

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Model:
How to determine the LRE in an IEP meeting
Script**

What is Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)?

IDEA states that all students with disabilities must receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. The least restrictive environment is the general education classroom. This does not mean that all students with disabilities must receive their special education services in the general education classroom for the entire school day. It is the responsibility of the IEP committee to determine the least restrictive environment for each student with a disability at their IEP meeting. A continuum of services ranging from the general education classroom to the special education classroom should be considered for each student with a disability, based upon the IEP objectives.

Why is it important to serve students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment?

A small body of research indicates that students with disabilities show higher achievement gains when served in the general education classroom with appropriate supports and services. In Georgia, the Division of Exceptional Children at the Department of Education has developed ten performance goals. Four of these goals are directly related to LRE.

- Decrease the percentage of students with disabilities who drop out of school.
- Increase the percentage of students with disabilities who earn a regular education diploma.
- Decrease the gap in performance of students with and without disabilities on statewide achievement tests.
- Increase the percentage of time students with disabilities receive instruction in the general education setting with appropriate supports and accommodations.

The 90/80 Standard:

In Georgia, school systems are currently asked to prepare an action plan to address “increasing the time in the general education setting” for students with disabilities. This is in response to the acceptable standard set by the United States, Department of Education.

The U.S. Department of Education states that the standard for all school systems regarding students with disabilities is 90% of students with disabilities will be educated in the general education classroom for a minimum of 80% of the school day.

Although this standard may take some time to achieve, school systems are being asked to look at their data and to begin working toward this goal. Currently, about 10 school systems in Georgia have met or exceeded this standard.

The 90/80 standard can seem overwhelming; however, 90% of students with disabilities are not 100%. There is an underlying assumption that 10% of students with disabilities may not be served in the general education classroom for 80% of the school day. Also, 80% of the school day is not 100% of the school day. Any student with a disability, for whom it is appropriate, could be removed from the general education setting for up to 20% of the day to receive services in a special education classroom.

**IEP Decision-Making Process:
How to determine the LRE for a student with a disability at an IEP Meeting**

Document Current Level of Performance:

The Present Level of Performance is the starting point for determining the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. Appropriate documentation of the current performance of a student is important because all decisions regarding the student's special education services as well as the goals and objectives will arise from this section.

Develop Student IEP Objectives:

Developing appropriate goals and objectives comes from the needs identified in the Present Level of Performance. The student's IEP objectives will determine what special education services and in which settings those special education services will be provided.

How can the objective, or related set of objectives, be taught in the general education classroom?

When this chart first came from the Georgia Department of Education, it did not include the word "how". We used to ask, "Can the objective be taught in the general education classroom?" – now, we know the important focus of the question is "How can the objectives be taught in the classroom".

Sometimes it is clear as to whether or not an objective can be taught in the general education classroom. For example if a student has mild disability in reading and is less than one grade level behind it is likely that this student can receive special education services in the general education setting. Another example, might involve a student with extreme aggressive behaviors toward other students. Perhaps behavioral objectives for this student might be difficult to implement in the general education setting. The majority of the time it will not be as obvious for the IEP team. The IEP team has to take each objective (or, related set of objectives) and go through the 3 circles (accommodations/modifications, settings, and personnel supports) to determine if additional support in one or more areas is required for the students to attend the general education class.

A related set of objectives is several objectives all dealing with the same skills. For example, 4 objectives all related to improvement of readings skills or several objects addressing behavioral issues. Sometimes objectives are so closely related to the goal it makes more sense to talk about them as a set rather than individual objectives.

Three levels of support that must be considered when determining the Least Restrictive Environment for students with disabilities.

Accommodations

Accommodations are any changes to activities, instruction, materials, or classroom environment that do not change the minimal requirements set forth in the Georgia Performance Standards. But rather, accommodations are for the purpose of providing students with disabilities access to the general education classroom and curriculum. It is the responsibility of the IEP committee to determine what accommodations are required in order for the student to access the general education classroom and which specific accommodations are appropriate for each class, course, or content area.

