



Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Chapter 12: Writing a Plan

Chapter 11: Special Education Referral and Identification Process and Chapter 12: Writing a Plan explain the details of how special education services are provided to children under the IDEA act. Watch the video below for a high-level overview of the special education process from beginning to end.



Video: Teachings in Education. (2019, April 25). *The special education process: Getting in & out.*

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SxTzl8TuEk>

Introduction

Identifying a student as eligible for special education is only the beginning of the process. Once a disability has been identified, the focus shifts from determining whether a student qualifies for services to determining the services needed and planning for how those services will be provided. The **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** serves as the roadmap for this process by describing the student's current strengths and needs,

establishing meaningful educational goals, and outlining the specially designed instruction, supports, and services required to help the student make appropriate educational progress. The work of the IEP team includes ensuring that these educational decisions are individualized, data-based, and designed to provide the student with a [Free Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\)](#).

This chapter examines the major components of the IEP and the collaborative process used to develop it. It begins by considering the importance of respectful, person-first language when discussing individuals with disabilities. The chapter then explores the required elements of an IEP, including present levels of performance, annual goals, progress monitoring, special education and related services, accommodations and modifications, placement decisions, and participation in state and districtwide assessments. Throughout the chapter, the emphasis is on using assessment data and collaborative decision-making to develop individualized educational programs that support student learning and participation in school.

Overview of the IEP Process

Once a student has been identified as having a disability and determined to be eligible for special education, the school has 30 days to develop an educational plan to address that student's needs. In the United States, this plan is called an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and will be written collaboratively by the IEP team. Parents are important members of this team and must be included under IDEA law. Other required members of the team include a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school representative who has the authority to approve the plan, and someone who can interpret the results of the various assessments that were conducted. It should be noted that one staff member may perform more than one of these required roles. For example, sometimes the special education teacher also fulfills the role of interpreter of the assessment data. By age 16, the student must be included on this team, although many children will begin participating in their IEPs at a younger age. Other members of the team are determined based on the student's needs. Some typical additional team members include a speech-

language pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, social worker, or school nurse. If the parents require a translator in order to participate in a meaningful way, the school must provide one. Parents may also choose to bring an advocate or support person to the meeting ([Stanberry, n. d.](#)).

Person-First Language



A disability is not a person's whole identity. Rather, it is simply something they have, just like they might have brown hair or a friendly smile.

Image: RF Studio. (2020, March 1). *Young woman with curly hair looks thoughtful against a bright pink backdrop.*

Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Words have power. [Yehuda Berg](#), a 21st century Jewish Rabbi and author, said this about the power of words: “Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble.” The words we use are important. Our word choices do not change a person's abilities or challenges, but they do influence how others perceive and respond to that person. While predispositions can be overcome as we get to know a person, not everyone will invest the time needed for that to happen. Thus, it is important that educators choose language that reflects dignity, respect, and the inherent worth of every person ([Schafer, 2010](#)).

Disability etiquette recommends that when we speak about a person with a disability, we use language that places the person first and the disability second. This means one should say, “person with a disability” or “child with Down syndrome” rather than “disabled person” or “Down syndrome child.” A disability is not a person’s whole identity. Rather, it is simply something they have, just like they might have brown hair or a friendly smile. It is also important to avoid negative expressions and language that makes the person a victim of their disability, including commonly used phrases like “suffers from” or “is afflicted with.” Instead of saying “wheelchair-bound person,” say “person who uses a wheelchair” since a wheelchair is merely a piece of equipment this person uses, just like others might use glasses, a hearing aid, or a communication device. The exception to this rule is when the person with a disability has a different preference. While many individuals and organizations encourage person-first language, some individuals and disability communities prefer identity-first language (for example, “autistic person” rather than “person with autism”). Educators should use the language an individual prefers when that preference is known; however, when an individual’s preference is unknown, using person-first language is generally considered the most respectful approach. Because language and cultural preferences change over time, educators should remain open to learning from individuals with disabilities and respecting the language they choose to describe themselves ([Kappes, 2023](#)).

