



on implementing special education in charter schools.

# SPECIAL REPORT

## Standards-Based IEPs: An Introduction

By

Eileen M. Ahearn, Ph.D.

This *Special Report* is part of the website created for the *Primers on Special Education in Charter Schools*. It is available online at [www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers](http://www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers)

This resource was produced by the TA Customizer Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education (#U282U030007-05) under the National Initiatives Grant of the Charter Schools Program. The Project is located at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education in Alexandria, VA. For further information, contact Eileen M. Ahearn, Project Director ([eileen.ahearn@nasdse.org](mailto:eileen.ahearn@nasdse.org)).

## Standards-Based IEPs: An Introduction

### Introduction

This introduction to standards-based IEPs has been prepared especially for those who work in and are responsible for charter schools. It is an addition to the resources available on the website that is designed specifically to support charter schools in meeting their responsibility to include students with disabilities in their schools.<sup>1</sup>

Involving state academic content standards in the development of individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities—a practice most often referred to as *standards-based IEPs*—is a relatively new strategy in special education. Requirements to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, adopted in the 1997 revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), prompted the movement toward this new approach to IEPs. As would be expected, there is little in the way of relevant formal literature on this new topic and most of what is available focuses on students with the most severe cognitive disabilities or on the development of curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

As amended in 2004, IDEA strongly reinforced the message in all previous versions of the law that supported the right of students with disabilities to a free appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). But this time the IDEA definition of special education emphasized a connection to standards:

*Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability and to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children.* [34CFR §300.39(b)(3)].

The preferred use of “people-first language” emphasizes the identity of “children with disabilities” (*not* “disabled children”). Children with disabilities are children first and their initial identifying distinction in school must be as

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is available on the website that contains the *Primers on Special Education in Charter Schools*—[www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers](http://www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers). It is adapted from a document by the author prepared for Project Forum available at [www.projectforum.org](http://www.projectforum.org).

<sup>2</sup> An excellent resource on this topic is the book, *Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards for Students with Moderate and Severe Disabilities*, published in 2005 by IEP Resources Attainment Company.

students in general education. The same symbolic importance is now placed on academic achievement for students with disabilities in the use of standards-based IEPs. Students with disabilities are entitled to instruction that is based on the standards and curriculum of their grade (or age) level. Special education for these students should be directed mainly toward providing access to that academic content and supporting the child in achieving success in appropriate educational instruction. The challenge faced by the field of special education now is developing and implementing the standards-based IEP to meet this goal.

## The Meaning of Standards

The way in which the term 'standards' is used under current federal legislation has contributed to much confusion for those trying to understand the topic of standards-based IEPs. The NCLB law required each state to adopt state standards for each grade level and also mandated specific assessment procedures to measure student progress toward those standards. It is necessary to differentiate among the law's various usages of the word 'standard' and to employ the appropriate meaning in order to understand the concept of standards-based IEPs.

Under NCLB there are two types of standards:

1. **academic content standards** = the basis of the general education curriculum covering what all students are expected to know and be able to do. This term means the set of grade-level academic standards developed by each state.
2. **academic achievement standards** = the degree of proficiency (i.e., how well the student has performed) demonstrated by students on assessments in the content areas. NCLB requires states to use at least 3 levels to describe that achievement and the most commonly used terms for the achievement standards are basic, proficient and advanced.

Then, there are three subtypes of academic achievement standards:

- a) **grade level** achievement standards;
- b) **alternate** achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (performance criteria for a small percent of students); and
- c) **modified** achievement standards (performance criteria for an additional group of students who can make progress toward

grade-level achievement standards, but may not reach them in the same timeframe as other students).

When we talk about standards-based IEPs, we are referring to the use of academic content standards (#1 above) as the framework for the development of every IEP.

## **Evolution of the IEP**

Using state standards as the framework for an IEP is a vastly different approach from what has traditionally been followed in special education. The IEP process starts with a focus on the skills the child has achieved and the child's needs as revealed through evaluations completed to establish eligibility for special education or review the IEP. In the early years after the passage IDEA in 1975, although academic areas would be included to some extent in IEP team discussions, the emphasis most often was on the child's acquisition of basic developmental and/or functional skills unrelated to specific academic areas.

Through the 1980s, interest shifted to a more functional approach with a focus on the ultimate goal of preparing students for life in the community with minimal attention to academics. In those early years, special education was widely considered to be "a place" where students with disabilities attended school or received related services and their IEPs often prescribed a curriculum that was different from the general education content provided to general education students at the same grade level.

In the 1990s, IEPs began to provide for students with disabilities to spend more time in general education settings during the school day. First called 'mainstreaming' and now 'inclusion,' this approach started out with emphasis on having students spend time in regular classes such as art or music or non-academic activities such as lunch or physical education. The trend expanded and strengthened in the 1990s and moved toward integrating students with disabilities into the academic component of the regular education classroom that is more the accepted practice today. Current efforts are focused on aligning IEPs with the regular education curriculum and a knowledge base is being built regarding the alignment of instruction, curriculum and assessment to meet the mandates of both IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB).

