

# IEP Team Leader Update

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## Best Practice Spotlight:

### DESIGNING Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)

Recently, I had the chance to talk with content experts from [Strategic Calibration Training Systems](#) (SCTS) about specially designed instruction (SDI). During our conversation, we looked together at the federal regulations describing SDI at [34 CFR 300.39\(b\)\(3\)](#).

The language in the regulations reminds us that SDI is about:

- adapting content, methodology, or delivery of instruction
- to meet the disability-related needs of the child, AND
- to ensure access to the general curriculum so that the child can meet the educational standards that apply to all children in the school.

One of these experts reminded me that the most important word in the phrase “specially designed instruction” is the word **DESIGNED**. Here’s a [tool](#) that SCTS developed to help providers articulate the elements of design in a way that aligns with federal requirements. Here are [two skill cards](#) (one for reading, one for math fluency) that show how this tool could be completed to support team planning for SDI. These could be used for training staff.

There are some underlying practices that teams must adopt in order to complete the SDI process in a way that fits with federal requirements. These include:

- **Identify the target standards:** School-based providers have to talk about the performance of students with disabilities in relation to the standards that apply to all children.
- **Identify, gather and share data that show the performance of the student with a disability in relation to the target standards:** School-based providers need to use data that come from classrooms or regular monitoring activities. In most cases, these data are the same data we use to understand the progress of all learners.
- **Individualize the design of instruction:** SDI should not look the same from child to child. The whole purpose of specially designed instruction is to design our approach to meet the unique needs of each child with a disability.

School-based members of the IEP team should be able to answer the following questions during the IEP team meeting in order to ensure a compliant and collaborative approach to SDI:

- **What are the learning standards that this child needs to attain by the end of the IEP period?** Targets should fit with the learning standards for the grade the child will be in when the IEP period ends. If targets are about behavior, social, or emotional development, they should come from school-wide behavior expectations or developmental expectations for the age the child will reach when the IEP ends.
- **What are the data we use to understand the progress of all children toward these standards?** We need to come prepared to share data about what the child is currently doing. We need to share it so that all team members understand what it means. We need to connect it to what the target expectation for all children is at the age or grade level that this child has currently attained.

When we do this, our design targets the student’s effective progress in the general curriculum.

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## IDEA Compliance Spotlight: Using Data to Make Decisions about Behavior that Disrupts Learning

Most schools have strong practices for collecting data about academic success. At the elementary level, whole school benchmarking assessments monitor student success with reading and math skills. In middle and high school we monitor student success through exams and projects. Transcripts, rubrics & work samples are additional tools that are commonly used to help us understand student progress at the secondary level.

But how do we understand effective progress in the general curriculum for students whose disabilities impact behavior?

There are several regulations that IEP teams must consider when a student's behavior is impacting their access to school or their progress:

- [34 CFR 300.304\(b\) and \(c\)](#): When evaluating children, assessments must be selected to assess both academic and functional performance and must identify all of the child's needs whether they are commonly linked to the disability category or not.
- [34 CFR 300.320\(a\)\(1\)](#): IEP Teams must consider the present levels of academic and functional performance and consider how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum.
- [34 CFR 300.324\(a\)\(2\)\(i\)](#): For a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others the team must consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports to address the behavior during IEP development.
- [34 CFR 300.530\(c\), \(d\), \(e\) and \(f\)](#): For children who experience disciplinary changes in placement (i.e. removals of more than 10 days due to behaviors that violate the school code), the team must consider whether the behavior is a manifestation of the disability. If it is and the child is removed from school, educational services and functional behavior assessment, behavior intervention plans, and / or modifications to address the behavior must be developed.

IEP team leaders need to remind all members of the IEP team that we have written guidance about the "standards" that guide behavioral expectations in schools. This guidance is typically found in our student handbooks or school policies. When we talk about behavior, we need to refer to our code of conduct, whether we are noticing behavior as a strength, or discussing the need for a change in the student's behavior.

Next, IEP team leaders need to refer to the abundant behavioral data that we have about all students. Sources of data that are reliably collected and readily available in schools include:

- Attendance data (number of days present / number of days possible for this school year).
- Time in class data (sign in / sign out logs; voluntary time out or adult-directed time out; tardiness or early dismissal records).
- Awards & recognitions
- Incident reports or Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence data, especially if a child was removed from a classroom for any period of time
- Suspension logs
- Observations of the student in classrooms
- Functional behavior assessments

When student behavior disrupts availability for learning, the IEP team leader should guide the team through consideration of the following questions:

- Do we have enough data to understand why this behavior is happening? [if not, evaluation is the next step]
- If we have enough data to understand the behavior, what is the standard we expect this child [and all children] to meet?
- In order to meet this standard, what is the goal that describes how we want to see the data about this behavior change?
- And finally, what is the specially designed instruction school-based team members will provide to support the child to reach this goal?

