

A Place to Start: Understanding the Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance Statement

A student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes the parents, expects special education services to help the student improve at school. As a foundation for higher achievement, the IEP team will identify:

- your child's current level of learning or performance
- the effect or impact of your child's disability on learning

This process can be compared to planning a trip to another city: You need to know where you are starting, as well as any obstacles that may make your trip more challenging.

To see where your child is starting and what obstacles he or she may face, the IEP team will ask these important questions at the annual IEP meeting:

- What are the disability-related challenges affecting his or her learning and involvement at school?
- At what academic and functional level is this student performing right now? (Where is the student's starting point?)
- Is there any other information we need to provide a complete picture of this student?
- What strategies, accommodations and/or assistive technology have already been successful for this student's learning?
- What are the grade-level academic standards for this student's grade, and how do this student's skills compare to those standards?

The answer to these questions will be documented as the present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) statement on the IEP. A student's IEP will be the road map guiding your child from a beginning level of performance to a higher level of performance.

The PLAAFP statement will give a snapshot of the student at a particular time and place. It will describe the level at which the student is working academically and functionally¹. This includes a description of a student's strengths and needs. Areas the team will consider include:

- academic
- communication
- functional
- general intelligence
- health
- motor or physical
- sensory, such as vision and hearing
- social and emotional
- transition to postsecondary adult living (beginning in ninth grade)

The PLAAFP statement will include data gathered from various sources, including:

- ending levels of performance on last year's goals
- any new special education assessment results
- performance on district and statewide assessments, including identification of skills and knowledge already attained in relation to grade-level standards
- classroom grades and observations, including behavior data
- input from the student and parents
- interests and strengths, including non-curricular areas (these can provide valuable information about a student's abilities and possible motivators)
- any strategies, accommodations or assistive technology devices or services that have already shown success

The team will also need to know how the student stands in comparison to his or her peers. Are there any gaps between a student's ability to perform academically with grade-level skills or behave with age-appropriate developmental skills?

How are grade-level academic skills defined? Minnesota has adopted a set of academic standards in language arts, math, social studies, English language proficiency and science for kindergarten through 12th grade. The standards describe what all students in a particular grade are expected to know and be able to do. School districts have chosen various curricula to teach these skills to their students. As the student's IEP team reviews the student's current performance level, they will ask, "How does that compare with other students in this grade?" This information is also part of the PLAAFP statement.

It is important to note that the student's regular education teacher can be a key team member, as he or she is familiar with grade-level and age-level expectations for all children². When the IEP team considers how a student is doing on grade-level skills, the team will want to make sure that the designated regular education teacher brings the appropriate information to the IEP meeting. For example, an art teacher may be a child's regular education teacher but may not be familiar with the child's reading and math skills. Also, depending on the time of year that the meeting is held, a regular education teacher for the next grade level may be the best source of regular education information needed for development of this IEP. Other teachers may attend or submit written information as well.

The information in the PLAAFP section of the IEP should be written in brief, clear, specific and accurate statements with enough information to describe the student's current skill levels in objective, measurable terms. If scores are reported, they should either be self-explanatory or explained.

For example:

Vague phrases	Specific phrases
Is friendly and loves attention	Greets peers appropriately for her age level
Received a math score of 50	Can count to 25
Can't talk well	Speaks in one-or two-word sentences

Vague phrases	Specific phrases
Can add	Writes answers to double-digit addition problems
Knows different careers	Can count five careers and five jobs associated with each
Difficulty reading third-grade materials	Reads third-grade materials at 70 words per minute
Difficulty following classroom rules	Follows classroom rules using visual cues
Spends a lot of time in suspension due to behavior problems	When redirected she becomes angry and disrupts class
She has a language difficulty and will have trouble meeting language arts standards	Her language impairment affects her progress in grade-level standards that include words with multiple meaning
She seldom completes assignments	She completes 25 percent of her homework and turns in 10 percent of the assignments

The PLAAFP statement will lead to the development of annual goals, accommodations, modifications and other IEP services. All IEP goals should be connected to the PLAAFP statement.

Parents knowledgeable about the PLAAFP statement and the IEP process can be an effective part of the IEP team and help their child work toward higher achievement. The goal of special education includes having high expectations for children so they can meet "the challenging expectations that have been established for all children and be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible." ("Findings" (c)(5)(A) IDEA. 2004.)

¹As used in special education, functional means routine activities of everyday living. Federal Register, August 14, 2006, Analysis of Comments and Changes, page 46661.

²The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that the school district must assign one regular education teacher of the student to be at the IEP meeting if the student is or may be participating in the regular education environment during this IEP year. Though parents may agree in writing to excuse one or more IEP team members, PACER recommends that all required IEP team members be present in order to plan an appropriate IEP for a student.