

## **Standards-Based Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) Benefit Students**

### **IEPs Must Align With the General Education Curriculum**

by Dr. Patricia MacQuarrie, Project Facilitator to the Standards-Based IEP Work Group for the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) makes schools accountable for the learning and achievement of all students. The need to align individualized education programs (IEPs) with the general curriculum was first introduced in the 1997 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). In 2004, the IDEA was reauthorized to align with NCLB, and a powerful connection was created. NCLB drives accountability and furthers alignment with state standards and assessments administered to all students with disabilities. Related requirements in IDEA 1997, IDEA 2004, and NCLB are the driving forces that affect the planning process for IEPs.

This article explains the need for standards-based or aligned IEPs and shows how IEPs that align with the general education curriculum benefit students throughout their educational years and help prepare for postsecondary goals. It also provides general guidelines for making appropriate assessment choices for students with disabilities (see sample *Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)* and *Goal* forms below).

### **Why Standards-Based IEPs?**

The IDEA 1997 cited findings from 20 years of research and experience that demonstrate that the education of students with disabilities can be more effective by having high expectations for students and ensuring access to the general education curriculum for the maximum extent possible. The IDEA 2004 expanded on the need for “access to the general education curriculum” by adding “in the regular classroom,” thereby increasing the access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

According to the California Comprehensive Center, which works to implement NCLB in California, the lack of requiring a general education curriculum in special education settings prior to the IDEA 1997 resulted in the following for students with disabilities:

- Students were often excluded from the general education curriculum or only exposed in a moderate form.
- Students were almost always exposed to an alternate curriculum district and statewide, which was often “deficit-driven instruction.”
- Students were not included in district and statewide assessments.

Without active engagement in the general education curriculum, or with very limited access to the general education curriculum, students with disabilities missed opportunities

to reach their full academic potential. Some students were unable to achieve otherwise attainable postsecondary goals such as supported employment and postsecondary education because of the lack of emphasis on achieving high levels of academic success. Furthermore, because students with disabilities were not always included in statewide assessments, states and school districts were not held to a high level of accountability for the quality of special education services.

Standards-based IEPs reinforce the concepts that shape our current education principles, policies, and practices:

- All students are general education students.
- There is one curriculum—the general education curriculum.
- The IEP identifies supports necessary for students with disabilities to achieve and make progress in the general education curriculum.

Standards-based IEPs encourage teachers and parents to consider all students as general education students with access to and support in the general education curriculum.

Michigan educators have an obligation to challenge students with disabilities to engage in more of the Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs). This responsibility falls on both special education teachers and general education teachers. Special education teachers must gain a deep understanding of GLCEs. General education teachers must work with special education teachers throughout the IEP process and accommodate students to ensure access and engagement in the general education curriculum.

### **General Guidelines for a Standards-Based IEP and Assessment Choices**

When creating a standards-based IEP, the IEP team should incorporate as many of the GLCEs as are deemed appropriate for the student. All IEP team members will need to be familiar with the general education curriculum standards based on GLCEs, as well as all of the state assessments, in order to be able to make informed decisions.

Under NCLB, all students are expected to participate in a statewide assessment. The need for higher levels of student performance on assessments puts an emphasis on access to the general education curriculum; this access is supported through a standards-based IEP. Therefore, the success of teaching GLCEs to students with disabilities will be reflected in assessment scores, which are used to determine a school district's adequate yearly progress (AYP) score. Schools failing to make AYP for two consecutive years in either English language arts or mathematics are identified for improvement and must work with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to develop plans for such improvement.

If the student is challenged with the most demanding assessment that is appropriate, the team and the student will be able to evaluate the success of learning the GLCEs. If a student were to take an alternate assessment, despite being capable of taking the regular assessment, a proficient score would still fail to inform the IEP team if the student is successfully learning from his or her curriculum. Also, parents should remember that their

child may be eligible for the Michigan Promise scholarship if the student participates in the regular high school assessment, the Michigan Merit Exam (MME), with or without accommodations.

## **New Assessment Regulation on Target for Implementation in Michigan**

In April of 2007, the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE) officially introduced a regulation to NCLB and IDEA known as the “2% Regulation.” This regulation permits states to develop optional alternate assessments based on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) that are aligned to grade-level content. The regulation encouraged states to develop the format and procedures for making decisions regarding state assessment(s) taken by students with disabilities. States that do not meet the USDoE deadline will not be allowed to use the flexibility when calculating results of AA-MAS taken by students with disabilities toward AYP under NCLB.

