

**Nick Martin: 21 Best Practices for Successful IEP Meetings  
Breakout Session Transcript**

NICK MARTIN: All right, well, welcome everybody. My goodness, it is a true joy to be here. Such a lovely setting and lovely bunch of people. My topic, of course, for today is going to be 21 Best Practices for Successful IEP Meetings. If you're like me, you go to a conference and you wonder, now who is this strange dude from out of town? And does that say Texas? And what does he know, what qualifies him to talk to me about IEP meetings? So I always like to begin with just a few words to set the stage how I come to be here talking with you, and then I also want to hear real briefly from you who you are, what you do, and what makes this topic relevant for you. My background many years ago was in clinical psychology. And at the tender age of 20-something, I had the wonderful opportunity to live my dream and be a psychotherapist. And I say that a little bit tongue-in-cheek because after a few years of doing that, I became very disenchanted with my career, and I found that I was not therapizing anybody. If you look in the dictionary, psychotherapy comes from the Greek, it means therapy of the psyche, healing of the mind. And I wasn't healing anybody. I found, to make the very long story short, that my counseling practice was very quickly revolving around essentially a private tutoring model. People were coming to me usually with the same very small list of very common challenges in our culture, mostly having to do with the emotional side of living, something that is so directly relevant to conflict. Our feelings, how do we feel, what do we do when we feel that way, and what could we do that would work more effectively? And a large part of that was always communication skills. So I found that over and over and over again, I was teaching people how to become more emotionally aware and how to be better communicators of their feelings so as to get better results. And that's not therapy. That's tutoring, it was teaching. So I began to shift out of a counseling mode and moving more into a training mode. And I was the person at the counseling center, which at that time was in Michigan, I was living in Michigan, and I was the person on the staff who would respond to the requests from the community for a speaker. And it was a short list of very frequently requested topics. And far and away the most commonly requested topic was conflict resolution. So I would put together little training packages on communication skills and stress management and anger and so on. And in one of my training programs on conflict resolution, a hand went up and an elementary school principal said, "If you know something about conflict resolution, can you train my IEP chairpersons?" And I said, "What is an IEP chairperson?" That was my launch point into special education. I honestly had no idea. I had never heard of this before. And I came to find out that, under federal law, and I'm going to ask you to correct me if I'm wrong, under federal law, whenever a child has special education needs, there has to be a committee formed. Am I right? And that committee is going to be made up of the people who know about the child and know about educational resources, and they're going to work collaboratively towards consensus with a minimum of conflict for the benefit of the child. Am I right? And I came to find out that these committees are frequently hotbeds of conflict that can easily spill over

into lawsuits, into due process hearings, so that there was a real need for people to be aware of how to prevent conflict and how to work collaboratively in special education. So a long story made short, over the next few years, this became my little niche in the universe. And for the last ten years, I have been working almost exclusively training school professionals, and to some extent parents, in what I call the great preparedness gap, the great preparedness gap. Now I was told prior to this conference to expect a very sophisticated group, so I know that I'm not talking here to people who are like, you know, fresh off the apple cart in the area of special education. And I know that we have some very sophisticated, very experienced people right here in this room. When I go traveling around this fine country working with school professionals, I love to begin the same way I'm beginning with you. And I say, "Would you agree that federal law requires people to work in committee collaboratively towards consensus with a minimum of conflict?" Who says yes, that's true? Who says no, that ain't true in my state? That's not true in your state? Where is your state? In Ohio, people are not expected to work --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We're very litigious.

NICK MARTIN: That's a different question, that's a different question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It comes from the IEP meetings.

NICK MARTIN: And yet, isn't it true that the people in Ohio working in special education are expected to work, under federal law, collaboratively? That that's the vision of the IEP meeting, am I right? It's a collaborative form, or at least it's designed to be, it's intended to be. In theory, very good. Okay, so then I ask this question. If you agree with me that this is the vision of the law that people are going to work together collaboratively, then how many of you, by show of hands, have received extensive and sufficient training in how to do that? Now I could ask that in this room. I'm a little nervous, but I'm going to do it. How many of you have received extensive and sufficient training in collaborative method, consensus-based decision making, and conflict prevention and resolution? May I see your hands if you have received extensive and sufficient training? Look around this room, and what I'm seeing is a greater proportion than I've ever seen anywhere in my life. I think we're at about 30%. Now most places I go, I'm not even at 3%. I had a room the other -- two weeks ago, I was in D.C., I had 400 people in the room, 400 school professionals. And I asked you, how many of you -- asked them, how many of you have received extensive -- and you're laughing about D.C. It was no different when I asked it in San Diego, California or in Oklahoma City, wherever it is that I'm working with people. I ask this question and the bottom line is that I'm lucky if 3% of the hands go up. Now we know this is a sophisticated group. 30%, 40% of the hands went up. Is that enough? Is it enough if 40% of the people out there working in special education IEP meetings have received training in collaborative method and how to prevent and resolve conflict? Would you be comfortable driving on the road if only 40% of the people in the state of Oregon are trained in how to drive a

car? Would you be comfortable sending our troops into combat if only 40% of them have been trained in what to do when they get there? And the answer is of course not. It is not enough to have 3%, 5%, even 50% is not enough. How many of them should know how to do this job that they're required to do at every single IEP meeting? Answer? All of them. Question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Ask your question again, who's sufficiently trained who is currently employed by a school district as a special educator? I raised my hand, that was all after I retired from --

NICK MARTIN: After you retired. So I think -- thank you for saying that. I think you're supporting my point that we have a global preparedness gap in special education. Now where does this come from? It comes from the -- I want to -- I'm trying to be polite. It comes from the idea of our legislators that we're going to create a collaborative forum on the expectation that anybody can walk in off the streets, sit down, and talk about something as emotionally charged as special education and do it collaboratively and reach consensus almost all of the time. It's ludicrous. We say special education is emotionally charged. Let me ask you about that. Anybody in here have children? Anybody in here a parent? Okay, okay. Is there anything that you care about more in your life than the well-being of your children? Is there anything that will bring out the mama bear or the mama moose more than a threat or perceived threat to a child? So what we have in special education is a highly charged -- highly emotionally charged environment. All the more reason why people need training. They don't have it, they don't have it nationwide. The good news is that this is not difficult. Working collaboratively towards consensus is not difficult. It does require training, and we're going to get a snippet of that this morning in the short amount of time we have together. So I have not done counseling for many years. I primarily work with school personnel and, to some extent, parents. And it's been a wonderful journey and I've been having a ball, and I'm happy to be here with you. This is my third CADRE conference. My basic premise, as I've mentioned, is that IDEA, of course, is IDEIA but we like IDEA, requires people to work together collaboratively towards consensus for the benefit of the children without ever showing them how. That's the great preparedness gap. We're going to try and fix that. Our objectives are very simply to enhance the skills for conducting effective IEP meetings, to bridge that gap and give people the skills that perhaps they did not receive in their training or their first years of experience. Where do I get my information? When I started in this area of special education, I was at that time living -- see, when you reach my age, you've lived a lot of places. I was at that time living in Lexington, Kentucky. And that's where I became aware that there's this potential for conflict at IEP meetings. So I quick wrote an email to the director of special education for the state, and I basically asked two questions. Is there a need and isn't it already being met? After all, schools and school systems have been around for so very long. Surely they don't need little old me to get involved in this. And the answer was yes, there's a need, nobody's doing it. And I was invited to a meeting at the state level in Frankfurt, Kentucky, where the representatives of parent organizations joined the assistant to the director for a

