Advocacy Brief from
National Center for Learning Disabilities
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Advocacy Brief

Understanding the Standards-based Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Many states and local school districts are embracing a new approach to developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students receiving special education. This approach—most often referred to as "standards-based IEPs"—is driven by changes to both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the current Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Understanding this standards-based approach to IEP development and how it can benefit students with LD is the focus of this Advocacy Brief.

While the requirement that every student receiving special education have an IEP is not new, linking the content of a student's IEP to the state's academic standards for the student's enrolled grade is both new and challenging. This approach seeks to raise the learning expectations for students with disabilities—including those with a **specific learning disability (SLD or LD)**—providing opportunities for students to make significant achievement gains. Moving away from the old approach to IEP development, which lacked a focus on closing the student's achievement gap, to a new process that focuses on alignment with what all students are expected to know and do, holds significant promise for students with LD.

Students with LD account for nearly half of all students that school districts determine as eligible for special education under the IDEA. Based on the IDEA's definition of **"specific learning disability"** and the determinations required to find students eligible for this disability category (see box on pg 2), students with LD should be expected to participate in general education curricula and achieve at a proficient level on state assessments, when provided with specially designed instruction and appropriate accommodations.

What is meant by a "standards-based IEP?"

In this Advocacy Brief, the term "**standards-based IEP**" is used to describe a process and document that is framed by the state standards and that contains annual goals aligned with, and chosen to facilitate the student's achievement of, state grade-level academic standards.

Source: Standards-Based IEPs: Implementation in Selected States, Project Forum at NASDSE, May 2006

Several states have begun to use a "standards-based" approach to IEP development. Be sure to check with your state or local school district about any available guidance on this topic.

Requirements of Federal Education Laws

The **IDEA 2004** requires every student eligible for special education to have an IEP in effect at the beginning of each school year.

The student's IEP must contain:

- a statement of the student's present **levels of academic achievement and functional performance** including how the student's disability affects the student's **involvement and progress in the general education curriculum***; and
- a statement of **measurable annual goals**, including academic and functional goals, designed to meet the student's needs that result from the student's disability to enable the student to be **involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum***; and
- a statement of the **special education and related services and supplementary aids and services**, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the student, or on behalf of the student, that will be provided to enable the student to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals and to be **involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum***.

  **While the IDEA does not define the term "general education curriculum" it is generally considered to mean the full range of courses, activities, lessons, and materials routinely used by the general population of a school. The general education curriculum is aligned to the state academic content standards.*

The **IDEA** also requires each state to ensure that all students with disabilities are included in all general state- and district-wide assessments with appropriate accommodations, if necessary, as indicated in their IEPs.

NCLB requires each state to test all students—including students with disabilities—annually in reading/language arts and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school (between grades 10 and 12). These assessments must be based on the state's academic content standards and the academic content standards must be the **same for all students**.

An increasing number of states are requiring students to pass a "high-stakes exam" (or "exit exam") in order to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. **Neither IDEA nor NCLB require exit exams.** These exams also focus on a student's proficiency in relation to state academic standards, so aligning IEPs with state standards helps ensure students with LD will be prepared to earn a regular diploma in a state where an exit exam is required.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) Defined

IDEA 2004 federal regulations define the term "specific learning disability" as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

A determination must be made that the disability is **not primarily the result** of a visual, hearing, or motor disability; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.

Additionally, a determination must be made ensuring that a student's academic underachievement is not due to lack of **appropriate instruction in reading or math**.

The Basics of a Standards-Based IEP

Every state has academic content standards that describe what students are expected to know and be able to do in each content area (such as reading and math) and at each grade level. Used as a framework for teaching, the standards tell teachers **what** to teach, not **how** to teach. Because the content standards do not prescribe **how** to teach, this distinction allows for differentiated instruction for students with special learning needs.

Since each state has developed its own set of academic content standards, there are significant differences across states. Some states have complex standards at each grade level, others are less specific and cover a cluster of required skills. Developing standards-based IEPs requires IEP team members to have an understanding of the state's standards—and if necessary, they need to understand the standards for each grade and for each academic content area.