Required Elements of an IEP

Every student who receives special education and related services in a public school must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP summarizes the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, identifies annual goals based on the student’s unique educational needs, and describes the special education services, related services, accommodations, and supports that will be provided. In this way, the IEP serves as a blueprint for the student’s educational program during the coming year and is the primary tool schools use to ensure that the student receives a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Although different states and school districts may

use somewhat different forms to document the IEP, IDEA requires that every IEP include the same essential components:

- A summary of the student's **present levels of academic achievement** and functional performance
- Measurable **annual goals** describing what the student is expected to achieve during the coming year
- A description of how the student's progress toward the annual goals will **be measured and reported**
- A description of the **special education services**, related services, supplementary aids and services, and program modifications or supports to be provided
- An explanation of the extent, if any, to which the student will not **participate with nondisabled peers in the general education classroom** and school activities
- Any **accommodations needed for state and districtwide assessments**, or an explanation of why an alternate assessment will be used
- The **frequency, duration, and location of services** and the date when the services will begin
- For students age 16 and older (or younger, if required by state law), appropriate measurable **postsecondary goals and transition services**, including information about the transfer of rights at the age of majority

Each of these required components is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Present Levels of Performance

According to IDEA, each student's IEP must have:

A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including—

- (i) How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children); or

(ii) For preschool children, as appropriate, how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities; ([IDEA, 2017e](#)).

The **Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)**

establish the foundation on which the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is built. This section is sometimes referred to as the Present Level of Performance (PLOP or PLP) or the Present Levels of Educational Performance (PLEP). The PLAAFP describes the student's current strengths, needs, and performance in both academic achievement and functional areas. Academic achievement includes the knowledge and skills the student has developed in school subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. Functional performance includes the nonacademic skills needed for success in school, such as social skills, behavior, motor skills, organization, and activities of daily living. Understanding both academic achievement and functional performance for a student helps the IEP team identify that student's strengths, determine areas of need, and develop appropriate educational goals and services ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Developing a meaningful PLAAFP requires the IEP team to gather information from multiple sources and carefully consider the student's current performance across settings. The PACER Center, an educational resource center supporting professionals, families, and persons with disabilities, recommends using  these questions to guide this process:

- What are the disability-related challenges that affect the student's progress and participation in the general education curriculum?
- At what academic and functional levels is the student performing right now? (Where is the student's starting point?)
- What strategies, accommodations, and assistive technology have already been successful for the student's learning? Has the student had an assistive technology evaluation?
- What are the grade-level academic standards for this student's grade? How do the student's skills compare to those standards?
- Does the student behave and learn with age-appropriate developmental skills?

- How does the student perform in non-school environments? (Information typically provided by the family)
- What does the student think is working or not working during the school day?
- Is there any other information we need to provide a complete picture of the student?
([PACER Center, 2018b](#))

The PLAAFP lays the foundation for the IEP. It identifies the student's strengths and needs in all areas affected by the disability and explains how the disability affects progress in the general education curriculum. For preschool children, the PLAAFP describes how the student's disability affects participation in age-appropriate activities. The PLAAFP should include specific, measurable assessment data that establish a baseline for monitoring future progress. This information may come from a variety of sources, including standardized assessments, classroom observations, educational records, work samples, and information shared by the family. The IEP team's determination of appropriate goals, services, supports, and placement must all be logically connected to the information in the PLAAFP; therefore, the PLAAFP must contain sufficient information to enable the team to make those determinations ([PROGRESS Center, 2020c](#)).

These example PLAAFP statements were created by the PACER Center:

- Jason has a reading disability. He is in seventh grade and reads independently at a third-grade level. He has grade-level comprehension of materials read to him. Jason needs to improve his reading skills.
- Lisa has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Her organizational skills are not well developed. She loses assignments and notes for her academic classes approximately 75 percent of the time and as a result comes to class without necessary materials. Due to these behaviors, Lisa is not able to complete grade-level work. Lisa needs instruction on organizational skills.
- Angela is 10 years old but performs academically at a kindergarten level in reading and at a first-grade level in math. Although she benefits socially from being in general

education classes, her class work in reading, math, science, and social studies needs to be modified. Angela needs to increase her academic skills.

