator or a hearing officer

**6. How is the confidentiality of the student and family maintained?**

The parent must provide their consent to allow the school to share confidential information about the student with the independent facilitator. This is required under the Family Education Rights Privacy Act.

**7. Who pays for the independent facilitator?**

There is no cost, to the parent or the school, to have an independent facilitator assist in the IEP process.

**8. What public agencies are offering independently facilitated meetings, and how do I contact them?**

Below are the public agencies offering the services of an independent facilitator to parents and school personnel, along with the contact information for the center that is providing the service for your local school system. Or, you may contact Community Mediation Maryland at 301-270-9700, or toll free 888-826-2262.

- Anne Arundel County Public Schools
  - Anne Arundel Conflict Resolution Center, 410-266-9033
- Baltimore City Public Schools
  - Community Mediation, 410-467-9165
- Baltimore County Public Schools
  - Conflict Resolution Center of Baltimore County, 410-780-1206
- Calvert County Public Schools
  - Community Mediation Maryland, 443-295-7456
- Carroll County Public Schools
  - Community Mediation, 410-848-1764
- Cecil County Public Schools
  - Community Mediation - Elkton Office, 443-207-5159
- Dorchester County
  - Mid-Shore Community Mediation Center, 410-820-5553
- Harford County
  - Harford County Community Mediation Center, 410-638-4807
- Howard County Public Schools
  - Community Mediation, 410-467-9165
- Frederick County Public Schools
  - Frederick County Mediation, 301-270-9700
- Montgomery County Public Schools
  - Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County, 301-652-0717
- Prince George's County Public Schools
  - Key Bridge Center for Conflict Resolution, 240-770-0401
- Queen Anne's County Public Schools
  - Community Mediation, 410-810-9188
- St. Mary's County
  - Community Mediation Center of St. Mary's County, 301-475-9118

**9. How far in advance do I need to request an independent facilitator?**

An important component of the IEP Facilitation process is the preparation work done by the independent facilitator in conversations with the parent and school personnel and the development of a formal agenda. In general, when a request is made at least 10 days in advance of a meeting, an independent facilitator can be assigned and this preparation work can be done. If the request is made with less time, all attempts will be made to provide an independent facilitator, but the independent facilitation service cannot be provided if the independent facilitator is not able to contact the parent and school personnel in advance of the meeting.

**10. Who do I contact, if my school system does not offer independently facilitated IEP team meetings?**

If you are interested in having your school system offer independently facilitated IEP team meetings you should contact the local school system's Director for Special Education. The Maryland State Department of Education and Community Mediation Maryland are committed to expanding the service to all school system's that are interested in providing this service to parents of students with disabilities and school personnel.

It is important to know that facilitated IEP meetings are the same as any other IEP meeting. The same expectations exist for compliance with legal regulations and any other requirements that govern the IEP process in Maryland. The only significant difference is the presence of a facilitator.

*MSDE acknowledges the assistance of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Exceptional Children Division and the Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) in the development of this document.*

Funding provided through the Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Early Intervention & Special Education Services from IDEA Part B Grant #HO27A070035A, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education or any other Federal agency and should not be regarded as such. The Division of Early Intervention & Special Education Services receives funding from the Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. This information is copyright free. Readers are encouraged to copy and share it, but please credit the Division of Early Intervention & Special Education Services, Maryland State Department of Education.

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Rev. 6/2019