An example to illustrate the point: Casey Martin, a professional golfer, with a degenerative vascular disease which made walking the golf course extremely painful and asked to use a golf cart on the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour. Because the PGA declined to make a decision, Martin took his case to court. Martin felt he had the right to use the cart under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). The case was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court applied the accommodations information from IDEA to the case to make their decision. The court was convinced the golf cart (an accommodation) was required for Martin to continue to have access to the PGA tour. Secondly, the court was convinced that the golf cart did not provide any advantage to improve his game or score. It never was an issue before the court that Martin might have an advantage over the other golfers. But rather, whether the accommodation (golf cart) would help him to improve his performance. Accommodations are not for the purpose of improving a student's academic performance, achievement, or grades. But rather, the purpose of accommodating a student's disability is to allow the student access to the general education classroom and curriculum.

Because Martin would not have had access to the PGA tour and the golf cart provided him no advantage to improve his performance, the court ordered him to be allowed to use the golf cart in tournament play. Interestingly, his golf career has not been particularly outstanding since the court's decision, confirming that the golf cart did not provide him with an advantage to improve his performance.

An example to illustrate the point: There were three students with Learning Disabilities in a co-taught 8th grade Algebra I class. The IEP committees for each of the students determined that the following accommodations would be required for the individual students to have access to the general education class and curriculum:

- Accommodation for Mary: extra time would be allocated for taking tests.
- Accommodation for John: use of a calculator, for class assignments and tests.
- Accommodation for Mark: was doing well and the committee decided no accommodations were required.

Each of the decisions regarding accommodations were made on an individual basis. All students with Learning Disabilities in math in 8th grade did not require the same accommodations. If Mark were allowed to use a calculator and receive extra time these accommodations could have resulted in him receiving a better grade, this would have been providing him with an undue advantage to improve his performance.

The purpose of accommodations is to provide access to the general education classroom and curriculum – not to help the student make a better grade.

Modifications

Modifications are changes to products, assessments, or materials that require less of the student than the minimum Georgia Performance Standards. It is the responsibility of the IEP committee to determine what modifications are required in order for the student to access the general education classroom and which specific modifications are appropriate for each class, course, or content area. Modifications do change the requirement for a student to meet the Georgia Performance Standards. Therefore, when students with disabilities require modification as determined by their IEP they are no longer on the general education curriculum; however, this does not imply that all students on a modified curriculum can not be educated in the general education classroom.

An example to illustrate the point: A co-teaching team at a Georgia high school was concerned with a student with a disability in their 9th grade American Literature class. The student was failing the class, despite the teachers' comments that the student worked hard, seemed to enjoy the class, and never exhibited any behavior problems. Her current grade several weeks into the semester was a 38. The teachers reviewed the students IEP and discovered she had been scheduled into the wrong English class. Her eligibility in special education was in the area of Mild Intellectual Disability and her IEP stated she should be receiving 9th grade English in a special education class on a functional curriculum. The teachers contacted her mother to explain the error and stated she would begin the next day in the special education class, much to their surprise the mother began to cry and begged them to let her daughter stay in the general education classroom. The mother stated how much her daughter loved the class and liked having the same book as all the other students. She stated that her daughter was even beginning to make friends for the first time. This was the first time the student had been in the general education classroom since 2nd grade. It was decided that the student would remain in the general education classroom with extensive modifications placing her on a functional curriculum as opposed to the general curriculum. Her IEP goals and objectives were used to measure her progress not her ability to complete the general education curriculum. She did not receive a carnegie unit for the course but rather she earned a special education credit.

Settings

It is rare that an IEP committee must make decisions about a specific educational setting or location within the school. However, occasionally this issue will arise, particularly regarding students with physical disabilities.

An example to illustrate this point: A student with a spinal chord injury which resulted in paralysis from the neck down was entering high school. The student required a wheelchair for mobility. The student's cognitive ability was above average and he was capable of taking all regular education classes without modifications to the curriculum. He did require accommodations and additional personnel support in order to access the general curriculum. The high school building was old and had been added onto several times. Not all locations in the building were easily accessible by wheelchair. The IEP committee determined that all of his classes would be located on the first floor of the main building for accessibility purposes.

Personnel Supports

Personnel supports are additional special education personnel in the general education classroom providing required support or instruction to students with disabilities. Personnel within the general education classroom can be certified teachers or classified positions. The following levels of personnel support have been approved by the GA DOE and should be considered for students with disabilities in GA public schools.

General Education Classroom:

The general education classroom is the least restrictive environment. Often students with disabilities spend the entire school day or a portion of the day in general education classes with no additional personnel support from special education.

