

'PERSON-CENTERED' SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

By Stacy Hultgren

Linda Grimm and Karen Stevens of Ben Haven recently presented a workshop about what is known as 'Futures Planning'. This type of approach is one example of 'person-centered planning', in other words, planning that is based upon information about a specific individual, rather than simply applying general knowledge about a disability or fitting them into programs that already exist. Futures Planning can be used in designing educational programming for children of any age, transition planning for high school students, and life plans for adults. In fact, this type of planning is a great tool to use for even a typically developing child. Some school districts have begun to include Futures Planning in their programs for children with disabilities, and you may want to think about whether it should be considered for your child.

What I have come to believe is that the information gathered in a Futures Plan is the information that most families have always expected to gather at a PPT (Planning and Placement Team) meeting. However since the purpose of a PPT, which is a much more formal setting, has a different agenda many families leave the table unhappy and frustrated. If the expectations are incorrect going in, then a PPT has little chance of feeling successful. Perhaps what we need to address is the need to take the time for a separate discussion that centers around the child him/herself, and leave the talk about procedures, progress, and methodology to a different type of meeting. Please keep in mind that the information gathered at a Futures Plan is no less critical, and is often much more helpful to staff as well as to families than anything said at a PPT.

A 'Futures plan' is developed by a group of people who know the individual well, and can contribute their knowledge to form a group vision about that person. This information is written into 'maps', or subject areas, that describe the student across many areas of his/her life, not just within the school building. Everyone involved will come away with a clear understanding of where the focus person (the person you are planning for) came from, how he's doing now, where he needs to get to in terms of a next step, and where the long-term vision will lead. They also walk away with specific tasks that they are responsible for, so that the document does not simply get filed in the drawer along with his many other papers. It is a working draft that is a "living document", in other words, it changes and grows as people help him/her move along the path to the future.

Why develop a 'Futures Plan'?

Linda Grimm says, Futures planning stresses the importance of becoming a real team, and encourages the

sharing of information in an informal and non-stressful way. This is a different type of team experience than people are used to seeing within the framework of a typical PPT meeting, but teamwork is critical in developing a plan that will work for a child on the autism spectrum. Teams need to be able to understand and to accept different points of view to come up with a comprehensive plan. "Oftentimes when we don't work as a team we can't understand why some things are so important. The parents may want something, a teacher may want something, but unless the whole team is working together and on a shared vision, and has shared understanding of why things are important, frustration is created." In other words, if we all come to the table with different perspectives, and different agendas and different purposes, we are not truly a team working toward a common goal. We need to understand one another to keep from being splintered in different directions. In developing a Futures Plan, she stresses, "Each person is valued, each contribution is valued, and each person brings a different perspective and their own uniqueness."

Linda reminds us that, "A child's education is a journey where both the outcome and the process need to be considered." She asked how many of us would set out on a journey not knowing where we were going or how to get there? Yet, when we plan a kids' program we tend to focus only on what we are doing now, and what should we should do next, but we often don't ask the bigger question of: where is it all going? Why are we doing this? It needs to fit into the scheme of the child's life not just for next week, but also for a year from now, or three years from now. Futures Planning is a way of asking us to think backwards – to begin with the destination, and then ask how we can get there. Linda asked us, as an example, to consider our next vacation. How would you plan it? You would make decisions about where you want to go, what you would do when you got there, what the cost would be, how you would save that money, in other words, you would work out the details of a plan starting from the final product. And, she stressed, that we would do all of this planning simply for a one-week vacation. Futures Planning lets you do that for your child's life experience. The plan doesn't look at speech, or fine motor skills, or reading levels. It only asks the participants to look at the whole child, including the child's life outside of the school walls, to determine an answer to the question, Who is this child?

Once a Futures Plan had been agreed upon as a strategy, the 'facilitator' (*the specially-trained person running the session*) begins preliminary preparations, involving such tasks as observing the child, interviewing teachers, parents, etc. to determine who should attend the Futures Planning session, what discussion points are relevant, and planning the details of the session itself. A group is then gathered together in a very informal setting. There are no tables as barriers, the participants sit in a semicircle to induce a more relaxed discussion. Linda believes it is "best to take the tables out because they create a boundary and if you think about it, oftentimes certain people sit at certain places around the table. You kinda know 'your place' at the table." There are no papers, note-taking, or any other activity or distracter. All the information is written by the 'recorder' (*the assistant to the facilitator – not a participant*) on large sheets of paper hanging on the wall so everyone can see the plan as it develops. The information on the sheets is then typed up after the conclusion of the meeting, and sent to each participant.

