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Standards-Based IEP: Implementation Update

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2006, Project Forum published a document entitled *Standards-Based IEPs: Implementation in Selected States*¹ based on staff interviews in 18 states about their use of standards-based individualized education programs (IEPs). The definition of a standards-based IEP as presented in that document is: *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.*

Findings from that study revealed the wide range of ways that state standards were being incorporated into the IEP process and document. Of the 18 states interviewed, 11 required IEP teams to use a standards-based approach as described in the definition above. The other seven states described their process as one in which IEP teams were expected to consider state standards and/or state curriculum based on the state standards in describing present levels of performance and in developing goals, but they did not require the use of grade-level standards for developing student goals.

The implementation of standards-based IEPs has continued to evolve and in March 2010, Project Forum surveyed all states to examine their current practices in this area. This document is based on the results of that survey. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) completed this task under its cooperative agreement with the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

¹ This and all other documents produced by Project Forum can be downloaded at <http://www.projectforum.org>.

BACKGROUND

The Standards-Based Approach to IEPs

Traditionally, the IEP process has started with a focus on the skills the child had achieved and the child's needs that had been revealed through evaluations conducted for the IEP. Although academic areas would be included in the discussion, the emphasis would most often be on the child's acquisition of basic developmental and/or functional skills unrelated to a specific academic area.

By contrast, a standards-based IEP process starts with a review by the IEP team of the student's present level of academic achievement performance focused on the student's achievement of academic standards for the enrolled grade. This information is then used to identify which state standards the student has achieved and which standards remain to be accomplished. It is important to note that the student's IEP resulting from this process does not contain a restatement of the state standards, but rather includes goals that designate the necessary learning—the specially designed instruction—that will lead to the student's attaining the standards that the team has identified as not yet achieved. If needed, goals related to acquisition of functional skills that will facilitate the achievement of state academic standards are also included.

As this document was under review before publication, the final version of the Common Core Standards² was released and states will have the opportunity to adopt the Common Core Standards to replace their existing set of standards. However, currently each state's standards are different from every other state's with a wide array of approaches in the number, types and content of those standards. The differences among states in the content of their standards means that in some states, there may be multiple goals related to one standard or, in other states, many standards may be involved in one goal. Thus, each state that adopts a standards-based IEP has to provide training for its IEP team members on how to identify appropriate standards-based goals. It is critical that all members of IEP teams have a clear and complete understanding of the state standards as a whole and that they understand how to develop goals that will reflect the student's need for specific academic skills to achieve the grade-level standards. Additional information about the standards-based IEP approach is available in the works cited in the references and appendix.

Influence of Assessments on the IEP

The change to using standards-based IEPs has been supported by two federal laws:

² See the website at <http://www.corestandards.org> for a copy of the standards.

- 1) the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that emphasizes access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities; and
- 2) the federal assessment regulations issued in 2007 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that permit states to implement an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS). The requirements that pertain to standards-based IEPs are contained in the following section of the ESEA regulations:

For students who are assessed based on modified academic achievement standards, the State must—

(i) Inform IEP teams that a student may be assessed based on modified academic achievement standards in one or more subjects for which assessments are administered under §200.2;

(ii) Establish and monitor implementation of clear and appropriate guidelines for IEP teams to apply in developing and implementing IEPs for students who are assessed based on modified academic achievement standards. These students' IEPs must—

(A) Include IEP goals that are based on the academic content standards for the grade in which a student is enrolled; and

(B) Be designed to monitor a student's progress in achieving the student's standards-based goals;

(iii) Ensure that students who are assessed based on modified academic achievement standards have access to the curriculum, including instruction, for the grade in which the students are enrolled;

(iv) Ensure that students who take alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards are not precluded from attempting to complete the requirements, as defined by the State, for a regular high school diploma; and

(v) Ensure that each IEP team reviews annually for each subject, according to the criteria in paragraph (e)(2) of this section, its decision to assess a student based on modified academic achievement standards to ensure that those standards remain appropriate [34 CFR 200.1(f)(2)].

