Documenting Alternative Means of Expression   
in the IEP

A Resource for Students, Their Families, and Their IEP Teams

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Note: This resource is offered as part of the *Inclusive Access to a Diploma: Reimagining Proficiency for Students with Disabilities initiative*. This is a companion resource to *Integrating Alternative Means of Expression as Assessment Options in Units and Lessons and Best Practice Guide: Embedding Alternative Means of Expression into Graduation-Based Coursework*.

Executive Summary

Each student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) describes the supports and services that student will receive to ensure a high quality and meaningful educational experience across their educational career. This practice brief provides students with disabilities, their families, and other members of IEP teams considerations and language for documenting the **alternative means of expression** a student may need to demonstrate proficiency in the coursework requirements tied to earning a regular diploma.

*Alternative Means of Expression are different assessment mediums (tools, strategies, and assessment types) available to students with disabilities, giving them flexibility in how they demonstrate their learning while still meeting coursework proficiency requirements—especially those requirements tied to earning a diploma.*

In this brief you will learn where and how alternative means of expression should be documented in the IEP and how, by engaging in discussions with students about their long-term goals, their strengths, and their past successes in school, IEP teams can define instructional strategies and assessment methods that promote success and result in students attaining a diploma.

Finally, the brief highlights the importance of collaboration among IEP team members—students, families, special education teachers, general education teachers, counselors, and administrators—in creating meaningful IEPs that strategically address each student’s unique needs. Ultimately, this resource aims to empower students with disabilities, their families, and IEP teams to develop IEPs that ensure they realize their right to a free and appropriate public education.

Documenting Alternative Means of Expression in the IEP

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), each eligible student is entitled to specially designed instruction and supplementary aids and services that promote access to general education and meet the student’s specific needs tied to their having a disability (IDEA, 2004). When a student’s IEP team has agreed upon, documented, and signed the IEP, it is a legally binding agreement. Therefore, when an IEP team determines that alternative means of expression are needed as part of instruction or accommodations on assessments and documents that in the IEP, the local educational agency (LEA) is legally required to provide these supports.

Discussing and Documenting Alternative Means of Expression

The need for alternative means of expression, a student’s past success using them, and specific courses where they should be made available can be discussed and documented in multiple areas of the IEP, including:

* Present Levels of Performance
* Supplementary Aids and Services
* Secondary Transition Plan

Present Levels of Performance

An important part of the IEP, and the first opportunity to discuss and document potential alternative means of expression, is when the IEP team describes a student’s strengths and needs in the *Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance* section of the IEP. Strengths provide teams with ideas for improving the design of a student’s supplementary aids and services, including potential alternative means of expression. This includes the content areas that have been strengths for the student, as well as areas where the student has historically experienced the greatest need.

The present levels section will often outline specific instructional supports and communication methods the student utilizes or prefers when showing their understanding. For example, imagine a student has clear documentation within their present levels that they prefer to verbally communicate course concepts via presentations or audio recordings, this information is helpful when identifying response methods (for example, use of verbal responses) that should be made available to the student to enable their success in demonstrating proficiency in future courses. This approach enables the team to develop goals, supports, and services that evolve and build upon the supports from previous years and allow students to access the general education curriculum, including coursework needed to obtain a diploma.

Supplementary Aids and Services

**Section 300.42** “Supplementary aids and services means aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate in accordance with §§ 300.114 through 300.116.” (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* 2004, § 300.42)

After an IEP team has established goals for a student, it determines the services needed, including specially designed instruction and supplementary aids and services, as well as the support structures required for an individual student with disabilities to make progress in the general curriculum alongside their peers without disabilities. Extended time within assessments, working in small group settings, access to specific assistive technology, and special seating are all examples of supplementary aids and services that can be applied across a wide array of instructional contexts. This is an ideal place to document specific alternative means of expression, including whether they are needed to enable students to progress in their general education coursework, similar to how other accommodations are listed for specific assessments.

The supplementary aids and services defined within a student’s IEP should have a clear history and logic for why they have been selected. The viability of these supports must be established by the IEP team’s historical experience with the student, as documented in previous IEPs, and by their own insights gained while working with the student.

Secondary Transition Plan

Beginning with the IEP before a child will turn 16 or sooner, the IEP team is required to develop a transition plan (34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)), although many IEP teams choose to begin that conversation much sooner. As part of that planning, the IEP team co-constructs the courses of study and graduation pathways that will be most meaningful to the student and help them meet their goals. For example, the IEP team for some students with an IEP may determine that the traditional, honors, college, and career pathways made available to all students are accessible, or the team could focus on pathways specific to students with disabilities such as the *Alternate Pathway to a Diploma* *Pathway* available to students with disabilities eligible for the California Alternate Assessment (CAA). Each of these pathways will have implications on the courses, services, and curricular adaptations the student will experience while in school, and therefore, must be used as a starting place when constructing a student’s secondary pathway.