conference with me about, you know, what have we got going on here, what are we thinking in terms of for addressing this gap? So out of that came a list of the concerns of parents, what it is that I call, in a sense, the headwaters of conflict in special education. With that clarity, I was also informed that there was nothing they could for me at the state level. I was going to have to go to the local level. And I received the amazing support of the director of special education in Lexington, who basically put all of her IEP chairpersons as my guinea pigs, like it or not, for my very, very earliest trainings in this topic. And it was with them and with dialogue -- through dialogue with them that I became aware of what are some of the sort of universal themes that create conflict in special education. And if we could approach them proactively, how much conflict might never occur? So what I firmly believe is that the lion's share of conflict in special education is completely preventable, completely preventable, and that the best prevention of conflict in special education is a well-run meeting. But now we come back to the preparedness gap. How can we expect people to run the meetings well if they haven't been taught how to do that? I remember doing a training in San Diego, California. California has two huge gold mines of conflict for the whole state. LAUSD, they call them USDs down there, LAUSD accounts for 40% of all of the due process hearing requests in the state of California. Now those numbers may have changed a little bit since the last time I looked at them, but LA is far and away the leader. And it's not just a population issue, the relative population. And the second is always San Diego. Those two are always leading the state. So why do I mention them? Because I was doing a training in San Diego that has so much conflict, and a lady came up to me on one of the breaks, and she said, "You know what? I have been chairing and leading IEP meetings for 13 years and no one has ever before taught me how to run a meeting." I call that an untenable situation. I'm so thrilled that we have people here who are in positions of influence at the state level. Consider this. You're expecting people throughout your state to do a job they haven't been trained for. Let's fix that. It's not that difficult. Here's what they can do. From those discussions came this list of concerns. Getting parents involved in training and activities is very difficult. Parents are always the odd person out when it comes to IEP meetings, and that's not going to change through our discussion about this. They simply haven't had the training, the certification, the supervision to be the equal partners at IEP meetings that the law grants them by right the authority to have. They are expected to be treated as equal partners on the decision making team. That's a wonderful vision. I like that vision. I also see problems at it -- in that vision because they haven't had the same training or the same accountability. What we also find is that when school districts or any kind of school agency attempts to give information to parents to bring them up to speed, the participation level of parents is amazingly low. So for example, I was hired by the education service center that services about 60 school districts in the greater Austin, Texas area. They hired me to do a training for parents in conflict prevention in special education. Four districts collaborated, districts collaborated to maximize parental attention -- attendance. How many parents do you think attended? Three, ten, twenty? Three and a half; one of them only came for part of it. Okay? All right, never mind Austin. Let's go to Virginia. We had about 15. Go to California, we had maybe 20. And this is what I

find is everywhere I go, no matter what level of organization, the school, the district, the region, we get these penny packets of parents in attendance. This is a real problem. And so they continue to be at a disadvantage. One of the solutions to this is to start either going to where they already meet, going to the parent conferences, going to the parent support groups to give them that information, not expecting them to come to the school. The other big thing is using the Internet. Parents of children with special needs, one of the greatest complaints that they so commonly report is they don't have time. They don't have time. So you give them a training, yes, they recognize the importance; yes, they have interest; they don't have time to go. So what do we do? We find a way to reach them where they can attend on their own time: three minutes here, ten minutes there, 20 minutes there, in their slippers at 2 o'clock in the morning or whenever it suits them, by using the Internet as a training vehicle for them. Incidentally, on my website, which I think is referenced in some of these materials, they put me in a studio in San Antonio based on this idea and we recorded the three most frequently requested topics that I do for parents, three in English and we did the same three in Spanish and posted them on the Internet, were free of charge, anybody can have access to that information. And then it's just a matter of getting the word out and encouraging people to look at this. And you're very welcome to check those out or send people there. There's no charge, there's no registration, there's no following, there's no nothing. We just need to get this information out to people. Number two, IEP meeting members often come with different agendas. There's this illusion out there that there's the school personnel and then there's the parents as if without the parents, the school personnel are one big, happy family. And guess what? We know better than that. How many school personnel do we have in here, either now or retired? Is it true that the school personnel are all one unified mind? Of course not. And it was mentioned earlier that there's like a universal -- there will always be a tension between general education and special education. I don't think that in all schools and districts special education is all that welcome and that this idea of inclusion is all that applauded by general education. There is a tension there, and it varies. So this becomes an education issue too. Don't get me started, I'll just say very, very briefly I believe that this kind of training that we're doing this morning should be mandatory for anybody who is a principal. And when I go and I do training for schools, and I had 400 people from the District of Columbia. Now most of you know in here that there is no state in the union that can compete with D.C. for conflict measures in special education. It is literally off the charts. It is so off the charts, they don't like to include them in the statistics because it skews everything. Example, in the year 2007 to 2008, California, California people, 35 million people in your fine state. You had 3,500 -- sorry, I'm lying, you had 2,500 requests for due process hearings in that year for 35 million people. Does that sound familiar, 2,500 roughly? D.C. has 640,000, call it half a million, they had 3,200. So they had more for half a million people than California with 35 million people. What is wrong with this picture?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We had six mediations during that same time period.

NICK MARTIN: You had six mediations during that same time period? What's -- where were you from?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: D.C. No, I'm talking about D.C. had --

NICK MARTIN: Oh, D.C. And also if you look at D.C.'s numbers, the last year you had 11 mediations, so you're getting better. But what's happening -- and you've also brought it down to only 1,600 due process hearings. Well, again, don't let me take a great detour here, but one of the issues here is everybody in D.C. just loves to go to court before they ever want to go to mediation or even a complaint investigation, and that becomes another issue. Okay, so we move on here. Parents often feel alone with their feelings, which is such a curious thing, is they see school personnel as not aware, not supportive, not caring. Is it true? So then what drives human behavior? Is it what's true or what's perceived to be true? Perception is everything. And for some funny reason, this perception is out there. So I ask school personnel, I say -- now let's speak honestly, okay? You know, what happens at Valley Inn stays at Valley Inn. Tell me the truth. How many of you went into education for the money? By show of hands, come on. And everybody laughs just like you're laughing because nobody goes into education for the money. So I say, okay, how about for the prestige? You can tell your neighbors I'm a teacher, right? And everybody laughs again. So what then brings people into education? And usually it's because they're heart-centered people who love kids, who like working with people, and it becomes all the more curious to me that this perception is out there about educators, of all people. I find educators to be a great bunch to work with. I work with them all the time and, generally speaking, I find them to be very nice people. So this perception is out there. It needs to be addressed. How does it become addressed? Two ways. One is we need to be aware of it, we need to be aware that this issue is out there, and we need to look at how we communicate so that we do communicate in the ways that convey our good intentions and also that we don't communicate in ways that give this wrong impression. And that becomes an education issue. I believe it was *Newsweek*, don't quote me, a few years ago they did an article that I read, I have it in my files. The number one reason that schools lose newly hired teachers. Do you know what it is? They can't stand the conflict with parents. There are a lot of school districts that have a critical teacher shortage, especially in special education. In Texas, we have something called emergency certification. We need special ed teachers so badly that we will basically take them on condition that they complete their requirements while they're in the school building. And so this conflict issue just has a huge price tag in so many different ways. Parents don't get evaluation reports ahead of time, and they're shocked by what they hear. The IEP process is often complicated and confusing. Texas, I don't know about California, some of the other places, but Texas is now a minority majority state, meaning -- oh, I pray not to sound racist, but this is the fact. Okay, we white people are in the minority in Texas because people of color are now the majority. And the most rapidly growing minority segment in the state of Texas is the Hispanic. And so we have more and more people for whom English is not their native language. Now if you think this IDEA stuff is difficult in English, imagine if that's not even your native language. Now you're not going to have