The survey conducted for this analysis included items designed to examine the influence of the AA-MAS test on the adoption of standards-based IEPs and related state practices.

METHODOLOGY

With input from the Assessing Special Education Students (ASES) SCASS,³ Project Forum developed a survey on the current implementation of standards-based IEPs.

³ SCASS is the acronym for State Collaboratives on Assessment and Student Standards managed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The collaboratives are groups of individuals from state departments of education who work on assessment-related challenges that are more effectively addressed by a group of states rather than an individual state. There are total of 14 different operating SCASS projects.

The survey was conducted using Zarca Interactive® (an online survey management program). Project Forum received survey responses from 41 states and one non-state jurisdiction (subsequently referred to as 42 states). Data were analyzed and survey findings are reported in the following sections of this document.

FINDINGS

States' Adoption of Standards-Based IEPs

A total of 33 of the 42 responding states indicated that they are already using, or in the process of implementing, standards-based IEPs. Responses to the follow-up question about when this practice began provided some details on variations in implementation among the states.

- Three states adopted standards-based IEPs before 2000. These respondents noted that their decision to revise their IEP was related either to the standards movement that started in the 1990s (*New Mexico*) or the IDEA regulations issued in 1999 (*Rhode Island* and *Wyoming*) that added to the definition of an IEP the requirement to ensure access for students with disabilities to the general curriculum.
- Nine states adopted standards-based IEPs between 2000 and 2005 and they cited a variety of reasons for this action:
 - *Alaska* adopted standards for general education in 2001 and aligned them with IEP goals and objectives in 2002.
 - *Alabama* started in 2003-04 to support access to the general education curriculum and then added this requirement to its state Code in 2007.
 - *Arizona* adopted a requirement in 2000 that all LEAs have curriculum that is based on, and aligned with state standards.
 - *California* began to train on standards-based IEPs in 2001 when it became clear that students with disabilities were falling behind in general education.
 - *Idaho, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia* and *West Virginia* cited similar reasons related to the standards movement, IDEA requirements and the need to meet individual student needs.
- Sixteen states adopted standards-based IEPs between 2006 and 2011. Although four of these states (*Arkansas, Georgia, Nebraska* and *Wisconsin*) cited reasons similar to the earlier adopting states (mainly to provide access to the general education curriculum), the majority (12) of these states were motivated to start using standards-based IEPs by their state's decision to create an AA-MAS (*Hawaii, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina* and *Texas*).

- The remaining five states of the 33 total states that indicated they are using or implementing standards-based IEPs noted somewhat different situations related to their decisions on this matter:
 - *Kentucky* said that its approach resembles more a “standards-referenced” IEP than a “standards-based” IEP.
 - *Massachusetts* has supported standards-based IEPs conceptually for many years, but said that added motivation came from the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA.
 - *Montana* indicated that standards-based IEPs are not a state initiative, but the state is providing training and promoting their use.
 - *Tennessee* said that it is now beginning to train LEAs to create and implement good, standards-based IEPs.
 - *Vermont* noted that it does not mandate standards-based IEPs so the consistency of development and implementation depends on the school, the supervisory union or the individual case manager.

A total of nine states (*Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New York and South Dakota*) said that they are not using or implementing a standards-based IEP. They were asked if they were considering developing one and, if so, what planning had been done. Four of these states indicated that they were in the process of development and provided the following details:

- *Connecticut* is collaborating with the State Education Resource Center that is starting to put together professional development and guidance regarding standards-based IEPs.
- *Iowa* has developed a definition of standards-based IEPs as part of its development of an AA-MAS that will be implemented in the Fall of 2010.
- *Montana* has been working toward an AA-MAS and is in the process of developing an approach to standards-based IEPs that will also require developing alternative standards which do not yet exist.
- *South Dakota* is working on training for standards-based IEPs.