Michigan’s AA-MAS is being developed through the Michigan Department of Education’s Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability (OEAA) and the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE-EIS). The new assessment, MEAP-Access, like the current MI-Access assessments, is intended to be utilized when IEP teams determine that the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), even with accommodations, is not appropriate for a student with an IEP. Michigan’s AA-MAS, which has been piloted across the state, will be administered as part of the Michigan Educational Assessment System (MEAS).

The regulation has monitoring language specifying that states must develop clear and appropriate guidelines and training to ensure that teams develop and implement IEPs based on grade-level, standards-based goals, and that the state will monitor whether that is occurring. This regulation requires that all students have access to the same challenging curriculum as their peers and that IEP goals address the skills specified in state content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled. This must occur in such a way that does not preclude earning a high school diploma. Having standards-based IEPs is one way to accomplish this alignment.

As part of Michigan’s preparation to meet all of the new federal requirements, the OSE-EIS formed a work group to review the IEP requirements. The work group developed a draft of a new IEP format and will continue to develop standards-based procedural and

### **A standards-based IEP, or aligned IEP, does the following:**

- Ties the IEP to the general education curriculum.
- Provides positive directions for goals and interventions.
- Utilizes standards to identify specific content critical to the student’s successful progress in the general education curriculum.
- Promotes a single educational system that is inclusive through common language and curriculum.
- Ensures greater consistency across schools and districts.
- Encourages higher expectations for students with disabilities.

guidance documents. The prototype of the IEP format and guidance documents will be distributed to school districts later in 2009; a transition to the new IEP format will begin at that time.

The majority of students, including students with disabilities, should take the regular assessment. The AA-MAS should be reserved for students who cannot be accurately assessed with a regular assessment. According to Kerri Briggs, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, "A small group of students can take the AA-MAS to ensure that all students with disabilities are counted in the accountability system and are appropriately assessed. These are students whose disabilities preclude them from achieving grade-level proficiency in the same timeframe as other students. Since all students with disabilities are to be receiving instruction in the grade-level curriculum, these tests will not only ensure their inclusion in accountability systems but also inform instruction."

The IEP team should choose the assessment that will best test the GLCEs taught in the student's curriculum. By making appropriate modifications and providing a challenging curriculum for students with disabilities, based on GLCEs, students are given the opportunities to achieve their highest level of success. The new standards-based IEP forms to be finalized in 2009 will help guide IEP team members in making the best decisions when aligning the IEP to the general education curriculum.

According to a recent study done by the National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO Synthesis Report 37) and Thompson et al., 2001, there are a number of benefits to standards-based IEPs or aligned IEPs:

- "...students with disabilities had improved exposure to subject matter..."
- "...collaboration between special and general education teachers was greater when they worked with a student with an aligned IEP."
- When using an aligned IEP, educators tended to focus on high expectations rather than academic deficits.
- The aligned IEP changed teachers' pedagogy and attitudes to ensure that students with disabilities had access to the general education curriculum.
- There was improved use of academic interventions, accommodations, and test data.

There are barriers to standards-based IEPs or aligned IEPs as well, including:

- Lack of time for functional skills instruction.
- Philosophical disagreements related to individualized versus standardized content instruction.

**Section 2: Option I—Sample PLAAF Statement**

Student's Name Last: \_\_\_\_\_ First: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle: \_\_\_\_\_ IEP Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section 2: Option I**

Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAF)

The IEP has considered the following special factors:

- A need for positive behavior interventions, supports, and other strategies.
- The **language/communication mode** for a student who is deaf/hard of hearing.
- The **language needs** for a student with limited English.
- A need for **Braille instruction**.
- The **communication needs** of the student.
- A requirement for **assistive technology**.

