

Massachusetts



Department of
Education

IEP PROCESS GUIDE

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INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM PROCESS GUIDE

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INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM PROCESS GUIDE

IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES

Individualized Education Programs can improve student outcomes.

The newly mandated Individualized Education Program (IEP) process and form is an important step forward in providing services to and improving outcomes for Massachusetts' students with disabilities. The revision has fostered collaboration and has linked sound practice with statutory and regulatory requirements. The clear intent of the revision is to ensure that all students are challenged to excel, progress within the general curriculum and are prepared for independence in adult life, including post-secondary education and/or employment.

Not since the inception of the Massachusetts State Special Education Statute in 1972 has such a comprehensive revision been undertaken. IDEA-97 and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 set the stage and support this critical undertaking.

IDEA-97 leads educators to improve educational results.

With the reauthorization of IDEA-97, the IEP process became unmistakably centered on these three key points:

- The involvement and progress of each child with a disability in the general curriculum including the addressing of the student's unique needs that are tied to the disability
- The involvement of parents, students, special educators and general educators in meeting the individualized educational needs of students with disabilities
- The critical need to prepare students with disabilities for independence and employment and other post-school activities.

IDEA-97 states that improving the educational results for children with disabilities is essential to ensuring equal opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency.

Massachusetts Education Reform Act sets high standards for all.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 also set high standards for all students including students with disabilities. Education reform reinforces the need to assist all children to reach their full potentials and to lead lives as participants and contributors to the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts IEP Process aligns with federal and state laws.

Massachusetts educators' approach to individualized educational programming must be revitalized to reach the goals set by IDEA-97 and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act.

The following process guide will lead you through the revised IEP process as well as suggest sound practices. This guide should be reviewed along with mandated forms, notices and corresponding directions.

Please read each section carefully and consider how you might begin today to change your current practices. We believe the revisions are comprehensive and intensive. We do not suggest a simple comparison with your current practice, but rather a full-scale rethinking of the process of finding a student eligible for special education and providing that student with appropriate services.

Other guides are available to assist you.

The Massachusetts Department of Education is producing other guides that may assist in realigning current practices. You may find the following documents helpful:

Guide to Special Education Requirements

Parent Guide to Special Education

(produced cooperatively between the Federation for Children with Special Needs and the Department of Education)

About This Guide:

We have designed this guide to be read and reviewed with its companion document, *IEP Forms and Notices*. We recommend a thorough reading of the *IEP Process Guide* before familiarizing yourself with the aforementioned companion document. *IEP Forms and Notices*, therefore, should be read following this guide. *IEP Forms and Notices* contains a quick reference sheet, form and notice directions and copies of the coded forms and coded notices. We believe that once you are familiar with the revised IEP process, you will more easily understand the use of the redesigned forms and notices.

We have graphically designed the two documents to help you easily cross reference one to the other. An icon has been developed to represent the three steps in the IEP Process. You will first see this icon on page five of this guide and then used repeatedly in *IEP Forms and Notices*. The icon becomes a visual link between form and notice use and the three steps of the IEP process described within this guide.

Additionally, we have used the codes from each form within this guide's section entitled *About the Team Process*. The codes, to the left of text, connect the process description to a specific form(s) or specific form section(s).

After your first thorough reading of *IEP Process Guide* and *IEP Forms and Notices*, you will be able to page through the guide while easily referencing specified form(s) or form section(s). Similarly, the icon will help you connect form and notice directions back to the process description found within this guide.

WORKING TOGETHER

IDEA-97 emphasizes a collaborative approach.

The IEP requirements under IDEA emphasize the importance of working cooperatively as a team. The law expects school districts to bring together parents, students, general educators and special educators to make important educational decisions for students with disabilities. With the combined knowledge and resources of these individuals, students will be assured greater support and subsequent success.

Parents are equal partners in the Team process.

The Team process should be a collaborative process between parents, school staff members and other professionals. Parents have a unique and critically important perspective on their child's learning style, strengths and needs. The school staff should ensure that parents feel welcomed and comfortable when communicating with school staff and at all meetings.

Parents have the right to be involved in meetings that discuss the identification, evaluation, IEP development and educational placement of their children. The law ensures that parents and school personnel are equal partners in all steps during the Team process.

Every effort should be made to resolve differences between parents and school staff through informal measures. Respect parents' right to disagree while looking for common goals and interest between a parent's requests and the school's position. Make sure you listen carefully to all proposals and understand the major issues involved. Brainstorm possible alternative solutions and offer reasonable compromises keeping the needs of the student central to your discussions and your negotiated agreements.

The Team should always work toward consensus. However, school personnel ultimately have the responsibility to ensure that the IEP includes the services that the student needs. Schools districts are, by law, obligated to make a proposal to the parent. If agreement cannot be reached, the school district cannot delay in proposing the services that it believes are the best services to ensure that the student receives an effective education.

Suggested Practices:

- Send evaluation material home in advance asking parent to develop a list of questions and/or concerns.
- Contact parents in advance of the meeting to discuss their concerns. For instance, call them a day or two before the meeting to talk through their concerns or ask them to come in fifteen minutes before the start of the meeting. Let them know that you would be happy to relate their concerns if they would prefer.
- Provide parents a seating plan for the meeting or use name signs or nametags.
- Introduce and refer to all Team members in the same manner and by name not role. For instance, if you refer to the child's science teacher as Mr. Smith, then the parent should be addressed as Mr. Jones not as dad or John.
- Establish methods for communication of general education and special education information with parents (e.g. newsletters, parent forums, training activities)
- Recruit parents who have children eligible for special education services to serve on school-wide parent groups.

Student participation is important and, at times, required.

Students should also be considered important members of Team meetings. As students get older, they should become more and more active within Team meetings with their interests and preferences determining the direction for the identified goals and services in the IEP.

Supporting active student participation in the Team process assists students in developing self-determination skills. Such skills are necessary in adult life.

School districts must explain to students their rights including their right to attend Team meetings and the importance of the corresponding responsibilities. Students are invited to attend beginning at age 14 or younger if the purpose of the meeting is to discuss transitional services. If the student does not attend the meeting, the district must take other steps to ensure that the student's preferences and interests are considered.

Massachusetts law establishes age eighteen (18) as the age of majority. At that age, students are adults and competent to make their own decisions including decisions in relation to special education services. Therefore, the school district at the student's 18th birthday and in the absence of any court action to the contrary must seek the consent of the student to continue the special education program. To prepare students for assuming their own decision making, Teams must discuss the transfer of rights at least one year before students turn eighteen.

Suggested Practices:

- Teach students their civil rights.
- Develop students' self-advocacy skills.
- Have students lead their own Team meetings.
- Invite adult human service agency representatives to speak to student groups about provided services and eligibility requirements.

General educators play a central role.

