



Create clarity with well-written multi-stage IEPs for students' transitional success

When a student is making a major transition in a school career, like moving from one program to another, a multi-stage IEP may be necessary to help during this period.

A multi-stage IEP outlines the best possible plan for the student making the transitional changes, which can sometimes be significant. When moving from middle school to high school, for example, the student might need to attend multiple programs during the transitional period, all of which would be outlined in the IEP.

"The first step of implementing any IEP is ensuring the offer is clear and well-documented, so anyone who is a stranger to the IEP can pick it up and know exactly how to implement it. For a multi-stage IEP, passing [this] 'stranger test' is very important," said Jennifer Baldassari, a school attorney with Lozano Smith in Walnut Creek, Calif.

Well-written multi-stage IEPs provide:

- Understanding to families.
- Student participation and buy-in.
- Certainty and clarity for IEP team and involved staff.

See below for a collection of best practices for implementing multi-stage IEPs.

Use student-centered data to make decisions for multi-stage IEPs

When making the decision to include multiple stages in a student's IEP, schools will want to use data-driven analysis when putting together the plan.

"Be prepared to consider student skills and performance through data, such as observations, informal assessment, progress on IEP goals, [and] timing in the child's educational career," Baldassari said.

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Most commonly, multi-stage IEPs exist when a student is moving from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school. A student's disability will not make him or her more likely to have a multi-stage IEP.

"Multi-stage IEPs should be available -- and will likely occur at one point or another in a child's career. [This can be] for any child with special needs, not simply [a] student with certain disabilities," Baldassari said.

When it comes to multi-stage IEPs, school districts should have a clear understanding of each stage so that it can be easily put into action. Baldassari said that any IEP should pass the "stranger test."

Have enough information before drawing up multi-stage IEP plans

When districts don't have enough present information to address the next stage, then a multi-stage IEP should be placed on hold. However, if the district has current information that suggests that a student will face a transitional stage in less than a year, then the IEP team should be prepared to address the next stage.

"If we don't have enough information on whether the data suggests a transition stage in less than a year, then teams should reconvene when they have more info," Baldassari said. "Clearly outline all the details of the multi-stage IEP. This will ensure that families understand and are able to participate in the process, [which] sets districts up for realistic expectations."

Baldassari also said that a multi-stage IEP should not be a tool to gradually change placement.

"In other words, the IEP should not be written as a gradual placement change because parents are refusing an immediate change of placement. For example, if data suggests [a special day class] placement is appropriate now, then the IEP should be written to offer the SDC placement now," she said.

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Exhibit clarity, transparency when implementing multi-stage IEPs; set realistic goals.

Oftentimes, multi-stage IEPs can seem intimidating for families. By being as clear and specific about the plan as possible, districts can help ensure that parent participation helps the child through the transition period. Allowing the student to participate in the process is also a good idea, Baldassari said.

"Having clarity, transparency, and open lines of communication with other staff and program members and families can help limit miscommunications during an already complicated process," she said.

A multi-stage IEP can be an effective tool for future planning in a child's educational career, but that starts with getting families involved early and communicating openly with them throughout the planning process.

Recognize impact of multi-stage IEP on student's educational career

Because most multi-stage IEPs are written to provide support during a transitional period, districts need to recognize the ripple effect that the transition will have on the student's family as well. Transitions are challenging. When questions come up from the student or the family about programs and placements included in the multi-stage IEP, districts should work with families to observe and address questions that come up.

"When an IEP is written well, its beneficial," Baldassari said. "Overall, multi-stage IEPs allow students to make necessary transitions from one stage to another without having to go through the process of re-meeting [with IEP teams] before every transition."

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