

TIPS FROM THE OPI MONITORS

Use the most recent version of all special education forms.

While the content and structure of special education forms are not dictated by regulation directly, the structure of the forms often guides people in practice. Because of this, forms do become an issue in monitoring and can be the underlying cause of a specific finding.

There are two fairly common issues surrounding special education forms that are contained in student records. The first issue is the use of outdated forms. It is not uncommon for a district to be currently using forms that are two or three generations old. The problem is that these older forms often do not contain all of the required components that currently must be addressed.

The second issue is that people do not always fully complete the forms they use. Problems range from leaving an item blank to not including any goals on a child's IEP. Double-check your work.

The most recent OPI forms can be found on the OPI Web site at:

<http://www.opi.mt.gov/SpecEd/Forms.html>

Review your Post-secondary Transition planning process.

Concerns in this area include:

- Not beginning the process by the child's 16th birthday
- Failing to invite the student or outside agency to the IEP meeting
- Meeting notice does not contain all required information
- Failing to address graduation as an exit from special education
- Failing to notify the parent(s) and student about the transfer of parental rights at the age of majority

Make sure PLAAFP, MAG, and STOB are understandable and measurable.

The statement of the child's Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) must describe the child's current skills and how the child's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the regular education curriculum related to the goal area. For preschool children the PLAAFP should indicate how the child's disability affects his or her involvement in appropriate activities. The PLAAFP should be written in language that is understandable to everyone, including the parents, and should not merely indicate the child's scores on some assessment. A well-written PLAAFP will serve as the basis upon which the child's progress toward the Measurable Annual Goal will be measured.

Measurable Annual Goals (MAGs) and Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks (STOBs) need to be meaningful, measurable, able to be monitored, and useful in making decisions. A simple format to follow in writing a measurable goal would be:

Condition: describes the circumstances under which the behavior will occur and sometimes includes the environment in which the behavior will occur.

Example: "Across all settings, . . ."

Behavior: identifies what is being measured; usually reflects an action or is directly observable, is measurable.

Example: "Ian will read aloud 20 major warning words and symbols (e.g., Stop, Poison, Danger, Hazard, etc.) . . . "

Criterion: identifies the level of performance/behavior/skill required to meet the goal and may include a level of consistency (how often the student must meet the criterion) and will indicate what is success for this measurable annual goal.

Statements should be specific and describe student, rather than staff, behavior. So, instead of having a goal of "Nica will improve in her ability to follow directions" the IEP might state, "When given a task that requires following up to five step directions, Nica will correctly complete each step with no prompting on eight of ten opportunities observed."

Advice and samples can be found at: <http://www.opi.mt.gov/pdf/speced/Guides/IEPGuide.pdf> beginning on page 36.

Make sure all required documents are in the students' records.

The most common missing item is the original referral for special education evaluation. This document must be reconstructed to the extent possible from the information available about the student. Other items that are frequently missing include an access log and test protocols.

A related issue involves documents not being attached to the IEP or CST form when the form indicates that they are attached. It is important to remember, "attached means attached." This means that the documents are physically attached to each other and numbered consecutively to include all pages of attachments. This makes it apparent that they are one document and makes it easy to determine if any pages are missing.

Complete initial evaluations within 60 days of receipt of the Evaluation Plan.

The initial evaluation of a student must be completed within 60 calendar days of the receipt of a signed Evaluation Plan. The 60-day clock does not stop for Christmas or summer vacation. The completion of the evaluation means either that a) an Evaluation Report (CST) meeting is held to determine the student's need and eligibility for special education and related services, or that b) all assessments identified on the Evaluation Plan have been completed, even though an Evaluation Report meeting has not been held.

The 60-day timeline does not apply to the reevaluation of students.

Clearly document eligibility and need for special education services.

As an example, students who are identified as having an Other Health Impairment must have a medical diagnosis from a physician, physician-assistant, podiatrist, dentist, or a nurse practitioner. This information is required for the initial evaluation only, must be available to the team at the time of the eligibility determination and is required only for the initial evaluation, not reevaluations.

The need for special education cannot be statements such as, “Joe has ADHD” or “Joe needs special education.” The statement should specifically address that the student needs adapted content and/or adapted teaching methods and/or adapted instructional delivery to address the unique needs of the disability.

Do not have a special education service of “Study Skills,” which is actually a “Study Hall.”

“Study Skills” are specific learning strategies students can use to improve their performance, usually in subjects which require reading or math. Study skills curriculums are available by searching that term on the Web. Measurable annual goals for study skills individualized to each student and are written to measure student’s acquisition and use of specific study skill strategies.

If the student is not receiving individualized instruction on specific skills included in measurable annual goals, but instead is only receiving help “if she/he needs or asks for it” or accommodations and modifications, this would be a study hall. If this is the only special education service identified for the student, the monitoring report may require the Evaluation Report (CST) team for each student to reconvene and document each student’s need for special education and related services.

There is no such thing as a "monitor IEP."

"Monitor" IEPs are IEPs where the student has no individualized instruction and MAGs such as, "Nica will maintain a passing grade in all classes." Schools and parents sometimes want students to continue to have an IEP, even though the student is not receiving any special education services, so that the student can continue to receive the supplementary aids and services in the IEP or to help her/him receive classification as a student with a disability in college.

Each IEP must have individualized instruction on specific skills included in measurable annual goals. If a student is receiving only supplementary aids and services he or she must be exited from IDEA services since they no longer need special education.

Attend OPI Special Education Trainings and read the OPI special education guides.

Personnel who attend trainings and workshops presented by the OPI Division of Special Education staff stay current on changes and interpretations of state and federal rules and regulations.

All of the OPI technical assistance guides are available on the OPI Web site.
(opi.mt.gov/speced/guides2.html)

Read all of the guides once, re-read the Evaluation Report and IEP guides at least once a year. The guides are the first place you should look when you have a question – at least 70 percent of the questions asked of the monitors have answers which are available in the guides.