With all students accessing the general education curriculum, general educators are vital participants in the development, review and revision of the IEP. As the experts on the general curriculum, their knowledge of the curriculum and how to modify the curriculum is vital to ensuring that a student participates in the general education environment and that a student makes progress in the general curriculum.

The general educator participates in the Team if the student is or may be participating in the general education environment. Although the general educator may not need to stay for the entire Team meeting or need to attend every Team meeting, IDEA-97 clearly includes general educators in the individualized decision-making process.

Suggested Practices:

- Have teacher assessment forms address a student's progress in the curriculum standards.
- Include general educators in professional development on special education topics.
- Provide routine opportunities for general and special educators to work together on lesson planning and curriculum development.

ABOUT THE TEAM PROCESS

The Team process has three important, integrated steps.

Under IDEA-97, the IEP process is a focal point for reaching improved outcomes for students with disabilities. The process, critically important to children with disabilities, must be carefully managed to ensure that the unique needs of the student are addressed and to ensure full compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements.

The Team has **three** important and integrated activities to manage. Each is of equal importance and interdependent on the quality of the other.

1. Eligibility determination: The Team must first determine whether a child is eligible for special education services. This determination starts with the careful and thorough evaluation of the child in all areas of suspected disabilities.
2. Development of the IEP: Next, if the Team has found the student eligible for special education, the elements of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be discussed, planned and then captured in a written document. Input from parents, the student, general educators and special educators is necessary to complete this service contract that sets high expectations for a student and then guides that student's special education services for the next year.
3. Placement decision. Once all the elements of the IEP are determined, including services and supports, a placement decision must be made. The first placement option considered for each student with a disability must be the general education classroom with the provision of needed aids and services. The law requires that students do not get placed outside of the general education classroom unless their disability requires another setting. The Team must always consider the unique needs of the student before making the final placement determination.

The guide discusses these three activities separately to clearly describe each area. However, most often, these activities will occur within a single meeting for students who are found eligible for special education.



About the Icon:

The icon was designed to visually represent the three steps of the IEP process. The icon is fully shaded when we refer to the process in its entirety. When we refer to a specific part or parts of the process, only the referred to section(s) of the icon is shaded.

The icon is found in this section of the guide and in direction sections of *IEP Forms and Notices*. The icon will help you connect the process description to form and notice directions and form and notice use.

Making an eligibility determination is the first step in the process.

To make an eligibility determination, the school district in consultation with the parent(s) must decide how best to evaluate the student. The Team's decision in regards to eligibility is based on the evaluation results.

Districts should take positive steps to promote responsive school environments.



All schools are required to have sound instructional practices and instructional supports that are responsive to the needs of all students. A variety of practices and supports should be tried and the results of each attempted strategy should be documented and placed in the student's record. If a student is subsequently evaluated to determine special education eligibility, documentation of instructional supports that have been tried should be made available for review by the Team when determining eligibility. No instructional support program or any other intervention, however, limits the right of a parent to refer a student for a special education evaluation.

An initial evaluation must be completed to determine eligibility.

A parent or any person in a caregiving or professional position concerned that a student may have a disability or concerned about a student's development may refer a student for an initial evaluation for purposes of determining whether the student needs special education. Special words need not be used in making a referral. Upon receipt of a referral of a student for an initial evaluation to determine eligibility for special education, the school district must send notice to the parent and must seek the parent's consent to conduct an evaluation in compliance with 603 C.M.R. §28.04(1). Where appropriate, the school district may also provide the parent and any other person making the referral with information concerning other supportive services that may better suit a particular student's needs.

Within thirty school days of receiving the parent's consent, the school district must evaluate the referred student in compliance with 603 C.M.R. §28.04(2). A school district may not refuse to evaluate a student who has been referred for evaluation as set forth above, on the basis of a pre-referral program or in order to try other instructional support activities or for any other reason. In accordance with G.L. c. 71B, §2, second paragraph (as amended, effective January 1, 2001), prior to referral by the school district of a student, the principal of the student's school shall ensure that all efforts have been made to meet such student's needs within the regular education program, but such efforts shall not be construed to limit or condition the right to refer a student for evaluation.

Note: The state special education law, at G.L. c. 71B, §3, fifth paragraph, provides that the school district is not required to refer a student for evaluation solely because the student presents a risk of or fails to be promoted at the end of a school year, or solely because the student has failed statewide assessment tests (MCAS). Further, G.L. c. 71B, §1, provides that no student shall be determined to be eligible for special education solely because the student's behavior violates the school's disciplinary code or solely because the student has failed the MCAS.

Evaluation of all areas related to the suspected disability is required.

Evaluation of a student in all areas of suspected disability is one critical aspect of the needed evaluative information. The evaluation process should be sufficiently comprehensive and child driven. No single procedure should be used as the sole criterion

When assessing students, school districts need to be clear as to the concerns of parents and educators to ensure that the initial evaluation and subsequent reevaluations provide clear and complete information. Evaluation activities need to be tailored to the specific student. The information needs to address the student's learning and whether or not a disability(ies) affects the student's learning

Sound evaluations use of a variety of assessment techniques.

School districts should use a variety of assessment techniques to guarantee that Team members have a full understanding of the student and the suspected disability(ies). Relying on a single test or single test battery for all students would not be adequate or legally appropriate. Evaluation can include formal and informal assessments; however, other evaluation strategies may also be needed. Some other appropriate measures include the following:

- Information provided by parents
- Observation
- Work samples
- Interviews
- Cumulative record review

School staff may be appropriate to complete some or all of the assessments. Yet, in certain cases, the district may not have a qualified staff member to assess a student's area of suspected disability. Under those circumstances, the district should contract with outside agencies or evaluators to ensure that sufficient information is available to Team members.

Assessment reports should be written in clear, jargon-free language. They should provide information regarding the possible presence or absence of a disability, and interpret assessment results related to the student's performance in school. Reports should also address the needs of the student and strategies for teachers. All evaluators should include educationally relevant recommendations within their reports.

For students with limited English proficiency (LEP), information about the student's language must be considered in determining how to conduct the evaluation to prevent a student from being misclassified. With a student with LEP, the district must assess the student's proficiency in English and the native language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and understanding.

Comprehensive, quality evaluations provide the Team with the information they need to make sound eligibility determinations and, if needed, to write appropriate IEPs. Good evaluations, also, reduce the need for subsequent independent evaluations as a parent's right to an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) is triggered when the parent disagrees with a publicly initiated evaluation.

Extra steps are required when a specific learning disability is suspected.

Federal regulation also requires additional steps in the evaluation process if the Team suspects a student of having a specific learning disability. The district must take the following steps in such cases:

- At least one Team member, other than the student's teacher, must complete a classroom observation of the student's academic performance. When a child is less than school age, a Team member should complete the observation of the child in an age-appropriate environment.