The team builds the structure of the plan together, and while the plan itself is the focus, what develops during the discussion is equally as important – a trusting relationship. Linda adds that most conflicts arise within school districts because there is a lack of trust on both the parts of families and districts. It is sometimes due to the fact that families and school staff view the child differently, and so it is quite easy for

this lack of trust to develop into a confrontational relationship that is hard to correct later on. If you see the child one way and believe you are right, then the other person who sees them differently in a different environment must be wrong or worse, untruthful. But what is important to families may look very different from what the district sees as important, and sometimes these differences are never addressed or even realized, and therefore may be misinterpreted. Different things are also important at different ages. Linda asks us to think about our own family. What is important to us for our child? Is it reading or writing? Or is it toileting, self-help, jobs, social circles and interactions with family members? "Those aren't things that typically happen between 9 and 2 at the school. And sometimes they say that's not our job. Part of why they say that I believe, is that they're not quite sure how to do all that either. No one took a course in school on how you help a family work with the grandparent. We didn't take classes on toileting. We didn't take classes on social skills...It's not something that teachers come with a great deal of experience in. When you get to a point where you are working as a team, and if you can say that - when a teacher can say, '*I don't know*',... you're really working together collaboratively to try to figure it out." A basic skill such as toileting has a tremendous impact on the family, and is part of building a rich and meaningful life. The term 'meaningful', Linda says, refers to meaning for the child, not for us. Teachers might think going to a basketball game or eating lunch in the cafeteria is the right thing because it is meaningful to most people. But she adds, that may not be meaningful to this particular child. Sometimes our kids like to be alone. They don't like crowds of people, or being pushed to be with people who are really different from him. We need to see it and plan it with their perspective at the forefront of our decision-making. Linda adds that, in her experience, teachers often eat at their desks because they prefer to, yet they may assume that the choice of the child would automatically be to eat in the cafeteria. "Maybe he would; but maybe he wouldn't. We need to look at this individual and what's meaningful to him." This is a process that will emphasize the need to create a rich and meaningful life based upon the individual - because it is not meaningful if the person who is actually living it doesn't think it is.

Men and women also have different perspectives on importance. Women talk more generally speaking, than men, and call friends on the phone more. To us, this type of skill might seem to be important. Men might disagree, and she reminds us that since most of our kids are boys who will become men, their perspective is really critical. Our kids might want to play on the computer instead, which men might agree is far more typical in adult life than spending hours on the phone. One way to be sure the child's perspective is taken into account, especially when talking about a very young child, is to gather as many ideas from people who know this child as possible. Linda asks us to remember back to when we were in first or second grade. What were you good at, she asks? We probably all remember well what we were not good at. "How many of you today are doing what you were not good at?" She reflects that she was not good at gym; and always the last one picked for teams. "Gym was the area that never worked for me," she tells us, "I hated it. It was awful. It was the worst part of my experience." She continues, "early on when I wasn't good at gym, I found other things that I was good at, and my teachers helped me to develop in those skills. No one said '*she's really disabled in the gym area; let's give her extra hours of gym!*'" She was simply never going to become good at it, nor would she ever have enjoyed it. But she stressed that when we talk about kids with disabilities, where's our focus? On the weak areas; on what they're deficient in; what they're not able to do. And she asked the group, "what would your day be like if you had to spend it working on

things you're not good at?" We wonder why our kids don't much like school, but that may be because we don't emphasize what he's good at. A Futures plan is a way to focus on their strengths, and plan around them instead.

