



Understanding the IEP Process

Competency

The educator uses district policy, state regulations, and federal law to understand Individualized Education Programs (IEP), write goals, and implement instructional support for students with IEPs.

Key Method

The educator analyzes a current student's present level within an IEP and uses that information to write SMART, need-based goals and related accommodations or modifications.

Method Components

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) plays a crucial role in the success of a student with a disability. An IEP is a collaborative plan created by a team of stakeholders using required components in federal law, state regulations, and local policies. It's a legally defined and student-centered process that maps out the student's current strengths and needs, annual goals, and required related services to support school achievement. An IEP is a living plan that supports a student's access to, participation in, and progress within education, and ensures disabled students - especially disabled students of color - can finally access public education and services that had been denied.

To learn about the required components of an IEP in your state, visit your state department of education website. Most states list these components within the special education regulations section of their website.

Initiating an IEP

The IEP process often begins when a concern is raised by a teacher, parent or guardian, or other school staff about a student's academic, behavioral, or functional performance.

Before creating an IEP, schools typically implement targeted interventions in the general education classroom. The teacher and interventionist, if available, work together to plan specific interventions, determine a schedule, and decide how data will be collected. Interventions usually run for a set period—often four to six weeks—so the team can observe the student’s response.

If concerns continue, the team may make a formal referral for a special education evaluation. Families must be informed of the concerns and the steps taken. Before any evaluation occurs, the school must obtain written informed consent from a parent or guardian.

A comprehensive evaluation gathers a complete picture of the student. Evaluations may include measures of:

- Academic achievement
- Cognitive and developmental functioning
- Behavior, communication, and social-emotional skills
- Functional and adaptive skills
- Medical or clinical information, when relevant (for example, vision, hearing, ADHD, intellectual disability, speech, or physical challenges)

Evaluations must be non-discriminatory and conducted in the student’s primary language when appropriate. This is critical because students of color and multilingual learners have historically been misidentified or denied appropriate services.

Determining Eligibility

The IEP team reviews evaluation data to determine whether the student meets criteria for one or more disability categories under IDEA, whether the disability adversely affects the student’s educational performance, and whether the student requires specialized instruction.

For multilingual learners, the team must determine whether the learning difficulty is primarily due to limited English proficiency, lack of appropriate instruction, or a disability. Schools must first examine whether the student has had appropriate instruction in both language development and academic content. The evaluation must include a review of the student’s progress in English language development as part of the process.

If all of these criteria are met, the student is determined eligible for special education services. Careful eligibility decisions help prevent multilingual learners - often students of color - from being mislabeled as disabled when the real issue is often access to high-quality instruction.

General Components of an IEP

Once created, IEPs are reviewed at least annually and may be revised as needed. Every three years, the team conducts a reevaluation to determine whether the student continues to be eligible and whether needs have changed. The process of creating or updating an existing IEP follows the same process.

The team begins by understanding how the student is currently doing. This is called the present level of educational performance. This may include:

- Recent evaluation or assessment results
- Progress in the general curriculum
- Student strengths
- Results on state and/or district-wide assessments
- Parent or caregiver concerns about the student's education

The team—including parents or caregivers, educators, and service providers—reviews all relevant information. This analysis should begin from an asset-focused lens. Identifying the student's strengths, interests, and skills provides a foundation for setting goals and services.

SMART Goals

Educators write annual goals that the student can reasonably achieve in a year. Goals may be academic, social-emotional or behavioral, physical, or related to other educational needs. The goals must be measurable so the team can determine whether the student has achieved them. Some IEPs also include short-term objectives or benchmarks, especially for students who participate in alternate assessments; in some states, benchmarks are required*.

SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. A SMART IEP goal is realistic for the student and clearly explains how the student will demonstrate progress.

For example: By the end of this IEP period, when given a list of 50 multisyllabic words containing closed, open, and consonant-vowel-e syllables, the student will decode 40 of 50 words correctly, as measured by teacher records.