Present Level of Performance (PLOP)

Every IEP begins with the development of a statement describing the student's current levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLOP). In a standards-based IEP approach, the PLOP clearly indicates how the student is currently performing **in relationship to the standards for the student's enrolled grade**. The PLOP should always be formulated using a variety of objective information and should be written in terms that are both **understandable** and **measurable**.

Sources of information that should be used to develop the PLOP include:

- the student's most recent performance on all state- and district-wide assessments;
- classroom-based testing data;
- progress monitoring data;
- parent information, including their concerns for enhancing the student's education.

The PLOP should also identify the **skills and knowledge** the student has already attained **relative to grade-level standards**. This information is then used to decide what academic standards the student has achieved and what standards remain to be accomplished. Determining the gaps between the student's current level of academic achievement and the expectations for grade-level performance provides a clear picture of what needs to be accomplished in the coming year.

Remember ...

Don't use the student's **disability** as the reason for achievement deficits. Rather, focus on the specific **impact** of the student's disability on achievement of the standards.

The statements made in the IEP should be curriculum-based, not deficit-based (see example below).

Example of what not to write in a PLOP

"Marcus' learning disability affects his progress in the general curriculum."

Example of what to write in a PLOP

"Marcus' weakness in applying strategies, such as making inferences and making complex predictions, affect his progress in comprehending sixth-grade literary materials."

Source: Alabama statewide training on standards-based IEPs (January to March 2006)

Important questions to ask when developing a standards-based PLOP include:

- What are the content standards for this student's enrolled grade?
- Where is this student performing in relation to the grade-level standards?
- What strengths/needs does this student have related to learning the standards?
- How does this student's disability affect involvement and progress in the general curriculum?
- What other needs—beyond academic skill deficits in areas such as organizational skills and social skills—impact the student's involvement and progress in the general curriculum?
- What strategies, accommodations, and/or interventions have been successful in helping this student make progress in the general curriculum?
- What strategies, accommodations, and/or interventions have been unsuccessful?

Annual Goals

The PLOP provides a picture of the student that is then used to develop the student's annual goals linked to state standards. Using information in the PLOP, the IEP team:

- selects an area of weakness;
- identifies the grade level standard affected by the area of weakness;
- writes a goal addressing the grade level standard.

Next, the IEP team:

- identifies the specific skill deficits that impact mastery of the standard;
- writes a goal addressing the skills needed to master the standard.

Every goal must relate to a need identified in the PLOP. In many cases, the goal will require the student to make more than one year's progress in an academic school year in order to close the gap.

Also:

- Annual goals are written only in areas that directly affect involvement and progress in the general education curriculum resulting from the student's disability.
- Goals don't simply restate the state content standard(s). Academic content standards state what **all students** should know and be able to do.
- Goals should be prioritized, clearly indicating the skills and knowledge most important to the student's long-term academic success.

Properly written, standards-based IEP goals make the content standard specific for the student, ensuring that the student will receive instruction at grade level.

Did you know ...

In a 2004 national survey, only seven states required that the IEPs of students with disabilities address state content standards and only 57 percent of special education teachers said they were "very" familiar with their state's academic content for the subjects they teach.

Source: Quality Counts 2004: Count Me In, Education Week 2004

In a 2001 study of 41 state IEP forms, five addressed state and district standards and 29 specifically reflected the statement of how present levels of performance would affect the student's performance in the general curriculum.

Source: Addressing standards and assessment on state IEP forms, Synthesis Report 38, National Center on Educational Outcomes

Important questions to ask when determining standards-based annual goals include:

- What skills must this student learn in order to become proficient on the grade-level standard(s)?
- What access skills related to the grade-level standard(s) must this student learn?
- What growth and progress can be reasonably expected of this student in the coming year?
- Will the expected growth and rate of progress close the achievement gap for this student?

Regardless of whether the annual goal addresses an academic deficit or some other skill that requires improvement, such as organizational skills or behavior, goals must be written in a manner that are strategic, measurable, and attainable and must contain these five critical elements:

- **The student … (WHO)**
- **Will do what … (BEHAVIOR)**
- **To what level or degree … (CRITERION)**
- **Under what conditions … (CONDITIONS)**
- **In what length of time … (TIMEFRAME)**

Here is an example of a properly written goal that contains all of the elements above.