compassion for me, you Californians, why? Because in LA, I am told that you people go to an IEP meeting, you have to be prepared to translate into 38 languages so that the typical day in an LA school professional might be going to the Greek IEP meeting followed by the Mandarin IEP meeting, then the Ethiopian IEP meeting. Just look at the restaurants next time you're in LA, am I right? So this issue of the process being confusing especially escalates when you have people of different cultures and languages, which is becoming more and more common. Used to be a Southern thing, used to be a New York and Miami thing. That's not true anymore. I was in Milwaukee. Anybody here from Wisconsin? They had me go to Milwaukee to do a presentation in Spanish because the Spanish population there has become huge. Staff attending IEP meetings frequently have other commitments, don't stay for the whole meeting. You sit in on an IEP meeting, it's like revolving doors. People are coming and going and coming and going. You don't know why they left, you don't know whether they're coming back. Meetings are scheduled at the convenience of school personnel much more than parents. Anybody doubt me? Is that not true in your state? If I'm a parent in your state and I say the best time for an IEP meeting for me would be Sunday morning just before church, how many of you going to be there? So you know, it's really interesting. We have this vision of equality and yet I don't know that that really filters down in practice. Parents feel this. Parents often have a history, maybe not at your school, maybe not even in your state, but does it matter if I had bad experience over there and I'm now starting at your school? Will it make a difference? You bet. Confidentiality is breached, especially in smaller communities. Why do people breach confidentiality? I ask people, by show of hands, all of you, how many of you is it news that special education, a child's enrollment in special education is a confidential matter? Anybody, is this news for you? No hands go up. Everybody knows it's a confidential proceeding. Why then should it be on the list of the issues that concern parents and parent group leaders? Answer: we get careless. Phone rings, "Oh hi, Mrs. Jones. Yeah, yeah, Johnny's meeting is at 11. Yes, I'll see you there, okay, bye." Was that a violation of confidentiality if somebody not privy to that information hears that conversation? I just identified the child and his IEP meeting. That's a breach of confidentiality. If I have a report, a folder on the desk with a child's name on it having to do with special ed or my computer screen is up with a report that I'm working on and I leave the room but other people can see those, is that a breach of confidentiality? Yes. So we get careless, and one of the solutions is just to keep this an ongoing topic of discussion, keep people on their sharp edge about confidentiality. Parents often feel intimidated. They walk into this room full of school personnel. I've attended IEP meetings with 18 people in the room, only three of which were the parents: mom, dad, and step-dad. General classroom teachers often have a limited understanding. They may see that child with special needs as an unwelcome intrusion. If that's true, how long's it take mom and dad to figure that out? The teacher doesn't really want my child in their classroom. And IEP meetings lack structure. I have -- you know, I have a personal ethic, and that is I don't teach what I don't know. So when I knew that I was going to be getting involved in this area, I looked for opportunities to get involved as an observer of IEP meetings, had dialogues with lots and lots of participants. Now I attend as a

facilitator once in a while, but I mean, I've seen this from the inside. And what I know is that unless people have been trained, you may not even see introductions at the beginning of the meeting. I remember one fellow looked across the table, says, "Excuse me, who are you and what are you doing in my child's education?" 30 minutes into the meeting. I have never in my life seen a written agenda used at an IEP meeting unless people had attended a training where they were encouraged to do so. And yet, some of these things are all it takes to start building in structure and addressing some of the issues that might otherwise become headwaters of conflict. I see conflict very much -- I use the analogy of sparks in a dry forest. Now I used to live in Bend, Oregon. Talk about dry forest and sparks. You guys still have -- I know you do, I know you still have fires like you used to when I used to live here. And you know, when a spark in a dry forest, if you see that spark and you catch it early enough, you can just rub it out with your hand and wouldn't even feel it. But if you let that thing get out of control, it does not take long before that becomes a huge conflagration. And I believe that almost every conflict in special education, I'm not going to say every one, I'm sure there are exceptions, but that so many conflicts in special education began as little sparks that could've been either avoided or easily dealt with if we just knew how if we were alert to them. So I think there's power in having this list of the 12 complaints because these are like the little sparks. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great French emperor, he had a saying that if nations would avert war, they should avoid the pinpricks that precede cannon shots. And I believe that so many of our complaints and due process hearings begin with these kinds of little issues that then flare out of control. If we take all of these 12 things and we boil them down into their bare essentials, what we find is that conflict in special education usually starts in one of four things. The process is not well understood. Who is at the greatest disadvantage? The parents. Who's at the second greatest disadvantage? The gen ed population, perhaps the child him or herself, yeah. But if everybody understood the law, if everybody understood the resources available, if everybody understood the implications, if everybody understood the constraints that people were under, I think a whole lot of things would not escalate. The human being has a tendency to fill the unknowns how, positively or negatively? Negatively. Your husband's late coming home from work. What are you telling yourself? He's probably out buying me flowers again. No, when we don't know what's going on, where there's an ambiguous situation, we human beings tend to fill the unknowns negatively. So what happens is when we don't understand why they did this, when we don't know what the law is, when we don't understand where someone's going with something, our tendency will be to -- it's called demonize, to demonize, to see people in global negatives. And if they're going to be that way, then I'm going to hire a lawyer. And this is so often what's going on. Number two, there's a perception of one against many. Who's at the greatest disadvantage? Parents. Who's at the second greatest disadvantage? Often the special ed personnel, who have to kind of persuade the general education people and the school administrator, who may know very little about special ed, may have very little compassion for special ed. So they may see themselves in the minority. There's a lack of structure, and we're going to talk about that a whole lot in just a minute, and there's a lack of time. And then the question



becomes, having looked at this with so many people so many times, the question then becomes how do the parent concerns that we've just talked about fit with the issues that are put before complaint investigation, behind complaint investigation requests, or to due process hearing officers? How do the headwaters of conflict in special education, if what I'm telling you is the truth, how do they square with the issues that get argued in court? With what's called the weasel words, the words that are open to interpretation about whether the child received an appropriate education in a least restrictive environment, and so on. And what I submit to you is that the vast majority of apparently, seemingly legal issues put before state departments of education and hearing officers are fundamentally -- are not originally legal issues at all. They get twisted into the language of the law so as to have standing, but really it's thinky-feely stuff. It's you hurt my feelings. It's I don't trust you. It's I'm offended. It's I feel intimidated. It's I don't believe you care, those kinds of things. I always remember this one woman in Corpus Christi, Texas, and she looked at me and she was hearing me talk along these lines. And she looked at me and she raised her hand, she said, "You know what? I hear what you're saying, but I talked to the principal. It didn't get me anywhere. I went to the superintendent, it didn't get me anywhere. I didn't get anywhere with my school people until I hired a lawyer." And I will remember that forever. So whenever I have school administrators and decision makers and people of power and influence in this arena, I want to take them by the shoulders and say, "Consider this. We have to show parents that they have an option that when they're unhappy, that it's not their only recourse to hire an attorney. We have to show them that when they have a concern, there is someone in the school population who will hear them, understand them, care, and be responsive." Let's talk now, we'll shift gears a little bit, and I want to dialogue with you and ask you to brainstorm with me good and bad meetings. When you think of meetings that you've attended that you enjoy, that you would say, "Hey, that was really a good meeting," what comes to mind and what was it about that meeting that leads you to say, "That was a good meeting, that was an effective meeting. I feel good about that meeting"? Tell me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Clear purpose or objectives.

NICK MARTIN: Clear purpose and objectives.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Preparation and dialogue.

NICK MARTIN: Preparation, dialogue.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Brevity.

NICK MARTIN: Brevity.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Outcomes and agenda.

NICK MARTIN: Outcomes, there was an agenda.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We actually talked about goals.