- Connor has Autism. His academic skills are above grade level, but his social and communication skills are more than two years behind those of his grade-level peers. Connor needs instruction to understand nonverbal social and communication cues

© 2018 PACER Center, Inc., 8161 Normandale Blvd. Minneapolis, MN 55437. [ACTion Sheet: PHP-c253](#). Used with permission.

Notice that each of these examples establishes the student's need for special education as well as a baseline for the areas of concern. Typical errors in writing the PLAAFP include only focusing on strengths, writing statements that are too vague, and not including all areas related to the student's disability ([NASET, 2024](#))

Annual Goals

IDEA requires that each student's IEP contain:

- (i) A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to—
 - (A) Meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and
 - (B) Meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability;
- (ii) For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate academic achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives; ([IDEA, 2017e](#)).

Every annual goal should address a need identified in the PLAAFP. If a skill is important enough to become an annual goal, there should be evidence in the PLAAFP demonstrating why that goal is needed. Annual goals describe what the IEP team expects the student to accomplish during the coming year as a result of receiving specially designed instruction

and related services. To ensure that students have access to the same curriculum as their peers, current federal guidance emphasizes that IEPs should be standards-based. This means that annual goals should be aligned with the state's grade-level academic content standards while remaining individualized to address the student's disability-related needs ([PACER Center, 2018a](#); [New York State Education Department, 2023](#); [IDEA, 2015](#)).

For students who participate in an alternate assessment aligned with alternate academic achievement standards, the IEP must also include either short-term objectives or benchmarks for each annual goal. **Short-term objectives** are created by identifying the intermediate steps or individual skills that come together to make up the more complex task that is the goal. **Benchmarks** identify the increasing levels of performance that would indicate progress toward the goal such as improved accuracy, greater independence, or successful generalization of the skill to other situations. Although short-term objectives and benchmarks are not required for all IEPs, they can be valuable tools for monitoring progress and determining when instruction or interventions should be adjusted ([PACER Center, 2018a](#); [New York State Education Department, 2023](#)).

Because an IEP addresses the educational needs resulting from a student's disability, each annual goal should target the knowledge and skills the student needs to improve academic and functional performance. Thus, goals are not intended to simply restate the grade-level curriculum. Instead, they identify the skills the student must develop in order to access and make progress in that curriculum. Every annual goal should include several essential components. First, the goal should describe the **condition** or context in which the student will perform the skill. Next, the target skill or **behavior** needs to be described in a way that can be seen and measured. Finally, the goal should specify the **criteria** for the level of proficiency the student is expected to exhibit when performing the skill. While not required, it is also a good idea to include in the goal explicit requirements for generalization and maintenance of the skill. **Generalization** describes the different settings, materials, people, or situations with which the student is expected to perform the skill. **Maintenance** identifies the length of time or the number of times the student must perform the skill

before it can be considered mastered ([PACER Center, 2018a](#); [New York State Education Department, 2023](#)).

There are many ways to set the criteria needed to demonstrate mastery. Percentage correct can be a useful measure when the number of trials may differ over time (e.g., read a grade-level paragraph aloud with 90% accuracy). Number correct or number of errors can be useful when the number of trials remains constant (e.g., 18 out of 20 spelling words correct). **Frequency** is a simple count (e.g., 3 times), while **rate** is a measure of speed and accuracy (e.g., number of words read correctly in 1 minute). **Latency** is the time between the presentation of a stimulus and the child's response (e.g., respond to a question within 5 seconds). **Duration** is a measure of time (e.g., for 20 minutes) ([NASSET, 2024](#), [VanTol, 2026](#)).

This example goal contains all the required elements:

When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details with 90% accuracy as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Condition: When given a subject by the teacher

Behavior: Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details

Criteria: with 90% accuracy as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric

Possible short-term objectives for this goal could be:

Short-Term Objective 1: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a topic sentence with 90% accuracy as measured on weekly writing samples using a writing rubric.