# Facilitation Strategies to Guide Team-based Discussions of SDI

Teams discuss specially designed instruction (SDI) after they have clearly identified the disability-related needs of a child and the learning standards or functional expectations at school that are impacted by these needs.

At the end of this first step, teams should identify and document the targets for change for this child and the data that will show the change is happening (i.e. goals & objectives).

Finally, teams should have conversations about adaptations to content, methodology and / or delivery of instruction happen. Remember that these “adaptations” can include accommodations, modifications, consultation & direct service in general education or substantially separate settings.



## What are the steps in discussing SDI as a team?

Before the team meets, team members including the student, family and school-based people, should have access to the data gathered by the team. If they can look at this data before the meeting, that's helpful. If not, that's OK--people should know that the team will use the data to answer questions and make decisions during the meeting.

During the meeting, teams should review and sort the data collaboratively, identifying:

- Strengths: data that show the child is meeting grade level academic and functional expectations.
- Needs: data that show the child should improve a particular academic or functional skill to meet grade level expectations.
- Targets for change: describe the skill(s) and the corresponding change in the available data that will show effective progress is happening.

After these elements of the plan are identified, team members can make recommendations and decide about the adjustments to content, methodology, or delivery of instruction that are needed in order to support the student to make the changes described in the targets. These adjustments can include accommodations, modifications, or services such as consultation, direct service in general education classrooms, or direct service in other settings.

## What if there is disagreement?

When facilitating conversations that are focused on specially designed instruction, teams may disagree about the priorities for change or the adaptations that are necessary to support student success.

One advantage of facilitating conversations as outlined in this article is that teams have two common points of reference about which agreement is certain: the grade level academic or behavioral expectations that a child should attain; and, the data that are collected to show the student's current performance.

By grounding our practice and conversations in standards and data, teams have a common jumping off point for planning. If team members disagree about what matters most (priorities for change) or what adaptations are needed (specially designed instruction), the IEP team leader can listen and document ideas.

After everyone is heard and different proposals are clear, the IEP team leader invites team members to share their level of support for each proposal. This is not a vote, but a time when team members rate their levels of agreement, sometimes on a scale of 1-5, so that the IEP team leader can propose SDI based on the team's input and consensus.

Remember, when team members do not agree, it is the IEP team leader's role to summarize what was said and clearly state what the district will offer based on the team's consideration.

## How can teams do this with limited time for collaboration?

IEP team leaders can coordinate members of the team so that they understand their role and responsibilities. This can happen asynchronously by using [shared graphic organizers](#) and reminding team members to enter the information they regularly gather about students.

Team member roles can be explained as follows:

- General education teacher: share observations (date / time / activity / student response) and work samples. Provide the grade level learning standards or classroom behavior expectations these data illustrate.
- Guidance or school adjustment counselor: share information about transcripts, awards, incidents, and attendance (daily & period by period). Provide the school-wide expectation that the student should meet.
- Special education teacher: share observations and work samples.
- Related service providers: share data from evaluations and observations / work samples from direct sessions with the student.
- Student / Parent: share information about what works / doesn't work and priorities for improvement at school.





## Connecticut Bureau of Special Education

[The Connecticut Aspiring Leaders Academy](#) is designed to assist in the preparation of future local special education leaders. An informational meeting will be held on March 10th. Click on the link for more information about this opportunity.

CT has an online IEP Manual that includes brief and direct instruction about each part of the IEP. Check out this section on [Annual Goals & Short Term Objectives!](#)

## Massachusetts Office of Special Education Planning and Policy

DESE has issued guidance about [Supporting all students, including LGBTQ students](#), on February 7th and February 11th, 2025. This guidance is relevant in light of recent communications from the White House and the U.S. Department of Education.

Competency Determination discussions and requirements for high school graduation continue in Massachusetts. Here is the [February memo](#) from Acting Commissioner Russell Johnston summarizing current action.

### Massachusetts Annual IEP Team Leaders' Seminar

April 30, 2025 from 9am - 3pm

Devens Commons in Devens, MA

Cost: \$225 per person (includes lunch)

Register [HERE](#)

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