Consultation:

If the IEP committee feels the objectives cannot be addressed in the general education classroom without additional personnel support, then the next option in the continuum would be consultation. The student with the disability receives at least one segment per month of direct service from a special education teacher.

Supportive Instruction:

If the IEP committee feels the objective cannot be addressed in the general education classroom with consultative support then the next option in the continuum would be supportive instruction. The student with a disability receives special education services from someone other than a certified special education teacher. These individuals can be sign language interpreters, community job coaches, paraprofessionals, or other non-certified personnel. Most often paraprofessionals will be used in the general education classroom to support individuals with disabilities. However, paraprofessionals are never to provide initial instruction to students. They may provide remedial or additional instruction following the introduction of the material by the classroom teacher.

Paraprofessionals providing support to students with disabilities in the general education classroom should be supervised and utilized at the discretion of the general education teacher. Although, special education paraprofessionals are required to assist students with disabilities as specified in their IEP they can work with all students in the general education classroom.

Caution: When writing paraprofessional supportive instruction into an IEP, consider stating that additional personnel support is required for the class in

order to implement the students IEP goals and objectives. As opposed to stating that the student with the disability will have a one-on-one paraprofessional to work with them in the general education classroom. There is research stating that one-on-one paraprofessionals are not effective for achievement or socialization of students with disabilities.

Collaboration:

If the IEP committee feels the objective cannot be addressed in the general education classroom with the addition of non-certified personnel, the next level of support to consider would be collaboration. Collaboration is a level of support provide to students with disabilities in the general education classroom by a certified special education teacher. The special education teacher is scheduled to work with two general education teachers during the same instructional segment. The special education teacher should spend 50% of their time in each classroom over the course of one week.

An example to illustrate this point: Special Education Teacher: Ms. Jones, General Education 9th Grade Literature Teacher: Ms. Smith, General Education 9th Grade Literature Teacher: Mr. Baker This week Ms. Jones will teach with Ms. Smith Monday, Tuesday, and 45-minutes on Friday (based on a 90-minute segment). Ms. Jones will teach with Mr. Baker Wednesday, Thursday, and the last 45-minutes of the segment on Friday. Next week, Ms. Jones will teach with Ms. Smith Monday, Tuesday, and half segment on Wednesday. Ms. Smith will be with Mr. Baker on half segment on Wednesday and the entire segment on Thursday and Friday. Hopefully, these three teachers will have common planning time in order to prepare for effective instruction. These three teachers decide on a weekly basis when the special education teacher will be in each class based on the content to be covered and the needs of all students.

** Caution the IEP must state that the student is receiving collaborative services from a special education teacher within the general education classroom and state the exact amount of time per week the student is served. The total number of special education students in both general education classes cannot exceed the maximum class size for special education per segment.

Co-Teaching:

If the IEP committee determines that the student's objectives cannot be addressed in the collaborative education classroom, then the next level of support on the continuum would be to receive services through a co-taught class. The special education teacher and the general education teacher provide instruction together in the general education classroom for the entire segment

every day. These two teachers share full responsibility for all students in the class and for all instructional activities.

****Caution the IEP must state that the student is receiving co-teaching services from a special education teacher within the general education classroom for 5 segments per week.**

Special Education Classroom:

If the IEP committee determines that the student's objectives cannot be addressed in the co-taught classroom, then the next level of support on the continuum would be to receive services in the special education classroom. Special education teacher provides services for students with disability in the special education class.

**** Caution the IEP must state that the student is receiving services in the special education classroom and specify for which courses and the amount of time. In addition the IEP should clarify if the student is receiving a carnegie unit for the course.**

Using the LRE Decision Making Matrix

When the IEP committee is determining the least restrictive environment (LRE) for a student with disabilities, an effective strategy is to use the LRE Decision Making Matrix. The matrix helps the IEP committee develop a visual representation of the student's day at school and what accommodations, modifications, or personnel supports might be required to address the student's objectives in the general education classroom.

Examples of LRE Decision Making Matrices are in the handouts along with blank pages that can be copied and used in IEP meetings. To use the matrix fill in a typical daily schedule for a general education student in the same age/grade level as the student with disabilities. The class schedule goes in the row across the top of the matrix. List the student with disabilities' IEP objectives in the left-hand column of the matrix. The IEP committee can now discuss each objective and determine how it can be addressed in the general education classroom.