> Jacob **(WHO)** will read 90-110 words of connected text **(CONDITION)** per minute **(BEHAVIOR)** with 100% accuracy **(CRITERION)** at the end of 36 weeks **(TIMEFRAME)**.

Source: Alabama statewide training on standards-based IEPs (January to March 2006)

Special Education, Related Services, Supplementary Aids and Services

In a standards-based IEP approach, the IEP team will provide a statement of the special education and related services the student needs to take the student from the starting point (as described in the PLOP) to the goal of meeting grade-level content standards.

Modifying grade-level expectations is appropriate only when the student's present level of performance is substantially below grade level. Unlike accommodations, modifications change the learning expectations of the standard being taught. Accommodations are tools and procedures that provide equal access to instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. Accommodations lessen the effects of a student's disability but do not change the learning expectation. **Accommodations are not specially designed instruction.**

Special Education

The IDEA defines **special education** as **"specially designed instruction**, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings …" In turn, **specially designed instruction** is defined as "adapting, as appropriate to the child's needs, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; to ensure access of the child to the general education curriculum, so that the child can meet the **educational standards** within the jurisdiction of the public agency that **apply to all children.**"

This definition of **"specially designed instruction"** clearly indicates that the intent is for students with disabilities to be provided with services that allow them to achieve equal to their same age peers without disabilities.

Understanding the difference between accommodations and specially designed instruction is essential when determining the special services a student needs to accomplish IEP goals (see box at right).

Accommodation

Susan will be provided her textbook on tape because she is unable to read.

Specially designed instruction

Susan will be provided intensive instruction in phonemic awareness.

Important questions to ask when developing standards-based specially designed instruction include:

- Which special services will make the biggest impact toward this student achieving grade-level proficiency?
- What is the direct instruction this student needs to support learning the grade-level content standard(s)?
- What accommodations will this student need in order to minimize the effects of his disability?

Benefits of a Standards-Based IEP Approach

Properly implemented, a standards-based approach to developing IEPs blends the best of special education and standards-based education. Aligning a student's special education program with the learning expectations for all students helps ensure that students with disabilities will benefit from school accountability and improvement activities just as all other students. As stated earlier, students with LD need specially designed instruction in order to achieve at grade level. Lowering expectations instead of providing intensive services is an inadequate approach to helping these student progress with his peers.

Students, parents, general and special education teachers, and schools all benefit from this approach.

Students will:

- Receive specially designed instruction linked to the general education curriculum for their enrolled grade;
- Receive appropriate accommodations designed to support their achievement at grade level;
- Be better prepared to earn a regular high school diploma and enjoy success beyond secondary school.

Accommodation vs. Modification

Accommodations are not the same as modifications. Accommodations are intended to lessen the effects of a student's disability; they are not intended to reduce learning expectations.

Changing, lowering or reducing learning expectations is usually referred to as a modification or alteration. Unlike accommodations, consistent use of modifications can increase the gap between the achievement of students with disabilities and the grade level expectations. This may have a negative impact on the student's educational career as the student may not continue to progress and be able to obtain a regular diploma.

Parents will:

- Have a better understanding of what is expected of all students in their child's grade;
- Have a better understanding of where their child is functioning in relationship to what the state expects of a child in the enrolled grade;
- Be able to support their child's learning at home.

General education and special education teachers will:

- Have a closer working relationship as they support student learning;
- Have a better understanding of what students with disabilities need to facilitate grade-level achievement;
- Have higher expectations of students with disabilities.

Schools will:

- Provide special education teachers with improved understanding of academic content standards;
- Provide time for general education and special education teachers to collaborate and support student learning;
- View students with disabilities as capable of achieving grade-level proficiency.

"Accelerated growth toward, and mastery of State-approved grade-level standards are goals of special education."