It's a team process

A Futures Planning session is only the first step in the journey. It's not a product that gets put in the record that staff may never see, or may easily forget about in their day-to-day teaching. Linda stated firmly that if your team's not committed to the first step, and then the next step, and the next until the child reaches adulthood, then don't waste your time because the document itself is not the end product, the work surrounding it is. When the document is complete you have a blueprint of the next step, but then subsequently every time the child transitions to a new team the document gets passed on along with him/her so that people aren't always "starting from scratch". In fact, Linda says that she often hears from teachers that they are angry about inclusion. That it is being forced on them, and that they are unprepared. They are angry because they're scared and feel unsupported – they don't know how to do this. The Futures document is very helpful to them in this regard. Linda explains, "It's better to look bad than it is to look stupid. That's why sometimes kids have behavioral issues". The same goes for adults - they don't want to look like they don't know, so they get angry instead as a defense. But one of the 'maps' that is developed in the sessions is called 'what works, and what doesn't', and this information can be invaluable to someone who doesn't know your kid, especially on the first day of school. "I don't mean to be critical," Linda states, "but most IEPs really aren't worth a whole lot. The whole IEP topic is goals and objectives, but it doesn't talk about the kid". While it may list the child's strengths and weaknesses, it doesn't give a description of who he is, what he likes, what works and doesn't work, what makes him angry, what distracts him, etc. For instance, she knows kids who like to be physically directed, and others who would shut down when touched. "Has anyone seen an IEP that says things like whether you can come into a child's space?" This is the information that the teacher can use in order to teach this child, but they do not get this kind of detail from an IEP. But if the teacher has more useful information, they can be more comfortable having your child in their class and being more confident that it is starting out right; and that they can build on it. On the other hand, they know quite well (as do parents) that if the school year starts out on the wrong foot, it's very difficult to fix during the year. Teachers need a chance to talk to each other, and the Futures plan also establishes this relationship, so that communication can continue as well.

When defining 'person-centered planning', there are different models to choose from, Futures Planning is only one of them. There isn't one that is better than another, or the 'best', and some techniques from different models can be combined to be more individualized. Linda and Karen have found that they continue to evolve as a facilitation team in developing a 'style', and in creating their own maps that they feel work best for them. There are themes for maps that are common to many types of planning models. The maps will also change depending on the age and functionality of the child. They choose the maps individually for each child's session, using the ones they believe best describe the child and fit the needs of the desired plan.

The structure of a planning session

It is important that the session itself be perceived as informal. Linda says that she, as a parent herself, still gets butterflies just going to parent-teacher conferences, because it is DIFFERENT when it's your kid. She stressed that the facilitator really needs to work at making it informal in order to maintain a feeling of equality and partnership among participants. When everyone is relaxed, there is less worry about 'what' you say or 'how' you say it. Food is important! Consider it a tool - it gives people something to do until you get started, "it's hard to make small talk when you're goin' into something like that", and that can set the wrong tone. It may be advisable to have the parent bring the food. While Linda certainly knows it is not the parent's JOB to bring food, she stressed the importance of the message that would be sent - "baked cookies are a gift - gifts mean something." It softens the relationship from the outset. It is a good idea to keep that in mind through the year, too. Linda stressed, "Research has shown it takes 7 positive statements to balance one negative statement." She asks us to remember that at work when we receive a performance evaluation, what do we walk out thinking about? The negative comments. Parents or teachers will remember the negative comments too. And let's face it, she says, it's never 7 to 1. Never. "Even if you have typically, say 4 concerns about a child. Do you think you said 28 positives about the child? You probably said something like, 'he's really doing good', or 'he's making progress'. But what does that really tell you? As a parent, have you said 7 positives to your teacher? To balance out the negatives you tell to your teacher?" So the facilitator should keep this in mind while structuring the session.

It is explained upfront that all perspectives are valued, and that there are no right or wrong answers. Just opinions. It all gets blended together to form a group vision. Sometimes both parents may not even see things the same way either, but it is important to have both of these perspectives, and it can also give staff 'permission' to say what they feel when they don't agree. "One of the things we believe is, one is good, two is better, three is even better... The more people you have working together to solve a problem or celebrate an accomplishment, the better the outcome will be." Everybody knows the focus person differently. If we look at the various people in our lives, we can think about what they would each say about us. People from the office might describe us in one way, but our mother is likely to say something different, and so would our sister or brother, or our neighbor. We do not become all the different people they are describing, but we are different depending on the context and on the relationship. It is OK to disagree, because you may experience a relationship with that person that puts it in a different context.

