



Guidance

Measurable Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives— Substantive Compliance for Writing Rigorous Achievable Goals

**Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education
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This document serves as a supplement to the original procedural-based Measurable Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives document. This document supports substantive compliance in developing goals for the purposes of educational benefit. Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams must ensure all students, including students with disabilities, are held to rigorous academic standards, high expectations, and have meaningful access to the state’s academic content standards.

Educational Benefit

Each student with a disability as defined in [34 CFR §300.8](#) is entitled to an IEP designed to provide educational benefit to the student. [The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) and the [Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education \(MARSE\)](#) require, as one component of the IEP, measurable annual goals and short-term objectives. The United States Department of Education (USDOE) [Dear Colleague Letter on Free Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\) \(November 16, 2015\)](#) states, “IEP goals must be aligned with grade-level content standards for all children with disabilities.” More information regarding determining measurability is provided in the [Measurable Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives](#) document.

To provide educational benefit, the IDEA and MARSE require measurable annual goals and short-term objectives designed to:

- meet a student’s needs resulting from the student’s disability to enable the student to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum
- align with the grade level of enrollment, not to the student’s ability level; and

- meet each of the student’s other educational needs resulting from the student’s disability [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(2\)](#).

Districts have an obligation to ensure both requirements of [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(2\)](#) are addressed within the IEP. The present level of academic and functional performance should explicitly connect these two components, showing how skill deficit work supports future independence and how the student is accessing the general education curriculum. An IEP developed to meet the unique needs of a student must address the following:

- Grade-Level Content Standards—scaffolded and adapted to the student’s present level to ensure the student has access to the general education curriculum (example: with support, the student will identify central ideas in grade-level text). This is to be understood to mean the general education curriculum for the grade the student is enrolled. This/these goal(s) can be a modification of the standards while the short-term objectives may be written in support of the goal to be accomplished.
- Skill Deficits—lagging skills at the student’s instructional level, to close the gap allowing the student to eventually meet grade level content expectations (phonics, math computation, working memory strategies).

An IEP Team must consider how to appropriately address a student’s unique needs impacting their ability to make progress on grade level content standards. The student’s needs might not always be addressed by a goal or objective, it could be addressed in supplementary aid or services, or an accommodation. If a need is identified, but not addressed the IEP Team must document the options considered but selected in prior written notice.

Aligning Annual Goals and Objectives to Grade-Level Content Standards

According to [34 CFR §300.321](#) the IEP Team must include a general education teacher if a student is, or may be, participating in the general education environment. The general education teacher is a required member of the IEP Team and plays a vital role in developing IEP goals aligned with grade-level content standards. These goals may also be a modification of the general education curriculum for the grade the student is enrolled, rather than their ability level. The general education teacher’s content expertise ensures the goals are both rigorous and achievable, providing a clear pathway

for the student to access and make progress in the general education curriculum. By collaborating with the special education team, the general education teacher helps to ensure IEP goals are tailored to meet the student's individual needs while maintaining alignment with grade-level content standards.

Collaborative Roles in Developing Annual IEP Goals

Developing meaningful and measurable annual goals for a student with an IEP is a shared responsibility between general education and special education teachers.

General Education Teacher's Role

The general education teacher contributes critical insight into grade-level content standards, behavioral, social and classroom expectations. By collaborating with the special education team, they help shape IEP goals to reflect the student's unique learning needs while maintaining consistency with academic benchmarks.

The general education teacher contributes to the IEP process by reporting on the student's ability to access and make progress in the general education curriculum. They also help identify the skills, supports, accommodations, and/or modifications necessary for the student to meaningfully participate and succeed in the general education setting. Modifications to the general education curriculum should be appropriate for the grade the student is enrolled in, rather than the student's ability level.

The general education teacher may provide specially designed instruction (SDI) to students with a disability under the direct supervision of a special education teacher.

Special Education Teacher's Role

The special education teacher is instrumental in the goal development process, using their expertise to assess the student's present levels of academic achievement and performance, identify skill gaps, and develop targeted objectives to align with the student's unique needs. By collaborating with the IEP Team, implementing evidence-based strategies, and developing and providing SDI, the special education teacher ensures a student with a disability receives instruction that is both individualized and aligned with grade-level expectations and progress is systematically monitored. This structured approach supports consistent growth and helps students stay on track toward achieving their annual goals.

SDI must be designed and supervised by a qualified special education teacher or professional in accordance with IDEA and MARSE. While special education personnel lead the design and oversight of SDI, general education teachers may deliver SDI when it is planned collaboratively and monitored by the IEP Team. This includes implementing instructional adaptations, supplementary aids, and services as outlined in the student's IEP to ensure access to and progress in the general education curriculum.

Why This Collaboration Matters

When general and special education teachers work together to develop annual goals and short-term objectives, students benefit from a cohesive plan that supports both access and achievement. This structured, team-based approach promotes consistent growth, fosters inclusion, and helps students stay on track toward meeting their educational milestones.

Annual goals are aligned with the grade-level content standards, and short-term objectives serve to scaffold the specific skills required for progress toward the annual goal. Short-term objectives play a critical role in helping students meet grade-level standards by breaking down annual goals into manageable, skill-specific steps. Short-term objectives serve as a clear framework for guiding instruction and tracking progress ensuring students acquire the foundational skills needed for sustainable achievement.

