

# IEP WORKING GROUP FINAL REPORT

Submitted in satisfaction of the requirements set forth in P.L. 2025, Chapter 107 on behalf of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Working Group

January 2026



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) IMPROVEMENTS

*This report reflects the views of members of the IEP Working Group established pursuant to P.L. 2025, Chapter 107. The information and recommendations set forth herein have not been endorsed by the Murphy Administration*

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# LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

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P.L. 2025, Chapter 107 mandated the establishment of a working group to examine and provide recommendations for improving the development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in New Jersey. The legislation directed the Commissioner of Education to convene a diverse group of stakeholders representing multiple perspectives within the special education community.

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## WORKING GROUP REQUIREMENTS

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The charge of the working group was to examine, research, and make recommendations regarding IEP development, implementation, and parental involvement. This included an examination of:

- Variations in practices across NJ districts
- Research and academic evidence of best practices
- Practices from states different from NJ
- Federal and State law restrictions on IEP changes
- Potential regulatory changes, funding allocations, or other improvements

### STAKEHOLDER REPRESENTATION

The legislation required representation from the following groups to ensure diverse perspectives and expertise:

- Special education teachers
- School administrators (principals and superintendents)
- Special education directors
- School board members
- Parents and guardians of students with disabilities
- Disability advocates and experts
- Child study team members

Members were intentionally selected to ensure representation across multiple dimensions of diversity, including geographic location, years of experience, district type (urban, suburban, rural), district size, and lived experience/expertise. The diversity of the working group strengthened the ability to identify barriers and develop recommendations that reflect the full range of experiences across New Jersey schools.

# WORKING GROUP COMPOSITION

The **IEP Working Group** comprised of 27 members representing the diverse stakeholder groups mandated by legislation. Members were selected to ensure geographic, experiential, and demographic diversity across New Jersey. The composition reflected the full spectrum of roles involved in the IEP process, from direct service providers to families and advocates.

## PARTICIPANT LIST

Member Name	Role	Member Name	Role
Megan Breitenbach	Special Education Teacher	Elizabeth Perry	Parent of a SWD*
Jessica Baum	Special Education Teacher	Brooke Baldizzone	Parent of a SWD*
Shannon Becker-Fyfe	Special Education Teacher	Dawn De Lorenzo	Parent of a SWD*
Tammy Lascar	Principal	John Worthington	Disability Advocate/Expert
Shawn Rebman	Principal	Peg Kinsell	Disability Advocate/Expert
Tara Rossi	Chief School Administrator	Eddie Fergus	Disability Advocate/Expert
Patricia Calandro	Chief School Administrator	Matthew Korobkin	Disability Advocate/Expert
Raphael Morales	Special Education Director	Carol Cicconi-Granato	Disability Advocate/Expert
Paul Barbato	Special Education Director	Stefanie Babits	Disability Advocate/Expert
Jean Gwathney	Special Education Director	Carlea Dries	Child Study Team Member
Vickie Mendes-Branch	School Board Member	Stacey Palant	Child Study Team Member
Leslie Norwood	School Board Member	Latasha George	Child Study Team Member
Parul Khemka	Parent of a SWD*	Maria Santiago	Child Study Team Member
Emilia Endean	Parent of a SWD*	*SWD = Student with a Disability	



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# PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The IEP Working Group engaged in a structured five-session process designed to move from broad priority identification to specific, actionable recommendations. Each session built upon previous work through a progressive facilitation model that balanced whole-group collaboration with focused subcommittee work.

## SESSION 1: PRIORITY SETTING (OCTOBER 14, 2025)

The working group examined the legislative mandate and engaged in a facilitated priority-setting process. Through collaborative discussion and consensus-building, members identified five priority areas consistent with the legislation's requirements related to IEP development, implementation, and parental involvement:

- Priority 1: PLAAFP Development
- Priority 2: Goals and Objectives
- Priority 3: Fidelity of Implementation
- Priority 4: Progress Monitoring
- Priority 5: IEP Team Collaboration and Consultation

All priorities incorporated a focus on parental and guardian involvement, including explicit consideration for accessibility and cultural responsiveness.



