

# Interactive Group Activities for Special Education Advisory Committee Meetings

Effective advisory groups are concerned not only with accomplishing tasks, but also with promoting productive interaction among their members. The following ideas, adapted from commonly practiced collaborative-learning strategies<sup>1</sup>, can facilitate group participation, problem solving, and evaluation of meeting outcomes.

## Facilitate Group Participation

Many people are uncomfortable when they first join a group. Informal, relational meeting-starters can help create an atmosphere of openness, trust, and interaction. In the quest to be efficient, well-meaning groups may eliminate introductions or ice-breakers, but investing in those activities often leads to a more productive meeting. Informal activities might include:

### Three-Step Interview

This activity works especially well with new groups. Before the meeting, prepare note cards with two or three “get acquainted” questions, or write the questions on a white board or flip chart. To begin the meeting, ask each member to team up with someone they don’t know well. For each pair, ask the person with the birthday closest to that day’s date to ask the interview questions. After a specified time, perhaps three minutes, ask participants to switch roles. Next, ask each pair to join up with another pair and take turns introducing the person they interviewed to the other members in the group.

### Magic Wand Introductions

Pass a “magic wand” around the group and ask committee members to introduce themselves and to share, in a minute or less,

one thing they would magically change for students receiving special education and why. This activity helps members learn about one another’s perspectives and priorities while breaking the ice for more focused discussion and decision-making.

## Facilitate Problem Solving

Special education advisory committees often make recommendations regarding possible solutions to problems. This work can be overwhelming, and the group may find itself spinning its wheels. One way to avoid that situation is by identifying and following a problem-solving process<sup>2</sup>. The following activities can be used to encourage active participation by all committee members.

### Pass-a-Problem

Prior to the meeting, identify a concern or issue related to an agenda item. Write the “problem” on a card and attach it to the front of a folder. Depending on the size of the group, you may wish to have up to three “problems.” Divide the committee into groups of no more than four people, give each group a folder, and ask them to write possible solutions to the stated problem. After a predetermined time, ask each group to place its list inside the folder and pass it to the next group. Without looking at the list inside the folder, the new group will compose its own list of solutions and add it to the folder. Continue until all groups have commented on all the problems. The folders can then be given to the group’s leadership team or a subcommittee that will review and analyze the proposed solutions, consolidate or expand them as necessary, and choose the best two options to present to the large group at the next meeting.

<sup>1</sup>“Parents as Collaborative Leaders, Module 5.” University of Vermont and PACER Center, 2008. [uvm.edu/~pcl/modules.php](http://uvm.edu/~pcl/modules.php).

<sup>2</sup>“SEAC Strategies for Success: An Online Guide for Minnesota Local Special Education Advisory Councils, Module 8.” PACER Center, 2008. [mnseacinfo.org/seacstrategies/index.asp](http://mnseacinfo.org/seacstrategies/index.asp).

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**Think, Pair, Share**

Pose a question about a specific topic the group needs to address. Ask each member to write down as many ideas or responses as possible in two minutes. Next, give the members three minutes to share their lists with one or two other members and then agree upon which five ideas the small group thinks are the most useful. Finally, ask a representative of each small group to share their five ideas with the whole group. Record the responses on a flip chart or white board to refer to during the subsequent discussion.

**Facilitate Meeting Evaluation**.....

All committees either increase in effectiveness, stagnate, or decline. To ensure ongoing productivity, groups need to have a continuous improvement plan. One way to develop such a plan is by helping members evaluate meeting outcomes and determine ongoing needs. Activities to accomplish that goal could include:

**On-the-Spot Progress Report**

Before the meeting, create a simple Special Education Advisory Committee Meeting Progress Report form that includes space for each member and visitor to write a meeting goal (either predetermined or agreed upon by the group) and three evaluation options: insufficient progress, adequate progress, and goal met. The goal, for example, might be "SEAC will come to consensus on two recommendations to the school board regarding school building accessibility policy."

Near the end of the meeting, ask each member to indicate his or her response and pass the form to a designated person to tally and report the results. Lead a brief discussion on the findings, focusing on specific strategies to promote progress.

**One-Minute Sticky Note Wrap-Up**

Before the meeting concludes, provide each member with three sticky note and three questions:

- What was the most important or useful topic addressed in today's meeting?
- What remains unclear?
- What additional information do you need to make progress toward the goal?

Give them one minute to jot down their first thoughts, with one answer per sticky note.

Ask members to attach their sticky notes to a poster board, then display the poster on a table for members to read. In addition to providing feedback about meeting outcomes, the responses will help members prepare for and facilitate discussion at future meetings.

By incorporating interactive activities such as these into advisory committee meetings, groups will likely see increased levels of participation, productivity, and satisfaction by group members. As a result, the committee will grow in effectiveness.