

ALIGNING IEPs WITH STATE STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

States, districts, and schools continue to emphasize the importance of aligning Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) with state standards in the general education curriculum. Such alignment attempts to ensure that students with disabilities are expected to achieve the same goals as their regular education peers and have the supports and accommodations they need to engage in content-centered learning.

This information brief summarizes current research on factors related to aligning IEPs with state standards. Key themes suggest the importance of pre- and in-service training and of flexible and useful special education policies.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Benefits

Benefits of aligned IEPs include higher expectations, focused and collaborative instruction, and increased exposure to curricular content. In a study by McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, and Henderson (1999), special education teachers indicated that when IEPs were aligned with state standards, students with disabilities had improved exposure to subject matter with focused instruction to meet challenging goals. These researchers also found that collaboration between special and general education teachers was greater when they worked with a student with an aligned IEP. When using aligned IEPs, educators tended to focus on high expectations rather than on student deficits (Thompson et al., 2001). In sum, the aligned IEP changed teachers' pedagogy and attitudes to ensure that students with disabilities had access to the general education curriculum. As special education students gain greater access to state content standards, their test scores should improve and the achievement gap between special education and general education should decrease.

Current Legislative Requirements:

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA '04) requires that the IEP include, among others, the following parts:

- A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance;
- A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals;
- A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child;
- A statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State or district-wide assessments consistent with section 612(a)(16)(A); and
- The projected date for the beginning of the services and...the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications.

IDEA '04 requires that an IEP team develop the IEP. This team is made up of these people:

- The parents of a child with a disability;
- Not less than one regular education teacher of such child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment);
- Not less than one special education teacher, or if appropriate, not less than one special education provider of such child;
- A representative of the local educational agency;
- An individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results;
- At the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate; and
- Whenever appropriate, the child with a disability.

Current Legislative Requirements (con'd):

IEP Team Attendance

- A member of the IEP Team is not required to attend an IEP meeting, in whole or in part, if the parent of a child with a disability and the local educational agency agree that the attendance of such member is not necessary.
- A member of the IEP Team may be excused from attending an IEP meeting, in whole or in part, when the meeting involves a modification to or discussion of the member's area of the curriculum or related services if the parents and LEA consent, and if the member submits written input into the development of the IEP prior to the meeting.
- A parent's agreement and consent to the above shall be in writing.
- In the case of a child who was previously served under part C, the parent may request that the part C service coordinator or other representatives be invited to the initial IEP meeting to assist with the smooth transition of services between Parts C and B.

Content of IEP Forms

In a study of 41 state IEP forms, Thompson and colleagues (2001) found that five addressed state and district standards, 29 specifically reflected the statement of how present levels of performance would affect the child's performance in the general curriculum, 31 listed three or more options for assessment participation, and eight required a statement of alternate assessment.

In a study of two states by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), findings showed that explanations for accommodations were either absent (20%) or insubstantial (19%) (Shriner & Destefano, 2003). Research findings demonstrated that many IEP forms lacked the necessary components to guide instruction and ensure participation in the general education curriculum. One reason for these findings may be that at the time of the 2001 study, access was interpreted by some to mean that the IEP team has considered the general education curriculum for the student but that did not always translate into performance in the general education curriculum. This interpretation of access may have been reflected in the IEPs, but it may not provide a clear picture of the strides made in access in the last few years. A more accurate picture of aligned IEPs may be gained through further studies.

Providing IEP team members with a common format can ensure that all special education service options are available and considered. By having clear descriptions of expectations for an aligned IEP, team members are better able to create connections between the needs of students with disabilities and the requirements of state standards.

Current research suggests:

States should "clearly label IEP forms as sample, recommended, or required so that districts know their parameters in making alterations" (Thompson et al., 2001, p. 13).

Teachers' Skills for Planning and Implementation

Pre- and in-service training for teachers and staff can make a significant difference in developing IEPs that guarantee access. Teacher training increases the participation of students with disabilities in large-scale assessments and improves consistency between IEP goals and the delivery of services (Shriner & Destefano, 2003). Teachers with a concrete understanding of content and disability can ensure that students have accommodations to meet the high expectations of IEPs aligned to state standards.

