

## School Preview

Many students with autism will profit from seeing, experiencing, and learning about the school before they show up on the first day. This is an effective strategy for students who are changing schools or for those who will be going to a certain classroom for the first time. A student can preview the school using many different tools. Some learners might appreciate a DVD of the school and its rooms, complete with short interviews with their new teachers (e.g., "Hi, I'm Ms. Thiel, and I'm going to be your fifth-grade teacher. We always start our day with humor, so feel free to bring your favorite joke book. We also use a lot of cooperative learning so you will get to know and work with all of the students in the classroom throughout the year."). Other students like to meet teachers face to face before school officially starts. Still others may want to hear siblings, parents, or friends tell them about the school. Here are a few other ways students can experience a preview:

- Send them brochures of the school and other paperwork (e.g., school calendar, student handbook).
- Send them school newsletters from the previous year.
- Show them the school's web site and have them take a "tour" by visiting the different areas of the site, reading information, and looking at pictures.
- Have them construct questions about the school and/or new classes and ask teachers to answer those questions in writing, or perhaps via a Skype phone call.

Some students need more than a video or brochure to introduce them to a new school. One of our former students visited his new school once a week during the summer. On every visit, he saw a different room. By September, when the school year began, he was able to make the transition with ease.

## Making Action Plans (MAPS)

Making Action Plans (MAPS; Forest & Lusthaus 1990; Forest & Pearpoint; 1992; Forest, Pearpoint, Vandercook, & York, 1989; Pearpoint, Forest, & O'Brien, 1996) addresses the question, "What does the child and family want?" The MAPS process is a tool teams can use to "think big" for a particular learner; it is especially appropriate for those students who are new to inclusive education because the process can help teachers generate adaptations and supports as well as serve as a starting point for a new IEP (Pearpoint et al., 1996).

MAPS brings together key individuals in a student's life. The student, his or her family and teachers, and others who are significant in the person's life meet to discuss dreams and goals and to brainstorm ways of making them a reality. The team then creates an action plan for the general education classroom (Pearpoint et al., 1996).

MAPS is different from some other assessment or planning tools because the process is centered on the strengths, potential, and uniqueness of the learner instead of on weaknesses or deficit areas. MAPS is based on the following core beliefs:

- All students belong in general classrooms—no ifs, ands, or buts.
- General education teachers can teach all students.
- Necessary supports will be provided as needed.
- Quality education is a right, not a privilege.
- Outcomes must be success, literacy, and graduation for all.
- Creative alternatives will be available for populations who do not succeed in typical ways (Pearpoint et al., 1996).

To use the MAPS process, stakeholders assemble and generate ideas for including the individual in schooling and in community life. Participants typically include the student; his parents; other family members of the student (e.g., grandmother, sister); classroom teachers (both general and special education); an administrator; and other school professionals such as a social worker, a favorite coach, or even a playground assistant. The student's peers also are invited to the meeting and are central to the process.

A MAPS session also requires two facilitators who guide the team through questions and ensure the comfort and participation of all. One facilitator, the process facilitator, explains the collaborative planning process and asks the questions. The other facilitator functions as a recorder; he or she takes notes using visuals; colored markers; and, typically, many sheets of chart paper. For technology-oriented teams, PowerPoint slides projected on a screen can also serve as a structure for note taking.

Hospitality is also a part of the MAPS process. The atmosphere should be personal and informal. To achieve this, the facilitator might put motivational posters on the wall, provide beanbag chairs for the younger participants, tack up favorite photos of the participant, or ask members of the group to bring a treat to share.

To begin the MAPS process, the family members answer the question, "What is \_\_\_\_\_'s history and story?" Then, each of the individuals present at the MAPS session focus on the remaining five questions and the plan that make up the MAPS process. These questions include the following:

- What are your dreams for \_\_\_\_\_? The facilitator should encourage the participants to think big. She might remind them that this is an opportunity to share their wishes without thinking about the constraints of money or time. In other words, participants should share what they truly dream for the student of focus, not what they think they can get or what they think is reasonable.
- What are your nightmares for \_\_\_\_\_? This can be a hard question to ask and an emotional one to answer. This question is used to generate a profile of what to avoid.
- Who is \_\_\_\_\_? Or, What are some words that describe \_\_\_\_\_ best?
- What are \_\_\_\_\_'s gifts, strengths, and talents? This is usually an enjoyable and easy part of the process. Some team members find they view the student differently after seeing the extensive list of strengths, gifts, and talents forming.
- What is \_\_\_\_\_ good at doing? What are his or her needs? The latter part of this question is when the team considers the person's struggles. The team also considers the different types of supports the individual receives or needs. Needs listed can range from concrete resources such as money or a new piece of assistive technology to abstract ideas such as love or happiness.

