FACILITATOR TRAINING SESSION

Bridging Perspectives

Advocating for Students During the IEP Process

From Conflict to Evidence-Based Advocacy

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IDEA

SESSION OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

01 Define effective special education advocacy — and distinguish it from simple meeting collaboration

02 Identify a student's disability-related needs using evaluation results, data, and present levels

03 Use data and evidence to advocate for appropriate goals, services, and placement

04 Recognize advocacy and communication barriers, and ask questions that drive sound team decisions

05 Respond effectively to disagreement and recognize when an IEP needs review or revision

OPENING REFLECTION

Think about the best meeting you have ever attended.

What made it successful?

Table Discussion

Discuss at your tables for 2–3 minutes, then share with the larger group.

Key Insight

People remember meetings where they felt respected and included — not just meetings where they got what they wanted.

WHY ADVOCACY MATTERS

Advocacy = Speaking up to ensure student needs are heard and considered.

Parents Provide

- Home behavior observations
- Medical concerns & history
- Emotional needs & context
- Long-term goals & vision

BEST DECISIONS

Schools Provide

- Academic performance data
- Classroom observations
- Progress monitoring results
- Intervention effectiveness

WHAT DOES AN EXPERT ADVOCATE KNOW?

"We are recommending this because..." An advocate can always finish that sentence.

Know the Child

Strengths, needs, interests, communication, and family concerns.

Know the Data

Evaluation results, progress monitoring, work samples, and intervention data.

Know the IEP

Present levels, goals, services, accommodations, supports, and placement.

Know the Requirements

IDEA, Mississippi Rule 74.19, procedural safeguards, LRE, and FAPE.

Know the Team

Understand each member’s role, expertise, and perspective at the table.

Know How to Explain "Why"

Be ready to say: "We are recommending this because..."

WHAT ADVOCACY IS — AND IS NOT

Advocacy is NOT

✗ Fighting for a predetermined outcome

✗ Assuming the answer before reviewing the data

✗ Treating “more services” as automatically “better services”

Advocacy IS

✓ Asking questions

✓ Seeking clarification

✓ Sharing concerns

✓ Presenting information

✓ Exploring options

✓ Focusing on student needs

⚠ *Collaboration breaks down when we focus on winning an argument rather than helping a student.*

PURPOSE OF THE IEP TEAM

The central question:

"What does this student need to make meaningful educational progress?"



Understand the child

Understand instruction

Understand interventions

Understand systems

Understand their experience

When one voice dominates, the team loses valuable information.

WHO SITS AT THE IEP TABLE?

Required Members

- Parents
- General education teacher
- Special education teacher
- District representative
- Individuals who can interpret evaluation results

Additional Participants

- Related service providers
- Advocates
- Interpreters
- Transition specialists
- Students

💡 *A parent entering a room with six school staff present may feel outnumbered — even when everyone intends to be supportive. Recognizing this dynamic is the first step toward reducing it.*

UNDERSTANDING THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Remember: for educators, this may be routine. For parents, this is deeply personal.

Feeling Intimidated	Feeling Outnumbered	Complex Language	Pre-made Decisions
Large meetings with many unfamiliar professionals	Often the only family member in the room	Special ed jargon can be difficult to follow	Concern that outcomes are decided in advance

Every parent enters the room carrying hopes, fears, and expectations for their child.

Educators face pressures that are often invisible to parents.

Educators Must Balance:

- → Student data & progress monitoring
- → State and federal regulations
- → Staffing limitations
- → Resource availability

The Shared Root

Educators may feel frustrated when their expertise is questioned.

Parents may feel frustrated when their concerns are minimized.

Both frustrations stem from the same need:

"People want their perspective to be valued."

Disagreement is not necessarily conflict — it often reflects multiple important perspectives that must be considered.

TABLE DISCUSSION

"What assumptions do schools make about parents — and parents make about schools?"

5 minutes • then share with the group

Parents May Assume:

- Decisions are already made
- Schools are focused on budgets
- Their concerns won't matter

Schools May Assume:

- Parents don't understand data
- Parents are being unreasonable
- Parents only see one side

Replace assumptions with questions. Replace defending with clarifying. Replace arguing with collaborating.