State Definitions of Standards-Based IEPs⁴

The interview respondents referenced a wide variety of materials in response to the request for a copy of their state’s definition of a standards-based IEP. Some provided links to their websites, while others indicated that their state’s definition was either in draft or being revised. Some states referred to Project Forum documents, especially the *Seven-Step Process to Creating Standards-Based IEPs* (Holbrook, 2007) as the source of their state’s definition. The following are examples of material states use to describe or define standards-based IEPs:

⁴ See the Appendix for state website links provided by survey respondents.

- *Indiana*: "Standard-based goals are not restatements of the standards. Instead, the goals capture the approximations to support the student's movement toward proficiency at grade level. These goals focus on incremental skills that give the student access to the content that is offered to all students. The student goals must be logical derivatives of the state standards as provided by the state."⁵
- *Wisconsin*: "An [IEP] connected to academic standards is one in which the IEP team utilizes grade level or developmental expectations in its design. A meaningful IEP reflects the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards, Wisconsin Assessment Frameworks, Wisconsin Extended Grade Band Standards, and local district benchmarks, to help meet the student's unique academic learning needs."⁶
- *New Mexico*: "An IEP is a written document that: 1) directs and guides the development of meaningful educational experiences to provide students with opportunities to gain skills and knowledge that will assist them in achieving the standards and expectations for all students in the educational system, and 2) prepares them for transition into adult life."⁷
- *Rhode Island*: "The IEP provides goals based on the general curriculum to guide the special education services to be provided in the least restrictive environment, which for most children is the general education classroom."⁸

States' Impetus to Adopt a Standards-Based IEP

The addition of an AA-MAS as an option to the federal assessment system under the ESEA has had an effect on the standards-based IEP movement. In response to a survey item, 14 of the 33 states that have adopted a standards-based IEP indicated that this change was brought about by their state's decision to develop an AA-MAS. In a follow-up item, eight of those states indicated that a standards-based IEP is currently required only for students who participate in the AA-MAS. Five of those states (*Kansas, Michigan, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania*) have plans to expand the use of the standards-based IEPs beyond the AA-MAS population, while three (*Minnesota, North Carolina and Virginia*) do not have plans to do so.

The 19 states that adopted a standards-based IEP for reasons not related to the AA-MAS described similar types of motivation for making this change with some differences in emphasis. The most commonly cited reason was to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Other reasons

⁵ From *Effective Goal Processes: A Training Module for Educators*, page 25. Online at: <https://ican.doe.state.in.us/beta/resources/tm/ISTART7/EffectiveGoalProcesses.pdf>

⁶ From *A Guide to Connecting Academic Standards and IEPs*, page 4 or online at: <http://www.dpi.wi.gov/sped/pdf/iepstandardsguide.pdf>.

⁷ From *Developing Quality IEPs*, page 28, o4 online at <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/seo/iep/dl10/NM%20IEP%20Manual.pdf>.

⁸ From *What is an IEP*," online at <http://www.ritap.org/iep/what-is-an-iep/what-is-an-iep.html>.

included ensuring alignment to state standards and improving instruction and achievement for students with disabilities. One state that has not formally adopted a standards-based approach noted that the state supports this change, but that implementation varies by district, while another state described its approach as more 'standards-referenced' with a procedure that does not always begin with a discussion of the student's performance in relation to state standards, although discussion around where the student is and needs to be in relation to the standards is ongoing and developing.

Professional Development on Standards-Based IEPs

A group of survey items addressed issues related to professional development. Of the 33 states that have adopted a standards-based IEP, 27 indicated that they provide some type of professional development on this topic. A few states were in the process of developing or revising their training materials or were using Project Forum documents (i.e., Holbrook, 2007). Most states have placed resources related to standards-based IEPs online for ongoing training and reference use (see the Appendix for links).

Of the 27 states that provide professional development, 18 include general education staff as well as special education staff in those activities and 24 states indicated that they include parents. When asked about how they ensure that new staff are provided with training on standards-based IEPs, most states indicated that local districts are responsible and a few referred to training carried out by regional entities.