NICK MARTIN: Talked about goals.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I knew why I was there.

NICK MARTIN: You knew why you were there. Anything else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible] parent concerns ahead of time to the team so the team could consider them.

NICK MARTIN: Parent concerns were known and considered ahead of time, okay. Now obviously we could continue this dialogue for a while. Let's shift gears and approach this the other way. Think of meetings you've attended that you dreaded, meetings that you think were really bad meetings. So what was it about them that you didn't like? What made them ineffective?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Outcomes were predetermined.

NICK MARTIN: Outcomes were predetermined.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No clear purpose.

NICK MARTIN: There was no clear purpose.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Ineffective communication.

NICK MARTIN: Ineffective communication.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Off topic.

NICK MARTIN: Off topic.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's like a subtext that you didn't know about.

NICK MARTIN: Subtext you didn't know about.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Spend the whole time talking about how the child has a behavior problem.

NICK MARTIN: Spent the whole time talking about problems, the child behavior problem. If we continued this dialogue for any length of time, what would happen is we would begin to clarify a list of what characterizes good meetings. And then when I ask you about what characterizes bad meetings, what we're going to find is simply the absence of what makes for good meetings. There's only one list. So you like meetings that start on time and end on time, you don't like meetings that start late and run late. You like meetings that have a clear purpose. You don't like meetings where you don't know why you're there. You like meetings where people have something accomplished, there was a positive outcome. You don't like meetings where nothing got

accomplished. You like meetings where time is focused and we stay on topic. You don't like meetings where people wander around and waste time. And already, in just the minute or so that we've spent on this little subtopic, we're seeing that same process come into clarity. So then, and here's the rabbit out of the hat, so then this little discussion points to a very, very important question, which is, how then can we use this insight of one list? And those characteristics that make for good meetings, whatever the meeting is, where it's a parent teacher conference, whether it's an IEP meeting, whether it is a public forum meeting, whether it's a social club, church meeting, family meeting, doesn't matter, any meeting will benefit by having in place certain characteristics. And now we come to the 21 best practices for effective IEP meetings. And as I'm about to shift into that, which is, of course, our topic for the day, I want to say again, the best prevention of conflict in special education is a well-run meeting. If the troops out there really knew and utilized these 21 keys, you would see conflict be very much -- I'm not going to say it's all going to go away, that's not realistic, but we're going to see a very large percent of it go away, very large percent of it. How can I document that? How do I know that? Pause. Because -- is anybody in here from Wisconsin? I wish -- when I was studying this stuff eight years ago, and I was starting to look at -- they were starting to make the statistics available on the Internet, I was starting to see that there was one state that every year was showing declining dispute indicators as measured by complaints, due process, and mediations. And that state was Wisconsin. And I thought, well, what are they doing in Wisconsin that's different? And I came to find out that Wisconsin, for one thing, is very proactive as opposed to many states that are reactive, and they also involve parents and school personnel in teams that work together to provide preventative training. Wisconsin has really set a good model, and it's no surprise to me to see that their statistics are not only lower than most states, but they're also moving in a positive direction, whereas other states are moving in a negative. Lexington, Kentucky, and I say this in humility, I want people to understand that this is not just Nick Martin's theory, this is beginning to have documentation in a variety of ways. My first work in special education was in Lexington, Kentucky called Fayette County public schools. It's one of those city county are one and the same governmental entity called Fayette County. Kentucky has three population centers: Louisville, Lexington, and what they call Northern Kentucky, which is the Cincinnati suburbs. And those were the three primary contributors to all of the statistics for conflict in special education in Kentucky. We took all of the IEP chairpersons in Lexington and put them through -- I'm trying to remember now, I think it was six days of training. No, it was in four groups. It was two days of training with follow up. That's what it was. It was two days of training with three-month, a six-month, a one-year, and a five-year follow up. Three-year follow up, correction, three-year follow up. So I got to work with these people initially, and then over the course of time. Their statistics dropped like stones for their contribution to the state's conflict indicators, supporting the number one point on the CADRE continuum. Everybody -- anybody ever heard of the CADRE continuum? I know you have. CADRE, this fine organization, has been very much in the know for many, many years as a primary clearinghouse for information about conflict prevention and resolution using non-adversarial means. That's

really part of its creation. Its mandate in being created was to support non-adversarial prevention resolution of conflict, and they created the CADRE continuum that's often spoken of, talking about where do you intervene and how do you intervene to prevent conflict. And number one, somebody correct me if I'm wrong, because number one, as I recall, has two phases, two aspects. One was involve the stakeholders, and the other one was preventative training. In fact, we need to rectify the great preparedness gap that we've talked about through training. Okay, I could continue on that, but I'm going to move forward. Here we go, here's the list.

Characteristics of ideal IEP meetings, and we'll take one down and pass them around. Here is a list in part two of these characteristics that we are about to go over. Number one, there's adequate -- there is pre-conferencing to assure adequate preparation. Somebody mentioned that they thought good meetings are where people come prepared. Can you possibly have a smooth running IEP meeting if people don't come prepared? How can this -- what form can this pre-conferencing take? Because I'm not talking about a staffing where you get everybody together for a meeting prior to the meeting. That's usually not practical in the school environment. There simply isn't the time to do that. If it works for you, do it provided that you're not doing it to make a decision prior to the meeting, but if it helps to make sure everybody is prepared for the decision making meeting, it can be a good thing. But generally speaking, I'm saying that staffing pre-meetings is not what I'm talking about. What are the other forms that pre-conferencing could take to assure adequate preparation?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Calling the parent and making sure that they know what the process is --

NICK MARTIN: Calling by phone to make sure they understand the process, answer any questions that they may have. They know when and where the meeting is going to be, ask them in advance what might be some of the concerns they'd like to see talked about. Excellent. Email? So I'm primarily talking about emails, telephones, and knocking on the door during somebody's planning period. The chairperson might touch base with this person prior to the meeting just to make sure that their calendars are clear, they've arranged class coverage or child care coverage, and they know what's expected of them. I had the wonderful opportunity -- I jokingly say that when I work with school personnel, I'm usually a here today, gone tomorrow kind of guy. And what I mean by that is that I go and I work with people and I may never see those people again. I may never really know what did they do with those days of training that we spent together. When I was in Kentucky, it was different because the special ed director gave me the opportunity to work with her staff for two days with a three-month, six-month, one-year, and then three-year follow up. And I had the opportunity to hear from them, what made a difference for you? We did this training, of which this is just one small segment of the 12-hour training that I do, and invariably people would say that one of the most helpful things was the encouragement to pre-conference prior to the meetings, that they found that people started coming more prepared, the objectives of the meeting were being reached, time was being better spent, people were feeling better about the meeting. Pre-conferencing with parents occurs when difficult issues are anticipated. On the list of my favorite questions