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## SESSION 2: SUBCOMMITTEE FORMATION AND SCOPE REFINEMENT (OCTOBER 22, 2025)

Members were assigned to priority subcommittees based on preference and expertise, ensuring diverse role representation across all subcommittees as required by the legislation. Each subcommittee:

- Narrowed the scope of their priority area
- Identified research questions and focus areas
- Established protocols for collaborative work between sessions

## SESSION 3: RESEARCH AND BARRIER IDENTIFICATION (NOVEMBER 10, 2025)

Subcommittees engaged in deep exploration of their topics, examining:

- Current research and evidence-based practices
- Policy-practice gaps in New Jersey
- Barriers related to funding, resources, and capacity
- Knowledge gaps among IEP team members
- Equity issues affecting implementation and outcomes

## SESSION 4: RECOMMENDATION DESIGN AND PRESENTATION (NOVEMBER 28, 2025)

Subcommittees designed recommendations based on their research and barrier analysis. Each subcommittee presented their recommendations to the full working group for feedback and refinement. A total of 29 recommendations emerged from this collaborative process.

Following Session 4, working group members were asked to vote on each recommendation using three options: Accept as Written, Accept with Edits, or Reject. This voting process ensured that the final recommendations reflected genuine consensus across the diverse stakeholder group.



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## SESSION 5: REFINEMENT AND FINALIZATION (DECEMBER 5, 2025)

The working group reviewed voting results and engaged in final refinement of the recommendations. Areas of strong consensus were affirmed, and recommendations requiring modification were discussed and revised. The session concluded with:

- Finalization of recommendations
- Discussion of implementation considerations
- Completion of process evaluation surveys to inform future stakeholder engagement
- Recognition of member contributions and distribution of certificates of participation

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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The IEP Working Group developed 17 recommendations across five priority areas. These recommendations represent consensus-driven solutions to identified barriers and gaps in IEP development, implementation, and parent involvement. Each recommendation is designed to be actionable by the NJDOE and has been vetted through research, stakeholder input, and voting processes.



## PRIORITY 1: PRESENT LEVELS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND FUNCTIONAL PERFORMANCE (PLAAFP) DEVELOPMENT

**Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) statements form the foundation of every IEP. The working group identified inconsistencies in PLAAFP quality, data integration, and connection to goals and services across districts.**

**Recommendation 1.1:** The NJDOE should develop, mandate, and monitor the use of a consistent PLAAFP structure through the state model IEP. A supplemental resource/guidance document shall be developed and released that includes, but is not limited to: (1) an exemplar PLAAFP with clear definitions, purpose statements, and guiding questions that connect academic/functional performance to needs, goals, and services; (2) a quality rubric for districts to self-assess PLAAFP effectiveness and identify improvement areas; (3) a statewide PLAAFP framework that defines expected data sources while allowing flexibility for individual student needs; and, (4) a series of guiding questions for PLAAFP development.

**Recommendation 1.2:** The NJDOE should develop and mandate asynchronous professional learning modules on the PLAAFP development, for educators and families, which also include integrating data and the use of assessment as part of the IEP development process.

**Recommendation 1.3:** The NJDOE should provide, free of charge, statewide Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) and progress monitoring tools and training in reading, math, and writing, as well as structured ecological and functional data collection tools. These tools will eliminate cost barriers and ensure all districts have access to high-quality, evidence-based measurement systems.

**Recommendation 1.4:** The NJDOE should establish statewide protocols incorporating Person-Centered Planning principles to ensure PLAAFPs integrate family and student voice, lived experiences, cultural context, and student perspectives.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## PRIORITY 2: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

**Clear, measurable goals are essential for supporting student progress and ensuring accountability. The working group determined that greater consistency is needed statewide to ensure that all districts develop individualized, specific, and measurable goals aligned with student needs.**

**Recommendation 2.1:** The NJDOE should revise the state Individualized Education Program (IEP) form to explicitly incorporate SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) within the goal-setting section. Clear prompts and structure will guide IEP teams in writing measurable, meaningful goals.

**Recommendation 2.2:** The NJDOE should expand parent resources and training beyond the PRISE to increase collaboration and reinforce best practices to enhance parent/guardian participation in the IEP development process.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## PRIORITY 3: FIDELITY OF IMPLEMENTATION

**Implementation fidelity ensures that IEPs are delivered as written. The working group identified gaps in the shared understanding of what fidelity means, inconsistent progress-monitoring practices, and limited local and state mechanisms to support and verify implementation.**

**Recommendation 3.1:** The NJDOE should define 'implementation fidelity' in state documents and NJ Special Education code (NJAC 6A:14). Clear definitions will establish a common understanding across all IEP team members (including parents) of what constitutes faithful IEP implementation.