Monitoring Standards-Based IEPs

Twelve of the states that have implemented standards-based IEPs indicated that they have a monitoring plan that describes the state's expectations for how districts will develop and implement standards-based IEPs. A few states have specific references to their requirements for including standards information in relation to student goals. A typical example is the *Arizona Monitoring Guidesteps* that contains the following statement: "The IEP includes the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance including strengths and needs and how the disability affects the student's involvement in the general education curriculum (*ESS Monitoring Model*, www.azed.gov/ESS/programsupport/Monitoring/Guidesteps.pdf, p.38)." However, none of the responding states had a plan specifically developed to review all the aspects of a student's goals that are a part of standards-based IEPs. Some states indicated that they do not monitor the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs per se. Others said that they are in the process of developing revised procedures to include this element in their monitoring procedures.

One respondent noted that "a significant improvement of standards-based IEP goal writing has been observed since the initial monitoring. LEAs are focusing on evidence- and research-based materials and strategies to access the general curriculum. The use and documentation of interventions on IEPs has increased."

Additional Comments

Additional comments provided by respondents mainly addressed the current stage of their implementation of standards-based IEPs. One respondent noted that the state “views the [ESEA] requirement for standards-based IEP goals as an opportunity to help IEP teams develop more instructionally relevant IEPs for students taking the [AA-MAS]. But, once IEP teams are accustomed to developing IEPs in this new way, we think they will be more likely to use the same process for all students with IEPs.”

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results of this Project Forum survey revealed an increase in the number of states now using a standards-based IEP over the number reported in an earlier survey. A total of 37 out of the 42 states that responded to the survey now have, or are working on implementing, a standards-based IEP. Fourteen of these states adopted this approach because of the AA-MAS option in ESEA and, although other respondents did not specifically cite this as a motivating factor in their state, it is clear that the ESEA regulations have had an impact on state decisions about revising their states’ IEPs.

Proponents of the adoption of standards-based IEPs describe this practice as the most effective way to implement real access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. However, there is little information available about standards-based IEPs aside from state policies and other documents that describe their use. This study indicates a critical need for more research in a number of areas related to the use of standards-based IEPs, for example, the impact on student academic achievement; how to use monitoring to ensure effective implementation of standards-based IEPs; and whether IEP members, particularly parents and students, see the this tool as more relevant for teaching and learning.

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APPENDIX
LIST OF STATE LINKS TO MATERIALS RELATED TO STANDARDS-BASED IEPs

- AK <http://www.eed.state.us/tls/SPED/Handbook.html>
- AL <http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=65&sort=16&footer=sections>
- AZ <http://www.ade.state.az.us/ess/publications/IEPAzTAS.pdf> and
<https://www.ade.state.az.us/ess/programsupport/Monitoring/Guidesteps.pdf>
- CA <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/ieptraining.asp>
- GA http://gadoe.org/ci_exceptional.aspx?PageReq=CIEXCImpMan and
http://gadoe.org/ci_exceptional.aspx?PageReq=CIEXCELLuminate
- IN <https://ican.doe.state.in.us/beta/resources/tm/ISTART7/EffectiveGoalProcesses.pdf>
- KS <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2371>
- MA <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/docs.html>
- NC <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/ec/policy/presentations>
- ND http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/speced/guide/iep/IEP_Guide.pdf and
<http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/speced/resource/alternate/index.shtm>
- NM <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/seo/iep/dl10/NM%20IEP%20Manual.pdf>
- OH www.edresourcesohio.org
- OK <http://sde.state.ok.us/Curriculum/SpecEd/pdf/Assessment/OAAPManual.pdf>
- PA <http://www.pattan.net/Standards-BasedIEPs.aspx> and
<http://www.pattan.net/TrainingMaterials.aspx?ContentLocation=/Standards-BasedIEPs.aspx>
- RI www.ritap.org/iep
- SC <http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Standards-and-Learning/Exceptional-Children/old/ec/stateregs/documents/8-12-09FinalPPP.doc>
- TX <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/special.ed/guidance/sbIEP.html>
- WI <http://www.dpi.wi.gov/sped/pdf/iepstandardsguide.pdf>
- WV <http://wvde.state.wv.us/teachiep/>