

Standard for Developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to Close or Narrow Academic Performance Gaps

The Blueprint Special Education Workgroup has identified the following Foundational Priority:

1. Ensure grade-level achievement expectations, standards, and related monitoring.
 - a. MSDE should develop COMAR regulations and guidance to require IEP goals and services that enable all students (including those taking alternate assessments) to meet grade-level standards¹. When students are behind grade-level standards, IEP goals and services should enable them to close or narrow the gap between the standards and their current performance levels
 - b. MSDE should develop state monitoring tools and compliance protocols to ensure that IEP goals narrow or close the gap and that, based upon research and professional judgment, IEP services are reasonably calculated to enable the goals to be achieved.

In response, MSDE has developed a standard for IEP teams to create IEPs that close or narrow performance gaps.

The standard for developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that enable students to reach grade-level proficiency or to narrow the academic performance gap for students with disabilities involves several key components:

Reasonable Calculation:

- Services in the IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable the attainment of goals to close or narrow the gap. The determination of whether the services are reasonably calculated should be based on evidence-based research to the extent practicable and the judgment of the IEP team, considering the student's individual circumstances.

Assessment of Current Performance:

- Identify the gap between the student's present level of performance and their enrolled grade level in foundational skills such as reading, math, and writing.

Setting "Narrowing the Gap" Goals:

- In academic areas impacted by their disability, students must have academic goals aligned to one or more grade-level standards.
- Academic goals and objectives aligned to standards from earlier in the learning progression may be necessary to reduce or narrow the performance gap. These "Narrowing the Gap" goals should set the

¹ Students who take the State assessment (i.e., MCAP) should meet proficiency on the regular standards and students who take the alternate assessment should meet proficiency on the alternate academic achievement standards. All students are instructed based on the same content standards that define the curriculum.

expectation of reasonable progress to close the identified gaps. These goals should be written at the grade level the student is expected to achieve.

- All goals, regardless of where they fall in the learning progression, must include the conditions under which the goal will be implemented and measured; the measurable action or behavior; the timeframe the goals will be worked on; the method of measurement; retention; and the criteria to demonstrate mastery.
- Academic “Narrowing the Gap” goals and grade-level aligned goals can support one another and be written in a standards-based continuum.

Individualized Considerations:

- Consider the student’s unique circumstances, evidence-based best practices for services and supports to the extent practicable, and the professional judgment of IEP Team members.
- If the IEP Team believes that Narrowing the Gap goals are not appropriate, based on individualized circumstances, the reasons must be documented in the IEP. Such reasons should be based on more than the basic nature of the disability. For example: phonological processing/poor memory, inattention, low-average IQ, and poor student motivation are not sufficient because evidence-based “specially designed instruction” and other supports should ordinarily enable Narrowing the Gap progress despite such common disability conditions.

Multi-Year Gaps:

- Recognize that for students with multi-year gaps it may not be feasible to close the gap within a single year. Instead, goals and services should be increased to accelerate the rate of progress for students to achieve both the “narrowing the gap” goals and grade-aligned goals. Closing gaps in the early grades is particularly important.

Instruction and Supports:

- Base the goals on evidence-based practices (to the extent practicable), related services, supplementary aids, and other supports that are reasonably calculated to enable the attainment of the goals.

Resource Independence:

- Ensure that the goals and services are guided by the student’s needs and not limited by the current resources of the school.

Grade Level Expression:

- IEP goals may be expressed in terms of early, mid, or late grade levels, as appropriate. The IEP should specify to which standard the goal is aligned.

This approach ensures that IEPs are tailored to each student’s needs and are grounded in evidence-based practices to effectively close or narrow academic achievement gaps.