COMMON SOURCES OF CONFLICT IN IEP MEETINGS

Conflict isn't the problem — the question is whether it becomes productive or destructive.

- Different interpretations of student data
- Misunderstanding of legal requirements
- Communication breakdowns
- Perceived power imbalances
- Service recommendations
- Placement decisions
- Emotional stress

💡 *What appears to be a disagreement about services is often a disagreement about whether people feel heard.*

If one link in the chain doesn't make sense, stop and ask why.

1	**Evaluation & Disability-Related Needs**	What the evaluation shows about how the disability affects learning
2	**Present Levels & Annual Goals**	Where the student is now, and what progress should look like
3	**Instruction & Accommodations**	How instruction and supports are matched to the identified need
4	**Services & Placement**	What is provided, how often, and in what setting
5	**Progress Monitoring**	How the team will know whether it worked

THE QUESTIONS OF EXPERT ADVOCACY

What & Why

1. What does the student need?
2. What evidence demonstrates that need?
3. What has already been tried?
4. What has the student responded to?
5. What does the current IEP provide?

Plan & Defend

6. Is the program producing expected progress?
7. What needs to change, if anything?
8. What data support this recommendation?
9. What student needs led to this decision?
10. Could we defend this six months from now?

💡 *If you can answer these questions, you are advocating from evidence instead of emotion.*

DATA AS A TOOL, NOT A WEAPON

"What does the data tell us?" — not "How can we use this data to support our argument?"

Data Used as a Weapon

Presented to justify a position
rather than inform a decision.
Leads to defensiveness.
Breaks down collaboration.

Data Used as a Tool

Used to explore possibilities
and inform decisions together.
Builds trust.
Strengthens collaboration.

Effective teams ask:

- What does the data say?
- What does it mean?
- What does it NOT tell us?
- What decision does the data support?

Together, qualitative and quantitative data create a more complete picture of the student.

Family May See	School May See
Homework struggles	Progress monitoring data
Emotional concerns	Benchmark assessments
Daily frustrations	Classroom performance
Home observations	Intervention data

BOTH MATTER

"What does each source of information add to our understanding of this student?"

WHEN A STUDENT IS NOT MAKING PROGRESS

Don’t start with: "Does this student need a more restrictive placement?"

- Is the IEP being implemented as written?
- Are accommodations being provided?
- Are the goals still appropriate?
- Is instruction addressing the identified need?
- What does progress-monitoring data show?
- What interventions and supports have been tried?
- What does the evaluation tell us?

💡 *Lack of progress is a reason to investigate, not an automatic reason to change placement.*

"What does this student need to receive FAPE?" — not "Where should this student go?"

Placement Drives the Decision

Starting with a setting
before the need is defined.
Services get fit to the room.
Needs follow the setting.

Need Drives the Decision

Starting with the student's
needs and required services.
The setting gets fit to the needs.
The setting follows the needs.

Before deciding on placement, ask:

- What are the student's needs?
- What services and supports are necessary?
- Can those needs be met in the current setting?
- What supplementary aids have been considered?

Plain language increases access. The information is the same — the accessibility is different.

Common Jargon to Explain

- ⚠ Present levels
- ⚠ Least restrictive environment
- ⚠ Progress monitoring
- ⚠ Related services

Reframing Example

❌ **Before:**

"The student's benchmark data indicates inadequate growth."

✅ **After:**

"The student is progressing, but not fast enough to reach grade-level expectations."

✓ *Use plain language* ✓ *Pause for questions* ✓ *Avoid acronyms* ✓ *Explain data clearly*

Effective advocacy is often organized advocacy.

How to Prepare

- ✓ Review documents before meetings
- ✓ Write questions in advance
- ✓ Bring notes to the meeting
- ✓ Request clarification when needed
- ✓ Share concerns early

Organize Concerns By Category

- **Academic Concerns**
- **Behavioral Concerns**
- **Communication Concerns**
- **Future Goals**

INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY

Reframing Statements

Work in groups to rewrite each statement using collaborative language. (5 minutes)

❌ *"That's not possible."*	✅ *"Let's discuss what options are available."*
❌ *"That service isn't available."*	✅ *"Let's explore what supports might address that concern."*
❌ *"You don't understand."*	✅ *"Let me explain our perspective and hear yours."*
❌ *"My child needs more."*	✅ *"I'm concerned about the rate of progress. Can we talk?"*

→

Providing a document is compliance. Ensuring a parent understands it is collaboration.