Short-Term Objective 2: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a topic sentence and two supporting detail sentences with 90% accuracy as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Annual Goal: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details with 90% accuracy as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Alternatively, possible benchmarks based on accuracy could be:

Benchmark 1: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details with 50% accuracy by November as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Benchmark 2: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details with 70% accuracy by February as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Annual Goal: When given a subject by the teacher, Sarah will write a 5-sentence paragraph that includes a topic sentence and at least three supporting details with 90% accuracy by May as measured on weekly writing samples using her writing rubric.

Example goal with all required elements (condition, behavior, criteria) plus generalization and maintenance:

Annual Goal: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn 4/5 opportunities to do so.

Annual Goal with Generalization: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn 4/5 opportunities to do so with at least three different peers and 3 different games.

Annual Goal with Maintenance: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting

appropriately for his own turn 4/5 opportunities to do so and will maintain this behavior for 3 weeks.

Annual Goal with Generalization and Maintenance: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn 4/5 opportunities to do so with at least three different peers and 3 different games and will maintain this behavior for 3 weeks.

Possible benchmarks based on assistance level for this goal could be:

Benchmark 1: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn with a physical prompt 4/5 opportunities to do so.

Benchmark 2: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn with a visual prompt 4/5 opportunities to do so.

Benchmark 3: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn with a verbal prompt 4/5 opportunities to do so.

Annual Goal: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn independently 4/5 opportunities to do so.

Annual Goal with Generalization and Maintenance: When playing a game with a peer, Joshua will engage in appropriate turn-taking by attending to his peer's turn and waiting appropriately for his own turn independently during 4/5 opportunities to do so with at least three different peers and 3 different games and will maintain this behavior for 3 weeks.

Measuring and Reporting Progress

IDEA specifies that the IEP must also contain:

A description of—

- (i) How the child’s progress toward meeting the annual goals described in paragraph (2) of this section will be measured; and
- (ii) When periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward meeting the annual goals (such as through the use of quarterly or other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards) will be provided; ([IDEA, 2017e](#))

Once the IEP team has developed the annual goals, it must determine how progress toward each goal will be measured, how often progress will be monitored, and when that information will be reported to parents. Progress can be monitored in a variety of ways, including:

- Observation data
- Checklists
- Rubrics
- Work samples
- Curriculum-based measures
- Formal tests

The type of measure used will be dictated by the nature of the goal and the unique characteristics of the learner. Academic goals are often measured using work samples and curriculum-based measures. Functional goals are more generally measured using observational data, rating scales, and checklists. Rubrics work well for many different types of goals, both academic and functional. Formal tests may also be used to measure progress, but these can be more time consuming than other methods. As with any assessment, progress-monitoring measures should be reliable and valid. Because progress is monitored frequently, however, teachers often select measures that are not only accurate but also efficient and practical to administer. The frequency of progress monitoring depends on the student's goals and the type of skill being measured. In practice, many elementary schools collect progress-monitoring data weekly, while secondary schools may do so every two weeks. IDEA requires that progress monitoring

results be sent home at least as often as report cards are sent to parents of nondisabled students and recommends that this happen quarterly at a minimum; however, the IEP could specify that this reporting be done more frequently ([Hasbrouck, 2006](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Special Education Provision



Think of the provision of special education and related services as a bridge. Those services connect the student's Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) with the annual goals identified in their IEP.

Image: Stone bridge. (2020, February 04). Publicdomainvectors.org

The next step is determining the special education services needed to help the child meet their goals and where those services will be provided. IDEA describes this section this way:

(4) A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child—

(i) To advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals;

(ii) To be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum in accordance with paragraph (a)(1) of this section, and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and

(iii) To be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children in the activities described in this section; ([IDEA, 2017e](#))

Special education and related services are the heart of the IEP. They provide the bridge between the student's current level of performance and the annual goals identified by the IEP team. IDEA defines special education as "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability" ([IDEA, 2017a](#)). It is important to recognize that special education is not a place but a service that can be provided across a continuum of educational settings, including the general education classroom, a co-taught classroom, a resource room, or a separate special education classroom. Special education encompasses the specially designed instruction, the opportunities for practice and feedback, and the assessments that are provided to help students achieve their IEP goals. It also includes any adaptations to the general education curriculum that may be needed.