The session itself provides a good opportunity to really sit back and listen. When you go to a PPT, people are busy writing out notes and filling in forms. They carry notebooks and reports, and they're all laid out in front of them. If you are the kind of person who listens better if you're doodling, she says it's fine to do that, however, for most of us writing keeps us from really listening. She reminds us that, "80% of the message is non-verbal.. That's why our kids have a hard time getting the message - they can't get the nonverbal," and neither will you if you are not looking at the speaker. In addition, if the teacher is talking about your child, and you're looking down writing, what message do you think that gives the teacher? It may convey that you're not paying attention or that you don't really care about what she says. If you are looking, on the other hand, even if you may not agree with them, they know you were listening.

It is crucial that everyone knows that they are not expected to answer other people's comments. If a parent says something the teacher disagrees with, they do not have to defend their position, but are welcome to

add their perspective to the map as well. Unfortunately, this happens quite often at PPTs. Linda says in explanation, "If you have to respond to what's being said, are you really listening or are you forming your answer?" Often we don't truly listen because we're busy thinking about how we can defend our position, what our thoughts on the subject are, etc. In fact, she adds, a good facilitator won't allow a response. "When you're allowed to listen sometimes you read the messages; you hear what the family is really saying, what the teacher is really saying, and it's not in the words." Again, those nonverbal messages can come across much more clearly.

When asked at what age should a Futures session be conducted, Linda recommended that they can start as early as the transition from pre-K to kindergarten. Additional comprehensive sessions would be advisable upon major transitions, for instance, grade school to middle school, middle to high school, high school to adulthood. In other words, at times when we need to change the questions we're asking or look at them differently because the child's needs change with age and maturity. Updates should happen every year including a review of accomplishments, plans for next year, and passing information from teacher to teacher, so that the existing plan can continue to develop.

What is a 'Map'?

Maps are written and developed throughout the meeting and consist only of non-judgmental statements of how people perceive the individual, and revolve around topics, such as 'What works, and what doesn't. There are individual maps that address the past, present, and future. How much you look back or forward is decided by the facilitator, and how much there is to say about each depends on the child's age. Maps for an 8 year-old looks very different than for a 20 year-old.

Who are the stakeholders at the session?

The most important person involved in this process is the focus person – who are we meeting about? That individual may or may not be present at the session, but their feedback is still important, because it is their perspective. The facilitator needs to make decisions prior to the session about how that individual will participate. Those decisions will be made partly on how old he/she is. If an adult, he/she may be able to attend the session, but care must be taken that this is a person who can understand the feedback from others, and is able to accept the comments. What is his/her level of understanding (i.e. does he know he's graduating and what that means?) Their personal comfort level is also critical. If he has no preparation for what is to happen, it might seem rather like being sent to the principal's office. And what about the comfort level of other members of the team? They may feel inclined to temper what they say if the person is there for fear of hurting their feelings, or making them angry or sad. If this is the case, things can go unsaid that are important. Linda stressed, "If I sat at a meeting and people listed all the things that were 'barriers to respect' for me, that might be hard; it might be hard for me to hear that and feel good about myself." Parents may not be honest either, because we may not want them to know all the fears that we have. Their attendance at the session should only occur if it is already established to be a positive team, and when it includes other people that are not involved with the school, such as soccer coaches, employers, etc. If it is deemed inappropriate for the focus person to attend, they should certainly participate in another way. This

is, after all, their plan and they should be able to contribute. One option is to attend for part of the meeting and hear his/her own accomplishments. Sometimes they can complete a worksheet, our kids can particularly like this activity because it allows them to participate in a more structured way. They might do their own maps with a friend or two, and Linda has gone into a social group at school where they did maps on all the kids in the group, so the individual would not feel singled out. The entire class benefited as well as enjoyed this activity! Some have their own mini-Futures plan, with limited attendees, because they might not want to be honest with parents either. The first preparation that needs to take place prior to the session is to decide how the individual him/herself will have some input into the plan.