U.S. Department of Education, 71 Federal Register, pg. 46,653

Linking Standards-based IEPs and Assessment Options

Students with disabilities who participate in state assessments required by NCLB via an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards** are required to have annual goals based on academic content standards for their enrolled grade.

This provision is an important safeguard to ensure that students continue to have access to grade-level instruction, even when their IEP team has determined the need for an alternate assessment.

For additional information on the assessment options see:

Understanding Assessment Options for IDEA-eligible Students under No Child Left Behind, National Center for Learning Disabilities, available at www.LD.org

Learning Opportunities for Your Child Through Alternate Assessments: Alternate Assessments Based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards, National Center on Educational Outcomes, available at www.nceo.info

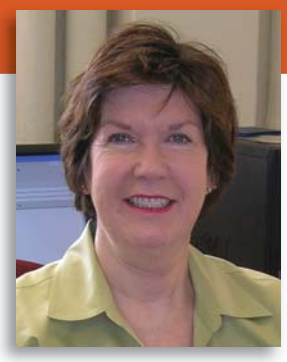
Tips for Parents

☐	Provide expectations and concerns regarding your child's school performance to the IEP team in a organized and concrete manner.
☐	Have an understanding of how your child is performing compared to your state academic content standards for his enrolled grade.
☐	Confirm that all information used to develop your child's present level of performance is based on a variety of information that is objective and documented.
☐	Expect all language in the IEP to be clear, understandable, and focus on what your child can be expected to do, not what your child can't do.
☐	Ask what you can do to reinforce your child's school program and instructional interventions at home, during holiday and summer breaks.

Tips for Educators

☐	Be familiar with the standards for the grade level you are teaching.
☐	Carefully consider the entire standard and decide if the student needs to master all of a particular standard or only part(s) of the standard.
☐	Analyze test results to determine the student's present level of performance relative to the standards for his enrolled grade.
☐	Include the priorities and concerns of the student and the student's parents.
☐	Define the student in terms that translate directly into instructional intervention.
☐	Document all data sources used to develop the student's present level of performance.

An Interview with Dr. Margaret McLaughlin



Dr. McLaughlin is Professor in the Department of Special Education and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland. She directs the doctoral program in Special Education Policy Leadership Development. This program trains personnel to assume key leadership roles in the public and private sectors and become policy makers at the state and national level. She also directs a doctoral program in using large-scale data to conduct policy research. Dr. McLaughlin's research includes investigation of the impact of education reform on students with disabilities and special education programs.

NCLD: Why do you think we are seeing a move toward "standards-based IEPs?"

Dr. McLaughlin: Attempting to develop goals and instruct in the grade level for students who have major gaps in their skills is not a new issue. In 1997, the IDEA amendments required that students access the general curriculum. We have a long tradition in special education of training our teachers to develop IEPs that are somewhat deficit based. We used assessments that were basic skills, standardized instruments, and focused our goals around remedying deficits. However, with the advent of 1997 "access" requirements, and the more recent NCLB requirements and regulations, specifically the NCLB regulation regarding alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards which requires a standards-based IEP approach, grade-level goals have become more and more important.

NCLD: Many seem to think that this is both inappropriate—in conflict with the "individualized nature of special education"—and impossible to do. What is your perspective?

Dr. McLaughlin: The bottom line is that "ready means never." If you wait to get these kids mastering basic skills, then there will never be time to learn and master the critical skills and knowledge they need to progress in their grade-level curriculum. The key question is "How do we take a child who has missing skills, and provide goals and instruction in grade-level content?"

Consider this example: One of our University of Maryland students was working with five boys, 10-11 years old, who had a diagnosis of emotional-behavior disorders. Each had IEP goals consistent with state standards, and they all had math standard goals, grade level appropriate. The U of MD student's task was to work on a curriculum unit on circles, circumference, diameter, and area of a circle, in a 5-6 week unit. These students needed extra help, but all students were working on this grade level unit. She found that all of them had basic skills gaps in computation, mathematics vocabulary, etc. She knew they had two needs: there needed to be instruction on filling the gaps, but not all of those gaps would preclude the students from determining the area of a circle. They also needed to work on the circle unit, according to their IEPs. She made a decision to focus on the basic foundational skills, and after 6 weeks, these students did not gain the knowledge of circles. This decision, and the outcome, is typical; many teachers face this.

