



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Writing IEPs Aligned to Standards

Introduction

While some states are experiencing changes as they implement new standards, all school districts are tasked with writing IEPs aligned with state standards. Special educators working to develop IEPs will do well to keep their standards in mind as they prepare students for the challenges of post-secondary education and employment.

Some frequently asked questions include:

1. *Is there a legal requirement to write IEPs aligned to curricular standards?*
2. *How does this affect the way IEPs goals are written?*
3. *Should IEP goals be developed at the student's grade placement level?*

While public education is in flux, the core requirements for IEPs have remained largely constant since 1997. As educators increase their knowledge of the standards, it is a perfect time to clarify the unique relationship between standards and IEPs. Let's start with a quick refresher on key terminology:

- **Standards** define the academic outcomes students are expected to achieve upon completion of each grade.
- **Curriculum** articulates how a school district will provide instruction (sequence of units, methodology, materials and assessments) for all students that will result in achievement of those outcomes.

Is there a legal requirement to write IEPs aligned to standards?

Federal regulations require that IEPs address a student's "involvement and progress in the general curriculum." Providing further clarification, the U.S. Department of Education issued a [guidance letter](#) in 2015 stating that all IEPs must be tied to state academic standards.

Since eligibility for special education is based on the adverse effect a disability has on a student's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, it is only logical that explicit connections to the curriculum (and associated standards) are addressed in each student's IEP.



In simple terms, students develop skills and learn concepts they have been taught. All students need to learn to read, write, communicate, compute, solve problems, make connections, speak, listen, etc. Likewise, students may learn these skills in different ways, in different timeframes and to different degrees.

The essential question at the heart of this discussion is *not*, "Can the student meet this standard?" A more engaging question is, "What would it take for this student to have meaningful interaction with grade level content?" This keeps the focus on rigorous content while providing necessary adaptations to methodology, materials and/or performance criteria for some students.

How does this affect the way IEP goals are written?

The IEP goal writing process can be summed up simply.

Based on:

- Purpose of the standard
- Characteristics and needs of the learner

IEP Team will determine:

- Skills (what the student will demonstrate)
- Conditions (what must be present when the student demonstrates the skill)
- Criteria (how well the student must demonstrate the skill)

Utilizing a structured approach to decision-making (Gap Analysis) will ensure consideration of high curricular expectations without ignoring how their disabilities may affect the development of skills and acquisition of knowledge for some students.

GAP ANALYSIS

A gap analysis is used to systematically compare the student's actual performance levels to his or her grade placement expectations.

Step 1: Identify the targeted skill within the general education curriculum (refer to skills at student's *grade level placement*).

Step 2: Identify the unique characteristics of the student in relationship to the standard. Include a description of both strengths and the skills/behaviors the student presently demonstrates (refer to the grade level standards that reflect *actual performance*).

Step 3: Analyze the "gap" using the following guidelines:

1. Compare the student's present levels (actual) with the demands of the standard (expected).
2. Establish the size and nature of the gap and its relationship to the student's disability.
3. Decide how the student's strengths can be leveraged to increase access and engagement.
4. Determine the student's need(s) and prioritize skills to be addressed in the IEP goals.

Let's look at an example of how a team might use this process when writing an IEP goal for a 5th grade student using a standard that focuses on reading informational text.

Step 1 – Standards:

Considerations	<i>Example: RI. 5.2. Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details. Summarize the text.</i>
Look at essence of the standard — what is the big idea?	<i>Readers use details in a text to make meaning of the text.</i>
Look at knowledge and skills — what does student need to know and be able to do?	<i>Knowledge: main idea, detail, components of summary, etc. Skills: identifying main idea and supporting details and summarizing.</i>
Look at vocabulary — what are the most important words?	<i>Main idea, key details, summarize, determine and explain.</i>
Look at cognitive demands — what does the student's brain need to do?	<i>Decode text, use linguistic skills to comprehend grade level text and executive skills to keep track of details, prioritize key details, organize information to summarize and communicate summary with expressive language skills.</i>

Step 2 – Student's Actual Performance:

John is a 5th grader with a reading disability that affects his decoding skills and an expressive language disability which affects both oral and written expression. John's strengths include strong receptive language, auditory comprehension skills, background knowledge and curiosity. His present levels show that he can independently read (decode) mid 3rd grade level text, but comprehends 5th grade level text when provided auditory supports. He can identify the main idea and details, but he has difficulty summarizing the text.

Step 3 – Analysis:

By analyzing the gap between the demands of RI. 5.2 and John's present levels, the team recognizes John can remain engaged in the same reading activities as his peers with the scaffold of auditory supports. The focus of his IEP goal will be on improving expressive language skills by summarizing the text. Because of deficits in decoding, John's team has determined he will have an additional goal aimed at improving his decoding skills. Because the purpose of a Reading Foundations standard and Reading Informational Text standard are different and will be addressed through different interventions, they will be written as two separate goals in the IEP.



