

Every Minute Counts: Calculating IEP Services to Improve Student Outcomes in Washington State

Report of the Existing Policies, Guidance, and Related Resources

For SWDs, their families, providers, and other members of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team, the IEP is an essential document that entitles a student with a disability (SWD) to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and informs efficacious delivery of services and supports. When developed and implemented collaboratively, an IEP outlines the critical decisions a team has made to address the unique needs resulting from a student's disability and enables meaningful progress in the general education curriculum. Specially designed instruction (SDI) and related services can change the trajectory of a student's growth whereby the gap between the performance of SWDs and their same-age peers can be narrowed or closed. The development and implementation of the IEP provide the opportunity for SWDs to access the general education curriculum and peers with and without disabilities.

Every Minute Counts: Calculating IEP Services to Improve Student Outcomes in Washington State is a project between members of the Institute for Innovation in Development, Engagement, and Learning Systems (IDEALS) and the Special Education Division of the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The objective is to identify existing problems of practice related to IEP development and identify best practices for determining the amount and type of special education and related services contained in students' IEPs. The initial stage of the project includes a comprehensive report presenting the research literature, existing policies at the federal and state level, and other related resources.

It is important to note that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services. Each state interprets IDEA to create policies and regulations that support and guide the implementation of special education services but must meet the minimum requirements set forth by IDEA. Interpretation of IDEA and guidance also changes over time based on legislation, regulations, and litigations.

The results presented in the [Report of the Existing Policies, Guidance, and Related Resources](#) and summarized below provide a snapshot of the present guidance on determining special education and related services for SWDs in various states across the country.

INDIVIDUALIZED DECISION-MAKING

The process of identifying and determining the amount of special education and related services within the IEP must be reflective of all the student's unique needs. Remaining student-focused ensures that special education, related services, and other supports not only allow a student to make progress in the general education curriculum but also:

- Advance toward student-specific academic and/or functional annual goals;
- Participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities; and
- Be educated alongside other students, including peers without disabilities.

“Keep the student in the center of every IEP decision to be made. In that way, each element of the IEP is in alignment with every other element of the IEP and the whole document accurately reflects a complete, accurate, and current picture of the student”
(Oregon Department of Education, n.d., p. 1).

Teams are advised to thoughtfully consider the **interconnectedness of the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) and the annual goals and objectives** within the IEP document. **Relevant and current data**, including formal and informal assessments, progress reports, observations, and other relevant sources of information collected by various members of the IEP Team are essential in determining whether services are ‘reasonably calculated’ or should be altered to increase the student’s accessibility to the general education curriculum and to ensure benefit from their special education program.

The literature also establishes the connection between goals and services and emphasizes the importance of **identifying the annual goals of the IEP prior to determining the type and amount of special education and related services**.

Continuous and accurate progress monitoring, as well as reviewing data in a timely manner, is an important part of the data-driven decision-making process to determine and iteratively revise the types and amount of special education and related services. Progress monitoring should occur across a variety of contexts and involve multiple IEP team members.

Learn more about individualized decision-making, PLAAFPs, annual goals, progress monitoring and a reasonably calculated educational program [here](#).

The Supreme Court has referred to the development of special education and related services as a general standard, not a formula; there can be no prescriptive model for determining whether special education programming is appropriate or delivers educational benefit. Rather, the unique circumstances of the student are to be the centerpiece of any and all IEP decisions.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

As mandated by IDEA, teachers and service providers should select academic and behavioral interventions that have research to indicate effectiveness. Sources of information about the research base include professional journals and websites, such as the What Works Clearinghouse Find What Works sponsored by the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES), and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Standards for Evidence-Based Practices.

Learn more about evidence-based practices [here](#).

CLARITY WITHIN THE IEP

Services within the IEP must be clearly documented, including the beginning and ending dates, frequency, location, and duration statements. The U.S. Department of Education has directed school districts to provide sufficient detail in IEPs to ensure that the resources the district will commit is clear to all members of the IEP Team, including families. **Such clarity in the IEP helps ensure that educators and service providers clearly understand their responsibilities and expectations in implementing the specific services to which a student is entitled based on assessments of the student’s needs, and supports future decisions for continuing, revising, or discontinuing services.**

Learn more about clearly documenting services with an IEP [here](#).

TEAM DECISION-MAKING

The development of an IEP requires a collaborative process, which includes general education classroom teachers, special education teachers, related service providers, parents, and the student. Eliciting and valuing the interrelated knowledge and disciplinary expertise of the IEP Team, especially from families, are important in determining special education and related services. Although special educators may be considered the primary professional responsible for SDI and collecting data and reporting progress towards goals and objectives, the nature of services should be delivered across a variety of settings. Thus, decisions should include all providers, such as general educators and related service providers, within those settings.