In order for the meeting to qualify as MAPS, the team must make a decision to assemble again and the meeting must end with the formation of a concrete plan of action. Participants should leave with actual tasks to address immediately. For instance, a parent may need to contact the drama teacher about getting the student involved in the school play. A school principal might work on a student's course schedule, making sure he or she can take classes with some friends. A general educator might go back to her classroom and move the student's desk to the front of the room. A friend might make a date with the student to go shopping.

After the process is over, the MAPS facilitator may also ask participants to think of ways in which the student has been described on other assessments. For instance, when I facilitated a MAPS session with a young woman named Crystal, she was described by the team as "a good listener," "a true friend," "always smiling," "loves art class," "Beach Boys fan," "a dancer," and "a trendy dresser." Then, the group brainstormed labels she had been given in her records. Figure 11.4 includes details about Crystal's MAPS session. That list included the



# MAPS: for Crystal

<p>What are your dreams for <u>Crystal</u> ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Traveling to South Padre Island</li> <li>- Winning the lottery and having all the money she will need</li> <li>- Falling in love</li> <li>- Driving a car</li> <li>- Going to dance school</li> <li>- Being able to talk</li> </ul>	<p>What are <u>Crystal's</u> gifts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loving</li> <li>- Good listener</li> <li>- Great smile</li> <li>- Sensitive</li> <li>- Graceful</li> <li>- Active and a fast runner</li> </ul>
<p>What are your nightmares for <u>Crystal</u> ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- She will never have a boyfriend.</li> <li>- She won't be able to live in her own house.</li> <li>- She won't finish high school.</li> </ul>	<p>What are some of <u>Crystal's</u> needs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Daily quiet time</li> <li>- Soft clothes</li> <li>- Access to her baseball cards at all times</li> <li>- Friends around her</li> <li>- Time to read her favorite books</li> </ul>
<p><u>Crystal</u> is . . . (What are some words that describe <u>Crystal</u> best?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jolly</li> <li>- A sister</li> <li>- A daughter</li> <li>- Animal lover</li> <li>- Animated</li> <li>- A night owl</li> <li>- Family-oriented</li> <li>- Funny</li> <li>- Shy</li> <li>- A true friend</li> <li>- A Beach Boys fan</li> <li>- A trendy dresser</li> <li>- A dancer</li> </ul>	<p>IDEAS FOR A PLAN: What would an ideal day look like for <u>Crystal</u> ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- She would get to watch a few minutes of CNN before school.</li> <li>- She would walk to school with a friend and go to the cafeteria to hang out before classes begin.</li> <li>- She would go to general education classes with her peers.</li> <li>- She would get to take two art classes including one course related to sculpture (her friend Robby would be in the class with her).</li> <li>- She would have lunch with a group of friends, and she would get to eat hamburgers at least once a week.</li> <li>- She would get to take a 10-minute walk with one of these friends before heading back to classes.</li> <li>- She would get to take a physical education class in the afternoon— hopefully with Mr. Dyson, her favorite teacher. She would get to help to manage the equipment during class.</li> <li>- She would get to have some trail mix as a snack in the afternoon.</li> <li>- She would stay after school and attend track practice.</li> <li>- She would get to dance.</li> <li>- She would get to listen to the Beach Boys at some point.</li> </ul>

Figure 11.4. An example of MAPS for Crystal.

**Excerpted from "You're Going to Love this Kid!" Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom, Second Edition by Paula Kluth, Ph.D.**

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following descriptors: "mentally retarded," "disabled," "slow," "manipulative," "autistic," and "aggressive." As a group, we contrasted these two sets of descriptions. This part of the process is important because it helps participants see that the discourse of special education often overshadows the individual's strengths and uniqueness.