



# Preparing Students **for Life**

**College and career ready IEPs: improving outcomes for students 3 through 21**

*Daniel Parker*

**W**isconsin has been a national leader in education because our values include the importance of a high-quality public education. Our vision is that each and every student, including students receiving special education through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), will graduate prepared for college and a career.

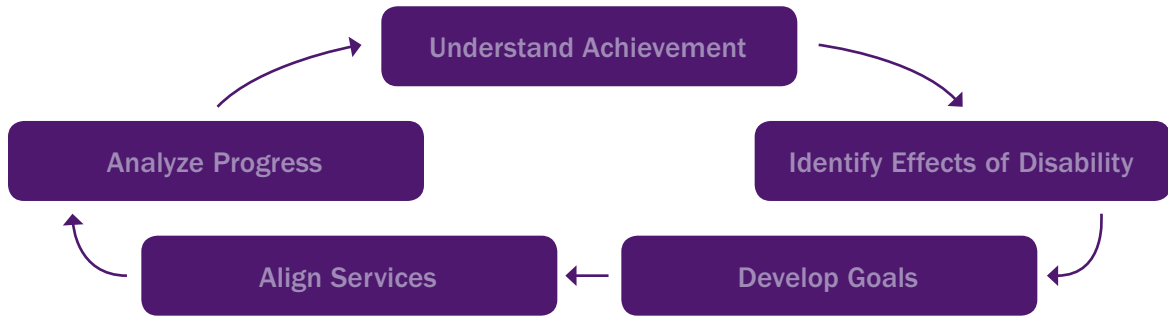
But what do students who require special education services need to know in order to prepare for college and a career? Whether the student is in preschool, elementary, or high school, we know that true college

and career readiness is about much more than academics. For students with IEPs, our graduates should have both the academic and functional proficiencies needed in order to demonstrate independence, self-determination, critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, creativity, responsibility, and persistence.

To best prepare students with IEPs for life after high school, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction developed the College and Career Ready (CCR) IEP framework. This framework was developed for the students, parents,

educators, and administrators who support IEP teams.

The framework includes updated model IEP forms and guidance to focus IEP team discussions on key factors that link together the five essential elements of a student's IEP. These elements, known as the College and Career Ready Five Step Process link together an understanding of the student's academic and functional performance with the unique strengths and needs of the student so the IEP team is able to develop ambitious and achievable goals, align services to support the



goals, and analyze progress to adjust the student’s program as needed. Guidance and sample forms provide both procedural support through the Five Step Process as well as systems-level support.

Correspondingly, Five Beliefs were identified based on feedback from stakeholders across Wisconsin and are additional research-based factors that are necessary components of a special education program. These beliefs are: high expectations, student relationships, culturally responsive practices, family and community engagement, and collective responsi-

bility. Forms and guidance incorporate the Five Beliefs to support students to prepare for college and a career and link to existing educator initiatives, supports, and resources available through the Department of Public Instruction.

Guidance from the national Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) states the primary vehicle for providing a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities is through an appropriately developed and implemented IEP. Thus, the IEP is not just about documenting compli-

ance. It is a tool for making positive change in the lives of students with disabilities.

You may have heard that OSEP instituted a new accountability system called Results Driven Accountability, or RDA. The RDA system places a focus on improving outcomes, which brings accountability for compliance and results into balance. This is also the thinking behind College and Career Ready IEPs. In Wisconsin, our state’s RDA focus is on literacy so we think of RDA as Reading Drives Achievement: Success through Literacy.



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## Five Step Process

This process emphasizes the importance of identifying each student's specific and unique disability-related needs that affect access, engagement, and progress in grade-level, general education standards-based curriculum, instruction, and environments.

**STEP 1:** Understand achievement of grade-level academic standards and functional expectations in order to identify how the student is accessing, engaging, and making progress in relation to grade-level peers. This should include information that reflects the family and student's voice and point of view on strengths, interests, and needs.

**STEP 2:** Identify the student's specific disability-related needs that affect academic achievement and functional performance. These needs are unique to each student and identify the root cause of "why" the student is having difficulty accessing, engaging, or making progress in the grade-level, standards-based curriculum, instruction, and environments. It is important to remember that not all children with the same disability category have the same needs.

**STEP 3:** Develop ambitious and achievable goals that address the student's unique disability-related needs and assist in closing achievement gaps.

**STEP 4:** Align specially designed instruction, services, supports, and accommodations needed to meet IEP goals, reduce barriers, and increase opportunities for access to the general curriculum. When the student's unique disability-related needs are met through specially designed instruction, related services, or other supports, the student will improve their access, engagement, and progress in grade-level, standards-based curriculum, instruction, and environments.

**STEP 5:** Analyze progress toward goals in order to evaluate what works and what is needed to close the student's achievement gaps. The IEP team has a system in place for monitoring student progress and if the student is not progressing as needed, the IEP team reviews and documents what changes will be made to best support the student moving forward.



The Career and College Ready IEP sample forms and guidance highlight the focus on improving reading and literacy outcomes for students with IEPs. Research has demonstrated that children with IEPs who struggle in reading can successfully learn grade-level content and make significant academic progress when appropriate instruction, services, and supports are provided. Conversely, low expectations can lead to children with disabilities receiving less challenging instruction comprised of below grade-level content standards, resulting in them not learning what they need to succeed at the grade in which they are enrolled or to prepare them for life after high school.

Grade-level standards should allow each and every student to engage, access, and be assessed in ways that fit their individual strengths, needs, and interests. Furthermore, students with IEPs must be provided specially designed instruction that meets their individual needs. It is expected that each individual student with an IEP will require unique services and supports matched to their strengths and needs in order to access grade-level, standards-based curriculum. Alternate achievement standards are available for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Ensuring students with IEPs have access to grade-level academic standards and high expectations does not mean a one-size-fits-all special education program. The Five Step Process emphasizes the importance of identifying each student's specific and unique disability-related needs that affect access, engagement, and progress



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in grade-level, general education, standards-based curriculum, instruction, and environments. The emphasis on identifying a student’s individual disability-related needs, also called root-cause analysis, is a key feature of the Five Step Process and is highlighted in Step 2 of the Five Step Process (see sidebar).

Students with IEPs and educators who support them have come a long way since state statutes like Chapter 115 and laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were first enacted in the

1970s to ensure students with disabilities have the same opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education as all other students. Educational research and practice, which promote access to content and instruction and advances in assistive technology, have provided unprecedented opportunities for students with IEPs.

These innovations and changes in how we “think” of students with disabilities is also changing in the workplace and within institutions of higher learning. New programs, such

### For More Information ...

Find more about College and Career Ready IEPs at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s IEP website where you will find sample IEP forms, webinars, training materials, *Five Step Process* steps at-a-glance guidance documents, and an online discussion tool.

<http://bit.ly/dpi-iep>

as Think College, provide post-high school educational opportunities to students who may never have had such opportunities in the past. College and Career Ready IEP sample forms and guidance were developed to align with these changes and prepare students for the future. ■

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