

Understanding IEPs: Accessing Services & Supports

VOICE Webinar Summary – September 15, 2025

Subject Matter Expert: Marjorie Cook, PEERS Program Manager, Greenleaf Family Center

Summary Overview

The September 15, 2025 VOICE webinar, led by Marjorie Cook, covered key aspects of IEPs, special education laws, and how families can access services and supports. Topics included the evaluation process, students' rights in discipline, least restrictive environments, and the use of accommodations and assistive technology. Marjorie emphasized the importance of documentation, parent advocacy, and collaboration with schools. The Q&A addressed issues like early pickups, long bus rides, progress monitoring, and local advocacy resources such as the Akron NOW program.

Meeting notes:

- **Understanding Special Education Rights and Laws:** Marjorie Cook provided a comprehensive overview of special education rights, relevant laws, and the challenges faced by parents, educators, and students in accessing appropriate educational supports.
 - **Key Legislation:** Marjorie explained the three main laws guaranteeing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE): the Right to Education Act, [IDEA](#), and [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#), emphasizing their continued relevance.
 - **State Standards and Documentation:** Marjorie outlined Ohio's operating standards for schools and the importance of accessing guides to [parent rights](#), all available through the Ohio Department of Education website.
 - **Challenges in Implementation:** Marjorie discussed the gap between federal law and local implementation, noting vague language and under-identification of children with disabilities, and encouraged parents to request school policies and procedures.
 - **Child Find and Eligibility:** Marjorie described the [Child Find mandate](#), which requires schools to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities, including those in private schools or who are homeless, and advised parents to use specific legal terminology when requesting evaluations.

- **Special Education Evaluation and IEP Process:** Marjorie Cook detailed the steps for initiating special education evaluations, the [Evaluation Team Report \(ETR\)](#), and the development and implementation of [Individualized Education Programs \(IEPs\)](#), including timelines and documentation requirements.
 - **Evaluation Request and Consent:** Marjorie explained that parents or school staff can [request an evaluation](#), and formal written consent from the parent starts the timeline for the school to respond within 30 days and complete the assessment within 60 days.
 - **ETR and IEP Meetings:** After the assessment, the team reviews the Evaluation Team Report to determine eligibility for specially designed instruction, and parents are encouraged to take time to process information before moving to the IEP meeting.
 - **IEP Goals and Baseline Data:** Marjorie emphasized the importance of establishing clear baseline data for IEP goals, aligning goals with specially designed instruction, and monitoring progress with accurate data collection.
 - **Dispute Resolution:** Options for resolving disagreements include case conferences, administrative reviews, mediation, and due process, with a strong recommendation to keep all communication in writing and to bring support to meetings.
- **School Discipline and Behavioral Supports:** Marjorie Cook explained students' rights regarding school discipline, the process for [functional behavior analysis](#), and the development of positive [behavior intervention plans](#), highlighting the importance of fair and documented disciplinary actions.
 - **Suspension and Expulsion Criteria:** Marjorie clarified that students with disabilities can be suspended for up to 10 days, with special rights after that, and can only be expelled for specific serious offenses such as weapons, bodily harm, or drugs/alcohol.
 - **Functional Behavior Analysis:** If a student is removed for more than 10 days, the school is required to conduct a functional behavior analysis to determine the underlying function of the behavior and develop a positive intervention plan.
 - **Positive Behavior Intervention Plans:** Behavior intervention plans should focus on reinforcing desired behaviors rather than tracking negatives, and students should not lose earned rewards due to unrelated infractions.