Other participants should be comprised of people who have a stake in the focus person's life. The role of the participants is to participate! Anyone who is not interested in participating is really unnecessary. The reason for this is that everyone who leaves the session will have tasks to do. The plan itself is only the beginning; the actual work takes place outside of the room. If participants are not invested in doing the follow up work, they don't need to be at the session either. Turn off all cell phones! No beepers! It is not unusual for some school staff to attend many, many PPTs at the end of each school year, and so often people are just kind of "nodding through them". Not here. The expectation is: everyone is there to share and listen. We should all feel empowered to share our perspective because, Linda says, "it's your role – that's why you're there, to share your perspective, your hopes, your beliefs."

At school - Paraprofessionals are critical members of the team because of their unique relationship with the child. They really know them differently than teachers do. Sometimes staff you don't think of within the school should be invited. It is important to look beyond the obvious. It might not be the special ed teacher, but maybe the art teacher with whom he has a great relationship. It is important to include the administrator! Linda says, "administrators are often asked to put money into things. Administrators are asked to do these Futures plans. It costs money. You've got to free up staff for this period of time, there have got to be substitutes. There is a cost associated with it, even if it's not a dollar cost, there are other costs associated with it. Resources that will need to go into implementing this plan. As an administrator, it feels very different to be part of that meeting, to see the evolution of this plan, hear the stories, hear the reasons why the parents are asking for something, hear the reasons why the teachers think that this is really important. To be involved at a grass roots level – that's very different than not being included, and you get this plan on your desk a week later and someone says we need to have subs because these teachers need to go to this training. It's very, very different." If decisions need to be made later on, they have a greater stake in making them successful if they've been involved from the beginning.

Family – Karen stressed the need for both mom and dad to be there if possible, as well as extended family if they are a caregiver or spend a lot of time with the child. Siblings may also attend, if appropriate. This is especially true if they are an older sibling who is or has been in the same school, because they can have an 'insiders' perspective (i.e. what the cafeteria or the locker room is REALLY like) as well as that of a sibling. Grandparents can themselves benefit from attending, if they are having trouble understanding the diagnosis or the child, and are not very understanding or supportive. They may 'hear' information from others that they didn't want to accept from you. Prior to the session itself it is important for the facilitator to meet with the family and teachers so that they can become comfortable with their role. It is sometimes difficult for families to relive experiences, and they may need time to prepare. The map titled 'barriers to

respect may be hard to talk about, and to hear. Support people can attend too, if needed for the family, even if they don't know the child well. Outside therapists may participate, but they often come for one hour, not for the whole meeting, or they can share information ahead of time (they may not commit to any follow up work, but their input might be valuable). If there are people who have not been successful in the past, they can still be good to have in attendance so others can hear what *didn't* work. "But if you have someone who really doesn't like your child, I don't think they should be at that meeting...I just think they are negative energy that just doesn't need to be in that room. They may not even say a whole lot, but (nonverbal messages) can distract from what's important..." Linda adds that, they can dislike *you* and still participate meaningfully, but not the child.

Friends or neighbors - If there are special caregivers or members of an old-world 'true neighborhood' where everyone looks out for each others' kids, they can offer a very different perspective from educators, and you might want to consider including them. If the focus person has had a best friend for many years, they might have an additional perspective. If the person is involved with extra curricular activities, like girl scouts for example, you might consider inviting kids or adults they connect with there. "Remember, you're making a tapestry, so the more colors you have, the better your product." For older kids and adults, employers and co-workers should be considered. This choice not only helps provide information to the school for planning, but also can help those employers and workers develop a better understanding of the student and how to work with him/her.

Facilitator – This critical person is "often the single most important factor in determining the quality of the process." On the surface, the role of the facilitator may sound simple. Ask the participants questions, write down their answers, and pass out typed copies later on. But, Karen stresses, it all rests on the experience of the facilitator. It is actually a much more complex process. The facilitator and the Recorder work together as a team. Part of what they do is to initially determine what the needs of the group are. Karen and/or Linda meet the student ahead of time (*although there may be other models of planning that don't require this, they feel it is an important step*). They conduct a couple of observations, both at school and at home. They meet with staff to find out what they are looking for – what they are struggling with, and what they are feeling good about. They do the same with parents. It is important for them to determine whether or not these people can work as a team. Are they struggling with the same things? What is their relationship like now? They then design the process by taking ideas from existing models, and sometimes creating their own maps and methods so that it is appropriate for *that* child. It is crucial that the facilitator be objective. Someone who isn't involved in the politics of the district, has no relationship with the family, etc. Some school districts, Karen tells us, have someone who is trained in doing Mapping. But it's hard for them to be objective, partly because the district person who is trained in a mapping technique is usually someone at the administration level – a psychologist, or a special education coordinator. "Ultimately," Linda says, "they own the implementation, and it's hard to be as pure when you have to do that." That doesn't rule out using someone in-district if you have a good relationship with the district, or a good rapport with the facilitator. She says though, that you shouldn't feel as if you have been "sloughed off" or the district is being uncooperative. You may, if you have a teenager for instance, need a different perspective from someone experienced in working with adults, coordinating with other agencies and providers, etc. It is critical that the facilitator remain non-judgmental, otherwise you won't end up with an "honest product" (as a facilitator, it is