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- Team members must complete a written report answering the following questions:
 - Does the child have a specific learning disability?
 - What basis was used for making the determination?
 - What relevant behavior was noted during the observation and how does that behavior relate to the student's academic functioning?
 - What educationally relevant medical findings, if any, were found?
 - Is there a severe discrepancy between achievement and ability?
 - Does the severe discrepancy between achievement and ability require specially designed instruction?
 - What was the Team's determination concerning the effects of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages and does the Team agree that the need for special education is not a result of such disadvantage?
 - Team members must certify in writing whether the written report reflects their conclusion of a finding of a specific learning disability.
 - Any individual who disagrees with the written report must submit a separate statement to express their differing conclusions.

Comprehensive evaluations lead to sound eligibility determinations.

An eligibility determination needs to be made by a Team of qualified professionals and parents. The Team deciding on eligibility must rely on a variety of assessment materials when determining whether the student is eligible for special education.

The Team must be sure that they have received parent input and have gathered sufficient data for making the eligibility determination. Information must be gathered in all areas of suspected disability.

Students must have a disability to be considered for special education.

ED 1 To be eligible for special education services, a student **must first** be found to have a disability which is causal to an inability to make effective progress in school. The Team, therefore, must carefully discuss the evaluation data and determine if an educational disability(ies) exists. Team members should identify the type of disability before taking the next step in the eligibility process.

The Massachusetts State Regulations include the following types of educational disabilities:

Autism	Developmental Delay
Intellectual	Neurological
Emotional	Communication
Physical	Specific Learning
Health	Sensory: Hearing, Vision, Deaf-Blind

Teams judge whether a student is making effective progress in school.

ED 1 The Team must make a judgment on whether the student is making effective progress in the general education program. The general education program includes preschool and early childhood programs offered by the district, academic and non-academic offerings of the districts and vocational programs and activities.

To judge whether a student is making effective progress, the Team must determine whether the student has:

- Made documented growth, with or without accommodations, in knowledge and skills acquisition including social/emotional development, the learning standards

set forth in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the curriculum of the district

- Made growth according to the chronological age, the developmental expectations and the individual educational potential of the child.

When considering if the student has made effective progress, the Team must specifically look at whether the disability(ies) is causal to an inability to make progress. Such a finding is pivotal in the eligibility determination. The law clearly states that students may not be determined eligible solely because of a need for reading or math instruction or because of limited English proficiency or social maladjustment.

Teams sometime struggle in trying to decide if a student is making effective progress and look for specific guidelines to assist in making this important decision. Effective progress, however, is not easily translated to test scores, academic achievement, social skills or other individual or specific variables, but rather is an interrelated measure. Teams, therefore, should carefully review evaluation data and make student-centered decisions on this important issue.

Teams judge whether the lack of progress is a result of the disability.

ED 1

Teams must look at the evaluation results to see whether the lack of progress is a result of the disability or a result of other factors. Only if the Team determines the lack of progress is connected to a disability or disabilities may the Team continue on to discuss a possible finding of special education eligibility. According to state and Federal regulation, a student may not be found eligible solely because the student is unable to follow the school discipline code, has limited English proficiency, social maladjustment or has lacked reading or math instruction. These reasons may become part of the Team's deliberations, but the essential finding of the Team must be that the lack of progress is, at least in part, a result of the disability(ies).

A student must need special education to be eligible.

ED 1

When making an eligibility determination, Teams must remember that the final question to ask is: Does the student require special education in order to make progress? Special education is defined as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of the student or related services that are necessary to access the general curriculum. Specially designed instruction means that there is a need to adapt the content, methodology, delivery of instruction and/or performance criteria in order for a student to make effective progress.

Related services, are developmental corrective and other supportive services. Within Massachusetts, related services necessary to access the general curriculum are considered special education and may be provided alone or in combination with specially designed instruction.

If the student only requires accommodations, then that student is not eligible for special education. Accommodations are adaptations to presentation or setting that can typically and easily occur in general education (such as preferential seating, wearing eyeglasses, giving extra time on tests).

A Team may find a student eligible for special education services.

ED 1

If a student is found eligible for special education, then an IEP must be developed. In most cases, development of the IEP will occur within a single meeting after the determination of eligibility has been made.

A Team may also make a finding of no eligibility.
ED 1 If the student does not have a disability, if the student does not show a lack of progress, if the student does show a lack of progress but it is not due to a disability or if the student does not require special education, then the team should make a finding of no eligibility. However, as a matter of good educational practice, the Team might reasonably discuss the appropriate next steps to ensure that any identified problem or concern is addressed by the school district. Most problems are best addressed as soon as possible and such early action may well be critical to the ultimate success of the student.

If the student has a disability, one such next step may be the development of a 504 Accommodation Plan. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. This law protects a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Major life activities include walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, caring for self and performing manual tasks. Teams that convene to consider special education eligibility are often composed of members who may be able to develop an appropriate plan under Section 504 – such an action could expedite services for a student in need.

Parents also have the right to appeal any eligibility determination to the Bureau of Special Education Appeals, including a finding of no eligibility. Parents may contact the Bureau directly or request district assistance in contacting this agency.

Parents should be asked if they agree with the evaluation findings.
ED 1 Team members should check a parent's understanding of the evaluation data and their agreement with it. If parents disagree with a particular school assessment, parents may have a right to an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). School district personnel should be familiar with the rights and responsibilities associated with the IEE.

Extended Evaluation is an option if evaluations prove inconclusive.
EE 1 If evaluation information is inconclusive and the Team has found the student eligible for special education, the Team may want to consider an Extended Evaluation. An
EE 2 Extended Evaluation may be used, with parental permission, to gather additional information needed to write an IEP.

Teams must be aware of the state regulatory restrictions placed on the use of Extended Evaluation. Extended Evaluation cannot be used for the following purposes:

- To extend the evaluation timelines for required assessments
- To deny programs or services to a student
- To constitute a temporary placement

If a student has been found eligible for special education services, the Team should write a partial or full IEP in conjunction with an Extended Evaluation Form. This action will ensure, with parental acceptance of the IEP, that a student is not denied services determined necessary at a Team Meeting.

An extended evaluation may run from one to eight weeks. The Team may decide to meet during that evaluation period. However, the Team must reconvene as soon as the additional evaluation data is available in order to review assessment data and/or complete the writing of the IEP.

ED 1

The Team reconsiders eligibility when a student is reevaluated.

When a student is referred for a reevaluation, the school district, under Federal regulation, should first review existing evaluation data. If no additional information is needed to determine whether the student continues to be eligible, the school district may request that a parent waive particular types of assessment(s). The parent may either consent to waive the assessment(s) or may choose to have the assessment completed regardless of the recommendation for waiver.

Note: if the district suspects that the student may no longer require special education services, then a reevaluation must occur since no decision to remove eligibility can occur without current and complete evaluation information, although no such evaluation is required before a student graduates from high school.