- **Documentation and Due Process:** Schools must provide written notification of disciplinary actions, and failure to do so invalidates the discipline; students can make up missed work during suspensions.
- **Least Restrictive Environment and Placement Options:** Marjorie Cook described the requirement for schools to provide a continuum of placement options and to educate students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible, with regular review and parental input.
 - **Continuum of Placement:** Schools must offer a range of placement options, from home instruction to regular education, and explain all available options to parents, not just preferred ones.
 - **Least Restrictive Environment:** The least restrictive environment principle requires students to be educated with non-disabled peers as much as possible, with placements tailored to individual needs and subject to regular review.
 - **Change of Placement:** A change in placement may refer to a shift within the same school, such as moving from a general education classroom to a resource room, and does not necessarily mean a change of school building.
- **Accommodations, Modifications, and Assistive Technology:** Marjorie Cook outlined the range of possible accommodations, modifications, and assistive technology supports available through IEPs, stressing the importance of individualized solutions and assessment for communication needs.
 - **Accommodations:** Accommodations can include anything agreed upon by the team, such as sensory breaks, differential seating, words of encouragement, or reduced homework, tailored to the student's needs.
 - **Modifications:** Modifications involve changing what is being learned, such as focusing on basic math instead of algebra, and may affect diploma eligibility depending on the extent of curriculum changes.
 - **Assistive Technology:** Assistive technology assessments are required, with options ranging from low-tech solutions like picture cards to high-tech devices for non-verbal communication, based on the student's readiness and needs.
- **Extracurricular Activities and Transportation Rights:** Marjorie Cook discussed students' rights to participate in [extracurricular activities](#) with necessary supports

and the requirement for schools to provide appropriate transportation, including individualized solutions and compensation for parents who transport their children.

- **Extracurricular Participation:** Schools must provide supplementary aids and services to ensure students with disabilities can participate in extracurricular activities, not just have access, with parents as equal IEP team members.
- **Transportation Needs:** Transportation must be provided as needed, including door-to-door service, aides on the bus, or special equipment, and parents may be compensated for transporting their children if necessary.
- **Extended School Year:** [Extended school year services](#) are available for students who need to avoid skill loss, have emerging skills, or behavioral issues over breaks, and plans should be individualized.
- **Q&A: Handling Early Pickups and Transportation Issues:** During the Q&A, Lisa Thompson and Marjorie Cook addressed common concerns about early pickups being counted as suspensions and strategies for managing lengthy bus rides, emphasizing documentation and advocacy for appropriate accommodations.
 - **Early Pickups as Suspensions:** Marjorie clarified that any time a child is sent home early for behavioral reasons, it counts as a suspension day, and parents should document each occurrence to ensure proper tracking and trigger required interventions after 10 days.
 - **Bus Route Lengths:** Marjorie advised parents to call IEP meetings to discuss transportation details, document the impact of long bus rides on their child's readiness to learn, and request accommodations or alternative arrangements as needed.
 - **Possible Solutions:** Suggestions included negotiating shorter bus routes, allowing snacks or calming activities on the bus, or arranging for parent transportation with compensation from the school.
- **Q&A: Monitoring Progress and Data Collection:** Lisa Thompson and Marjorie Cook discussed how parents can monitor their child's progress, emphasizing the importance of understanding baseline data, data collection methods, and regularly calling meetings to clarify progress reports.
 - **Baseline Data Importance:** Marjorie stressed the need for clear baseline data to accurately measure progress, noting that mismatched data

collection can obscure true progress and recommending parents ask for explanations in layman's terms.

- **Regular Data Meetings:** Lisa shared their practice of calling meetings after each report card to review anecdotal teacher comments and progress, encouraging other parents to do the same for better understanding.
- **Q&A: Akron NOW Program and Advocacy Resources:** Marjorie Cook explained the Akron public schools' NOW (No Opportunity Wasted) program for students with behavioral challenges and encouraged parents to visit classrooms, meet staff, and utilize advocacy resources for informed decision-making.
 - **NOW Program Overview:** Marjorie described the NOW program as a behavioral support initiative in Akron schools, recommending parents visit classrooms, meet teachers and aides, and ask questions to assess suitability for their child.
 - **Advocacy Resources:** Information was provided on how to contact the [PEERS team](#) for free advocacy services, and Lisa encouraged joining the [online caregiver Facebook group](#) for peer support and advice.