Components of the IEP to Be Reviewed for Substantive Compliance

- Areas of need [34 CFR §300.324\(a\)\(1\)\(iv\)](#)
- Present level of performance [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(1\)](#);
- Alignment of needs, current level, and goals [34 CFR § 300.324](#); and
- Progress reports [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(3\)](#).

Description

- Areas of need: The academic, developmental, and functional needs of a student. Skills or behaviors that are a result of the student's disability, which require specially designed instruction [34 CFR §300.324\(a\)\(1\)\(iv\)](#).
- Current level of performance: For each identified area of need, data, either quantitative or qualitative, are provided, which gives information regarding the

student's present level of academic achievement or functional performance [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(1\)](#).

- Alignment of needs, current levels, and goals: For every area of need identified in the IEP, there is a reasonably calculated annual goal or service [34 CFR §300.324](#).
- Progress Reports: Periodic reports on the progress the student is making toward meeting the annual goals (such as, through the use of quarterly or other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards) [34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(3\)](#).

This information may be found in the goal itself or in other areas throughout the IEP.

Important Note: The IDEA does not establish a specific number of goals to be included in an IEP, as this may contradict the premise that requires an IEP to be individualized. However, each area of need must be clearly defined in a student's IEP and addressed in one or more of the following areas: annual goals and short-term objectives, supplementary aids and services, related services and programs, and/or transition services.

Alignment to State Standards: To help make sure students with disabilities are held to high expectations and have meaningful access to a state's academic content standards, the goals must be aligned with the state's academic content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled. The state standards are a set of expectations that all students are expected to achieve by the end of the school year in a given grade level or concept. The state standards are not an annual goal and should not be written as such for students with IEPs. Rather, the goal should focus on what skills a student needs to develop in order to achieve or move closer to achieving a particular standard.

Annual IEP goals need to be written as **rigorous, achievable goals** that enable students to make progress in the general education curriculum. Below are reasons why this approach is essential:

- **Equity and High Expectations:** Writing rigorous, achievable annual goals based on grade-level standards ensures students are challenged appropriately while receiving the necessary supports to succeed. Maintaining high expectations prevents limiting a student's potential.
- **Access to the General Education Curriculum:** Federal laws, including the IDEA emphasize that students with disabilities must have access to the same

curriculum as their nondisabled peers. Goals aligned with grade-level expectations support inclusivity and meaningful participation. It is critical for special education and general education teachers to collaborate on goal development to ensure the student has access to general education grade-level expectations.

- **Closing Learning Gaps:** By focusing on grade-level skills, educators can help students close gaps in learning rather than reinforcing below-grade-level instruction that may hinder progress.
- **Preparation for Future Success:** Ensuring students engage with appropriate grade content prepares them for transitions to higher grade levels and future opportunities, including college and careers.
- **Tailored Support for Success:** While rigorous goals set high expectations, objectives can be written to outline the scaffolding, strategies, and accommodations necessary for a student to achieve those goals successfully. This individualized approach ensures students receive the support they need while striving for progress.

By structuring IEP goals in this way, students receive targeted instruction that fosters their ability to thrive academically while remaining engaged with the grade-level curriculum.

Goals for Transition Age Students

Measurable annual goals included in an IEP for a transition-aged student must meet all the above requirements, in addition to the procedural compliance requirements outlined in the [Measurable Annual Goals and Short Term Objectives \(Procedural Compliance\)](#) document. At least one measurable goal must relate to the student's transition services needs.

IEP Team Key Considerations

Link Goals to Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)

- Ensure each goal directly addresses needs identified in the PLAAFP statement.
- Ask: What does the student need to learn or improve, and how significantly does that differ from typical peer expectations?

Specify Supports and Services Needed to Meet the Goal

- Identify whether goals can be met with supplementary aids and services in the general education environment.
- Ask: Can the student make meaningful progress on this goal with support in a general education classroom, or is a more restrictive setting necessary?

Assess the Intensity and Frequency of Instruction

- Consider how much support, time, and specialization the goal requires.
- A goal requiring highly individualized instruction or specialized settings may suggest a more restrictive placement.
- Example: A student requiring 1:1 direct instruction for a behavior goal may need a special education program temporarily.

Ensure Goals are Observable and Data-Driven

- Write goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).
- Ask: Can we track progress clearly enough to determine if the placement is supporting goal achievement?

Ensure Placement Decisions are based on the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

- Demonstrate the IEP Team considered meeting the student's needs in general education with supplementary aids and services. (When supplementary aids and services are not working, have different ones been tried?)
- Ask: Can we justify the student's placement? Is the placement based on the following:
 - The needs of the student?
- An adequate consideration of meeting the student's needs in general education with supplementary aids and services?

Use Goals to Monitor LRE Appropriateness

- Revisit measurable progress data regularly.

- Ensure progress monitoring allows for review of the following:
 - Whether the skill gap is being closed (example moving from third to fourth grade reading level)
 - Whether the student is making progress on grade-level tasks (e.g. meeting ELA standards benchmarks)
- If a student is not making expected progress despite supports, consider adjustments to services or placement — not just the goals themselves.