The IEP team may determine that the student also needs related services in order to receive educational benefit. Like special education, related services are supports rather than places and may be provided across a continuum of educational settings. Common related services include:

- Physical therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Social work services
- Speech-language pathology services
- Audiology services
- School health and nursing services
- Interpreting services
- Orientation and mobility services

- Transportation, including specialized equipment if needed

In addition to special education and the related services noted above, the IEP team may also determine that the student requires supplementary aids and services due to the impact of their disability. IDEA defines supplementary aids and services as “aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate” ([IDEA, 2017b](#)). The purpose of these supplementary aids and services is to enable the student with a disability to be educated in the least restrictive environment, including provision of supports for participation in extracurricular activities such as sports and school clubs, by reducing barriers to participation. These can be direct services and supports to the student, accommodations and modifications to the curriculum, assistive technology, or consultation, support, and training for the staff ([CPIR, 2017](#), [NASET, 2024](#)).

Examples of supplementary aids and services include:

- Environmental supports such as preferential seating in the classroom, on the bus, in the lunchroom, or in the school auditorium as well as physical alterations to a learning space
- Personnel supports such as consultation services, a behavior specialist, a health care assistant, an instructional aide, and one-to-one assistance
- Specialized equipment and assistive technology including wheelchairs, computers and software, augmentative and alternative communication devices, adapted tableware, pencil grips, and restroom equipment
- Accessible materials such as audio or digital texts, Braille, and large print materials
- Social supports such as Circle of Friends, peer buddies, and cooperative learning groups
- Training that teachers and other staff members may require to best meet a child’s needs

Supplementary aids and services help remove barriers to participation, allowing students with disabilities to take part more fully in general and special education classrooms, extracurricular activities, and other school experiences ([CPIR, 2017](#)).

If the IEP team determines that adaptations to the curriculum or to instructional practices are needed, these will also be specified in the IEP. These adaptations generally fall into one of two categories: accommodations and modifications. **Accommodations** change how a student learns or demonstrates learning without changing the instructional expectations or the level of difficulty. Examples include extended time on tests, having a test read aloud, dictating responses to a scribe, or receiving copies of class notes. In contrast, **modifications** change what a student is expected to learn by altering the content, instructional expectations, or level of difficulty ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Accommodations and modifications may be made in several areas, including:

- Scheduling – for example, breaking a test into shorter sessions over several days
- Setting – such as completing work in a small-group or one-to-one setting
- Materials – for example, providing audio versions of required reading
- Instruction – such as simplifying or reducing the complexity of instructional materials
- Student response – for example, allowing the student to use a word processor or speech-to-text software for written assignments

These examples represent only a small sample of the supports that may be included in an IEP. IDEA does not provide an exhaustive list of accommodations or modifications. Instead, the IEP team determines the supports each student needs based on the student's unique strengths and educational needs. If the team determines that the child needs an aid or service that is typically provided in the special education classroom, but the team also determines that the student can be educated in the general education classroom with the support of that aid or service, then the team must specify that in the IEP and find a way to provide it. “We’ve never done it that way before” is not a reason why it can’t be done that way now, given the IEP team has determined it is the best plan for the learner ([CPIR, 2017](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Once the IEP team has determined the amount of special education and related services a student requires, the frequency, duration, location, and anticipated beginning date of each service are documented in the IEP. These decisions should be based on the student's individual needs rather than on the availability of personnel or resources. In the past, some IEP teams listed service times as a range to account for school holidays, schedule changes, or weather-related cancellations. Current best practice, however, is to specify the frequency and duration of services the team determines are needed to help the student achieve their annual goals, with the understanding that occasional interruptions to the school schedule may occur. The IEP team must also determine where services will be provided. Placement decisions should always be based on the [Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\)](#) in which the student can receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). It is also very important that placement not be decided before the IEP is developed. Instead, the IEP team must first determine the student's educational needs, annual goals, specially designed instruction, related services, supplementary aids and services, and accommodations. Only then does the team consider the educational setting in which those services can be provided most appropriately for that student ([NASSET, 2024](#)).