**The IDEA does not require the inclusion of short-term objectives or benchmarks in all IEPs (except for IEPs for students who are taking alternate assessments), BUT some states do require this.*

Accommodations

According to Understood.org, accommodations change how a student learns or demonstrates learning by removing barriers and providing equal access to instruction and achievement. They don't change what the student is expected to learn. Examples include:

- Presentation: Changing how information is presented. Example: Allowing a student with dyslexia to listen to audiobooks instead of reading printed text.
- Response: Changing how a student completes assignments or tests. Example: Providing a keyboard to a student who struggles with handwriting when writing an essay.
- Setting: Changing the learning environment. Example: Allowing a student with ADHD to take a test in a quieter room.
- Timing and scheduling: Changing the amount of time or scheduling of tasks. Example: Providing extra time for homework to a student with slow processing speed.

Modifications

Modifications change what a student is taught or expected to learn. They're tools to counteract barriers created by curriculum and systems, not deficits in students. Like accommodations, modifications help ensure students across race and disability status have a fair shot at meeting high expectations. Assignment modifications may allow a student to:

- Complete fewer or different homework problems than peers
- Write shorter papers
- Answer fewer or different test questions
- Complete alternate projects or assignments

Curriculum modifications may allow a student to:

- Learn different material (for example, continuing to work on multiplication while classmates move on to fractions)
- Be graded or assessed using a different standard than classmates
- Be excused from particular projects

An IEP is created through a cycle of evaluation, planning, implementation, and reflection that's grounded in collaboration, data, and the belief that students thrive when barriers are intentionally removed. The IEP process prioritizes early support and strong family partnership.

Supporting Rationale and Research

Akcin, F. Nur. Identification of the processes of preparing Individualized Education Programs (IEP) by special education teachers, and of problems encountered therein. *Educational Research and Reviews*. Vol. 17(1). Pp. 31-45, January 2022, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1332835.pdf>

Blackwell W.H. & Rosetti, Z.S. (2014). The Development of Individualized Education Programs: Where Have We Been and Where Should We Go Now? Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244014530411>

United States Department of Education. A Guide to the Individualized Education Program. Retrieved from <https://ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>

United States Department of Education. IDEA Individual with Disabilities Education Act. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33>

Resources

Template

[Present Level Analysis Template Sample](#)

[Present Level Analysis Copy for Submission](#)-will make a copy for your use

IEP components

[IEP required components](#)

[Present level required components with examples from New York](#)

[Assistive Technology and Schools](#)

[What Is an IEP? Individualized Education Programs, Explained](#)

[Understanding the IEP Process: A Guide for Parents | Greenwich Anxiety](#)

[Page 3: The IEP Process](#)

Goal writing

[How to Recognize SMART IEP Goals | Individualized Education Program](#)

[SMART IEP goal bank for behavioral goals](#)

[IEP Goals for Reading: What They Look Like](#)

Accommodations/Modifications

[Accommodations: What They Are](#)

[Examples of Accommodations & Modifications | Smart Kids](#)

[Common Classroom Accommodations and Modifications](#)

Exceptional Learner

Understanding the IEP Process

Last Revised on July 22, 2026

Strategies for Teaching

[Teaching Mathematics to Students with Disabilities](#)

[Classroom accommodations for dyscalculia](#)

[Shining a Light on Dyscalculia](#)

[Kids Can't Wait: Strategies to Support Struggling Readers - Yale Dyslexia](#)

[Reading Instruction: Tips for Teachers](#)

[Literacy Strategies for Students with Severe Cognitive Disabilities](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3 and receive a proficient score for all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

(250 - 500 words)

Please answer the following contextual questions to help our assessors understand your current situation. *Please don't include any information that will identify you or your students to reviewers.*

1. Describe your current (or past) experience with the components of the IEP, especially the present level, goal writing, and accommodations or modifications.
2. Describe your current role as part of the IEP team and list your responsibilities before, during, and after the IEP is written. How many students with disabilities do you currently serve?
3. Describe the challenges you face when working with students with disabilities as you implement goals and accommodations or modifications.

Passing: Response completely addresses each of the questions using specific details and personal examples. Responses give the assessors a clear view of the current role and challenges being faced.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following **five artifacts** as evidence of your learning. *Please don't include any information that will identify you or your students to reviewers.*

Artifact 1: Copy of Present Level

Submit a copy of a present level form from an IEP for a student at your school. Remove or redact the student's name and any other identifying information before submitting.

Artifact 2: Analysis of Present Level

Under the present level from Artifact 1, complete the Present Level Analysis [template](#) (this link will create a forced copy that you can write on). Upload the template once it's complete.