NCLD: So, how do IEP teams go about addressing this challenge?

Dr. McLaughlin: We need to address BOTH of these questions in the IEP: How do we deal with critical foundation skills and how will the student build skills and knowledge in the grade-level content? These are equally important things for IEP teams to address. So, here is what the IEP team needs to know before they can develop a standards-based IEP:

- **People on the IEP team collectively have to have a deep understanding of general education subject matter content, and understand not just WHAT is in it, and how the curriculum is organized, over time—K-12, and within the grade level, precursors to later skills and knowledge—they have to think about what has to occur in this year and the year after.** It cannot be looked at in

a one-year frame. They also need to look at how the curriculum is "chunked," most commonly into units, 5-6 weeks in time. Students don't have a "year" to learn all the content, but need to follow the curriculum throughout the year. It requires general education teachers as well as the special education teachers.

- **All people who are involved in the IEP development must know how to assess the student in relationship to the grade-level content demands.** It is not enough to take an "off the shelf" test that identifies deficits. Instead—what are the key units of instruction coming up, and what do we need to work on to ensure the student can benefit. Some gaps in learning may be essential to mastering the content coming up in the curriculum, but not all of them will be. Using the example above, computation skills aren't essential to the circle unit. Does the student have basic understanding of geometric concepts, can we work on terminology? We need to use ongoing assessments to figure out what needs to be built in order to allow the student to access the content. We need bigger assessment toolkits than we have had in the past.

We can't forget that if they could learn everything in the unit of instruction within the 5-6 weeks, then we may not have a child that has an IEP. So, now we have to think very strategically about which of the core pieces of the standard need to be mastered and learned well. We can't do it by cherry-picking out of the state standards—the student needs to build a foundation to move to the next level. There may be some things that IEP teams can determine that aren't going to be as critical—and again, they can focus the goals on those things that will contribute to this year and out years as well.

- **The team needs to think about accommodations and supports.** What will the student need to access the content? The student may have some reading deficits the team will have to consider. What are the accommodations the student will need in reading to access information and knowledge in spite of basic reading skills deficits? The IEP team should have good knowledge of the accommodations policies, and the difference between an accommodation and a modification. I have seen too often recently on IEPs just a list of the accommodations allowable on the test—but they aren't connected to content or instructional context.

- **Progress monitoring is a critical piece of this—how you determine what evidence to use to determine what the student has learned at the end of critical chunks of the curriculum, to ensure that the student did learn the critical knowledge and skills we wanted him to learn.** Assessments used for this purpose must be linked to the curriculum and academic content, and aligned with the state assessment. Tools such as end-of-unit tests, informal and systematic questioning of the student, and curriculum-based measures (CBMs) for some of the basic skills can be used. There are tools and techniques to monitor the progress of students, but we need tools that cover all of the rich and varied content, not just basic skills.

- **The IEP should show who will be responsible for teaching these goals, and where it will occur.** Some of the instruction in the example discussed earlier might occur just with special educator in a pull-out for a few hours a week or day until the student has mastered specific skills, but differentiated instruction matching challenges of content and the needs of the student is an essential piece for the IEP team to consider.

NCLD: These seem like tall orders for IEP teams. What else needs to happen to change the way we approach instruction for students with disabilities?

Dr. McLaughlin: This cannot just be "done" in the IEP meeting. It has to be done in a school wide and district wide effort, working on how to teach all children grade-level content. This is being done in a number of schools—there is no doubt that it can be done—but we have to overcome the traditions of IEP development, and our history of thinking about deficit planning for the IEP. We must think of IEP development as not only giving access, but ensuring meaningful progress toward those grade level standards—that is what is needed to achieve at grade level.

Resources

IDEA Parent Guide (May 2006)
www.ncld.org/content/view/902/456086/

Standards-Based Instruction: Could it Happen in Special Education?
A WestED Web cast (April 2006)
www.schoolsmovingup.net/events/standardsbasedspecialed

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