As integral members of the IEP Team, the information and perspectives shared by families are crucial in ensuring that decisions on special education and related services are based on the child's unique needs. Parental voice and involvement can shed light on why the child's needs warrant specific services and how services can benefit the child. As a collaborative process, other members of the IEP Team should clarify decisions regarding special education and related services, as well as explain the research foundations implicate certain interventions and services that are based on evidence.

The related service provider plays a key role in communicating assessment results and progress reports to the entire team to assist the team in making sense of the data to then determine the appropriateness of the related service, and if applicable, continuation, changes, or discontinuation of the service. Related service providers may remove barriers by integrating therapies across school settings and in naturally occurring environments, and further enable others (e.g., staff, parents, peers) to implement and support the therapy goals.

Learn more about the importance of collaboratively developing IEPs, including partnering with families and related service providers, [here](#).

THINKING CREATIVELY AS A TEAM

Flexibility may be necessary to remain responsive to the needs of the student and allow for added opportunities for meaningful delivery. Flexibility supports student progress and, as an added benefit, provides the most efficient use of a provider's time. Student-centered decision-making may necessitate interventions be provided in a variety of settings (e.g., academics, lunch, recess, specials, extracurricular activities). Flexible scheduling permits a combination of delivery models (e.g., direct, integrated/ collaboration indirect, and consultation) to be provided to or on behalf of the student and ensures that the needs of the student are being addressed. The IEP Team may also consider whether related services will be provided to a student individually and/or within a group. Thinking creatively as a team may afford related service providers the opportunity to increase the impact of therapies; increase collaboration and progress monitoring with other educators; minimize disruptions within the classroom; and increase opportunities for students to remain with their peers.

Learn more about how IEP Teams can creatively develop a plan for delivering services as it relates to frequency, duration, settings, delivery models, and within groups [here](#).

GUIDING QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The literature includes guidance and prompts for IEP Teams to consider and discuss to determine what types of services are needed, including the amount, location, and provider for that service.

Learn more about the compiled guiding questions and considerations [here](#).

PRECAUTIONS

The unique educational needs of the student are to be the central focus of the decision-making process and IEP Teams should refrain from basing decisions narrowly on the student's category of eligibility (i.e., the needs commonly associated with the disability category), which would narrowly and inaccurately place parameters around the type and amount of special education and related services.

Additionally, when services are being determined, the IEP Team and school administrators cannot consider the expense of special education services. Convenience of school or program scheduling, class periods and bell schedules, availability of the service provider, or other administrative reasons should not drive IEP Team decisions.

Lastly, students are to receive the full duration of service as indicated on their IEPs. Delivering services with fidelity, including frequency, duration, and setting, as well as implementing interventions with fidelity is crucial. IEP alterations that are conducted without required documentation must not occur, as this can negatively impact service efficacy and shared decision-making on behalf of the student.

Learn more about precautions [here](#).

The intent of the [Report of the Existing Policies, Guidance, and Related Resources](#) is to provide a comprehensive picture of current literature, including policy and state guidance to provide a national scope. The findings outlined within the report present the current guidance on determining special education and related services for SWDs. This problem of practice continues to be challenging and nuanced, and states do their best to interpret IDEA and effectively support SWDs. This report is meant to provide guidance that allows IEP Teams and educator preparation programs to foster IEP development that is individualized, effective, and responsive to SWDs. However, it is important to recognize that continual improvements to these practices remain to ensure that SWDs receive FAPE in their educational programming.

The next stages of the **Every Minute Counts: Calculating IEP Services to Improve Student Outcomes in Washington State** project includes conducting focus groups with key partners to further understand the problem of practice and to identify solutions and additional guidance for the state of Washington. The results from this report and the themes that emerge from the focus groups will lead to the creation of a technical assistance guide and corresponding professional learning materials to support individuals across the state. In the spirit of collaboration, members of the IDEALS Institute are also cooperating with OSPI to connect this work with other partnership projects, including the Keeping Exceptional Special Educators (KESE) Grant, CEEDAR Center Washington Intensive Technical Assistance Center, Washington Teacher Residency Technical Advisory Workgroup, and the Inclusionary Practices Professional Development Project.

If you have feedback on the Report of the Existing Policies, Guidance, and Related Resources, we encourage you to provide feedback using the form [here](#).