- List the student's strengths and concerns and identify the area each relates to (for example, academic, social, adaptive, medical, related service, or behavioral).
- Identify three to five challenges educators may face when addressing and implementing goals and accommodations for the student.

Artifact 3: SMART Goals

Using the information you identified in Article 2, convert one concern into a SMART goal. See the Resources section for guidance on writing SMART IEP goals.

Artifact 4: Accommodation/Modification Writing

Based on your analysis and the SMART goal from Artifact 3, write three accommodations or modifications that will support the student's classroom experience. For each, indicate whether it's an accommodation (removes barriers to content) or a modification (changes the information or assignment).

Artifact 5: IEP Meeting Analysis and Evaluation (500-700 words)

With permission from the IEP team, including a parent or caregiver, attend an IEP meeting. **This doesn't need to be the student from Artifacts 1-4.**

Take notes for your own use (you don't need to submit them).

Then answer the following questions:

- How did each stakeholder present give input on the present level, goals, and accommodations or modifications?
 - Parent(s)
 - General education teacher
 - Special education teacher
 - School psychologist

- Counselor
 - Specialized Instructional Support Personnel
 - Paraeducators
 - Administrators
 - Other (if included)
- What changes could improve the process so all voices are heard?
- What issues related bias emerged, and how were they addressed or how should they be reconsidered?

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: Copy of Present Level	Present level document was included. No identifying information shared.	Present level document was included. No identifying information shared.	Documentation isn't submitted.
Artifact 2: Analysis of Present Level	All strengths and concerns from the present level are listed. List identifies where the concerns are related to: - Academic - Behavior - Service areas - Medical - Other There's a list of at least three challenges that might have to be overcome to help the student achieve their goals. After removing identifiable information, include a copy of the present level used to complete this artifact.	Strengths and concerns are listed. The list identifies the concerns are related to: - Academic - Behavior - Service areas - Medical - Other One to two challenges to overcome are listed. After removing identifiable information, include a copy of the present level used to complete this artifact.	A minimal list of strengths and concerns is included. None of the concerns are categorized as: - Academic - Behavior - Service areas - Medical - Other A challenge isn't listed. After removing identifiable information, include a copy of the present level used to complete this artifact.
Artifact 3: SMART Goal	One SMART goal is written that's directly related to a student concern and includes	A goal is written that's	A goal is written, but it's not clearly related to a student concern and lacks

Exceptional Learner

Understanding the IEP Process
Last Revised on July 22, 2026

	all SMART components: (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, Time-bound.)	related to a student concern but one or more SMART components is unclear or missing.	multiple SMART components.
Artifact 4: Accommodation/Modification Writing	Three accommodations or modifications are listed. They're correctly identified as an accommodation or modification. They're directly related to the student's goals, concerns, and needs in the regular classroom.	Two accommodations or modifications are listed. They may be incorrectly identified as an accommodation or modification. They're related to student concerns.	An accommodation or modification was written, but didn't relate to student concerns.
Artifact 5: IEP Meeting Analysis	The educator attended an IEP meeting. Analysis includes how each member of the IEP team gave input on the present level, goals, and accommodations or modifications. Includes if he/she would change anything to ensure all voices were heard at the meeting and rationale for their assessment. Explains whether he/she felt the best goals and accommodations or modifications were created to ensure goal progress.	The educator attended an IEP meeting. The analysis includes how some members of the IEP team gave input on the present level, goals, and accommodations or modifications. Includes if he/she would change anything to ensure all voices were heard at the meeting and rationale for their assessment.	The educator did not attend an IEP meeting. Or, if they did attend, they did not include analysis. Explains if he/she felt the best goals and accommodations were created to ensure progress on the goals.

Exceptional Learner

Understanding the IEP Process

Last Revised on July 22, 2026

Part 3 Reflection

(350-500 word limit)

Use the word count as a guide to writing your personal reflection on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

1. How did completing this microcredential increase your understanding of the IEP process, from present levels through SMART goals and accommodations or modifications? What will you do differently now?
2. What challenges did you encounter during this micro-credential, and how did you overcome them?

Passing: Both questions are answered. Reflection provides evidence that this activity has had a positive impact on educator practice and future student successes. Examples from professional experiences with the IEP process are included within each response.