

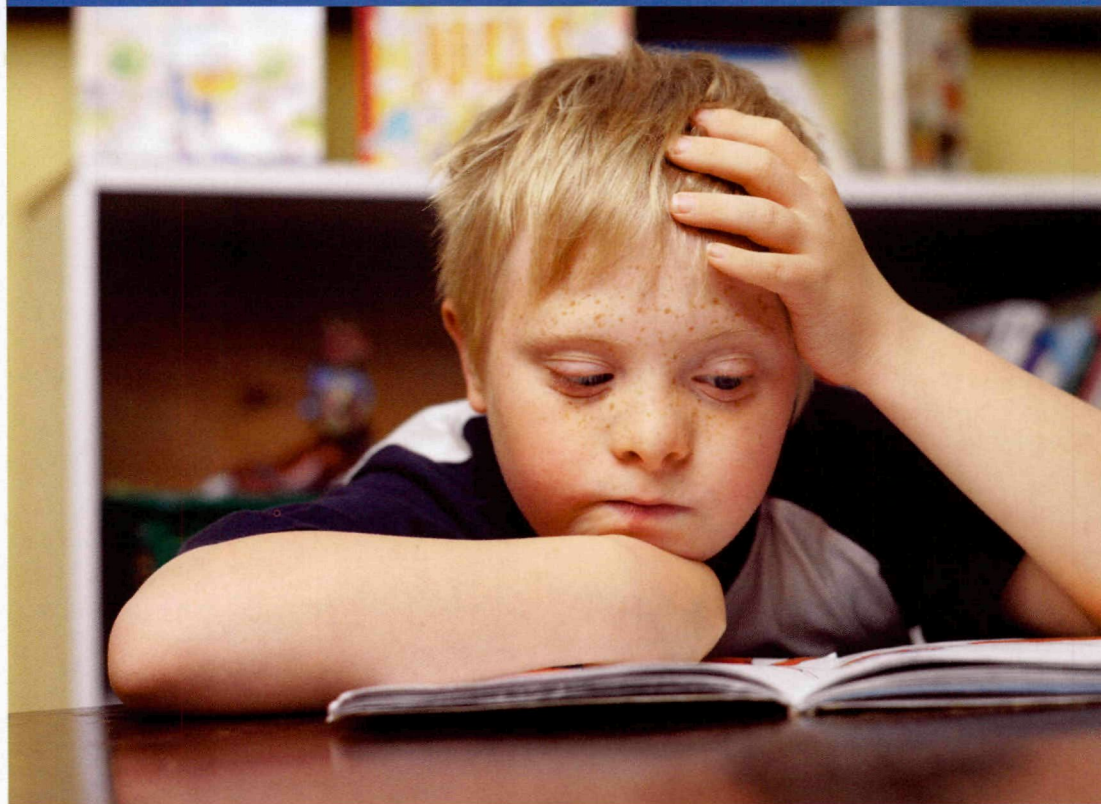
Reading an IEP: An Overview for Classroom Teachers

BY KIMBERLY KODE SUTTON



Dr. Sutton is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Special Education Program at York College of Pennsylvania. Certified in both regular and special education, she teaches undergraduate special education courses centered on special education law and services, evidence-based instruction for children with emotional or behavioral disorders, and assistive technology.

Dr. Sutton presented a helpful webinar called Driving Forces for Children with Disabilities, which you can access in the Webinars section of the Resources Catalog at www.kdp.org



In schools across the United States, new teachers will encounter special education students in their classrooms for the first time. Indeed, the majority of special education students now receive all or part of their education in the regular classroom setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The inclusion of these students brings additional responsibilities for providing the services and accommodations each student is entitled to under law. The student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) details this information.

Considered confidential documents, IEPs are stored separately from the student's other educational records. If the student has a confidential file, a note inside the student's educational record will confirm it. Regular educators responsible for special

education students in the classroom have the right (and responsibility) to access and read the confidential file.

Developed by a multidisciplinary team, this legal document provides guidelines for the daily education of the student (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2013) and directs the actions required for the student to have an appropriate education. There are specific sections of the IEP that are particularly important for any regular education teacher to understand:

- 1. Area of Eligibility:** This section identifies the category of disability under which the student qualifies for special education services. Each category of disability is identified in special education law.

- 2. Present Level of Performance:** This provides a "snapshot" of what the student can and cannot do in a specific area related to academics or behavior. Each Present Level of Performance must address how the disability affects the student's involvement in the general education curriculum. The Present Level of Performance is used to develop the student's annual IEP goals.
- 3. Measurable Annual Goals:** Using the information contained in the Present Level of Performance, the multidisciplinary team develops several goals for the student to work toward over the next year. These goals are used to guide the instruction the student will receive, and all services provided are to help the student achieve his or her goals. The IEP should also describe how progress toward each goal will be measured and how parents will be kept informed.
- 4. Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) or Modifications:** Detailed in this section are the instructional, behavioral, physical, or social accommodations the student requires as part of his or her individualized education. Special needs students who are educated in the regular classroom setting must still be provided with these identified modifications.
- 5. Participation in Statewide or District Assessment:** As a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) legislation, at least 95% of special education students participate in statewide assessments used as standard measures for yearly progress (Vaughn, Vos, & Schum, 2014). This section of the IEP will describe which assessments the student is expected to take and which accommodations are to be provided. If no assessments will be taken, the multidisciplinary team must include a justification.
- 6. Related Services:** Related services are provided if the multidisciplinary team determines they are necessary to help the student to benefit from his or her individualized education. Common related services include specialized transportation, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and assistive technology. The providers

of these services often participate on the multidisciplinary team that writes the IEP.

- 7. General Education Participation:** Each special education student must be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), allowing the student to spend the maximum amount of time possible with non-disabled peers. If the student will not participate in regular education, extracurricular activities, or other non-academics, this section of the IEP should explain why.
- 8. Transition Planning:** Although the law recommends that transition services begin as early as possible, by the time the student is 14 years of age, the IEP team must include information on what planning is being done for the student's eventual transition out of school. This section may include transition assessment scores, possible courses of study, and any transition services that will be needed, as well as input from the student, parent(s), and team members.
- 9. Implementation Dates:** These dates indicate when this IEP went into effect and when it expires. No changes can be made to the IEP during its duration unless the members of the multidisciplinary team agree to the change. IEPs are updated yearly.

Conclusion

Although Individualized Education Plans can be lengthy and cumbersome, they contain the information essential to assist teachers in providing students with special needs the accommodations they require in the regular education classroom. It is key, therefore, that new teachers understand how to access, how to read and interpret, and how to implement the information in this important document. 🍏

References

- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, §115, Stat. 1425 (2002).
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