1	**Right to Participate**	Full involvement in IEP planning and decisions
2	**Right to Ask Questions**	Clarify any aspect of evaluation, goals, or services
3	**Right to Request Meetings**	Request an IEP meeting when concerned about the child's educational program
4	**Right to Review Records**	Access educational records at any time
5	**Right to Disagree**	Dispute decisions through formal processes

PRIOR WRITTEN NOTICE AS AN ADVOCACY TOOL

A notice required before the district acts or refuses.

- ? Identification of a disability
- ? Evaluation of the student
- ? Educational placement
- ? Provision of FAPE

Advocacy Question
"What information did the team consider, and why?"

When It's Required
Any time the district proposes or refuses to act.

PWN connects a legal requirement directly to advocacy: it documents the team's reasoning, not just its decision.

The goal is not to avoid difficult conversations — it is to navigate them professionally.

When emotions increase:

1. Slow the pace
2. Clarify concerns
3. Restate shared goals
4. Ask questions
5. Listen carefully

"Can you help me understand your concern?" — a question that lowers defensiveness and opens dialogue.

Separate people from problems. Focus on interests, not positions.

1

Separate People from Problems

The parent is not the problem. The teacher is not the problem. The issue being discussed is the problem.

2

Identify Common Goals

Student success · Student safety · Meaningful progress · Positive outcomes

3

Focus on Interests, Not Positions

Position: "I want additional services."
Interest: "I am worried my child isn't making enough progress."

💡 *When interests are identified, teams often discover multiple possible solutions.*

"How can we help students develop ownership of their educational plans?"

When Students Participate Meaningfully:

- ★ Self-advocacy skills improve
- ★ Goal ownership increases
- ★ Transition outcomes improve
- ★ Motivation often increases

Participation Can Include:

1. Sharing strengths
2. Discussing goals
3. Explaining challenges
4. Presenting interests

⚡ *Students rarely need to lead the entire meeting — meaningful participation starts small and grows over time.*

Self-advocacy must be taught. Students rarely become effective self-advocates by accident.

Practice Introductions

Help students learn to introduce themselves and describe their disability.

Review Goals Beforehand

Walk through goals before the meeting so students can discuss them confidently.

Create Student Presentations

Let students prepare a short summary of their strengths and goals.

Teach Accommodations

Students should be able to explain what supports help them learn.

Identify Strengths & Needs

Help students articulate what they do well and where they need support.

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CASE STUDY ACTIVITY

Meet Marcus

Marcus is a 4th-grade student receiving special education services for a specific learning disability in reading. Recent benchmark data shows slow progress despite interventions. Parents are requesting additional services; the school believes current services should continue.

Discussion Questions (7–8 minutes):

1. What concerns might parents have?
2. What concerns might educators have?
3. What additional information is needed?
4. What common goals might exist?

Tip: Identify agreement before disagreement. See the next slide for Marcus's full data profile.

MARCUS: WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

Now you have enough information to make a real special education decision.

Reading Performance

Reading a full grade level below expectation; fluency and comprehension both below benchmark.

Progress Monitoring

Baseline through 5 data points shows minimal growth toward the annual goal.

Current IEP & Intervention

30 min/day small-group reading; Tier 2 intervention delivered with fidelity for 12 weeks.

Parent Concerns

Homework takes hours; Marcus is frustrated and avoids reading at home.

Teacher Concerns

Marcus engages well in class but cannot yet decode grade-level text independently.

The Question

Given this data, what would you recommend for Marcus, and why?

Both groups are concerned about student success — the challenge is finding shared pathways.

Parent Concerns Often Include:	School Concerns Often Include:
→ Fear of falling behind	→ Data interpretation
→ Long-term success	→ Service effectiveness
→ Adequacy of services	→ Resource allocation

✦ **Shared Goal: Student success — the challenge is finding shared pathways to achieve it.**

Effective advocacy begins by assuming positive intent while still asking difficult questions.