easier to be non-judgmental if it is not in your own district). The facilitator needs to be good listener, to 'hear' the nonverbal messages (remember, that's 80% of the message), and to know when to back off or to push harder. A sense of humor helps, too. A good facilitator needs to be able to read the audience, and think on their feet. To be flexible about the issues and the pace, and to be supportive – this is a very difficult meeting for some family members or for the student. They may hear many things that cause great sorrow. And, Linda says, they need to have a strong belief system in this process, because if they think of this as 'just another meeting', it has little hope of being productive. Talk to the proposed facilitator, as well as to others they have done Maps for. You need to have confidence in that individual. "If you don't have confidence in that person, stop the process right then." She also warns that a Futures plan will not work if participants are polarized into two 'sides', and they are hoping to sway the other side into believing that they are right. It doesn't happen. It doesn't bring people together. This is, Karen reminds us, a very tough experience for family members, it is hard to share such personal things in a group, and nerves are often very raw.

Recorder- This role is as the facilitator's partner, and they are responsible for accurately recording what is said during the session. Every comment must be included, and written without adding judgment or bias. Linda and Karen use colored markers to record them (*rather like Carol Gray in her Comic Strip Conversations*), for example, positives statements are written in green, negatives in red, visionary are purple, etc. Karen adds that statements can be green for one person, and red for another person, and they can be recorded this way. By the end of the meeting, the walls are "literally covered with maps, with paper containing lots of information." This information is then transcribed and sent to each member. Karen says that, "the beauty of a Futures plan is that it's alive, it doesn't get filed, that people really work off of it, and if it's not something that people can understand, then it's not going to be helpful to the team as the team moves along." Linda tells us that teachers have let them know that, "out of everything that was in the file, it was the only thing that was helpful to help them understand the child. And it was easy reading. You have to realize teachers are trying to get a lot done in a short period of time....and evaluation reports can get pretty wordy."

A list of typical maps includes:

Participants and desired outcomes – Group members introduce themselves and why they are here. What answers do they wish to get at this session? Linda likes to tell people upfront that if they are coming to hear about curriculum, that is not what is going to happen. They will not be taking about spelling, or about specific educational strategies.

Who is (focus person)? – Items discussed could include: likes to be involved; perceptive; honest; truthful; unsure of what he is doing; anxious; poor understanding of boundaries; wears his heart on his sleeve; at home he wants every one to be happy. Linda adds, "When you see that, you see a person. That we are talking about a person. A person who has qualities. We are not talking about well, he's reading at the third grade level, math scores are below grade level across the board. This is who he is, not what does he do." Note: the same kid described here did his own map prior to the meeting. His comments about himself were: smart; truthful; trouble understanding; gets confused; tall; loud voice; cooperative; good friend; can get angry; hard worker. "Isn't that wonderful? That's who he sees himself as. That 's how he perceives

himself. That is a gift for us right upfront to know how that person perceives himself." She also noted that if you put both maps side by side, you can see the similarities. She likes to do this map first so attendants can switch gears from being teachers to being people.

Background and history - Good memories, bad memories. This is often a hard one for families, because it may be the first time they are talking about what it was like the first day he got on the special bus. Or attended the first PPT. It can be powerful. Sometimes when we talk about what it's like, it starts to link the team. A few pictures of the child as he grew helps make it real (but only a FEW pictures!).

