



## IEP Basics for Parents of Students with Learning Disabilities

This toolkit includes the following items:

- “What is an IEP?”
- “The Basics of a Standards-Based IEP”
- “IEP Meeting Planner”
- Related Resources



# What is an IEP?

*By NCLD Editorial Staff*

Each public school child who receives special education and related services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Each IEP must be designed for one student and must be a truly individualized document. The IEP creates an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities. The IEP is the cornerstone of a quality education for each child with a disability.

To create an effective IEP, parents, teachers, other school staff and often the student must come together to look closely at the student's unique needs. These individuals pool knowledge, experience and commitment to design an educational program that will help the student be involved in, and progress in, the general curriculum. The IEP guides the delivery of special education supports and services for the student with a disability.

## General Steps in the Special Education Process

- Child is identified as possibly needing special education and related services.
- Child is evaluated.
- Eligibility is decided.
- Child is found eligible for services.
- IEP meeting is scheduled.
- IEP meeting is held and the IEP is written.
- Services are provided.
- Progress is measured and reported to parents.
- IEP is reviewed.
- Child is reevaluated.

## Contents of the IEP

By law, the IEP must include certain information about the child and the educational program designed to meet his or her unique needs. This information covers topics such as current performance, annual goals, special education and related services, accommodations, participation in state and district-wide tests, needed transition services, and measured progress.

## The IEP Team Members

The team that writes a child's Individualized Education Program includes the parent(s), regular education teacher(s), special education teacher(s), other individuals from the school and district, and the student when appropriate. A meeting to write the IEP must be held within 30 calendar days of deciding that the child is eligible for special education and related services. Each team member brings important information to the IEP meeting. Members share their information and work together to write the child's Individualized Education Program. Each person's information adds to the team's understanding of the child and what services the child needs.



## Writing the IEP

To help decide what special education and related services the student needs, generally the IEP team will begin by looking at the child's evaluation results, such as classroom tests, individual tests given to establish the student's eligibility, and observations by teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, related service providers, administrators, and others. This information will help the team describe the student's "present levels of educational performance" in other words, how the student is currently doing in school. Knowing how the student is currently performing in school will help the team develop annual goals to address those areas where the student has an identified educational need.

### The IEP team must also discuss specific information about the child.

#### This includes:

- the child's strengths;
- the parents' ideas for enhancing their child's education;
- the results of recent evaluations or reevaluations; and
- how the child has done on state and district-wide tests.

Depending on the needs of the child, the IEP team also needs to consider special factors, which include behavioral issues, limited proficiency in English, blindness or visual impairment, communication needs, deafness or difficulty hearing, and assistive technology.

### It is important that the discussion of what the child needs be framed around how to help the child:

- advance toward the annual goals;
- be involved in and progress in the general curriculum;
- participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities; and
- be educated with and participate with other children with disabilities and non-disabled children.

Based on the above discussion, the IEP team will then write the child's IEP. This includes the services and supports the school will provide for the child. If the IEP team decides that a child needs a particular device or service (including an intervention, accommodation, or other program modification), the IEP team must write this information in the IEP.

## After the IEP is Written

When the IEP has been written, parents must receive a copy at no cost to themselves. Everyone who will be involved in implementing the IEP must have access to the document. This includes the child's:

- regular education teacher(s);
- special education teacher(s);
- related service provider(s) (for example, speech therapist); or
- any other service provider (such as a paraprofessional) who will be responsible for a part of the child's education.



Each of these individuals needs to know what his or her specific responsibilities are for carrying out the child's IEP. This includes the specific accommodations, modifications, and supports that the child must receive, according to the IEP.

## Parents Permission

Before the school can provide a child with special education and related services for the first time, the child's parents must give their written permission. For more information, visit the [IDEA Guide](#) — especially its chapter on Individualized Education Programs.

*Adapted from the Guide to the Individualized Education Program, by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education.*



# The Basics of a Standards-Based IEP

By Candace Cortiella

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.

**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.

**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.**

Understanding the difference between accommodations and specially designed instruction is essential when determining the special services a student needs to accomplish IEP goals.

**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 gradelevel 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?