At the reevaluation Team meeting, the Team after determining the existence of a disability(ies) must decide whether the student would continue to make progress in school without the continued provision of special education services. A student's progress should not be judged solely on the completion of IEP goals or report card grades.

Suggested Practices:

- Review student folder to determine what assessment information is currently available.
- Develop standard school district practices that encourage parents and teachers to discuss their concerns.
- Develop a list of needed assessments that will fully address all areas of suspected disability.
- Determine, in consultation with parents, which assessments should be completed by school staff and which assessments, if any, need to be completed by outside agencies or evaluators.
- Establish a relationship with outside evaluators who can assist in completing needed assessments.
- Provide evaluators clear directions on required report format and content.
- Provide staff and parent training on disability types and steps to making eligibility determinations.

Writing the Individualized Education Program is the second step in the process.

After finding a student eligible for special education services, the Team develops the IEP.

IEP development is a student driven process.



Once a student has been found eligible for special education services, an IEP must be developed. The IEP must address the unique needs of the student and, therefore, must be tailored to the individual student needs as determined through the evaluation process. Good IEPs will be responsive to parents concerns and the student's vision and will assist the student as much as possible to move towards independence.

The IEP is intended to be a useful document that helps educators and parents to understand the student and how best to work with that student. In other words, the IEP should describe how the student learns, how the student best demonstrates that learning and how the school staff and student will work together to help the student learn better.

The IEP is not intended to be a daily, weekly, or monthly lesson plan but should provide a clear picture of the student's current abilities and needs and should identify key goals and objectives that provide a direction and focus for the student's learning over the next IEP period. If carefully and thoughtfully written, the IEP will serve as a vehicle for improving the educational experience and results for a student with disabilities.

Although IEP development is a student driven, individualized process, there are some central concepts that should be adhered to during a well-managed Team meeting. A well-managed Team meeting will:

- Obtain parent/student input.
- Think about the student's future dreams and goals.
- Understand how the student's disability(ies) affect the student's learning.
- Know how the student performs today.
- Address only the areas that are affected by the disability(ies).
- Provide a focus for the student's learning during the designated IEP period.
- Reflect high expectations for the student.
- Stay as close as appropriate to what the student's peers are learning and doing.
- Identify supports and services the student needs for success.

The IEP forms the basis for the placement decision. Therefore, the IEP must be developed in its entirety before placement is decided. The placement decision must be based on a careful reflection of the IEP, including the services that the Team has identified as necessary, and the impact of the disability on the student's learning. Finally, the Team must be mindful of the requirements related to placement in the least restrictive environment. Teams need to remember that removal from the classroom solely because of needed program modifications is not permissible (34 CFR 300.550(b)(2)). Only after the needs of the child and the types of services have been discussed by the Team and agreed to in an IEP can the placement be effectively chosen by the Team.

**The IEP is written to fit the student.
The placement is chosen to fit the IEP.**

The IEP under no circumstances should be written "to fit" a particular placement. Teams must remember this critical fact when moving through the Team process to ensure that the IEP is written to address the unique needs of the student.

Team meetings should be used as a communication vehicle.

During an IEP Meeting, Team members share information and discuss the needs of the student. All members should listen carefully and share information that brings about a better understanding of the student. The discussion should connect one IEP element to the next and ensure internal consistency within the produced document.

A Team meeting works better if the meeting is small and focused on the student. A Team meeting works better if its members are knowledgeable about the district, special education law and the student. A Team meeting works better if parents are respected participants, giving and receiving information that will assist them in making informed decisions.

All Team members should be treated as equal partners in the process. An atmosphere of mutual respect opens the lines of communication and builds a strong base for ongoing cooperation between parents, school district personnel and other Team members.

School systems that routinely send evaluation reports to parents in advance of a meeting find that the Team discussion is more focussed and can immediately start with a common base of information rather than a lengthy recitation of evaluation results. This strategy allows for more time to brainstorm and to write the IEP itself. Parents then leave the meeting with a more solid understanding of their child and how the school system plans to help their child improve.

The IEP is a contract between the school district and the parent.

The IEP should reflect the decisions made at the Team meeting and should serve as a contract between the school system and parent(s). For that reason, the document must clearly communicate to parents the needs of their child, the steps the school district will take to address these needs and the progress their child is expected to make during the set IEP period. The IEP must also be written in generally understandable language and free of educational jargon.

The IEP does not serve as a guarantee of progress. However, school districts must be aware that IDEA-97 clearly states that a school district must make a good faith effort to assist the student in making progress towards the IEP goals.

Each Team meeting is unique.

A Team meeting is a group process and an individual inquiry process that makes no two Team meetings alike as each group considers what is best for each distinctive student. The Team process will be affected by the differences among the individuals attending each meeting, by the differences among schools and school districts, by the differences among the types of evaluation data being considered and by multiple other factors. Each group will arrive at different answers, ideas and services to address a student's needs and will write the IEP in a different manner. All of these differences should be expected and encouraged, as there is no single correct way to serve a student or to write an IEP.

At times, Team members are hesitant to make a recommendation for fear of setting a precedent. However, this fear is ungrounded because no precedents can be set when the Team responds to the unique and individual needs of an eligible student.

The IEP should serve to focus the special education services.

The IEP will better serve the student if it focuses on what will make the biggest difference for that student and not on every aspect of every school day. The IEP should concentrate on offsetting or reducing the problems resulting from the student's

disability that interfere with learning and educational performance. Therefore, Team members need to narrow their focus as they discuss the contents of the IEP. The IEP elements found within the initial pages of the document assist the Team in developing a focussed IEP.

Parents and/or students need to give input into IEP development.

- IEP 1 Parent and/or student input becomes the first indicator for defining the IEP focus. The placement of this item as the first order of business is deliberate and in keeping with the importance given to parent input in IDEA-97. Parents need to be asked to share their biggest concerns and their hopes for their child's accomplishments, as the parent perspective is unique and important to the Team's work. Parents, without exception, have a view of the student that cannot be duplicated by even experienced evaluators.

Teams should keep a whole child perspective.

- IEP 1 The Team must next review the student's strengths, interests, personal attributes and personal accomplishments as well as key evaluation results to enable Team members to keep a whole child perspective when writing the IEP. Teams should avoid a segmented look at the student where individual skills or problems are identified in isolation. The Team will want to keep the big picture in mind and plan to use the student's strengths to best advantage in planning steps for the next IEP period.

When developing an IEP for a student with an existing IEP, the Team should always review the content of the existing IEP as they begin developing a new IEP. The new IEP should be revised and updated as needed to shift goals and services and to demonstrate a progression of learning. Each year's measurable annual goals should clearly show a step by step increase in a student's learning outcomes. Also, if necessary, any lack of expected progress needs to be discussed and addressed.

The vision statement directs the Team's attention towards the future.