Should IEP goals be developed at the student's grade placement level?

Whether a student's goal is set at their grade placement level will be determined by analyzing the student's present level and the relevant standard. IEP goals must be challenging, and they must be attainable. Once the Gap Analysis is completed, the Team can determine what supports are necessary to allow the student to have meaningful engagement with grade level content. In other words, how can the team make the least change to the ***purpose of the standard*** while ensuring the student has meaningful interaction with the content?

The basic elements of a goal provide the team several opportunities to *align* the goal to grade level content while individualizing it to address the student's unique disability-related needs. Goals must include the following:

- **Skills** — What skills (consistent with the grade level standard) will the student need to demonstrate?
- **Condition** — What level of support/scaffolding is needed for the student to demonstrate the skill?
- **Criteria** — What specific criteria will be used to determine if the student demonstrates the skill?

SKILLS

Select the appropriate skills to address in an IEP through the Gap Analysis. Because many basic skills are sequential, it is possible that a goal may be based on a skill that is aligned with a lower grade than the student's placement. For example, a 4th grade student with a significant reading disability may have a reading goal that targets decoding single syllable words, a skill typically learned in a lower grade. However, this same student may also need goals addressing higher level skills (determine main idea and details, multiply, convey ideas in written form, etc.). It is likely that some students will have more than one goal in areas such as reading and math.

CONDITION

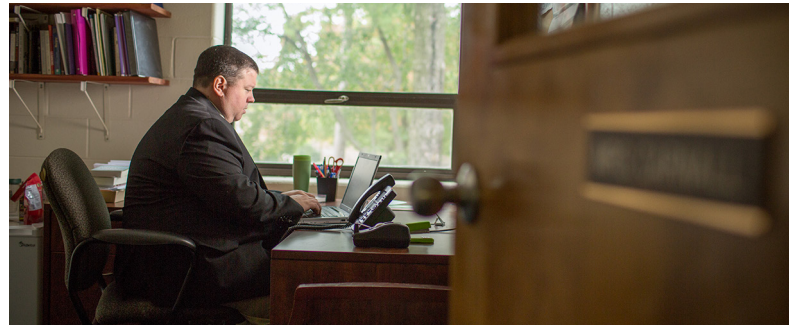
Determine the condition under which the student must demonstrate the skill. The team can decide what is negotiable – in other words, what adaptations might be necessary for the student to have meaningful interaction with the content in order to learn/demonstrate the “skill.”

For example, if the **skill** is to communicate information based on evidence and the student is unable to independently write a paragraph, the condition for the goal may be “given the use of a graphic organizer,” “dictating,” or “using visual representations.” We can alter the **condition** to reflect the degree of scaffolding necessary for the student to engage in challenging content. Consider what can be modified while preserving the purpose of the standard.

- Level (e.g. given a passage at the student independent reading level)
- Supports (e.g. given a verbal prompt)
- Environment (e.g. in a familiar setting with known adult)

CRITERIA

Identify the performance criteria necessary for the student to attain the goal. Adapting criteria allows for full or partial participation in the grade level based on present levels of performance and what is attainable within one year.



Here is John's IEP goal written to align with reading informational text: *RI. 5.2. Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details. Summarize the text.*

When provided grade level digital text (with auditory supports), John will summarize the text by verbalizing or writing 3-5 sentences that include the main idea and at least 2 key details that support the main idea for 4 consecutive opportunities.

Now let's look at Jennifer. Jennifer is also a 5th grader. She has an intellectual disability that impacts all aspects of her language and academic functioning. She loves participating in reading activities, her receptive language is a relative strength and she uses visual cues to help with comprehension. Jennifer can independently read 1st grade level text. Her language deficits make it very difficult for her to comprehend vocabulary and syntax above the 2nd-3rd grade level. She can answer who, what and where questions on 1st grade level text. She is unable to independently identify the main idea of a paragraph which is an essential pre-requisite skill for summarizing. Here is the goal Jennifer's team selected to align with RI.5.2.

After reading 1st grade level multi-paragraph informational text, Jennifer will identify the main idea of each paragraph by completing a fill in the blank graphic organizer with 90% accuracy for four consecutive opportunities.

Both John and Jennifer have IEP goals that align with 5th grade expectations. Each of their goals establishes challenging, yet attainable expectations based on their unique needs.

Final Thoughts

Standards provide a framework for the skills students need for life beyond high school. Students will develop these skills in different ways and in different timeframes. When we ask the question, “What would it take for this student to have meaningful engagement with the curriculum?” the IEP team is empowered to not only address the student’s unique needs, but also ensure the student has access to challenging and engaging curriculum. When we set high expectations and provide appropriate supports, students are likely to meet or exceed them.





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