## **Standards-Based IEPs**

The educational system has the core function of providing instruction in academic areas. Most schools will add that they focus on "the whole child"

and are interested in all areas development since functional skills cannot be totally isolated from academics. However, the educational system's major mission is academic achievement for all students and that must include students with disabilities. A standards-based IEP approach is the most effective way of ensuring that the mission of education is carried out for students with disabilities.

The following definitions are those used in the document on which this article is based and are followed as the working definitions used in this article:

- standards-based IEP—a process and document that is framed by the state standards and that contains goals aligned with, and chosen to facilitate the student's achievement of, state grade-level academic standards;
- goal—specific knowledge and/or skill the student can be expected to achieve during the period of the IEP based on what that individual student needs to progress. For standards-based IEPs, goals are chosen as the learning and skills that will facilitate the student's achievement of a specific grade-level standard;
- functional goals—non-academic skills the student needs as confirmed by evaluation or prior progress that the students can be expected to achieve during the period of the IEP. For a standards-based IEP, most functional goals are those that the student needs to be able to access one or more grade-level academic standards (sometimes referred to as 'access goals').<sup>3</sup>

It is critical to the successful implementation of a standards-based IEP approach that everyone involved—administrators, teachers, parents, etc.—have a good working knowledge of the state standards, especially those of the child's grade level. State standards must pervade every aspect of the IEP team<sup>4</sup> process. The development of an IEP starts with a discussion by the IEP team of the child's present level of performance focused on all areas of the child's progress in learning and functional development. Under a

---

<sup>3</sup> Note: Some special education practitioners and researchers maintain that students with severe disabilities have an ongoing need for functional life skills instruction and that some of these goals do not link clearly to standards. (For a discussion of this point see Browder & Courtade-Little, 2005, p. 24).

<sup>4</sup> An IEP team is composed of the following individuals: parents of the child; one regular education teacher of the child; one special education teacher/provider; a representative of the school system who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities and who is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and the availability of resources; an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results; other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child; and, whenever appropriate, the child with a disability. (See IDEA regulations at 34CFR §300.321 for more details.)

standards-based approach, the discussion of present performance levels starts with recognizing which state standards the student has achieved and identifying the skills and knowledge the student has already acquired that will allow him/her to work toward standards for the current grade level. Then, input from evaluations and other sources are discussed in terms of the skills and knowledge the student needs to reach the goals of the current grade. This process ties the child's needs to state standards keeping the main focus on academic content. Areas of functional skills may also be addressed from the perspective of how they are connected to achievement of the academic content in the standards.

The goals that frame the special education program/services for a child on an IEP are not a reiteration of the state standards, but rather the specific knowledge and skills that the student needs to acquire in order to achieve the standards and the services that will be provided for the student to reach those goals. Related services (e.g., speech therapy, counseling, etc.) are provided in addition to specially designed academic instruction to support achievement of the goals needed to reach one or more of the standards.

The most recent change in NCLB directly supports the use of standards-based goals in IEPs. The changes in assessment requirements under NCLB, promulgated in the Federal Register on April 9, 2007, gave states the added flexibility to provide a different assessment based on modified achievement standards for students with disabilities whose progress is such that, even after receiving appropriate instruction, including special education and related services designed to address the students' individual needs, the students' IEP teams are reasonably certain that the students will not achieve grade-level proficiency within the year covered by the students' IEPs. One of the requirements for a modified assessment is that the IEP include goals that are based on the academic content standards for the grade in which a student is enrolled. The regulation requires that the IEP be designed to monitor the student's progress in achieving those standards-based goals.

Standards-based IEPs are still very new to the field of special education and the procedures and terminology are still being developed. Many states are beginning to implement standards-based IEPs and many in the field have concluded that this approach has the best potential for meeting the requirement of "specially designed instruction" that is required by IDEA as well as the mandated appropriate access to the general education curriculum for all students with disabilities.

## Resources

As mentioned above, published resources related to the topic of standards-based IEPs are still not widely available. The most current and relevant information is available on the internet in state policy and/or training materials or technical assistance documents from organizations. A particularly valuable document, *A Seven-Step Process to Creating Standards-based IEPs*, is included as an appendix to this article.

The following links are a few examples of useful materials available on the Internet at the time this article is begin written.