*Excerpted from NCLD's [Understanding the Standards-based IEP](#)*

### About the Author

**Candace Cortiella** is Director of The Advocacy Institute, a nonprofit focused on improving the lives of people with disabilities through public policy and other initiatives. The mother of a young adult with learning disabilities, she lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

# IEP Meeting Planner

Use this planner to get the most out of IEP meetings and special education services for your child

CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	<b>WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE MEETING</b> (Complete at least 2 weeks prior to the meeting)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Visit your child's classroom</b></p> <p>If your child is elementary age, you should consider visiting the classroom to observe how your child is performing in class, classroom conditions and routines, instructional materials being used. Classroom visits should be arranged in advance with the teacher and school officials.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Review your child's records</b></p> <p>Compile and review the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your child's current IEP</li> <li>• Reports of progress toward the annual goals in your child's current IEP</li> <li>• Report cards for current school year</li> <li>• Recent work samples</li> <li>• Performance on district and/or state assessments (If your child is participating in district and/or state assessments in an alternate manner, be sure to get information on how your child is performing in relative to samegrade peers. Results on alternate assessments, out-of-level assessments do not provide information on your child's performance compared to other students at his/her grade level.)</li> <li>• Results of most recent evaluation(s) (If your child has recently received an individual evaluation, be sure to request a copy of the evaluation report prior to the IEP meeting. If you have had your child evaluated privately, consider sharing the results of the evaluation with school personnel prior to the IEP meeting)</li> <li>• If your child has a job outside the home, bring copies of letters or reviews from supervisors</li> <li>• Any other communications with the teacher and/or school</li> </ul> <p><b>Note:</b> You have the right to inspect and review any education records relating to your child that are collected, maintained, or used by the school district. You may also request a copy of your child's educational records at any time.</p> <p>Be sure to organize all of these records (preferably in a 3-ring binder) and take them with you to the IEP meeting.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Network</b></p> <p>Join local chapters of parent groups that offer information about your child's specific disability. Contact your state Parent Training and Information Center for information on your state's special education laws or regulations. Attend trainings and support groups that will help you understand ways to use your rights under IDEA.</p>



CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE MEETING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request and review notice of meeting</b></p> <p>You should be given written notice of the proposed IEP meeting, preferably at least 10 days in advance. The notice should include the date, time, purpose of the meeting and those expected to attend. Use this meeting notice to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The date and time are convenient for you and others you plan to have attend (advocate, private tutor, private evaluator)</li> <li>• If appropriate, your child is expected to attend</li> <li>• If your child will turn age 16 (or older) during the period of the next IEP, or if you feel that transition planning should begin with the next IEP (regardless of your child’s age), both your child and any appropriate representatives from other agencies are invited to attend</li> <li>• All appropriate school personnel are listed as expected to be in attendance. See team excusal below for additional information.</li> </ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request alternative means of meeting attendance</b></p> <p>If you or others you want to attend the meeting cannot attend on the proposed date and time, you can propose alternative forms of meeting attendance such as audio conference calling or video conferencing. Be sure to make your requests for such alternate meetings well in advance so the school can provide the necessary equipment.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Approve or reject proposed IEP team member excusals</b></p> <p>Your IEP Meeting notice should indicate if the school proposes to excuse a team member or members — from attending either the entire meeting or part of the meeting — for one of the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The member’s area of curriculum or related services is not being modified or discussed in the meeting</li> <li>• The member’s area of curriculum or related services is being discussed and the member will submit written input to the parents and the team prior to the meeting</li> </ul> <p>If the school proposes to excuse a member for either of these reasons, you must agree in writing.</p> <p>If you disagree with the proposal to excuse a member on the basis that their area of curriculum or related services will not be discussed, inform the school that you do not agree with the proposed excusal and you expect the member to attend the meeting.</p> <p>Written input from an excused member should be provided well in advance of the meeting in order to allow time for your review and acceptance. If you determine that the written input is not sufficient, advise the school that you expect the member to attend the meeting.</p> <p>For best results, members of the IEP team who should not be excused under any circumstances include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The district representative (knowledgeable about the availability of the school district’s resources)</li> <li>• Your child’s regular education teacher (who is involved in the implementation of the IEP)</li> </ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request information on any district or state assessments</b></p> <p>In order to make important decisions about how your child will participate in required district and/or state-wide assessments (such as those required by the No Child Left Behind Act – NCLB) request complete information on those assessments, including information about the type of test, when it is administered and sample questions. Also request information about alternate assessment options and information about how participation in an alternate form of assessment might impact your child.</p>



CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE MEETING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request state guidelines for test accommodations</b>                      In order to make important decisions about the appropriate accommodations your child will need in order to participate in required district and/or state-wide assessments (such as those required by the No Child Left Behind Act – NCLB) request a copy of your state’s guidelines on test accommodations. Every state is required to have such guidelines. The guidelines should include information regarding any accommodation that, if used, will invalid the test score.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Notify the school if:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You plan to tape the IEP meeting. The option to tape an IEP meeting varies by state, so be sure to check into your state’s policy regarding taping and also advise the school in advance of your plans to tape the meeting</li> <li>• You plan to bring others to the meeting. Provide the school with a written notice of who you will bring and their relationship to your child</li> </ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Review your Procedural Safeguards Notice</b>                      Make sure you have a copy of the current Procedural Safeguards Notice for your school district.  <b>Note:</b> Schools are no longer required to provide a copy of this notice with each IEP meeting notice.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Develop your Parent Report</b>                      Your Parent Report should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your impressions of how your child is doing in school. Include both academic performance as well as social, behavioral and functional performance (include work samples and/or school reports that substantiate your comments and concerns).</li> <li>• Your child’s strengths and weaknesses, relationships with family and friends</li> <li>• Your comments or concerns regarding your child’s attainment (or lack of attainment) of the annual goals on the current IEP</li> <li>• Your input regarding particular strategies that are or are not working for your child</li> <li>• Your input regarding other areas such as behavior plans and/or technology that might help support your child’s learning</li> <li>• If your child’s IEP also includes a transition plan, include information about your child’s postsecondary goals (college, vocational interests, possible career choices)</li> </ul> <p>Use the <a href="#">Organizing Your Concerns Chart</a> to help compile your Parent Report.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> You can share your Parent Report with school personnel before or at the IEP meeting. Sharing it before the meeting will allow school personnel the opportunity to review your report and include information you have submitted in the IEP.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Develop Annual Goals</b>                      Using the annual goals in your child’s current IEP, develop annual goals for the coming year, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The amount of progress you want to see your child make in the coming year (progress should be adequate to allow your child to make up for significant gaps in achievement vs. same age/grade students)</li> <li>• Any particular methodology you think would be well suited for your child given his/her particular difficulty or deficit, age, learning style. Special education and related services must be based on peer-reviewed research whenever possible</li> <li>• How progress toward the goals will be measured and how frequently progress will be reported to you. (Reports of progress must be based on objective measures and progress reports should be provided to you as frequently as progress is reported to all parents, generally at each grading period)</li> </ul>



CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	WHAT TO DO <b>BEFORE</b> THE MEETING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Learn the Form</b></p> <p>Most school district (or states) has developed IEP forms that are used to compile a student’s individualized program. Become familiar with your school’s form prior to the meeting so you will know what information will be included and how the IEP will be developed. Request a copy of your school’s form from your school or district special education office.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request IEP draft</b></p> <p>Many schools accomplish some advance work on developing student IEPs by doing a “draft” which will then be reviewed at the meeting. If this is the practice of your school district, request a copy of the “draft” prior to the meeting so you have time to review it.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> “Draft” IEPs are just that — drafts to help facilitate the meeting. Completing IEPs prior to the meeting violates the IDEA. Don’t be intimidated by “draft” IEPs — instead, consider it an extra opportunity to see the thinking of IEP team members in advance. You will provide your comments and concerns about any “draft” and you should expect a final IEP to be produced at the official IEP meeting.</p>



CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	WHAT TO DO DURING THE MEETING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Arrive early</b>            Arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the time your meeting is scheduled to begin. Provide any persons you have invited to attend the meeting with a copy of your child’s current IEP, your Parent Report and your suggested annual goals.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Remain calm</b>            IEP meetings can be stressful and emotional. Above all, you must be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative</li> <li>• Respectful</li> <li>• Calm</li> <li>• Positive</li> </ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Name a note taker</b>            Unless you plan to tape record the meeting, you will need to take detailed notes. If note taking is hard for you to do while participating in the discussion, designate one of your invitees to be the note taker for the meeting.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Request introductions</b>            Ask everyone at the meeting to introduce themselves and explain their role in the meeting. Have anyone you have brought to the meeting introduce themselves and explain their relationship to your child. Be sure to record this information in your meeting notes.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Review your Parent Report</b>            If you haven’t shared your Parent Report with school personnel prior to the meeting, review it at this point. Your input should be incorporated into the school’s information to complete your child’s Present Level of Performance (PLOP).</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Develop all required IEP components</b>            The IDEA requires several components to be a part of every IEP. Be sure that each component is discussed and included. Use the <a href="#">IEP Checklist for Parents</a> to review the proposed IEP for completeness. Make sure that all agreed upon services are written in the IEP document.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> While some services, such as accommodations, might be “standard practice” in many schools or classrooms, the IEP should reflect all special education, related services, supplemental aids and services, modifications, accommodations (classroom and testing) that will be provided.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Finalize the IEP</b>            You don’t have to sign the IEP at this meeting. If you want to review the IEP first, ask to take it home before you sign it. Be sure your signature indicates what you intend it to mean, such as attendance, agreement, partial agreement, refusal. Provide any concerns you have about the proposed IEP to the school in writing. If you object to the proposed IEP or any part of the proposal, explain the reasons for your objection. Ask that your written concerns be attached to the proposed IEP.</p>



CHECK WHEN COMPLETE	WHAT TO DO <b>AFTER</b> THE MEETING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Explain changes to your child</b>                      If your child didn't attend the IEP meeting, explain any changes that will be made to the child's current program or placement and the reasons for the changes. Don't let your child be surprised by changes agreed upon in the IEP. Knowing what to expect will help ensure success.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Monitor progress</b>                      While the school is required to provide you with regular progress reports (generally at each grading period) you can request more frequent progress reports. Progress reports should be based on objective information, not teacher opinion or observation. Work samples and performance on district or state assessments should be compared to the progress reported on the IEP progress reports.</p> <p>If progress reports show significant progress or a substantial lack of progress, the IEP goal(s) should be discussed and the instructional program in use should be reviewed.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Meeting more than once a year</b>                      While each student's IEP must be reviewed and updated at least annually, you can request an IEP meeting at any time. If progress is slow or other issues, such as behavior, need to be addressed, request an IEP meeting in writing.</p>

From NCLD's IDEA Parent Guide, Chapter 7: Individualized Education Program (IEP).

## About the Author

**Candace Cortiella** is Director of The Advocacy Institute, a nonprofit focused on improving the lives of people with disabilities through public policy and other initiatives. The mother of a young adult with learning disabilities, she lives in the Washington, D.C., area.



## Additional Resources

### **Additional Resources for IEPs**

- U.S. Department of Education: [Q and A: Questions and Answers On Individualized Education Programs \(IEP's\), Evaluations and Reevaluations](#)
- Wrightslaw: [All About IEPs](#)

### **Related Content on LD.org**

- [Knowing Your Child's Rights](#)
- [Advocating for Your School-Aged Child](#)
- [How IDEA Can Help You Help Your Child](#)
- [A Parent's Perspective — Prior Written Notice](#)
- [A Parent's Perspective — Why My Son Attended His Own IEP Meetings](#)
- [Understanding the Standards-based IEP](#)
- [IDEA Parent Guide](#)
- [Determining Appropriate Assessment Accommodations for Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Assessment Options for IDEA-Eligible Students](#)



## LD.org — Designed with Parents in Mind

The National Center for Learning Disabilities' [LD.org](http://LD.org) Web site offers busy parents a “one-stop shop” — answering questions about learning disabilities (LD) and providing free, helpful resources for the entire family as you move along the “LD journey.”

Visit these sections on LD.org to find the LD information you need.

### [LD Basics](#)

“The basics” about various types of learning disabilities.

### [In the Home](#)

Real-life suggestions to help parents manage the day-to-day challenges and expectations of having a child with LD.

### [At School](#)

Information that teaches parents how to advocate for their child by explaining their child's rights.

### [College and Work](#)

Strategies and tools for parents whose children are transitioning from high school to work or college.

### [On Capitol Hill](#)

Highlights education and civil rights legislation that directly impacts students with LD and their families.

### **NCLD's free high-quality resources include:**

- [Parent & Advocacy Guides](#)
- [Exclusive NCLD policy-related publications](#)
- [Checklists and worksheets](#)
- [Online newsletters](#)
- [LD Insights Blog](#)
- [Legislative updates, and more](#)

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