Educational Placement and LRE



IDEA requires that student with disabilities have the maximum opportunity to learn alongside their nondisabled peers. This placement is known as Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Image: Krijgsman, A. (2015, July 2). Children sitting on brown chairs inside the classroom. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

IDEA requires that public schools “ensure that a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services” ([IDEA, 2017d](#)). In addition, IDEA specifies that states must have policies and procedures in effect to ensure that the LRE requirements of IDEA are met and that schools ensure that

- (i) To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and
- (ii) Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. ([IDEA, 2017c](#)).

Given the priority placed on educating students with their nondisabled peers, IDEA requires that the IEP include:

- (5) An explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class and in (other school) activities ([IDEA, 2017a](#)).

Educational placement decisions are made by the IEP team, including the student's parents, and are based on the student's individual strengths, needs, and educational goals rather than on the student's disability category. Because a student's needs may change over time, placement decisions are reviewed at least annually as part of the IEP process and may be reconsidered whenever new information or student progress indicates that a different educational setting is needed. Whenever the IEP team determines that a student will not receive instruction in the general education classroom or participate with nondisabled peers in extracurricular or other nonacademic activities for any portion of the school day, the IEP team must document the extent of the removal and explain why it is necessary for this student ([NASET, 2024](#); [PROGRESS Center, 2021](#)).

Accommodations and Modifications for State and Districtwide Testing

IDEA also requires that the IEP include:

- (6) (i) A statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State and districtwide assessments
- (ii) If the IEP Team determines that the child must take an alternate assessment instead of a particular regular State or districtwide assessment of student achievement, a statement of why—
 - (A) The child cannot participate in the regular assessment; and
 - (B) The particular alternate assessment selected is appropriate for the child; ([IDEA, 2017e](#)).

All students, including those with disabilities, are expected to participate in state and districtwide assessments. One purpose of these assessments is to help schools monitor student achievement as well as to hold public schools accountable for student learning. This accountability encourages schools to maintain high academic expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, as most students with disabilities will participate in the same assessments as their nondisabled peers. Only those students with significant cognitive disabilities, generally limited to about 1% of the total student population, qualify to participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards. As discussed earlier in this chapter, annual goals for students who participate in alternate assessments must also include either short-term objectives or benchmarks in order to better monitor their progress toward their goals ([PROGRESS Center, 2020b](#)).

Students with disabilities who routinely use testing accommodations during classroom instruction and assessment may also use approved accommodations during state and districtwide assessments, provided those accommodations are documented in the IEP. Although each state maintains its own list of approved testing accommodations, the categories are generally similar and include:

- Setting accommodations: for example, a student can take a test in a different location such as in the special education classroom rather than in the general education classroom with the rest of the class
- Response accommodations: such as being allowed to respond orally or with a communication device rather than providing a standard paper and pencil response
- Timing accommodations: for example, a student might be given extra time to complete the test or multiple breaks during testing
- Presentation accommodations: such as providing a student with a test reader, large-print materials, or Braille versions of the assessment

The IEP should document the rationale for any accommodations that will be used during state and districtwide assessments. If the student will participate in an alternate assessment, the IEP must also explain why the alternate assessment is appropriate ([PROGRESS Center, 2020b](#)).

Final IEP Requirements

The IEP is required to indicate:

- (7) The projected date for the beginning of the services and modifications described in (the IEP), and the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications. ([IDEA, 2017e](#)).

The IEP will indicate the date that services will begin. Typically, an IEP will be dated to start as soon as possible. It will also contain the frequency, duration, and location where special education and related services will be provided. The frequency of each of these services should be enough to ensure the child has sufficient opportunities to practice the skill, receive feedback, and make meaningful progress. The duration of each session should be provided in minutes and, again, be based on the student's needs and abilities. Finally, the location where each service will be provided should not be determined until decisions have been made on the other IEP components ([PROGRESS Center, 2020a](#)).