In addition to formal and required transition conversations, IEP teams can and should start conversations about a student’s long-term plans in late elementary grade levels or early middle school (grades six and seven) by sharing the various pathways a student with disabilities may use to meet graduation requirements. The IEP team will have a better sense of the needed specially designed instruction and supplementary aids and services most appropriate for the student. Then, in grades eight and nine, IEP teams can start identifying which pathways are most supportive of a student’s educational goals and which course requirements in those pathways will require alternative means of expression.

As potential courses of study are agreed upon by an IEP team and documented in the secondary transition plan, the IEP team can document which parts of those courses of study may be made accessible by ensuring that the student has access to alternative means of expression. This could be documented in the transition plan by noting, for example, that a student with strengths in verbal communication is planning to participate in general education English language arts courses with accommodations, including alternative means of expression.

Defining and Ensuring Access to Alternative Means of Expression

A student’s IEP will likely include many supplementary aids and services, which have implications that extend well beyond the design of assessments and methods of expressive communication. The most relevant aids or accommodations for students related to the *Inclusive Access to a Diploma: Reimagining Proficiency for Students with Disabilities* initiative are the student’s response methods because they give the general education and special education teachers implementing the IEP insights into potential areas to explore while developing viable alternative means of expression.

It is important for the IEP team to clearly articulate the preferred or potential response methods for a student, including for which coursework they are most likely to be used. Table 1 offers several ways the student’s communication and assessment strengths might be communicated through various response methods. IEP teams must determine when including the response methods as a supplementary aid or accommodation is sufficient and when a specific description of an alternative mean of expression is warranted to ensure the student has access to the coursework.

For example, for one student, it may be sufficient to include verbal response as a response method accommodation to ensure that the student can provide oral rather than written responses in all general education courses. For the same student or another student, it may be necessary to describe how a construction project, such as building a staircase as part of CTE coursework, will be used as a performance task to demonstrate their understanding of geometry concepts. The level of detail to be recorded in the IEP is dependent on the needs of each student.

Table 1. Sample Response Methods to Document on the IEP

| Area of strength | Sample response methods | Resulting alternative  means of expression |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Verbal academic and functional communication | * Speech-to-text * Use of a scribe * Verbal response | Leverage forms of verbal communication. |
| Selecting from an array | * Multiple choice answers * Use of card sorts | Utilize their ability to select from an array to show what they know. Educator teams would need to define the big ideas and standards for these methods to be viable assessment forms. |
| Drawing or visual forms of expression | * Create a presentation * Craft an infographic * Utilize a graphic organizer * Use of visual storytelling or a comic strip | Clear ties to visual forms of expression. Educator teams would have autonomy in creating or curating experiences that allow students to utilize these methods without sacrificing the rigor of the content. |
| Preference for experiential or real-life connections | * Complete a performance task * Craft a project * Curate a portfolio | Different assessment formats are offered. Once documented within an IEP, teachers can work collaboratively to find ways to integrate these formats within coursework. |

Coordination Among Team Members

Collaboration between general education and special education teachers is crucial for implementing alternative means of expression to ensure students demonstrate proficiency in the general education coursework needed for a diploma. To develop supplementary aids and services that include alternative means of expression that are most likely to be used in the classroom, IEP teams should use various data sources, including formative and summative assessment data, insights from the student and their family regarding challenges that affect coursework completion, and comprehensive explanations with related data detailing the interventions and supports previously attempted within the core instruction and why they were successful or not.

Although much of the guidance provided in this practice brief is specific to the context of the IEP, the conversations and planning regarding how a student demonstrates proficiency in coursework needed for graduation should not be confined solely to a formal IEP setting. The ongoing implementation of the services, goals, and supports defined within the IEP requires continual collaboration between students, families, administrators, general education and special education teachers, and other IEP team members. Partnership is necessary to enact alternative means of expression, especially given the wide array of content areas needed for graduation, and the fact that all general education teachers with content area expertise will likely not be able to attend each IEP meeting.

To enable IEP teams to collaborate in this manner, the responsibility cannot fall on one IEP team member alone. Students and families cannot be expected to be the sole advocates for these supports. Nor should teachers be seen as the only ones who can offer different response methods. For more resources offering schools, districts, and LEAs guidance on structures for supporting these interactions, including course and content specific examples of coursework requirements and aligned alternative means of expression, please explore other resources created for the *Inclusive Access to a Diploma: Reimagining Proficiency for Students with Disabilities* initiative.

Conclusion

Earning a diploma does not have to be achieved using a narrow set of assessment structures. Students with disabilities can benefit especially from IEP teams partnering to forge new routes to proficiency that reflect both the rigor of the content requirements and the unique strengths and needs of each student. This practice brief was designed to equip IEP teams in California, starting with students and families, with strategies to incorporate alternative means of expression into students’ IEPs and craft more personalized assessment practices and accommodations. By embracing diverse assessment methods and fostering collaboration among educators, families, and students, educational communities in California can create an inclusive educational environment where all students are empowered to demonstrate their understanding and achieve their academic goals.