After reviewing this student's progress in the general education curriculum and prior special education goals and objectives, describe the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>In areas of need, report baseline data with same age peer comparison such as curriculum based assessments, student work, teacher observations, parent input, and other data scores that have been collected over time.</p> | <p>To enable the student to access or make progress in general education curriculum based on grade level content standards for grade in which the student is enrolled or would be enrolled based on age:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe modifications/accommodations currently used.</li> <li>• Describe modifications/accommodations and goal areas student needs.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>ACADEMIC/PRE-ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:</b><br/><i>Individual tests and/or district-wide assessments (required).</i></p> <p>Reading:</p> <p>Mathematics:</p> <p>Written Language:</p>  |   |
| <p><b>TRANSITION ASSESSMENT:</b><br/><i>Age appropriate related to training, education, employment, and independent living skills.</i></p>  |   |
| <p><b>COMMUNICATION/SPEECH &amp; LANGUAGE:</b></p>  |   |
| <p><b>SOCIO-EMOTIONAL/BEHAVIORAL:</b></p>   |   |
| <p><b>PERCEPTION/MOTOR/MOBILITY:</b><br/><i>Gross and fine motor coordination, balance, and limb/body mobility.</i></p>   |   |
| <p><b>ADAPTIVE/INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS:</b><br/><i>Skills for academic success and independent living (where appropriate).</i></p>  |   |
| <p><b>MEDICAL:</b><br/><i>Health, vision, hearing, or other physical/medical issues.</i></p>  |   |
| <p><b>ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:</b><br/><i>If previously assigned.</i></p>  |   |
| <p><b>GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM:</b><br/><i>Student involvement and progress in general education curriculum or participation in appropriate activities for preschool children.</i></p>                                    |   |

The new forms contain two options for IEP teams to consider as they write PLAAF statements and review a student's progress in the general education curriculum and on special education goals. Option I (above) gives the most specific guidance to IEP teams. This is the first time MDE has provided options for IEP teams to consider in order to best reflect the progress, needs, and goals of the student.

**Section 4: Option I—Sample Goals and Objectives/Benchmarks**

Student's Name Last: \_\_\_\_\_ First: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle: \_\_\_\_\_ IEP Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section 5: Option I**  
Goal and Objectives/Benchmarks

**Instructional Area:** (content area—strand/domain) \_\_\_\_\_

**Michigan Content Expectations Upon Which Goal Will Be Based:** (GLCE/EGLCE/HSCE/EHSCE/Preschool Outcomes) \_\_\_\_\_

**Baseline Data:**  
\_\_\_\_\_ is currently \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_.  
(student)

**Annual Goal:**  
By \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ when/at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.  
(student) (demonstrate skill) (conditions criteria) (assessment/evaluation)

**Position(s) Responsible for Implementing Goal Activities:**  
 Special Education Teacher  
  General Education Teacher  
  TC  
  SLP  
  SSW  
  OT  
  PT  
  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Position(s) responsible for reporting progress on goal: \_\_\_\_\_

**The transition area related to the above stated goal is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Short-Term Objectives/Benchmarks**

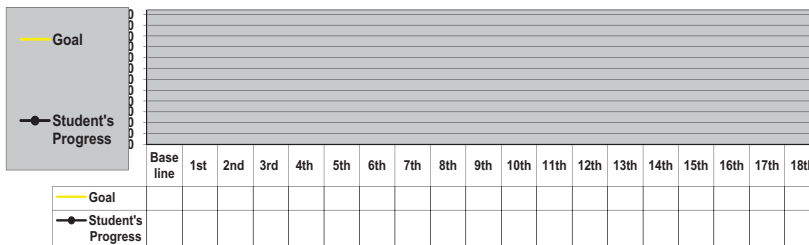
By the end of \_\_\_\_\_ marking period \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.  
(#) (school year) (student) (criteria) (assessment/evaluation)

By the end of \_\_\_\_\_ marking period \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.  
(#) (school year) (student) (criteria) (assessment/evaluation)

By the end of \_\_\_\_\_ marking period \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.  
(#) (school year) (student) (criteria) (assessment/evaluation)

By the end of \_\_\_\_\_ marking period \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ will \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_.  
(#) (school year) (student) (criteria) (assessment/evaluation)

**Student Progress Toward Annual Goal Based on:**



| Progress Reporting |           |           |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Report Date:       | Progress: | Comments: |
| Report Date:       | Progress: | Comments: |
| Report Date:       | Progress: | Comments: |
| Report Date:       | Progress: | Comments: |

**Schedule for Evaluation/Reporting Progress**

This progress report will be sent home to parents every \_\_\_\_\_ weeks.  
(#)

There are two options for IEP teams to consider as they develop goals and objectives for each student. Option I (above) gives specific direction on developing goals and objectives as well as progress monitoring.