Schools typically take an extended break during the summer months; however, some students may require extended school year (ESY) services during these breaks. This is not

required for all students on IEPs and is only provided when necessary to prevent significant regression of critical skills and to support continued progress toward the student's annual goals. One factor the IEP team considers is whether the student is likely to lose important skills during an extended school break and to require an unusually long period of time to regain them once school resumes. Finally, all IEPs for students age 16 and older must include transition services and information about the transfer of rights at the age of majority. These requirements are discussed in greater detail in a later chapter ([Morin, n. d.; NASET, 2024](#)).

Confidentiality and Educational Records



Confidentiality of student records is legally required under IDEA and FERPA.

Image: Flour, K. (2017, January 6). Grayscale photo of woman doing silent hand sign. Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

Throughout the referral, evaluation, and IEP process, schools collect sensitive personal information that must remain confidential. Only those with a legitimate educational need should have access to this information. In the United States, confidentiality is addressed by both IDEA law and the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#). These laws provide guidance on the type of information a school may share and when consent to share information is required. FERPA does permit schools to disclose certain types of "directory information," such as student name, address, phone number, email address, dates of attendance, degrees earned, field of study, and enrollment status. However, parent

permission must be granted for all other disclosures unless the school has received a court order or in the case of a health or safety emergency ([United States Department of Education, 2021](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

These laws also give parents the right to review their child's educational records and to request copies, although schools may charge a reasonable fee for these copies. Parents may also request that schools correct any errors they identify when reviewing the records. If the school decides that there is no need for a correction, parents can request a hearing to challenge the information. If the outcome of the hearing is that the information should remain unchanged, parents have a right to share their viewpoint on the contested material by placing a statement in the educational record. When personally identifiable information is no longer needed to provide educational services, parents may request that it be destroyed. However, schools have a right to maintain a permanent record of the student's name, address, phone number, grades, attendance record, grade levels completed, classes attended, and year of completion ([United States Department of Education, 2021](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Conclusion

Developing an Individualized Education Program is much more than completing a required form. The IEP is a collaborative planning process that uses assessment data to identify a student's strengths and needs, establish meaningful annual goals, and determine the specially designed instruction, related services, and other supports needed to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Although IDEA specifies the required components of every IEP, the educational decisions made by the team must always reflect the student's unique strengths, needs, interests, and circumstances. Parents, educators, related service providers, and, when appropriate, the student work together to create an individualized plan that supports meaningful participation in the general education curriculum and promotes student success.

For classroom teachers, understanding the IEP process is an essential part of creating inclusive learning environments. Whether serving as a member of the IEP team,

implementing accommodations and modifications, monitoring student progress, or collaborating with specialists and families, classroom teachers play an important role in ensuring that the educational plan developed by the IEP team is translated into effective daily instruction. Ultimately, the success of an IEP depends not only on how well it is written, but on how faithfully it is implemented to support each student's learning and participation.

Notice and Reflect

If possible, identify one student who is receiving special education services (do not use the student's real name). Observe the supports that are provided during instruction.

Reflect

- What accommodations, modifications, or supplementary aids and services do you notice?
- How do these supports help the student participate in learning alongside classmates?
- How do the general education teacher and any special education staff collaborate during instruction?
- What do you think might be one educational goal or need that could reasonably appear in the student's IEP? Explain what evidence led you to that conclusion?
- How can thoughtful planning and collaboration support a student's ability to participate and make educational progress in the general education classroom?

Glossary

- **Accommodations.** Change how a student learns or demonstrates learning without changing the instructional expectations or the level of difficulty.
- **Benchmarks.** Identify the increasing levels of performance that show progress toward a goal.
- **Duration.** A measure of time.
- **The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).** Provides certain rights for parents regarding their children's education records.