- IEP 1 The vision statement focuses the Team on the future of the student. The Team steps back from the here and now to take a broader, long-range perspective as it looks to where this student is headed in the future. Developing the vision statement helps the Team balance between the immediate concerns and the hopes and dreams for the future. Knowing where the student is headed makes it easier for the Team to eventually determine what progress needs to be made this year. Teams must remember the ultimate goal for all students with disabilities is independence and productive lives.

Depending on the student's age, the Team needs to look one to five years in the future when writing the vision statement. As the student becomes older and more involved in transition planning, the vision statement becomes the hopes and dreams of the student and not the parent and Team. Also, the statement for older students must conform to Federal regulation and be based on the student's preference and interests and include desired outcomes in adult living and post-secondary and work environments.

For younger students, the Team might want to project over a shorter span of time and concentrate on times when the student might be transitioning from preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school or from a more restrictive environment to a less restrictive environment. For these younger students, the adults take the more active role in developing the vision statement.

Transition planning is integrated into the development of the IEP.

Transition planning is more effective when the planning is an integral part of the student's IEP and the student's program. Transition planning is required under

IEP 1 Federal law and becomes a major Team focus when a student reaches fourteen years
IEP 2 of age.

IEP 3 The vision statement aids Team members in determining the student's transition
IEP 4 needs, transition goals and transition services. As a student approaches graduation,
IEP 5 the Team must also consider the student's graduation status, the possibility of a
IEP 8 referral for Chapter 688 services (services from adult human service agencies) and the
involvement of adult service agencies. As the student nears or reaches age seventeen,
the Team must discuss the transfer of rights at age of majority.

The Team is required to write IEPs that prepare students with disabilities for independence and employment and other post-school activities. The commitment of students, parents, educators, adult agency staff and community members is required to help students reach their visions and be active participants and contributors to society.

Present Levels of Educational Performance must be clearly written.

The Team will also use the assessment information and their discussion of the student's present levels of educational performance (PLEP) to focus the direction of the IEP goals and services. The PLEPs must be based on current, relevant
IEP 2 information about the student obtained from a variety of sources.
IEP 3

The Team first clarifies the educational needs that result from the student's disability(ies). In other words, the Team describes the impact of the student's disability(ies) on student's participation in the general curriculum and the school. To keep the IEP focused, only areas affected by the disability should be described. Clear descriptions of how the disability(ies) impacts progress will better assist Teams in determining the most appropriate and individualized accommodations and special education services.

The general curriculum must be addressed in all students' IEPs.

IEP 2 The IEP should be considered a primary tool for enhancing a student's involvement and progress in the general curriculum. All students regardless of the nature or severity of the disability or their educational setting must have access to and progress in the general curriculum. As defined by Federal Regulation, the general curriculum is the curriculum used with nondisabled children.

Therefore, all students with disabilities whether they receive their education in general education classrooms, resource rooms, public day schools, private day schools, residential schools or institutional settings must have access to this curriculum. The general curriculum can no longer be viewed as a curriculum that is used only within general education classrooms. School districts as well as other special education settings that receive public funds are responsible for aligning their school and classroom curriculums with curriculum frameworks provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education.

Within Massachusetts, the general curriculum is defined by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in the following areas: English Language Arts, Mathematics, History and Social Sciences and Science and Technology. Other curriculum areas can and should be discussed if the student's disability affects progress in those areas.

School districts must maintain high standards for children with disabilities. These standards should be consistent with the expectations for all students in the educational system. Addressing a student's academic achievement is a primary aim of special education.

General educators play a critical role in the Team process as the experts on the general curriculum and the general education environment. Their participation in the Team process is required under Federal Regulation.

The IEP must also address areas of other educational need.

IEP 3

Student participation and progress in the general curriculum is a core concept of IDEA-97; however, it is not the only required purpose of special education. The Team must also take a broader look at the student's overall involvement within the school including participation in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities and, for preschool students, participation in appropriate activities to ascertain other areas of need. The Team may consider how students communicate with others, how the students' behavior affects their learning or the learning of others, how assistive technology could support effective progress or how the students' disabilities affect transition to post-secondary activities.

When discussing how a student's disability(ies) affects transition to post-secondary activities, the Team must ensure that its discussion relates to the Vision Statement based on the student's preferences and interests (on IEP 1) and considers vocational education options that include a full range of occupational and career development possibilities. A Team that concludes a student's IEP should include vocational education must ensure that the student's IEP addresses how the disability would impact vocational education and include measurable, annual goal(s) and the necessary special education, related services and supplementary aids and services needed for the student to reach the vocational goal.

However, Teams must remember that IEP development is a consideration of service needs and is not a placement decision. A placement decision may be made only after the IEP is fully developed. Therefore, choosing to consider vocational education on the IEP does not constitute a placement decision to a vocational technical school and if such misunderstanding occurs during IEP development it should be corrected.

The Federal law requires the consideration of a variety of special factors but the list of factors is not exhaustive. IEP 3 lists elements required by Federal law for consideration as a prompt to thorough IEP development. However, the listing does not require that all elements be discussed for all students. Teams must consider the listed elements and rely on the evaluation material and their own judgment in determining what educational needs that result from the disability should be included in the IEP.

Some needs will be addressed through accommodations.

**IEP 2
IEP 3**

Accommodations are modifications that are typically provided by general educators within the general education environment. Preferential seating, pencil grip use or cooperative learning strategies are some examples of these kinds of typical accommodations. Accommodations do not involve modifying the material content but do allow students to receive information in a more effective manner.

Not every student who is eligible for special education will require accommodations. The Team must reflect on the affect the disability(ies) has on educational progress and then identify accommodations, if any are needed, for the student to make effective progress. Some students with disabilities may require accommodations in only one curriculum or program area, others may require extensive accommodations, or none at all. The Team's attention at this point should be on what the school district can do to help the student.

IEP 2
IEP 3

Specially designed instruction addresses more complex needs.

Specially designed instruction addresses the unique needs of the student that result from the student's disability. Specially designed instruction is a modification not regularly provided for students in the general education program. Special education services will usually include "specially designed instruction unless the students only require a related service(s) to access the general curriculum. However, not all students will need specially designed instruction in all areas of educational need and not all students will require all types of specially designed instruction.

Specially designed instruction includes modifications that affect content, delivery of instruction, methodology and/or performance criteria and are necessary to assist the student in participating and learning. This instruction is designed by or with an appropriately credentialed special education teacher or related service provider.

For some students, teachers may need to present information through the use of manipulatives or may need to give oral rather than written quizzes. For other students, teachers may need to select and teach only important key concepts and then alter evaluation activities and criteria to match this content change.

In each case, the Team must decide whether an instructional methodology should be included in a student's IEP. Generally, if the methodology is an essential part of what is required to meet the individualized needs of the student, the methodology should be included. For instance, if a student has a learning disability and has not learned to read using traditional methods, then another method may be required. When including such an IEP recommendation, the Team should describe the components of the appropriate type of methodology as opposed to naming a specific methodology.

