IDEA states that “the child, wherever appropriate” must be included on the IEP team. More specifically, before age 14, student attendance and participation are at the discretion of the parents; beginning at age 14 the student must be invited to attend and should be encouraged to participate in the entire meeting. Yet rarely does the student play an active role in the IEP process (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994).

This may be because students with disabilities are often perceived by administrators, teachers, or parents as recipients of special services rather than an integral part of the IEP team with the right (if not the responsibility) to help develop and implement their own special education programs. When empowered as active participants in the IEP process, however, students have an opportunity to heighten their independence, self-advocacy skills, and self-esteem (German, Martin, Huber Marshall, & Sale, 2000). Also, students may be able to offer insights and valuable contributions. Students with disabilities can and should be involved in the IEP process.

How Can Students Participate?
The IEP conference is just one part of the special education process. Students may be involved at any stage. Figure A lists ways in which students can participate in the three major stages of assessment, the IEP conference itself, and instruction.

Assessment
All students should actively participate in the assessment and evaluation of their skills and preferences.

Self-determination of preferences. For all students, participation in the IEP process can begin with determining preferences. By sharing their likes and dislikes, students provide input from which teachers can identify objectives, goals, and potential reinforcers. Students sometimes make inappropriate or unrealistic choices. In these cases, teachers should counsel students and present them with a variety of more likely alternatives.

Self-evaluation. Students can be further involved in the assessment phase by engaging in self-evaluation. They can use a teacher-made self-rating scale or checklist to determine perceived strengths, weaknesses, competencies, and successes in goal attainment. This information can help teachers devise goals that focus on the student’s strong points and address deficit areas that are important to the student.

Goal setting. Students who are trained to assess their own skills and goal achievement may be better able to set realistic expectations for themselves. Other valuable information that can contribute to the assessment phase is student identification of future goals and ambitions. A wish list can help students identify future plans, expectations, and skills they wish to acquire. Pictures, photos, checklists, and classroom activities can help students identify goals that can be then incorporated into their IEPs. Curriculum materials such as the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Series (Huber Marshall et al., 1999; Martin, Hughes, Huber Marshall, Jerman, & Maxson, 1999) offer adolescents and adults an interactive program for choosing long- and short-term goals.

The IEP Conference
The degree to which a student may participate in the IEP conference will vary. The highest degree of involvement occurs when students participate as full team members and act as self-advocates. There are also many opportunities for partial participation by students whose disabilities limit their level of involvement.

Preconference preparation. Students should be informed about the intent and significance of the IEP meeting,
the roles of each team member, and procedures that will be followed. Videotaped presentations of real or staged IEP meetings can be an excellent way to prepare students for their own conference. Role playing can also help emphasize and define the responsibilities of all team members, including those of the student. Students should rehearse appropriate and expected behaviors. The following are suggested rules for student behavior during the IEP conference:

- Remain seated throughout the meeting.
- Maintain eye contact with those who are addressing you.
- Respect others as they speak by listening without interruption.
- If you don’t understand, excuse yourself politely and ask the speaker to explain again.
- Wait your turn before offering your opinion and recommendations.
- When you disagree, state your case without being loud or impatient; offer your own suggestions instead.
- Respond to direct questions.

Creative intervention by teachers is sometimes necessary to convince parents of the advantages of student involvement in the IEP conference. Parents may be persuaded by talking to others who have involved their child in the IEP conference. Parents can be invited to participate in or view videotapes of classroom preconference activities. In some cases, administrators may also need to be reminded of students’ right to participate and be encouraged to advocate for them in this regard.

Conference participation. Students who have been involved in other phases of the IEP process will be better prepared for the conference experience. The more active the student has been, the more likely she will be successful in the IEP meeting itself. When something should not be discussed in front of the child (e.g., controversial issues, policy decisions, disagreements), the student can enter the meeting near its conclusion to meet with team members, listen to suggested goals and objectives, and hear comments relating to her progress.

With parental cooperation, team commitment, prior preparation, and involvement in other phases of the IEP process, students can be successfully integrated as team members. The student might report her own progress, contribute to discussions, and help formulate goals and objectives at the conference. Once these are agreed on, the student should co-sign the completed IEP document, just as other team members do.

### Instruction

In co-monitoring their progress, students participate in classroom activities that remind them of the goals they have helped set. Daily, weekly, and monthly activities can be designed to include students in the ongoing collection of data, assessment of progress, and reevaluation of goals. Teachers can help students tally stickers, tokens, points, or grades they have earned. These can be recorded on a chart or other visual representation related to identified student goals. Students can select items to include in a portfolio of academic or other work products (Salend, 2001; Wesson & King, 1996). Younger students can color bar graphs or collect small items or cards to signify their progress.

Students can also co-monitor their progress in meetings with other students. These meetings should be positive, encouraging group cooperation, support, and problem-solving opportunities. Self-management, self-monitoring, and self-instruction techniques may also help students meet the goals they have helped set (Kerr & Nelson, 2002; Lovitt, 2000).

Including students in a process designed expressly for them is often overlooked, but there are numerous possibilities for student participation in the IEP process for educators who wish to implement instruction with students—not just for them.