- **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).** A legal right under IDEA, which guarantees eligible children with disabilities a public education tailored to their unique needs at no cost to families.
- **Frequency.** A measure of how often a behavior occurs.
- **Generalization.** Describes the different settings, materials, people, or situations with which the student is expected to perform the skill.
- **Individualized Education Program (IEP).** A formal, legally binding plan that maps out how a particular student will receive special education and related services under IDEA.
- **Latency.** The time between the presentation of a stimulus and a response.
- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).** A legal requirement in IDEA which ensures students with disabilities have the maximum opportunity to learn alongside their nondisabled peers.
- **Maintenance.** Identifies the length of time or the number of times a student must perform a skill before it can be considered mastered.
- **Modifications.** Change what a student is expected to learn by altering the content, instructional expectations, or level of difficulty.
- **Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP).** Describes the student's current strengths, needs, and performance in both academic achievement and functional areas.
- **Rate.** A measure of speed and accuracy.
- **Short-term objectives.** Intermediate steps that come together to make up the more complex task that is the goal.

References

Berg, Y. (2011, November 17). *The power of words*. Huffpost.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-power-of-words_b_716183

Center for Parent Information & Resources (CPIR). (2017, November). *Supplementary aids and services (Component of the IEP)*. <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-supplementary/>

Hasbrouck, J. (2006). *Screening, diagnosing, and progress monitoring for fluency: The details*. Reading Rockets.
<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/fluency/articles/screening-diagnosing-and-progress-monitoring-fluency-details>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2015, November 16). *OSEP dear colleague letter on free appropriate education (FAPE)*. U.S. Department of Education.
<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/osep-dear-colleague-letter-on-free-and-appropriate-public-education-fape/>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2017a, May 2). *Sec. 300.39 Special education*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.39>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2017b, May 2). *Sec. 300.42 Supplementary aids and services*. U.S. Department of Education.
<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.42>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2017c, May 3). *Sec. 300.114 LRE requirements*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.114>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2017d, May 3). *Sec. 300.115(a)*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.115/a>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2017e, July 12). *Sec. 300.320(a)*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.320/a>

Kappes, S. (2023, March 22). *7 disability etiquette tips for the workplace*. Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/workplace-etiquette-tips-disability-inclusion>

Morin, A. (n. d.). *Extended school year services: What you need to know*. Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/extended-school-year-services-what-you-need-to-know>

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET). (2024). *IEP components*.

NASSET. <https://www.naset.org/publications/iep-components>

New York State Education Department. (2023, September). *Guide to quality Individualized Education Program (IEP) development and implementation*.

<https://www.nysed.gov/special-education/guide-quality-individualized-education-program-iep-development-and-implementation>

PACER Center. (2018a). *Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals (ACTion Sheet: PHP-c266)*.

<https://media.pacer.org/php/php-c266.pdf>

PACER Center. (2018b). *A place to start: Understanding the present level of academic achievement and functional performance achievement (ACTion Sheet: PHP-c186)*.

<https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c186.pdf>

PACER Center. (2018c). *Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) examples (ACTion Sheet: PHP-c253)*.

<https://media.pacer.org/php/php-c253.pdf>

PROGRESS Center. (2020a, October 6). *IEP tip sheet: Dates, frequency, location, and duration of services*.

<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-start-date-frequency-location-and-duration-services>

PROGRESS Center. (2020b, October 6). *IEP tip sheet: Participation in Assessment*.

<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-participation-assessment>

PROGRESS Center. (2020c, October 6). *IEP tip sheet: PLAAFP statement*.

<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-plaafps>

PROGRESS Center. (2021, June). *IEP tip sheet: Explanation of educational setting*.

<https://promotingprogress.org/resources/iep-tip-sheet-explanation-educational-setting>

Schafer, J. (2010, November 2). *Words have power*. Psychology Today.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/let-their-words-do-the-talking/201011/words-have-power>

Stanberry, Kristin. (n.d.) *Who's on the IEP team?* Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/whos-on-the-iep-team>

United States Department of Education, Student Privacy Office. (2021, July). *A parent guide to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)*.

VanTol, K. (2026). Module 6: Looking for the "why". *JONAH: A positive behavior strategy (Version 2)*. Center for the Advancement of Christian Education; Dordt University.

<https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/jonah>

About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

Recommended citation

VanTol, K. (2026). *Foundations of special education* (3rd ed.). Dordt University.

<https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/foundations-special-education>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

