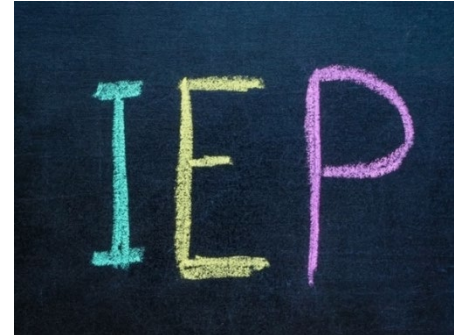


Understanding the New IEP Form in Massachusetts

The majority of students in Massachusetts with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or a related neurodevelopmental condition have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a legally binding document that outlines the specific educational services and accommodations that a student with special needs is entitled to receive. The IEP is designed to address unique learning needs and to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to access an appropriate education.



For the first time in 20 years, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has updated its suite of IEP resources, including a revised IEP form which is used to plan and guide special education goals and programming for all students who require special education services. In this article we will highlight changes to the IEP form. We would like to note that DESE is still reviewing the IEP form, and it is anticipated to become mandatory across the state in fall 2024. However, some districts are rolling it out sooner.

This update to the IEP form has been almost 10 years in the making. The revamp was led by the State Department of Education, including input from teachers, administrators, and advocates. For years, stakeholders from all sides have agreed that the IEP form needed updating, and particularly that the old form was too focused on deficits. In addition, many people felt that more could be done to meet the spirit of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA](#)), a Federal law, which among other things, encourages collaborative discussions between students, parents, and school staff.

What is different about the new form?

The new IEP form captures the student's individual profile with more specificity than before, including attributes like a student's diagnosed disabilities, their English learner status, their language-related needs, and their need for assistive technology, if applicable. While much of this information was incorporated in the previous form in various ways, it is now featured prominently at the start of the form, keeping the student's unique profile front and center.

While some sections of the IEP remain largely unchanged, there are some key updates, including:

- **Increased emphasis on student participation.** The new form encourages student participation more prominently. Even at the early elementary level, students are involved in creating a vision statement, that is, their learning goals. Many students will require some assistance in developing their vision statement. This might be in the form of assistance from a teacher, a school counselor, or another service provider. The form does not specify how non-speaking or minimally verbal students will participate in this process, so parents and caregivers may need to advocate for the best way to include their child in the process.
- **Additional specificity and structure throughout the form.** The previous form had open-ended narrative sections at the beginning. Some school teams were thoughtful and comprehensive, but not all teams included sufficient information in these sections. In contrast, the new form prompts teams to provide detailed and specific information.
- **Consistent inclusion of autism-specific questions.** The new form includes a number of autism-specific questions and sections that are now required for students with ASD. This includes special considerations including the impact of the student’s ASD on progress in the general education curriculum, the need for positive behavioral interventions, and needs related to verbal and nonverbal communication, including Assistive Technology and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) supports.
- **Greater emphasis on the needs of English language learners.** The new IEP form includes a specific section to identify English language learners and to describe their English Learner Education program, English as a Second Language services, and progress toward specific proficiency benchmarks. There is also a specific question to outline how the student’s language needs relate to their IEP.
- **Bullying is handled prominently and in more detail.** The new IEP form includes a specific section to outline the disability-related skills and proficiencies that a student needs to avoid and respond to bullying. It also requires the team to describe how these specific needs will be addressed in the IEP. This section emphasizes skill building and is required for all students with autism.
- **Detailed documentation of the need for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices.** The new IEP form includes not only *if* a student requires the use of AAC, but now more details about when and where the student requires AAC supports, who

requires training and/or technical assistance to use the AAC device, and where AAC-related needs will be addressed in the IEP form.

- **More robust “Accommodations and Modifications” section.** The new IEP form includes a more detailed table format requiring accommodations and modifications to be listed with more structure and specificity than the old form. This includes an opportunity to include much more specific information about when and how accommodations and modifications are required.
- **More detailed transition planning.** The new IEP form includes much more specificity around postsecondary transition, including current performance, strengths, interests, and preferences, and impact of disability. It breaks this information down across education, employment, and community experience/independent living, providing much more structure and specificity.
- **Less detail on general education participation.** The new IEP form no longer includes inclusion designations by the percentage of time that a student is in a general education setting. Because percent designations are no longer detailed, parents and caregivers will want to ensure the narrative description provides a sufficiently detailed verbal description of how much a child will be in the general education setting versus other, more restrictive settings.
- **Service delivery grid is now divided into two sections.** Although the general format and information remains consistent with the old form, the new IEP form now divides the service delivery grid into two sections: 1) standard school year and 2) extended school year services.
- **Parents and caregivers are critical participants in the creation of an IEP.** Finally, the new IEP form includes several specific areas for parent and caregiver contributions. This includes specific input in the “Student and Parent Concerns” section, opportunities to



share information in the autism-specific questions, and an additional “Parent Comment” in the IEP response section.

The new IEP form is available now on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ([DESE website](#)). As with most changes in life, there are likely to be “growing pains,” as the new form rolls out, and we encourage you to monitor the impact of the new form on your child’s educational program and services. Share your questions and concerns with your child’s school team and with school administrators.

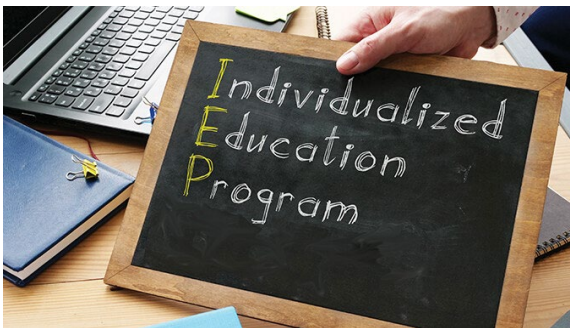
To learn more:

- View a recording of the Lurie Center’s Coffee Convo presentation on this topic [here](#).
- Join an upcoming webinar, presented by our colleague, Jill Dymont on this topic:

Navigating the IEP for Your Child with Autism - A Virtual Workshop

February 6th, 6:30pm - 7:30pm

\$35 per person



Jill Dymont, Program Manager of Child Services at Aspire, is presenting a new parent and caregiver workshop, "[Navigating the IEP for Your Child with Autism](#)." This virtual workshop is designed for parents of elementary and middle school aged children with ASD. The presentation and discussion will provide details about each part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), from parent input to accommodations, goals and services. The workshop will address parts of the IEP that

are specific to autism diagnoses, including bullying considerations and the seven specific areas of need for students with ASD. The goal of this workshop is to help familiarize families with each part of the IEP document, allowing them to engage in the Team process with more knowledge and confidence. Call 781-860-1700 or email LurieCenter@mgb.org to register.

About the authors

Dr. Lisa Nowinski is Clinical Director of non-physician services at the Lurie Center for Autism and Instructor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She is a clinical neuropsychologist with nearly two decades of experience diagnosing and caring for individuals with ASD and other neurodevelopmental disorders. Lisa is responsible for all clinical psychology services and training at the Center and specializes in diagnostic and neuropsychological assessments of individuals with ASD across the lifespan.

Gretchen Timmel, M.Ed. is a licensed educational psychologist, certified teacher, and an educational consultant/advocate at the Lurie Center. She provides educational consulting services for children and young adults. Gretchen has extensive experience in school and residential settings collaborating across medical teams, schools, and caregivers to promote individual student success. Gretchen specializes in the development of educational programs, teaching methodology, and advocacy. Since each student is an individual, the type and scope of the educational services recommended will vary based on the student's unique needs.