Alabama Department of Education:

<http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=65&sort=16&footer=sections>

Arkansas Department of Education

[http://arksped.k12.ar.us/documents/special\\_show\\_08/MMeaningful\\_Programming\\_Crowley.pdf](http://arksped.k12.ar.us/documents/special_show_08/MMeaningful_Programming_Crowley.pdf)

California Department of Education:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/iepresources.asp>

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) article:

[http://www.nclld.org/images/stories/downloads/advocacy/advocates\\_guide/understandingstandards-basedieps.pdf](http://www.nclld.org/images/stories/downloads/advocacy/advocates_guide/understandingstandards-basedieps.pdf)

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN):

<http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/Standards-BasedIEPs.aspx>

West Virginia Department of Education:

<http://wvde.state.wv.us/ose/StandardsBasedIEPs.pdf>



## A Seven-Step Process to Creating Standards-based IEPs<sup>5</sup> by Marla Davis Holbrook

**Note:** This document is a companion to the “Standards-based IEP Examples” tool found at [www.projectforum.org](http://www.projectforum.org).

This document presents a seven-step process for developing IEPs that are aligned with state academic grade-level content standards. Each step is followed by guiding questions for the IEP team to consider in making data-based decisions. This process can help school personnel to: (a) consider each student’s strengths and needs to develop goals focused on closing the gaps between the student’s levels of academic achievement and grade-level standards; and (b) use data to make decisions, including selecting the most appropriate assessment option. The goal is to support IEP teams to develop documents that, when implemented, provide access to the general curriculum and enable students to demonstrate academic achievement linked to grade-level content.

Prior to developing IEPs, all IEP team members, including parents, need to be familiar with the general education curriculum including the state’s academic content standards and state assessments used for calculating adequate yearly progress (AYP). In order to make informed decisions about each student’s strengths and needs, the IEP team should consider how the student is performing in relation to the state’s grade-level content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled.

The seven major steps that educators can take to develop a standards-based IEP are:

### **Step 1: Consider the grade-level content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled or would be enrolled based on age.**

- Ask:**
- What is the intent of the content standard?
  - What is the content standard saying that the student must know and be able to do?

### **Step 2: Examine classroom and student data to determine where the student is functioning in relation to the grade-level standards.**

- Ask:**
- Has the student been taught content aligned with grade-level standards?
  - Has the student been provided appropriate instructional scaffolding to attain grade-level expectations?
  - Were the lessons and teaching materials used to teach the student aligned with state grade-level standards?
  - Was the instruction evidence-based?

### **Step 3: Develop the present level of academic achievement and functional performance.**

Describe the individual strengths and needs of the student in relation to accessing and mastering the general curriculum.

- Ask:**
- What do we know about the student’s response to academic instruction (e.g., progress monitoring data)?
  - What programs, accommodations (i.e., classroom and testing) and/or interventions have been successful with the student?
  - What have we learned from previous IEPs and student data that can inform decision making?
  - Are there assessment data (i.e., state, district and/or classroom) that can provide useful information for making decisions about the student’s strengths and needs (e.g., patterns in the data)?

Consider the factors related to the student’s disability and how they affect how the student learns and demonstrates what he or she knows.

---

<sup>5</sup> These steps are adapted from materials on the Alabama website regarding standards-based IEPs found at [http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/section\\_detail.asp?section=65&footer=sections](http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/section_detail.asp?section=65&footer=sections)

- Ask:**
- How does the student's disability affect participation and progress in the general curriculum?
  - What supports does the student need to learn the knowledge and attain the skills to progress in the general curriculum?
  - Is the student on track to achieve grade-level proficiency within the year?

**Step 4: Develop measurable annual goals aligned with grade-level academic content standards.**

- Ask:**
- What are the student's needs as identified in the present level of performance?
  - Does the goal have a specific timeframe?
  - What can the student reasonably be expected to accomplish in one school year?
  - Are the conditions for meeting the goal addressed?
  - How will the outcome of the goal be measured?

**Step 5: Assess and report the student's progress throughout the year.**

- Ask:**
- How does the student demonstrate what he/she knows on classroom, district and state assessments?
  - Are a variety of assessments used to measure progress?
  - How will progress be reported to parents?

**Step 6: Identify specially designed instruction including accommodations and/or modifications needed to access and progress in the general education curriculum.**

- Ask:**
- What accommodations are needed to enable the student to access the knowledge in the general education curriculum?
  - What accommodations have been used with the student and were they effective?
  - Has the complexity of the material been changed in such a way that the content has been modified?

**Step 7: Determine the most appropriate assessment option.**

- Ask:**
- What types of assessments are offered in my state?
  - What types of responses do different state assessments require?
  - What are the administrative conditions of the assessment? (i.e., setting, delivery of instructions, time allotted, etc.)
  - What accommodations are allowed on the assessment(s)?
  - Are the accommodations approved for the assessment also used in the classroom?
  - Has the student received standards-based, grade-level instruction?
  - Was the instruction evidence based?
  - What is the student's instructional level?
  - How different is the student's instructional level from the level of typical peers?
  - Can the student make progress toward grade-level standards in the same timeframe as typical peers? (If no, consider modified academic achievement standards)
  - What can be learned from the student's previous state assessment results?
  - Can the student demonstrate what he/she knows on the assessment option under consideration?