Choices - Kids with disabilities don't have control, and don't get to make many choices. And she adds, "if I had somebody making all my choices for me, I would have significant behavior issues." This map asks what choices does the focus person get to make? What choices do others make for him? "The teachers that don't do well with some of these kids, particularly the Asperger's kids, are the teachers who like all their duckies in a row." These kids need to be able to have, and to make choices.

Preferences/what works and what doesn't - Statements that create motivations and enthusiasm can include: humor; touch; style of people; music. And what creates frustration anxiety, shut-down, or anger. This is a critical map for anybody who doesn't know your child. It's the one where they will get the most useful information. "It's a quick cheat sheet," Linda says, "it tells them 'don't do this'."

What are (focus person's) gifts? - What is he/she good at? Statements can include: doesn't hold grudges; observational; likes to know how things work. If a child is good at computer, art, spelling, etc. he/she might be good at computer graphics - this map looks at the avenues for the future. This map can also be done by the focus person's peers in another setting. One team had peers write a letter to a girl's new middle school teacher telling her what she should do to make things work for her. It contained ideas like, *if she gets upset, have her take a note to the office.* They know what works. Peer maps show the perspective of peers, and since interactions with peers is what we encourage so strongly, this is an important map, because the focus person needs to work on some things that are barriers in the peers eyes, even if adults don't see them.

Respect, and what are the barriers to respect? - Linda describes this as the "Momma Bear map". This is the map that pushes a mother's buttons, so she always prefaces it by reviewing with the group beforehand that, "it's not what you say, it's how you say it. So I tell people to say it as if you're talking about someone you love." Leave the adjectives and the judgments out. Sensitive issues come up in this category, such as hygiene issues. She stresses that they are important issues; we don't want to lose them, we need to teach to them, but that there is a difference between saying '*he smells*' vs. '*he needs to shower more*'. She asked facetiously, "do any of you have kids who have these issues? Are they actually written as IEP goals and objectives to address those things? No. Do you think those are the things that in the end are going to keep your kid from being accepted by other people? We put these issues on maps so we can start paying attention to them." She reminds us we also need to ask, what would peers say are the barriers? Having to be first in line might be one, or not being able to lose a game. If so, those things should also appear on the next IEP.

Accomplishments in the past year - This one is so you can stop and smell the roses. "'Cause somebody worked hard to make those accomplishments happen, including your child."

People and places - Who are the people in this child's life? If they are isolated, this map will show it. Where does he go? If he doesn't go anywhere, why not? Where are the places other typical kids go? Is it

behavior that keeps him from it? What can we do to help figure that out and fix it? Linda stressed to the group, "an education for a child is not what happens in the classroom. It's what improves the quality of the life of a child. What to do at a birthday party may be more important for that child and for the family, for him to learn skills to be around people, than what is in class. If he can't go in a barber chair, we'd better figure it out so there's not the same problem when he's 35." She adds that sometimes it's easier for an outside person (like an educational consultant) to ask for self-help skills at school. "Those are important things to sometimes look at. Especially if you have a district that's really '*in the box*'. If they're '*in the box*', sometimes those maps can help bring people out of boxes."

Worst nightmare – this is also a tough map for parents. "What do you lay awake worrying about for this child? What are all those things that you fear? It's a really potent map. Because sometimes when you share these, that's when educators understand why you worry about things. They may get why some things are important to you and not to them." They are, she said, not going to always get solved on this day, but it gets it talked about. So, she gives the example, if you're asking for a para, and they don't get it, they might if they know you fear him running out of the building and getting hit by a car. Even if it's not a realistic fear, they can look at it differently. She told of one mom whose daughter was transitioning to the high school, and staff didn't understand why her mom was so afraid. This girl would eat anything. She was given candy in the school office when she ran errands. This girl believed that if someone in school gave you candy, it was OK. Her mom was afraid of drugs. So they decided to do some pre-teaching about what to eat and what not to. "It's not about trying to make people feel bad, it's about trying to put things out there that people really worry about. There are lots of parents that worry about their child being molested. And not being able to tell them. Does that get talked about at a PPT ever? Those are real fears. What are you going to do to help, what is the child learning along the way."

Vision of the future/best dream – It's not important to look too far ahead for very young kids, because they change so quickly. Perhaps look ahead 2 years for younger children, and up to four for adolescents. How different were you from 7th grade to 10th grade? Longer term plans may not be realistic, but sharing ideas for long-term futures can start people thinking..