to ask groups of school professionals is this question. Do you not know in advance of that meeting, when you've read the reports or you've seen the classroom behavior or you've made those observations, you've worked with that child, do you not know in advance what is likely to be an emotional bombshell when that parent hears this? And just like many of you are nodding your heads, school personnel almost always nod their heads, yes they know. So I say then why wait till the meeting to drop that bomb on the parent? What could you do instead? You could prevent that shell shock by touching base with the parent in advance to let them know of these issues, give them some emotional support, answer their questions, allay their fears. I learned this from a parent who said to me the first time she ever heard the words mildly mentally retarded applied to her child, she said she may have still smiled and nodded and said the right words, but she was no longer there at that meeting. So given that we generally know in advance what's going to be a difficult issue, why not find a way to address that proactively, minimize the damage to the meeting? Evaluation results are reviewed in advance, especially when we know they contain bad news. I attended an IEP meeting that went like this. Somebody mentioned the doctor's report. Parent said, "What doctor's report?" "Well, this doctor's report right here." "May I see that?" "Well, here you are." "This thing is dated April; it's now August. How come I didn't get a copy of that report?" "Oh, well, there were summer vacations and people were busy and we're very sorry." "Well, can I read it right now?" "Yeah, sure, go ahead, take some time." And she's trying to read this three-page high-falutin document right there in the meeting. You could just feel the tension. And that was just one of those little pinpricks. That meeting literally ended with people walking out saying they're going to call their lawyer. So preventable. Childcare's been arranged in advance. Most of you have probably attended IEP meetings where mom brings a toddler or two in tow, am I right? Does that help the smooth running focus of the meeting? How are we going to fix that? Put a big sign over the school room doors that say no children permitted, can't do that? What can we do then? Well again, how about touch base with mom in advance and say, "Have you been able to arrange childcare?" Is this an issue that perhaps the school needs to have a backup plan to help with? Now we're not going to -- this is not going to stop. We're never going to reach a point where little toddlers are never brought to meetings, but perhaps we can lower the number of times that those are there because they are so often a distraction to the meeting. The chairperson meets informally with the parents to address their questions, cover procedural safeguards. As a time management factor. Participants are introduced to each other. How obvious is that? And yet, it doesn't always happen. A written agenda is visible to all participants on paper or posted. I love to stand in front of large groups of school personnel, say, "How many of you use a written agenda at all of your IEP meetings?" Very, very few hands will go up. And yet, what could more quickly and easily bring structure and focus and clarity to the meeting? I have also had people in follow up sessions come and tell me that using a written agenda really made their meetings run so much more smoothly. Now, just to show you how easy that is, I'm going to share one with you. This is a generic IEP meeting. You could see the agendas at IEP meetings, this is -- there's nothing difficult about this. If I told you that I was going to an annual

review, do you not already know a large part of what's going to happen during that meeting? And if I told you I was going to an initial eligibility determination meeting, would you not already know a lot of what's going to happen there? So this is a matter of just creating a generic IEP agenda that can be adapted with a few additions or subtractions and used at any IEP meeting. Feel very welcome to duplicate that, circulate it far and wide. It's probably one of the single most impactful things that can be done to make these meetings run more smoothly. Now I recommend that that written agenda, this or something like it, always be supported by two verbal questions. The one question is any additions. Team, as I've circulated this proposed agenda, is there anything that should be on this agenda that maybe isn't there now? And someone might say, "Well, yeah, I think we should talk about summer school." And somebody else might say, "Well, I think we need to talk about transportation issues." Now obviously the law requires that if schools are going to talk about certain things at IEP meetings, the parent has to have written notice in advance. Am I right? Correct me if I'm wrong. The parent doesn't have that restriction. Now if the parent says, "I want to talk about this," can't the school agree to, yeah, we can talk about this during the meeting? Yes? I'm seeing some nodding heads. Okay, so one thing is to ask for any additions, being alert to any legal implications there may about advance written notice. And another question is, team, do we agree that this is a reasonable slate of topics for today's meeting? Now can anybody anticipate why I think it's important to support the written agenda with two verbals? What might be the benefit of asking verbal questions like this?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Commitment and buy-in.

NICK MARTIN: You get commitment and buy-in, exactly. Something that you will not get if you just hand out to people and say "Here's the agenda, let's get started." Then who's agenda is it? It's mine. And a lot of people out there -- so again, I acknowledge I'm with a sophisticated group. You understand this. They may not have been trained in this. They may not recognize the importance of that. And I see a lot of school personnel, especially administrators, impose things on the team because the law requires it. Well, okay, fine, yes. And yet, with a very simple, stylistic, diplomatic asking questions, like does this sound like a good plan for our meeting, you will get their buy-in. Ma'am?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm thinking it might be helpful also for parents to see a copy of this or to at least have time to review it because the team has bit more of an idea overall --

NICK MARTIN: To see it in advance, absolutely, absolutely.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you think it would be beneficial to call a parent and ask them, "Do you have any agenda items? I'm putting together my agenda."

NICK MARTIN: I think that's ideal, yes, yes. You know, the law was -- the reauthorization of 1997 included

language to very clearly state a whole bunch of changes. They always do when there's a bunch of them during a reauthorization, but one of the language changes was that school personnel are encouraged to see parents as decision making partners in the education of their children. So perhaps for the first time, the law came out with very specific language to clarify the vision of partnership. Well, how come if we all know at the school what's going to happen during the meeting and you don't, how can that be true partnership? So absolutely, you know, I'm talking, I'm calling all of our team members and asking for their input. "Is there anything you'd like to suggest?" That does wonders for helping parents feel welcome and empowered, and then conflict tends to go down as a result.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I work with a lot of parents who don't know what all the team members do, so in the introduction, you know, if there's a time even before that to talk about when they give the team notice and they see, you know, X name OT, X name PT, X name SLP.

NICK MARTIN: Well, now we go back to the confusion issue. By the way, I hope there are enough papers to go around for everyone. If for any reason you didn't get one, these are on your disc that could be printed later. What I'm sending around now is a checklist of what should be covered in a comprehensive introduction to an IEP meeting. It's a lot more than just, "Hi, my name's John and I'm the principal." The chairpersons of these meetings should cover a whole lot of things, which includes not just the names, but also their roles, how long the meeting is likely to take, clarifying whether anyone may need to be leaving in advance, and a bunch of other things we'll be talking about. For right now, let's just emphasize the importance of buy-in, which you will not get if you simply distribute a written agenda, however much that agenda may comply with federal law. Roundtable seating in a comfortable setting. I ask school personnel, "How many of you have a comfortable setting in which to hold your meetings?" And half the time, a large proportion of the group does not raise their hand. You would probably not come to a conference if you knew it was going to be held in a hot or cold or uncomfortable, drafty little room, right? The human being does not like to go where he or she is not physically comfortable. Why should that be any different at our IEP meetings? If they're not a comfortable setting, we need to make it a comfortable setting. I have attended IEP meetings in what was held at what seemed like the school broom closet with the only available copy machine in the school. And every five minutes, somebody's interrupting the meeting to use the copy machine. Not a good plan. Refreshments are provided. I ask people, "How many of you provide refreshments at your IEP meetings?" Very, very few hands go up. And they tell me, "Well, we can't afford it. It's against district policy," so on and so forth. Let me ask you this. What is the first thing you're going to do when I come to visit you at your home other than tell me to wipe my feet? You're going to offer me something to eat or drink. Why are you going to do that? Because it's hospitality, it's to help people feel welcome. Why could we not do that when someone comes to visit us at our school? I highly recommend it. I remember that I had a chance to shadow a wonderful, excellent IEP chairperson for a couple of days. And at the