Examples of completed LRE Decision Making Matrices are in the handouts. Three students are presented: Larry, who is LD in reading; Amy, who has a moderate to severe intellectually disabled and is entering Kindergarten; and Lucy, who has a moderate disability and is entering her second year in high school.

**LRE Decision Making Matrix
for students on the general education curriculum: Larry**

Larry's reading skills are less than a grade level below average. Larry and his parents are planning for him to complete a College Prep Diploma in high school and attend college. The general education teacher attending the IEP meeting was the 8th grade Science teacher. This teacher brought all the 8th grade textbooks to the meeting for review by the IEP committee.

The IEP committee discussed each of Larry's IEP objectives and determined which, if any, accommodations or personnel supports were needed to address that objective in each general education class. According to the LRE Decision Making Matrix, the IEP committee determined Larry needed no accommodations in the general education 8th grade Algebra I class, lunch, Band, or PE. The IEP committee determined that he did need accommodations in his other classes.

Please refer to LRE Decision Making Matrix handout in this manual. The matrix for Larry provides a visual representation of which accommodations Larry will require in each course to address his IEP objectives. The total number of accommodations per course does not determine the level of personnel support or placement. But rather, serves only as a guide for discussion.

Larry's IEP committee made the following decision regarding what special education services he would require and in what environment those services would be provided. In Algebra, Band, lunch, and PE, Larry would have no accommodations or additional personnel support and would be in the general education classroom. He would be held to the same standards as the general education students. In social studies, Larry would have a few accommodations in the general education classroom, but he would not have additional personnel support. Science and English required more extensive accommodations and the IEP committee felt Larry would require a co-taught class for these subjects in order to implement the small group remedial instruction.

LRE Decision Making Matrix for students on a functional curriculum: Amy

When you look at Amy's LRE Decision Making Matrix, you can see that a typical day's schedule for a general education student in the same grade level or age level as the student with disabilities has been written in the top row. Amy's shows a Kindergarten schedule. The first thing you notice when looking at the matrix is that there are "X's" instead of the accommodations codes as were on Larry's. That is because Amy is on a functional curriculum instead of an academic curriculum. The IEP Team discusses Amy's IEP Objectives and the various classes and places and "X" under the class in which that IEP Objective could possibly be addressed. Amy has a lot of "X's" on her matrix. Remember, the teachers will be comparing Amy's performance to her progress on IEP objectives – not comparing her performance to the other students in the class. When you look at the totals at the bottom of the page, you can see that the higher the numbers, the more IEP objectives that can be addressed in that class. This gives a clear picture of why a moderately disabled student like Amy is in that particular class.

Now the IEP Team begins the process of determining appropriate special education services for Amy. Homeroom, Calendar Time, and Center Time may or may not require a personnel support. IN Math, only 2 of Amy's IEP objectives can be addressed. This may be a class where Amy needs to participate in a special education classroom because she may require such specialized instruction in order to make meaningful educational progress.

When participating in IEP meetings for students with severe disabilities, opportunities for social and language development are as important as academic instruction. Because students with severe disabilities are not on the general education curriculum but a functional curriculum, their progress will be measured based on their IEP objectives.

Amy's IEP committee decided she would participate with the general education kindergarten class for center time, lunch, and specials three times a week. In addition it was determined she would require supportive instruction in the segments she was in the general education classroom.

LRE Decision Making Matrix for a student on a functional curriculum: Lucy

Lucy's LRE Decision Making Matrix is different from Amy's because she is a student in high school. A typical 10th grade schedule is written across the top of her Matrix with Lucy's objectives written down the left-hand column. Again, the process for the IEP Team is the same as with Larry and Amy. For students with disabilities in high school, transition becomes an important focus because it looks at what will happen with the student after they exit high school.

Lucy's IEP Team determined that Lucy should participate in CBVI training in a community setting for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th periods. She will return to the high school and go to lunch in the lunchroom with all the other students. The IEP Team determined that Lucy needed Supportive Instruction in PE so a paraprofessional will be in the PE class. Lucy can go to Chorus by herself and the general education Chorus teacher can implement her objectives. The IEP Team needs to also discuss Lucy's participation in assemblies, clubs, and after-school activities (refer to step 5 of LRE Decision Process – Circle Page). A place is provided on the matrix for that.