Ongoing training and technical assistance can have significant effects on alignment. States and or districts should consider doing the following:

- Offer statewide training, ongoing technical assistance, and easily accessible information about standards-based IEPs (Thompson et al., 2001, p. 13);
- Make IEP forms available to all IEP team members on the district Web site and in the school so that members can familiarize themselves with the format (Thompson et al., 2001);
- Make sure that IEP team members thoroughly understand and use state and district content standards to ensure that IEP goals and objectives are aligned (Joint Task Force on Achievement Standards and Assessments for Students with Disabilities, 2001);
- Develop training and technical assistance to help IEP team members ensure that goals are linked to the student’s achievement of age-appropriate state content standards, including those standards that the team determines are currently inappropriate on the basis of an analysis of the student’s present level of educational performance but that could be appropriate at some future date (Johnson, 2003);
- Provide training for special educators and general educators jointly so that they hear the same message and can discuss common goals, address questions, and learn from one another; and
- Focus professional development on the organization and writing of IEPs, giving team members support through “Curriculum Alignment Organizer” and “Big Picture” matrices (Walsh, 2001) that offer teachers a structure that ensures that IEP goals and instruction are directed to specific standards.

Pre-service training and professional development can build IEP team skills. Technical assistance enhances the performance of these skills.

Time, Functional Skills, and Individualization

Studies indicate that aligning IEPs with state standards has both benefits and barriers. Some studies (McLaughlin et al., 1999; OSEP, 1999) demonstrated that although students with disabilities have made some academic gains, barriers still hinder the scaling up of aligned IEP development and implementation.

Attitudinal studies also indicate a number of barriers. Researchers identified concerns about time, functional skills, and individualization. For example, in situations without sufficient time for functional skills instruction, special and general education teachers and administrators resisted aligning IEPs with standards. McLaughlin and colleagues (1999) found that the lack of instructional time and the need to focus on functional goals were issues that professionals attempted to negotiate. Also, special educators tried to ensure individualized instruction while meeting the greater demands of standardized content (OSEP, 1999). McLaughlin and Nagle (in press) state that a tension exists between the concept of an “individualized” education as determined by the IEP team and the notion of common content standards and performance expectations.

Researchers offer several suggestions to remedy the barriers indicated by educational professionals participating on IEP teams. State and district professionals can ensure that

State-level standards need to be:

- “Appropriate for students with disabilities” (Consortium of Inclusive Schooling Practices [Consortium], 1996, p. 6),
- “Broad enough to encompass more than strictly academic outcomes as defined by the traditional disciplines” (Consortium, 1996, p. 6), yet
- “Specific enough to enable schools and parents to readily meet” the standards (Johnson, 2003).

standards are accessible to diverse students and that IEPs connect individual student strengths and challenges to the expectations of typically developing peers. State administrators can set the stage for IEP teams by creating standards that can be implemented for diverse learners.

For example, state standards should provide a scope and sequence for content skills and knowledge so that teachers can choose appropriate goals for their students' needs. The district may be able to influence IEP development by implementing policies that aid alignment to state standards. District-level policies regarding IEPs should—

- be accessible (students with diverse needs can participate in general education curriculum) (Consortium of Inclusive Schooling Practices [Consortium], 1996, p. 6),
- allow flexibility in learning styles (acknowledging diverse strengths and challenges) (Consortium, 1996, p. 6),
- make adaptations and accommodations available (using school and district resources to meet student needs) (Consortium, 1996, p. 6), and
- ensure that IEPs include the teaching of access skills (such as study skills and social-emotional skills) that will allow the student with disabilities to participate in the general education curriculum (Johnson, 2003).

Ideally, the district should be encouraged to ensure that IEP team members design IEPs that are specific to the policies of the district as well as to the individual needs of the child. State and local administrators should attempt to empower teachers to develop aligned IEPs by creating appropriate standards and IEP policies that guarantee that issues of time, functional skills, and individualization are addressed.

SUMMARY

The alignment of IEPs to state standards is a central concern for many educational professionals as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and IDEA are implemented at the local level. Aligned IEPs can have a number of benefits, including increased access to curricular content, enhanced collaboration between special education and general education teachers, and focused instruction. Research on alignment, however, shows that many IEP forms lack the necessary components to connect student needs with the requirements of state standards. Professional development for special education and general education teachers will help enhance the ability of team members to write an effective and appropriate IEP and ensure that a student's goals and objectives are aligned. Districts also can support alignment by making policies regarding IEPs available and ensuring that IEPs include the skills that a student needs to access the general education curriculum.

As students with disabilities participate in large-scale standards-based assessments, all stakeholders must understand the role that aligned IEPs play in giving these students opportunities to practice the skills necessary to succeed on these tests. In addition, the IEP team should consider a student's needs and skills in the general education curriculum before assigning accommodations that are based on the aligned IEP, and the team should determine what supports are necessary to ensure that the student is able to participate. Studies show that students with disabilities gain more opportunities to meet high expectations with appropriate supports and accommodations defined in the aligned IEP.

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