end of the couple days, she said, "Nick, you're the expert. Do you have any feedback, any suggestions for me?" And I said, "I thought you did a wonderful job. I have one suggestion. What if you had some individually wrapped candies or crackers or bottled waters or juices on the table, a little bit of refreshment?" She said, "Oh, well, we don't have a budget for that." I said, "Send me the bill. You know, hey, how much does it cost?" That offer expired in 2006. I forgot about it and about three weeks later, I got an email from her. She said, "Nick, you wouldn't believe what happened. I followed your suggestion, I put a little bowl of Hershey's Kisses on the table, chocolates. And people walked into the room and the first thing they noticed was that little bowl of chocolates, and they started talking about the chocolates, laughing about the chocolates, and it created a party atmosphere that cut the tension." So I highly recommend it. It costs so little. And I also recommend that if you're going to put out refreshments, also do what? If you come to my house and you pass the fruit bowl, what are you going to do? You're going to wait until someone offers. And I have attended IEP meetings where people sort of sit there and drool looking at the banana bread and the cookies and the cokes and all these and they don't touch anything because they haven't been invited. I do not call this a make or break thing, this is not an essential piece of an IEP meeting. It's a helpful piece. I recommend it. The other thing, by the way, before we leave this is people rushing to an IEP meeting may not have had time for a snack, for breakfast, or for lunch, and we don't think and interact clearly and comfortably when we're hungry or thirsty. Another reason to do this. Each member is time conscious. I loved what Marshall said this morning about how, you know, think of all the places you could, should, or would be if you weren't here with me. And then he said, "Throw it at me. You know, write it down, throw it at me." I thought, well, I'll remember that one. I don't want to say time is money, but I do want to say that time is valuable, time is important, and that everybody attending an IEP meeting has somewhere else that they could be. Administrators need to be back at their offices. People have to be back at that other campus or back at their classroom or back at home with the other children or whatever it is. People are busy. Nobody likes to waste time or go to meetings where time is not well spent. So related to that, the chairperson politely redirects people who wander. Guidelines or ground rules. I used to say ground rules, I've changed it. I like to say guidelines. Guidelines are proposed and agreed at the start of a meeting. See, the human being -- I once made a list of about 37 characteristics, I'm still working on it, of the human being. And it's like I may never have met you before in my life, but I already know a lot about you. I know that you are generally motivated by good intention. You mean well. I know that if you freely tell me you're going to do something, you will probably do it. I know that you insist upon respect and that if I don't appear to be respectful of you, that will have repercussions. You will not like that. Whole bunch of things that I know about human beings. And because I know that human beings tend to comply with what they freely agree, if you can start the meeting with agreements, like we're going to say on task, we're going to turn off our cell phones, we're going to be respectful, that human beings will generally do that and that prevents a lot of what might otherwise become sparks in dry forest. These are all pretty obvious, turning off phones, being focused, and so on. This one, the



owwies rule, may warrant a few extra words because I've never heard it until I made it up. An owwie is simply a cutesy word for an emotional reaction. Somebody feels hurt, somebody feels attacked, somebody feels belittled, somebody feels disrespected. The kind of thing that so commonly occurs whenever people are working together. As a psychologist, I learned that if put two people in the same room long enough, somebody will get an owwie. Anybody in here ever been married, right? Did you ever get an owwie, right? It's going to happen. That's why how wonderful when Dr. Mayer this morning was talking about how conflict -- he began with that opening slide about how conflict is kind of inevitable, it's kind of normal. It's how we deal with it, how we respond to it, whether we're willing to look at it as opportunity. What can we learn here? How can we use whatever is involved here to help us be getting along and doing our work more effectively in the future? So I recommend that every meeting begin with a guideline that if anybody should have an owwie, please speak up so that we can address it at the earliest possible moment and fix that because we care how you feel, and we all want you, us, our team to feel good about this meeting. So we make that an agreement from the very beginning. Think of how much was emphasized in the opening lecture this morning about the importance of maintaining open and effective communications, avenues for communication. Question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I clearly agree and I generally always teach this when I talk about facilitating IEP meetings or just having good IEP meetings. One of the number one concerns I usually hear from teachers is they're just really uncomfortable with the idea of going over ground rules. If it's a problematic IEP, then yes, it's something they'll do. But I agree, I think all meetings should have it. And so they don't really know how to go about introducing the subject without essentially saying -- they say, "It seems like we're setting it up to have a problem already." So how do you --

NICK MARTIN: Here's my answer. First of all, don't direct this at the parent. See, so often everybody makes the parent the hub of the wheel. "So before we start our meeting today, are there any guidelines that you'd like to have to prevent conflict with us?" That's a setup for problems. No, keep your eyes moving. Everybody. In fact, don't even look at the parent too much, okay. "Before we start our meeting, team, are there any guidelines anyone would like to propose perhaps for how this meeting might run more smoothly, like no interrupting or turning off cell phones?" And let them respond to the question, not the statement. Highly recommend it. I also have gotten feedback from people who started using this that, by golly, it prevented a lot of conflict, especially useful in those meetings that you anticipate might become a little bit conflict laden. I can tell you that I never attended an IEP meeting that had ground rules in place until there was training about it, except, on occasion, "Before we start, on the wall there is a list of the district's guidelines for IEP meetings." What's wrong with this picture? And there's this list of we will not, you will not, they will not, right? What don't you have? Buy-in. You don't have ownership, and therefore you get resistance or avoidance. Did you have your hand up?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was going to say language is important. I mean, there's ground rules and there's shared expectations, I think.

NICK MARTIN: Shared expectations, yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: If you're coming in the room with expectation, let's talk about what those expectations are.

NICK MARTIN: Right, good suggestion. And that's why you'll notice yours may still say ground rules because this is a big change for me. I just changed it, I don't say ground rules anymore. I say guidelines or proposals. Ma'am?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I appreciate bringing up the emotional piece because when I was first just kind of, you know, glancing through your presentation, I was like, "Oh, I don't see that on there." So the one thing that I think is important to note about that, I agree with you, it's probably one of the most essential things that needs to be addressed, is how you handle it if somebody gets emotional during the meeting? But I think that we're assuming that people have the skill to know how to do that, which is a whole other set of training because, in general, I think people are so uncomfortable with emotions and the immediate response is shut it down.

NICK MARTIN: And that's why the training that I do with school personnel is not just an hour. It's 12 hours and the -- people say, "Why do you need two days?" And my answer is because you won't give me four days. It's because these are skill sets that, you know, two days is the best I can get. I usually do a two-day program limited to 40 people. Phone rings, D.C. schools, we want one day, not two, 400, not 40, okay? You know, here's what I've learned is the number one basic ground rule of special education. Correct me if I'm wrong, the number one ground rule of special education: you do the best you can with what you've got. You do the best you can with what you've got because you're never going to have the ideal scenario in terms of all the personnel, the time, the budget, and so on. Sir?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I would suggest looking at it as collaborative norms. If you were going to set up a curriculum committee or a special development committee or any other kind of activity, those collaborative norms make the committee more effective. They aren't necessarily rules to corral somebody or to contain a problem, but they're how can we deal most effectively and make this valuable to us. And looking at it as norms to effectively do our best as a team avoids the whole idea of we're trying to --

NICK MARTIN: So that's why I've changed my language to guidelines, but proposals, norms, expectations, perfectly good. And the thing I want to really emphasize is we do not tell the team what the guidelines are. We ask them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And I think the other thing I do in training is then ask the people coming up with the guidelines, people are having meeting after meeting, and how can you take these guidelines and integrate that

into the setup of the room, having tissue there. I mean, there's so many things that you can do to support the guidelines or rules or whatever that you have to make it real to the people that are there so they're not just the words. And that can be for the other teachers and stuff as well coming in, you know, or providing a place in your agenda like if you have any concerns, you know, at this point, you know, we're going to take a break and give people an invitation. And I think if you see the guidelines as not something that's just something that you check box at the top, it's something that's integrated into your whole thing and get people to brainstorm about how to do that.