CAN YOU DEFEND THE DECISION?

If someone challenged this decision six months from now, could the team explain why?

1. What the student’s needs were?
2. What data the team considered?
3. Whether the IEP was implemented?
4. What progress occurred and what alternatives were tried?
5. Why the team made its decision?

A defensible decision isn’t the one everyone agrees with — it’s the one the evidence supports.

Trust is built through repeated positive interactions.

- ? Were phone calls returned?
- ? Were concerns acknowledged?
- ? Was communication consistent?
- ? Were successes shared, not just problems?

When trust EXISTS disagreements become easier to navigate.

When trust is ABSENT even simple decisions become difficult.

Trust cannot be established in a single meeting — it develops through ongoing communication and mutual respect.

Trust is proactive, not reactive.

Regular Communication

Don't wait for problems to arise — reach out proactively.

Respond Promptly

Timely responses signal that concerns matter.

Positive Phone Calls

Call to share successes, not only concerns.

Invite Input Early

Ask for parent perspectives before the meeting begins.

Sharing Successes

Parents want to hear good news. Make it a habit.

Invite Input Early

Ask for parent perspectives before the meeting begins.

BUILDING TRUST DURING THE MEETING

Simple actions matter. Start with strengths — it reminds everyone why they are there.

Warm Welcome

Greet parents by name and make introductions before starting.

Explain Roles

Briefly clarify why each person is at the table.

Start With Strengths

Open with positive observations about the student.

Encourage Questions

Invite questions throughout, not just at the end.

Check Understanding

Pause and confirm families are following along.

Invite Participation

Regularly ask: "Does anyone have questions before we move forward?"

BUILDING TRUST AFTER THE MEETING

The work doesn't stop when signatures are collected.

Send Summaries

Provide a written recap of decisions and next steps.

Monitor Implementation

Ensure agreed supports are actually being delivered.

Provide Progress Updates

Share data regularly — not just at annual reviews.

Address Concerns Promptly

Respond quickly when parents raise questions.

Parents should not be surprised by information discussed at annual review meetings.

A guide for administrators sitting on behalf of the district.

Before the Meeting	During the Meeting	After the Meeting
▸ Know the student and review the current IEP	▸ Listen before responding	▸ Confirm responsibilities and next steps
▸ Review progress and evaluation information	▸ Ask for evidence, and avoid predetermined decisions	▸ Ensure implementation begins as agreed
▸ Understand the parent's concerns	▸ Ensure all voices are heard	▸ Monitor progress
▸ Know what decisions may need to be made	▸ Keep the discussion student-centered	▸ Follow up on concerns promptly
▸ Confirm required members will attend	▸ Document disagreements appropriately	

Know it. Ask it. Document it. Follow through.

Know	Ask	Document & Follow Through
▸ The student, the evaluation, the IEP	▸ What does the student need?	▸ Concerns, data, and decisions
▸ The data and progress-monitoring history	▸ What evidence supports that?	▸ Options considered and reasons why
▸ IDEA and Mississippi requirements	▸ What has worked, and what hasn't?	▸ Implementation and progress monitoring
▸ What has already been tried	▸ What alternatives exist?	▸ When and how the plan will be revisited
▸ Your "why" for each recommendation	▸ What decision does the evidence support?	

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Five Things Every Advocate Should Remember

1. **Know the Child —** Understand the whole student, not just the disability category.
2. **Know the Data —** Advocate from evidence, not assumptions.
3. **Know the IEP —** Every service, goal, accommodation, and placement should connect to student need.
4. **Know the Process —** Understand parent participation, evaluation, placement, safeguards, and PWN.
5. **Know Your "Why" —** Be able to explain: "We are recommending this because..."

FINAL REFLECTION

"What is one change you can make tomorrow to improve collaboration during the IEP process?"

"Every person at the IEP table brings a different perspective.

The challenge is not determining whose voice matters most.

The challenge is ensuring every voice contributes to decisions that help students succeed."

Thank you for your time, your commitment to students, and the work you do every day.