



Informational

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education
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Core Principle

The intent of educating students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) under IDEA is to ensure students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate for their individual needs.

This means schools first consider placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms with supplementary aids and services. Only when the nature or severity of a student's disability makes education in the general education classroom unsatisfactory, even with supports, should the student be placed in a more restrictive setting like a separate classroom or school.

The underlying principle of LRE is all students benefit from learning together in inclusive environments, while still ensuring each student with a disability receives the specialized instruction and services they need to make meaningful educational progress. The goal is to provide the right balance of inclusion and individualized support.

The Central Balance: Appropriate vs. Restrictive

Appropriate educational settings must meet unique learning needs, enable general education curriculum access, provide necessary support, and make meaningful progress.

Restrictive refers to separation from typical peers, ranging from general education classrooms with support to residential facilities.

Schools must begin with the consideration of the least restrictive option and move to more restrictive settings only when less restrictive options cannot appropriately support student needs, with consistent implementation of appropriate supplementary aids and services. Restrictive settings should never result from convenience, cost-saving, or

resource limitations. Decisions on placement must be documented in the IEP or on the notice page.

Implementation Challenges

Real-world application involves complex scenarios: students with severe behavioral issues disrupting learning, students with significant intellectual disabilities in advanced classes, students overwhelmed in large groups, or those requiring specialized equipment unavailable in general education.

Schools often err on the extremes, pushing full inclusion without adequate support or placing students in restrictive settings too quickly. IDEA demands individualized decision-making with robust support systems.

Roles and Responsibilities

Schools and IEP Teams must justify restrictive placements with data, provide supplementary aids and services, regularly review placements, start discussions with general education, document insufficient support, and balance academic, social, and behavioral needs.

General Education Teachers experience fundamental responsibility shifts—all students, with and without disabilities, are their responsibility, requiring collaboration with special education professionals to deliver tiered (e.g., MTSS) instructional and curricular modifications while maintaining grade-level expectations and ongoing professional development.

Principals serve as implementation linchpins, allocate resources for staffing and training, coordinate complex service scheduling, foster school-wide inclusion and acceptance, and lead problem-solving when challenges arise.

Special Education Teachers must continue to evolve from separate classroom instruction to consultation and support roles, collaborate with general education teachers to design curriculum modifications, provide support for the implementation of tiered frameworks (e.g., MTSS), deliver specialized Tier 3 interventions when needed, monitor the effectiveness of supports, and advocate against premature restrictive placements.

System-Wide Transformation

Successful LRE implementation requires philosophical shifts from deficit-based to strength-based perspectives, developing shared responsibility cultures, recognizing inclusive practices benefit all students, and prioritizing individual needs over standardized approaches.

Structural changes may include establishing tiered support systems that provide systematic interventions (e.g., MTSS) as a foundational framework for inclusive education, making evidence-based/effective co-teaching standard practice, embedding Universal Design for Learning principles in all curriculums, prioritizing curriculum modifications and supporting resources over separate placements, and normalizing flexible grouping and differentiated instruction. In combination, this transforms how schools approach student needs by building proactive, data-driven systems that prevent the need for restrictive placements.

Teacher Preparation Implications

University programs must fundamentally restructure by ensuring all teacher candidates learn about disabilities, teaching co-teaching models and collaboration skills universally, integrating disability studies and inclusive education philosophy throughout programs, and making UDL and differentiation core competencies.

Field experiences must include diverse classroom placements, co-teaching model practice, IEP team participation, and assistive technology exposure. Faculty development requires modeling inclusive practices, focusing research on effective inclusion, expanding dual certification programs, and including disability-related continuing education requirements.

Long-Term Vision

Well-implemented LRE creates transformative change extending beyond legal compliance, developing educators who view inclusion as natural and necessary. System-wide benefits include reduced stigma, enhanced empathy and social skills for all students, more skilled teachers meeting varied needs, efficient special education resource use, and better preparation for diverse workplaces and communities.

The ultimate goal represents a fundamental shift from retrofitting inclusion into existing systems to building inclusion as the foundation for all educational practices. This transformation requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and a shared vision of what truly inclusive education can achieve for all students—incorporating compliance into comprehensive cultural change that benefits the entire educational community.