NICK MARTIN: Very good. And it's not something that takes a lot of time, especially if they're used to doing this as opening remarks at every meeting. Couple of quick questions, I'm looking at the clock getting away from us.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Maybe it's just Massachusetts, but the idea that everybody has formal team chairpeople at every team meeting is not something that Massachusetts has. And as budgets become more crushed, maybe team chairs will run meetings that look like this, but special ed teachers or other people will be pulled in to chair with what they think are the good parents, the ones that'll go along. And then once those people fall into that 10% of the concerned parents, then you get meetings like this. And I'm wondering how can you -- you have people who come to team meetings that are chairing it and they'll say, "I don't think we can do this. I have to call the SpEd director." And you know, they don't even commit the resources the district --

NICK MARTIN: Well, if I'm not mistaken, federal law does require that there be at every IEP meeting someone with the authority for the disposition of district funds. And that person will usually be the campus administrator, meaning principal or their designee. And what's commonly done is the principal or assistant principal may be present in the room in that capacity, but they've assigned the leadership of the meeting to the special ed teacher or the diagnostician. I agree with you that there may need to be some clarity about the leadership of the meeting, and I suspect that that may involve just some discussion among the participants who are already there because, again, the law requires that there be some authority figure there. And are they, number one, in compliance and, number two, do they have a game plan where I'm there with the authority, but you're going to run the meeting?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Often in like other states too, they have -- the teachers don't have any of this kind of training to comprehend what it takes to run an IEP meeting and put the IEP up on if they have an LCD or whatever they have. And they just run like a train.

NICK MARTIN: And yet, I agree with you. That's my point that we have this great preparedness gap and yet it would be so easy to fix it if the people who decide what are the priorities for training would make that decision. And when I'm -- I didn't tell you the whole story. I can tell you that every school entity that has made this kind of training a priority has seen huge reductions in their conflict levels. Okay, in the interest of time, one last

question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of the things is where I see that you got that they're agreed to, it's also that they're followed through on, because I've seen them where they're posted and when the lack of respect, the eye rolling, the nonverbal communication stuff starts happening, the question is who's going to call that person on doing that? So not just having them posted, but also immediately implementing and complying with what they say.

NICK MARTIN: Yes. Now again, I'm not big on posting, I'm big on asking. Because again, if people agree freely, they'll comply. There's another way we can deal with that, which is, well -- I'm not sure what order the slides, but we're going to talk about how we conclude the meeting, so we're going to come back to that point at that time. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect. As I mentioned earlier, the human being, you and me included, insists upon respect. You can be pretty sure that in almost every conflict, somebody is feeling that their ideas, that their feelings, that their children are not being respected. If we can safeguard that atmosphere of respect, conflict won't happen most of the time. Participants share and contribute to a common purpose. They remember that we're here to serve the child. And yet I hear so often that when conflict arises at IEP meetings, the child and what benefits the child has been forgotten. We've gotten into our egos, we've gotten into our feelings, we've lost sight of what we're really here to do. Breaks are taken as needed. The human being can only sit for so long comfortably. And if the meeting goes beyond, and I set as a reasonable limit 90 minutes, people cannot sit longer than 90 minutes comfortably. And I'm going to tell you how I learned this. I was in Texarkana on the Arkansas border, I was doing a training. We were on a roll. I mean, it was going well. People were with me, and I said, "You know, do we need to take a break?" And then, no, no, keep going. So I kept going, and a little lady stood up in the back, and she said, "Nick, I'm sorry, but I've had four children and I have to take a break." Now I don't know what four children had to do with it, but some of you may know. But in any case, that taught me that people need a leg stretch usually at the one-hour mark, you're pushing it at an hour and fifteen, but you're breaking it at beyond an hour and a half. You've got to give them a break. The meeting has a clear purpose. Everybody knows what their roles are before, during, and after the meeting. The outcome is restated for clarity. At the end of the meeting, I don't just say, "Thanks you all. You know, it was a great job, see you next time." Most children have IEP meetings how often? Once a year. So if what I do at the end of the meeting is say, "Wow, you really did a great job today, this is wonderful, I feel so good about this. See you next year." And a year goes by and I say, "So how'd the testing go?" And she says, "What testing?" "Well, I had written in my notes you were going to do the testing." "No, she was going to do the testing." "Oh, you were going to do the testing?" "No, I thought she was going to do it." And we've got all kinds of confusion that could've been prevented if at the end of last year's meeting, we took a minute to say, "Okay, this is my understanding. We're going to do this, we're going to do that, everybody on the same page?" Number 18, written parking lot is

established for issues to be addressed at a later time if somebody brings up something that this is not the right time or place. We don't just say, "I'm sorry, we're not going to talk about that," but instead say, "That's an important issue you're raising. Let's set a time to get together. How does that sound?" And I use this example. Imagine that mom says, "Could we spend some time talking about piano lessons for my older child?" Well, now obviously, that cannot be an IEP issue because we're not here for the older child, we're here for this child. So how do I deal with that? If I say, "I'm sorry, but that is not an IEP issue," how is that person going to feel? Slighted, foolish, disrespected, hurt. What can I do instead? Very simply, "Mom, that's a wonderful idea. How about give me a couple days to look into that and I give you a call later in the week. Would that be all right? Come up with some suggestions?" So somehow find a way to address the things that cannot or should not be addressed here. Number 19, an open door exists for airing and sharing between meetings. Let people know that if there are questions or concerns that arise after the meeting, my door is open. Check with me or with another person. Oh, and this one is especially important if you ever have reason to think that someone left your meeting unhappy because what happens to unhappiness if it is not addressed? If they're in Ohio, they call you, right? It festers, it grows, and it comes back to haunt you in nasty ways. So if I'm a member and certainly if I'm the chairperson of this IEP meeting and I have a feeling that mom left or dad left the meeting unhappy, or anybody, principal left, whoever it is, left the meeting unhappy, I'm going to follow up with them in some way. And I'm going to say, "Greg, I wasn't sure -- how'd you feel about today's meeting?" And he may say, "Oh, I thought it was fine, I thought it was wonderful." Okay, or he might say, "I thought it was a total waste of time. I thought it stunk." Here's what I consider the most foolish thing that could ever be said in special education: let's not get emotional. We're talking about people's kids here. They're going to get emotional, so the best response to a negative, and I like to say repeat after me. I'm going to teach you the A, number one golden key to conflict prevention resolution, are you ready? Repeat after me. Say some more about that. So if I call Greg and I say, "Greg, how'd you feel about the meeting?" "Yeah, it was a total waste of time. You all a bunch of egomaniacs. You don't care about anything. You already had this all figured out before I even got there." My response is, "Say some more about that. Help me understand your thoughts." Because human emotions are like dirty water in a bathtub. The best way to help people who feel bad feel better is to pull the plug and let those emotions drain. That's why moms, you moms in here, what do you do when Johnny has a long face, your child, and you can tell something's bothering him? What are you going to say to him? You're going to say, "Tell me about it. What's going on? Talk about it." Because you know that if he talks about it, he's going to feel better. Even if the situation doesn't change, most of the time we will feel better when we feel bad if we have the opportunity to talk about it in a supportive environment. Final -- nope, 20, not finally, closing remarks are standard operating procedure. What if every meeting ended with a short debrief? Here's a picture of the pilot getting out of the airplane because in the air force, after every flight, certainly after every combat mission, there's a debrief. You sit down and you talk about how the mission went, what can we learn, were there any problems? And I