The Team should tailor their suggestions to the unique needs and circumstances of the student and keep their attention centered on what the school district can do to help the student. Educators will be better assisted in implementing the IEP and improving the education results for students with clear and specific recommendations.

IEP 4

Teams must connect current performance to measurable annual goals.

The IEP should be written with a direct connection between the current performance levels and the measurable annual goals. The current performance levels state what the student can currently do and identify key stumbling blocks. The goals state what the student will accomplish by the end of the IEP period. The current performance levels become the starting points for determining the goals and the goals become the end points for student accomplishment for the IEP period.

The Team now begins to shift their attention. The Team began by paying attention to how the student participates in the school and what the school district will do for the student. Now the Team members begin to pay attention to what the school district will expect the student to do and accomplish given the assistance the student will receive over the IEP period.

Therefore, Teams need to be prepared to identify how students perform today across the important and selected IEP focus areas. In well-written IEPs, these more specific statements of progress will directly reflect information found within the PLEPs written earlier within the Team meeting.

The IEP focus areas are determined, as previously mentioned, through parent and student input, through the vision statement and through how the disability(ies) affect progress in the general curriculum and other aspects of school life. The focus areas should be selected based on what will make the biggest difference in the student's school experience.

Greater specificity in the current performance statements will result in clearer and more helpful goals. The following examples will more clearly illustrate this point.

	Less Helpful Statements:	More Helpful Statements:
Current Performance Level	Joe is not committed to his school program.	Joe submits fewer than half of his required homework assignments. He starts most assignments but lacks the organizational skills to complete them by the required due dates.
Goal	Joe will improve his attitude towards school.	Joe will regularly submit all required homework assignments on time.

	Less Helpful Statements:	More Helpful Statements:
Current Performance Level	Jill has a short attention span.	Jill typically interrupts the work of others five times per hour. She interrupts when she requires teacher assistance.
Goal	Jill will stay more focused on her classwork.	Jill will raise her hand to get teacher assistance during quiet work times.

IEP goals are written to make the greatest difference for students.

IEP 4

Goals must be measurable and must specify the expected knowledge, skill, behavior or attitude to be achieved within the IEP period, typically one school year. Goal statements address priority needs and focus the instruction over the next year. The Team will have to make choices as to what can reasonably be accomplished in a single year's time. The Team must ensure the selected goals are the ones that matter to the parent, to the future of the student and in making the biggest difference for the student in the school.

Most IEPs should include only three to four direction-setting goals. However, the Team is responsible for making the final determination of the number and types of goals that are included in the IEP. Remember, though, an IEP is not a daily, weekly or monthly lesson plan but rather is a guide that supports the development of these other plans.

Goals must be challenging to ensure that students with disabilities are being held to high standards and are being adequately prepared for independence and productive

lives. Yet, they must also be measurable and attainable. If a goal is being repeated year after year, there is something wrong. Most likely, the goal is not an annual goal and is not written in measurable terms. If the same goal is being repeated year after year, the goal is too vague or too broad and, in reality, becomes meaningless to judging a student's progress.

Goals need to spell out how the Team will determine if the student has met the goal. If a goal does not include evaluation strategies and/or criteria, the Team can not see whether the student has accomplished what was intended. The evaluation procedures should specify how the student's performance, resulting from instruction, will be documented.

With practice, Teams will be able to write clearer and more effective goals. Teams may want to ask themselves these questions to prompt the writing of more helpful goals:

- What components should be included in the goal?
- What does the skill look like when the student has achieved the goal?
- How might the student demonstrate that the goal has been achieved?
- How will this demonstration be assessed?

The key to writing good goals is to recognize them as a test at the end of the year and to write them so that someone else could understand, implement and evaluate them.

Goals need not address areas that are not affected by the disability(ies). Nor should the goals clutter the IEP with specific details for each content standard. Rather the goals should focus on the strategies the student needs for making progress in the general curriculum and other areas of need.

Goals must be individualized. Goals must be based on the student's past experience, current performance, rate of learning and educational needs, which rules out simply paraphrasing curricular content areas. For example, if a student is not making progress across the curriculum due to a reading disability then a measurable, annual goal should be written for reading. However, if another student has sound reading skills but is not making progress across the curriculum due to a writing disability, then a reading goal should not be added to the IEP but a goal addressing the less well developed writing skills should be included.

Some goals may reflect the need to learn knowledge, skills, behaviors or attitudes that may be integrated across curriculum areas. Yet, some student needs will be best addressed by a single goal solely directed to that individual need. The Team will need to make that type of important judgment as they cooperatively work to develop the IEP.

Objectives and benchmarks further clarify goal statements.

IEP 4 If the current performance levels are the starting points and the goals are the end points, then the objectives and benchmarks should be thought of as the steps between the starting and end points. Depending upon the needs of the student and the makeup of the goal, the Team may choose to break down the goal into objectives, benchmarks or a combination of the two. These statements restate the knowledge, skill, behavior or attitude to be achieved but in time periods of less than the length of the IEP period.

Objectives, as defined by Federal regulation, break skills within the annual goal into discrete components. The benchmarks describe the amount of progress a student is

expected to make within a specified segment of the IEP period. The benchmarks establish expected performance levels that allow for regular checks of progress that coincide with progress-reporting periods. Both lay out sequential, logical steps towards reaching the annual goal and help organize the instruction for the IEP period.

If we remember Joe (described above):

Current Performance Level	Annual Goal
Joe submits fewer than half of his required homework assignments. He starts most assignments but lacks the organizational skills to complete them by the required due dates.	Joe will regularly submit all required homework assignments on time.

Some reasonable steps toward reaching the goal might be these:

- | |
|---|
| 1. Joe will learn to use organizational templates developed by his teacher that identify the steps necessary to begin and complete assigned homework tasks. |
| 2. Joe will learn to develop and use organizational templates himself. |

Not every goal will require only two objectives, some will more naturally have three or four. Not every goal will need “objectives,” some will more naturally fit with benchmarks. It is not important that Teams differentiate between objectives and benchmarks. It is not important that all goals have the same number of steps (objectives/benchmarks). What is important is that each annual goal has accompanying objectives/benchmarks that will indicate that progress is being made toward that goal.

Measurable goals are the key to identifying progress.

IEP 4

Fewer goals make it more possible to see the changes in a student and to determine whether the student is really making the hoped for progress. Goals, then, can be used to measure student progress but can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of aids and services. Therefore, well-written goals will help the Team more effectively consider how to adjust services and aids to prompt better results.

Progress reports reflect steps taken towards annual goals.