Next step/accomplishments a year from the date - Where do you want the child to be in one year? Envision yourself there. Maybe he's eating with utensils. Be very specific, and, Linda says, "that, then, becomes what your educational plan should focus on for the next year."

Supports needed to be successful/components of a successful program

Learning needs, *and*

Miscellaneous other maps

What is the relationship to the IEP?

Supports, learning needs, and next step, become very integrated into the plan. Then, at the follow up at the end of the year, they will review all of the maps and talk about what accomplishments were made, what worked and what didn't, and look at a year ahead again. "That becomes the teachers written goals and objectives. That's their IEP meeting, (*or transition plan, ITP, meeting*). None of those yellow forms come to the table." The PPT is then only a formalization of the plan.

After describing one child's maps and the resulting plan, Linda says, "oftentimes when teachers develop

IEPs they look at where the kid is now and say OK, what's the next step in this sequence? Even if you're not sure why you're in that sequence, it's what comes next. That's the way we're trained to think. Instead, this asks us to say, where do we want him to go? Then our goal becomes, what do we need to teach? How do we teach him that? If this was your child, and these were all the things being worked on for a year (*referring to his plan*), wouldn't you say 'WOW, good program!' Those are the kinds of things parents want kids to work on. They don't want to hear on an IEP they'll be reading at 3.2 grade level. Cause honestly, do you know what 3.2 grade level means? It's a number." Sometimes, she adds, it's hard for people to adjust. "We talk about that the goals and objectives need to come from here now. And you still have teachers that will sit there, and it's really hard for them to let go. It's also scary." The child she described for us had been failing. They didn't get it. "They didn't have it. But they didn't even know they didn't have it until we started to do the process. When people don't know how, it's scary and they cling to what they know. If we had never had that meeting, if we pretended and just pushed it under the carpet and moved on, those parents would have kept beating at that principal's door, nagging and nagging..." He is now doing quite well, and you would never know from the maps in subsequent sessions that they described the very same child. Linda also suggests that districts can use a Futures plan as a tool for planning an entire program. A preschool class, for instance, to determine where the program has been, what have we done? What are our 'customers' not satisfied with?

After the session

When all is said and done at the Futures session, everyone walks out with tasks that they are responsible for. Someone will be in charge of arranging the next meeting (the frequency of which has been decided upon), a training session for teachers has been arranged and someone is in charge of organizing attendance at the training. Someone else has the task of looking into extracurricular opportunities and will report back at the next meeting. Someone else will do some social skills lessons around boy-girl relationships in his social group. They walk out of there knowing 'that's my job'. And it will all be revisited at the next meeting. Nobody wants to say to the group that they didn't do their part, so nobody drops the ball. There is always a commitment for follow up meetings. It is important that someone be identified as the 'keeper' –the person they will check in with, will schedule the next meeting, etc. One of the questions on the maps deals with what support is needed for a particular task to get done. This allows for a way that staff can ask for help and save face. "It becomes OK to say, I need help to do it." Parents can, and do, get tasks too.

Linda says again that this is a process, and the session itself is not the end, but the beginning. Everyone involved needs to know that they will do work from the document. She also adds that, once teachers see how successful it can be, they will ask for this for their other students, and it is a far more effective request coming from teachers than from parents.

Lots of things don't get talked about in a PPT. When they do, they can still go unheard. At a Futures planning session every comment is documented. The tasks are given out, and everyone walks out with a plan. Nothing gets lost in the translation, nothing gets forgotten. And if it's written in, it makes it important.

Everyone feels like a part of a team, and everyone feels valued. Isn't this the way it's supposed to be?

*Remember that a Futures plan is not required by law to be provided by a school district. **This is a negotiation point.** You need to be able to convince the administrator (probably the Special Education Director or Coordinator) not just that this would be of value to your child, but that this planning process is needed in order to provide appropriate programming in terms of goals and objectives and allowing for reasonable progress in skill areas (which can include areas of social skills, self-help and independence). If you need more information on Futures planning, you can contact ASRC at (203) 787-3676.*

Thank you Linda and Karen for a wonderful presentation! Your insight has helped countless kids here in CT already.