recommend that every single IEP meeting end with a short debrief revolving around two questions. Number one, anything anyone would like to say before we close for today? Now why should this be an important part of the ending of a meeting? Anything anybody want to say before we close for today? Psychologists have a term called unfinished business. We don't want someone leaving the room with unfinished business. Somebody walking out and say, "You know, I thought we were going to talk about summer school and nobody even brought it up. You know, my child is doing so well in math and in history, and nobody even talked about what he's doing well." We don't want people to leave with that unfinished business, so we say, "Is there anything you'd like to say, anybody would like to say before we close?" Now a curious thing is not only will people bring up their concerns and their negatives, but you will be surprised the human being is remarkably positive, remarkably positive. And if you open the door, "Is there anything you'd like to say before we leave for today?" And you might say, "Well, I just wanted to say you're doing such a good job with my child. I just want to say that my child comes home, he just loves your class. And I really appreciate the way you wrote that report, that was so thorough." People will do that. One way or the other, it's an important question. The other is, "Team, how do we feel about today's meeting? Is there anything we should do differently next time?" And here's where we can get to the issue of the disrespect if people were being disrespectful, if that atmosphere wasn't being watched carefully, if time was not being well spent, if people didn't come prepared. The curious thing is that people attending this IEP meeting probably attend lots of IEP meetings, not so much the parent, but the school personnel are usually in lots of IEP meetings. How many times do you think they need to hear that, "Well, you know, I thought we had a lot of side talking today that we didn't really need. Or you know what really concerned me, that I didn't get a copy of that doctor's report. Or you know, I think that we were really bird walking a lot and talking about things we didn't need to talk about." How many times will they need to hear that kind of feedback before they begin to modify behavior? Probably not very often. So I'm recommending that every IEP meeting end with how we feel about today's meeting, anything we should do differently next time. And again, people may be positive. How much clock time do you think it would take to ask these two questions? Five minutes? If there's a backlog of six years of conflict, this could be a long topic. You know, and a lot of school personnel, I find they're afraid to open the doors. You know, that's Pandora's box. I don't want to ask somebody how they feel because I don't know what I'm going to hear. I would say if it becomes woven into the fabric of how we do our meetings on a regular basis, it'll take two minutes, and usually be more positive than negative. Now people will often be more willing to share in writing than they are verbally, so evaluation forms, okay. So here's a little handy dandy, hopefully very short evaluation form for those people who might like to use them at IEP meetings to address in writing. And it's designed to take not more than two minutes. Scale of one to ten, how'd you like the meeting? What'd you find worthwhile, how could it have been improved, anything else? Very, very simple. I have never seen an IEP meeting use these until after it was presented in a training. By way of follow up, I heard later that a special ed director who attended this training

made it mandatory in her district. And I had the opportunity to get feedback and they said it was working very well. People say, "Well, who should fill it out? Just the parent?" No, everybody. Should people put their names on it? Yes. Should they send it back in the kid's backpack? No, leave it on the table because here's my opportunity. "Oh, you gave a five for today's meeting. Let's talk by phone by way of follow up," okay. Also, people like the knowledge that they will have a chance to share their thoughts or feelings, knowing that if I didn't like what you said, when that evaluation comes back today, by golly, here's my chance. Speaking of which, funny how almost every conference now has written evaluations at the end. We understand this principle for good conferences. Why do we do this? We do this because the conference leaders want you to enjoy this conference, they want this conference to be worthwhile, and they want your feedback so that future conferences can be improved. Why should it be any different at our IEP meetings? It's the exact same principle. And then finally, the meeting ends on a positive note and participants are thanked for their time and contributions. See, the human being basically, number one, human beings, believe it or not, are basically positive. They like to be positive. And more than anything, the human being thrives on positives. We know that with children. Educators have learned with children that if you want to see behavior change in a child, you want to praise them. Every time you see something good, praise them. My daughter comes home from school with smiley faces and good job and rewards of different kinds that the classes earned. When I went to school, my dad never saw that. My dad saw pink slips from the assistant principal. So we know with our children that they thrive on positives. They respond to positives that you get what you reward. See something you like, reward it and you'll get more of it. Now at what age does the human being no longer respond to positives? When do we stop? When do we no longer need that or benefit from it? At the funeral, at the funeral. So if I had the time, we could spend more time with this. Just let it be said that people of all ages respond so well to positives. Conflict will go down where people feel rewarded, praised, appreciated, acknowledged. Notice what Dr -- is it Mayor? Mayer? Mayer, I think. Dr. Mayer said this morning, he said that in mediation he's learned that whatever the monetary settlement, whatever the specifics or the details of the outcome, there are two things that people seem to always want. Acknowledgment that there was an injury and some sort of agreement or process put in place that will prevent this from happening again, that the pain and suffering was somehow worthwhile. These are universal principles. Human being thrives on positives. We need to build positives into all of our relationships. Very briefly, there's a lot of focus on IEP meetings, but that's only one phase of a broader IEP environment. I call that the during phase. And what happens in those meetings is very much dependent on what happens before the meeting, whether people come prepared for example, what happens in setting the stage for the meeting, whether there's an agenda, whether there are norms and expectations set. Then there's the running of the meeting, but there's also how we conclude the meeting, with a little bit of a debrief, with anything further someone wants to share. And then perhaps some of the chronic offenders need to be spoken with in private after the meeting. I'm looking at the clock and I see that it's getting away from us, so I'm going to

run through this real quickly because we can do it if we make haste. Talk about some very common scenarios that arise in the IEP environment. What do you do when a parent seems overwhelmed by information? School personnel will quickly tell me check in with them and ask them. So if we're having a meeting and I ask, "Dad, dad, did you understand what they meant by RTI?" What's he going to do? If every time somebody, "Excuse me, I just want to check in with dad. Did you understand when they said OHI and are you familiar with that?" What is the problem with this picture? Dad is going to feel singled out and he's either going to say, "Oh yeah, I understood all that," when he really didn't. Or he's going to say, "No, I didn't understand," and feel embarrassed. So instead, the recommendation you'll read in your handouts is make it a group issue. "Team, so that we're all on the same page, could I ask you to help me understand what you mean when you say RTI and OHI?" And avoid even singling out the parent. Okay, direct it at yourself rather than the other person. Is that clear? Okay, what do you do if people are side talking at a meeting? The favorite response is just say, "So Greg, what do you think?" And then what's Greg going to do? He's, "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. What was the question?" He's going to be embarrassed. What could we do instead? You could, number one, call him by name, praise him. "Greg, you've had a lot of experience working in this area. What would you recommend as the best way to help Johnny improve his reading by the end of the school year?" So you build him a bridge to come back into the conversation so that he's not left with the old proverbial deer in the headlights. Reporter is too longwinded. You ever seen that? You're afraid to drop a nickel because they'll run for an hour? Very similar intervention. Politely interrupt, praise them, okay. And you say, "John, you've put a lot of time into that report, I really appreciate that. Could I ask you to summarize the points we most need to understand to determine if eligibility is still appropriate?" Again, ask for what you need. And then if he's a chronic offender, you prevent this with ground rules, guidelines at the beginning of the meeting, we're going to make our reports short and sweet. And then you do a debrief at the end of the meeting, maybe we could have been a little shorter, succinct. And if you've got a chronic offender, you deal with them privately after the meeting. If parent becomes silent and tearful, offer them tissues, show them some support. These reports can be very hard to hear. If I were in your shoes, I might be feeling a little emotional too. And then ask for help. But when you ask for help, don't lead the witness. "Would you like to take a break? Would a break maybe be helpful? Maybe a few minutes to stretch your legs." I'm leading the witness. I'm implying what the right answer is. So instead I say, "Mom, would you maybe like to take a break or would you like us just to continue, or perhaps share your feelings? What would be most helpful to you?" Give them several options. On that note, where do you go from here? I have a book that talks about this. Basically, after I did that -- the two-day training for years, I wrote it up in a book form called *A Guide to Collaboration for IEP Teams*. It includes this and a whole lot more. Another book is *Supporting the IEP Process*, which is a facilitator's guide, and that's more about the facilitation process. And I didn't bring books because I'm not selling books here, but I do have some books if anybody wants to just flip through them and be familiar with them, but I also have a page that lists them and where you can get them if



you're interested. On that note, I mentioned the videos. I also have articles at my website you're welcome to check out. On that note, I'm going to say thank you for being a wonderful group to work with, and I look forward to spending the rest of the conference with you.