PR 1

Progress reports must be sent to parents at least as often as parents are informed of their nondisabled children’s progress. By Federal regulation, progress reports must answer the following two questions for each goal:

- What is the student’s progress toward the annual goal?
- Is the progress sufficient to enable the student to achieve the annual goal by the end of the IEP period?

Team members should respond to the mandated questions by following these steps when writing their progress reports:

- Specify what the student has been working on.
- List what the student has achieved.
- Indicate any stumbling blocks to progress.
- Project whether the student will reach the annual goal if progress continues at its current pace.

Progress reports are tools that school districts use to communicate with parents. When writing these reports, school personnel should use language that is generally understandable and should avoid using educational jargon.

Meaningful progress reports not only depend on well-written goals but also depend on clearly written descriptions of the special education services and accurate and precise current performance levels. Teams must remember that the IEP process is cyclical and interdependent with student success tied to the effective completing of each step in the process.

An exemplary progress report would not only include the description of student progress but also the refinements to existing in-class strategies required to address any lack of progress. If the lack of progress cannot be addressed through in-class refinements, the district must consider why progress is not being made, and, if appropriate, the district must reconvene the Team. The Team then will discuss the lack of expected progress and responsively revise the IEP.

Progress reports may prompt the Team to amend an IEP.

IEP-A 1 If a lack of expected progress continues past the first progress report and subsequent
IEP-A 2 in-class refinements, the Team should make IEP adjustments and may want to consider rewriting a goal to set a different and more attainable standard.

If a student is making more progress than projected, progress reports may make recommendations on next steps. Sometimes it may be appropriate to amend the IEP to add additional annual goals.

Progress reporting may coincide with an Annual Review Meeting.

PR 1 Documentation from an Annual Review Meeting should reflect the student's progress towards the existing IEP goals. Therefore, Teams will want to refer to the most current progress report during such review meetings. However, the Annual Review Meeting **may never substitute** for a required, written progress report even if the two activities coincide.

At the Annual Review Meeting, the Team should review IEP progress towards the previously developed annual goals, adjust the IEP in any necessary section to ensure the information is current, and add new goals for the next IEP period. Each IEP period's measurable annual goals should clearly show a step by step increase in a student's learning outcomes, a progression of learning.

Recommended services should assist students to succeed.

IEP 5 Services for each student must be individually considered and recommended and should not depend on known or existing services. Services within the IEP may assist the student with the following:

- To reach the IEP goals
- To be involved and progress in the general curriculum
- To participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities
- To allow the student to participate with nondisabled students while working towards the IEP goals

Overall, the services and aids should lead the student to success and to greater independence. To accomplish this aim, services may be provided directly to the student and/or in behalf of the student. In others words, the supplemental aids and services recommended to benefit the student may be provided to the student, to the

parents and/or to the school staff. Services that are provided to parents and school staff members should help them assist the student in reaching IEP goals.

Supplemental aids and services should, to the maximum extent possible, allow the student to work within the general education environment along with nondisabled peers. The requirement for the student to work within the least restrictive environment is regardless of the nature and severity of the student's disability. When writing an IEP, Team members must ensure such aids and services are recommended to ensure consistency with IDEA-97 mandates.

Teams must justify nonparticipation in general education program.

IEP 6

To reinforce, IDEA's strong preference for involvement in the general education environment, the law requires a clear statement justifying why removal is necessary when removal occurs. Teams no longer need to identify the steps for moving a student to a less restrictive environment. Rather Team members must clearly identify times when a student is removed from the general education classroom and give good reason for such removal.

Given reasons should focus on the benefit the student will receive from being outside of the general education environment. Teams will run counter to Federal mandates if their justification center on why the school district cannot provide the services within the general education environment. For instance, the general education classroom not being large enough for the speech therapist to provide specially designed instruction within the same room or the speech therapist's schedule only allows for small group, pullout services would be inappropriate justifications.

Teams are providing their justification during IEP development before the placement decisions have been made. Therefore, the justification should refer to any special education and related services recommended to occur in other settings during the service delivery discussion and not to potential placements.

Teams must describe when a student's school day or year is modified.

IEP 6

Most students with disabilities will attend school on the same daily and yearly schedule as their nondisabled peers. However, in certain circumstances, a Team will recommend a schedule modification. The Team may decide the student requires a shortened school day, shortened school year, longer school day, longer school year or residential services. In each case, the IEP must describe the modification and the reasons for such modification.

Typically a shortened day or school year may only be considered if a physician recommends such a change due to the student's health and consequent inability to participate in a full day program of instruction. Other reasons for a shortened day or year may exist but Teams should exercise extreme caution when making this type of recommendation as it may limit a student's ability to make effective progress, to reach higher standards, to meet graduation requirements, and to receive FAPE.

Extended school day and year services must be considered and recommended on an individual basis and the school may not routinely deny such services nor establish policies that deny such services without a consideration of the needs of the individual student. Not all students will require extended services and not all students who require extended services will require the same extended services. Even though school districts need not provide extended services to all students, school districts must make sure that their policies or procedures do not limit the individual consideration and provision of such services.

The Team's consideration of extended school day and year services must be based on (1) the unique nature of any specially designed instruction or related services needed due to the disability of the student or (2) if the student has demonstrated, or is likely to demonstrate, substantial regression due to a break in service (such as a summer vacation period). In regard to regression, all students "regress"—lose progress, forget, revert to previous behavior—to some extent between school years. It must be determined whether a student's regression would likely be substantial, and whether the student would require a greater than usual time to "recoup"—to get back to the level the student had achieved before a break in service. These decisions as with earlier IEP decisions must be made by the Team based on the needs of the individual student and regardless of the nature and severity of the disability.

If residential services are recommended, they must be recommended based on a determination that the student essentially requires a 24-hour program in order to make educational progress. If so, the Team must include goals and services in the appropriate IEP sections that reflect that extended program need. Additionally, the Team must describe under Schedule Modifications how the day education services of the IEP will coordinate with the residential services of the IEP.

Transportation is a related service.

IEP 6 Transportation is considered a related service under the Federal statute and needs to be provided to ensure that students receive educational benefit from special education. A recommendation for a student to receive transportation, as with other IEP decisions, relates back to the affect of the student's disability(ies) on transportation. A Team must decide whether a student requires regular transportation or special transportation.

Regular transportation is the typical way students get to school.

IEP 6 Team members must ascertain whether the disability(ies) prevents the student from getting to the local school in the same manner as the student's nondisabled peers would get to the local school. If the nondisabled peers in the student's neighborhood walk to the school, then does the student's disability(ies) prevent the student from walking to school? If the nondisabled peers in that student's neighborhood ride a bus to the school, then does the student's disability(ies) prevent the student from riding the yellow school bus? If the Team answers no to these questions, then they recommend regular transportation.

As the exact placement for the student is not yet known and as IDEA's strong preference is for students to be educated in the general education environment in their neighborhood schools, the Team responds to the transportation questions based on the assumption that the student will attend the local school. If after a placement decision is made, the student is placed away from the local school, the school district will be required to provide transportation.

Special transportation is required as a result of the disability.

IEP 6 Special transportation includes riding on a regular transportation vehicle with prescribed modifications and/or specialized equipment and precautions and on a special transportation vehicle with prescribed modifications and/or specialized equipment and precautions. As with other services, transportation should be provided in the least restrictive environment.

Therefore, the Team should always discuss first whether the student can be safely transported in a regular transportation vehicle with some

accommodations or assistance due to the student's disability(ies). For instance, a student with cognitive impairment may be able to ride the yellow school bus to school along with the student's nondisabled peers if the bus stops at the student's home for pick up and drop off as opposed to the traditional bus stop four streets away.

Only if modified regular transportation is not a reasonable alternative should the Team move on to recommend a special transportation vehicle. Again, the Team must carefully review and include in the IEP any needed modifications, specialized equipment or precautions for this type of transportation.

Furthermore, the Team has been given, under state regulation, specific transportation related issues to discuss and record within a student's IEP when special transportation is recommended. Team members should be prepared to specify the following:

- Whether a student who uses a wheelchair should regularly transfer in and out of a conventional vehicle to or from a wheelchair for therapeutic or for independence training;
- Whether the student requires assistance in or out of the home, on or off the vehicle, and in or out of school;
- Whether the student has a particular need or problem that may cause difficulties during transportation.

Parents may be eligible for transportation cost reimbursement.

IEP 6

Teams decide only whether students will receive regular or special transportation. Parents, once they receive an IEP and a placement decision, may decide whether to transport their child to the school where the child is placed. If parents make such a decision, they are entitled, under certain circumstances, to reimbursement at the state approved mileage rate.

If the IEP recommends regular transportation and the student is placed at the neighborhood school, parents who choose to transport their child are not eligible for transportation reimbursement. If the IEP recommends regular transportation and the student is placed away from the neighborhood school, parents who choose to transport their child are eligible for transportation reimbursement. If the IEP recommends special transportation regardless of the placement location and parents choose to transport their child, they are eligible for transportation reimbursement.

Students will participate in state and district-wide assessments.

IEP 7

Eligible students must be included in state and district-wide assessment programs. IDEA-97 designates the Team as the group responsible for determining how a student will participate in these types of assessments.

For each district or statewide assessment, the Team must first decide whether the student can take the on-demand test as given. If not, Team members must ascertain whether the student can take the on-demand test with accommodations. Team members should ensure that their accommodation recommendations in this IEP section coincide with their earlier recommendations included in the PLEPs.

If the Team feels the student should not take any one of the on-demand assessments even with accommodations, then the Team must recommend and discuss why the student is being recommended to be assessed through an alternate assessment. Since

Massachusetts has adopted state models for alternate assessments, after recording the reason for such assessment, Teams need only indicate that state alternate assessment models will be used.


All students must be included in the statewide assessment system. No student can be exempted even if a parent prefers the student not be included.

Suggested Practices:

- Ensure that the Team has all the evaluation information needed to make the required IEP decisions.
- Routinely send evaluation reports to parent(s) and Team members before the meeting is convened.
- Set a meeting agenda for each Team meeting.
- Provide a reference set of IEP forms for each Team member.
- Eliminate educational jargon within IEPs.
- As the school district develops the technology to do so, we recommend at the end of a Team meeting that the parent is provided with a copy of the developed IEP. If a full, neat copy is unavailable at the end of the meeting, we recommend that parents receive the sections related to goals and objectives, and services, even if such information is provided in rough draft form.

Making a placement decision is the third step in the process.

The Team decides the placement after the IEP is written. The school district must work cooperatively with the Team to implement the placement determination, and must ensure that final placement is made consistent with the IEP, least restrictive environment requirements and requirements related to giving preference to approved programs and programs in Massachusetts.

 ***Placement is decided after the IEP is written.***
The IEP forms the basis for the placement decision. Once the Team has decided on the student's needs and required services, the Team decides which placement is required to implement the IEP. The placement should be chosen individually for each student from a full continuum of placement options based on the most appropriate placement to provide the services on the student's IEP.

A placement in the general education environment is presumed.
IDEA-97 presumes the first placement option considered for all eligible students will be the general education classroom with the use of supplemental aids and services.
PL 1 Students may not be denied education in age-appropriate general education
PL 2 classrooms solely because the students' education requires modification to the general curriculum.

Teams must first consider if the eligible student may be served in the school and classroom the student would attend if not disabled. Other options should be considered only when the nature and severity of the disability would prevent satisfactory achievement within the general education environment.

An in-district placement should always be considered and recommended before an out-of-district placement is considered. If the Team determines that an out-of-district placement is necessary, the Team must be mindful of the requirement to give preference to approved programs located in Massachusetts.

It is worth noting that if the Team determines an out-of-district placement is required, most such programs are not within the jurisdiction of the public school district and specific program locations cannot be guaranteed. In such cases, the public school district must work cooperatively with the Team to implement the placement determination, and may have to consider referrals to multiple program locations.

In most cases, the Team who wrote the IEP will decide the placement immediately after the IEP is developed. If the student's needs and corresponding services are complex and the Team is considering an initial out-of-district program or a different setting for a student currently in an out-of-district placement, a subsequent meeting might be scheduled to finalize the placement decision. In all cases, the parent continues to be an equal participant in the Team process.

School districts must notify parents about graduation plans.
Graduation, under IDEA-97, is considered a change of placement. Parents must be notified when a Team recommends this placement change. Parents may be notified at the same time the IEP is written. However, if a school district chooses to notify separately from the proposed final IEP, the district must ensure that parents are notified in a reasonable amount of time before the proposed graduation date. The Department would recommend that this notification occurs no later than the fall preceding the proposed graduation.
IEP 8

Suggested Practices:

- Train staff members in the importance of developing the IEP before making a placement decision.
- Develop a full continuum of services at the school district level.

Summary

Team members need to know key features of the Massachusetts IEP Process.

With a thorough understanding of the IEP process, Teams can accomplish the intended goal of better results for students with disabilities. Therefore, school districts should thoughtfully plan how they intend to include special educators, general educators, parents and students in their training activities.

Teams must do the right thing.

Law and regulation tightly control the IEP process. The Massachusetts IEP was developed to ensure that Teams are in compliance with the myriad rules and regulations related to the IEP. However, the best reason to carefully follow the process and its key elements, as listed below, is to ensure positive student-centered results:

Key Elements of IEP Process

- ☐ Assessing in all areas related to the suspected disability(ies)
- ☐ Considering access to the general curriculum
- ☐ Considering how the disability affects the student's learning
- ☐ Developing goals and objectives that make the biggest difference for the student
- ☐ And ultimately choosing a placement in the least restrictive environment

All of these things are not just the law, they are the right thing to do for our students.