**Recommendation 3.2:** The NJDOE should add explicit language in NJDOE guidance documents that 'implement with fidelity' is required. This will strengthen accountability for IEP implementation across the state.

**Recommendation 3.3:** The NJDOE should establish and provide standardized protocols, templates, and schedules for documenting and verifying IEP implementation fidelity. Districts should designate specific staff (e.g., CST directors, compliance officers) to conduct fidelity checks using these state-developed resources.

**Recommendation 3.4:** The NJDOE should develop and provide easily accessible statewide professional development on legal requirements and best practices for IEP implementation. Training should be available in multiple formats (on-demand modules, virtual sessions, translated materials) to ensure all IEP team participants can access consistent, high-quality information.

**Recommendation 3.5:** The NJDOE should provide districts with standardized, translated templates to communicate with parents and families. Districts should utilize the templates to craft documents in the family's primary language and ensure that families without reliable internet or computer access receive them in an accessible format.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## PRIORITY 4: PROGRESS MONITORING

**Effective progress monitoring enables data-driven decision-making and meaningful communication with families. The working group identified inconsistencies in student progress-monitoring practices, varied interpretations of progress descriptors, and challenges that limit families' access to and understanding of progress data.**

**Recommendation 4.1:** The NJDOE should establish specific parameters for data tracking, progress monitoring, and reporting through the state Model IEP form, requiring the use of measurable data made available to guardians and all IEP team members during IEP development and progress reporting throughout the year.

**Recommendation 4.2:** The NJDOE should define, promote, and monitor a unified language of progress monitoring descriptors to create a universal understanding of metrics and eliminate varied definitions of vague terms, strengthening family-school communication.

**Recommendation 4.3:** The NJDOE should develop and require one statewide IEP system (e.g., Frontline, Realtime, IEP Direct) or progress monitoring dashboard/framework to eliminate variations amongst reporting formats and create a unified parent and educator experience for tracking student progress.

**Recommendation 4.4:** The NJDOE should revisit the current translation website/document and update it frequently to promote translation services available by county for universal access. These updates should be disseminated (i.e., state-approved translation resources to school districts and families) quarterly.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## PRIORITY 5: IEP TEAM COLLABORATION AND CONSULTATION

**Meaningful collaboration among IEP team members, particularly with families, is essential for developing and implementing effective IEPs. The working group identified barriers to authentic parent participation, including insufficient time to review a draft IEP or related documents prior to the meeting, communication gaps, and inconsistent practices for sharing information.**

**Recommendation 5.1:** The NJDOE should require that districts provide parents/guardians with a complete draft IEP—including PLAAFPs, goals, services, accommodations, and modifications—at least five (5) working days before any IEP meeting. Provide implementation guidance to ensure consistent statewide practice and equitable access to information for meaningful parent participation (e.g., parents/guardians can review, prepare questions, and participate meaningfully).

**Recommendation 5.2:** The NJDOE should develop and facilitate training on progress reporting and data communication (including evaluation, standardized, and benchmark data analysis) for school district administrators, child study team members, and parents/guardians. Training should be available in multiple formats (on-demand modules, virtual sessions, translated materials) to ensure accessibility. The proposed professional development model is as a train-the-trainer approach.

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# ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

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FOLLOWING THE VOTING PROCESS, WORKING GROUP MEMBERS WERE PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUBMIT ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS THAT THEY FELT WERE NOT SUFFICIENTLY ADDRESSED THROUGH THE SUBCOMMITTEE PROCESS. THESE INDIVIDUALLY SUBMITTED ITEMS REFLECT IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVES AND POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION; HOWEVER, THEY SHOULD BE INTERPRETED WITH APPROPRIATE CAUTION AS THEY DID NOT UNDERGO THE SAME RIGOROUS VETTING, RESEARCH, DISCUSSION, AND CONSENSUS-BUILDING PROCESS AS THE PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS.

## SYSTEM-LEVEL ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT

### **Expand Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) to include special education**

Add special education service implementation to the Instruction and Program (I&P) indicator under "Tiered Supports for all Learners." This would create accountability structures, ensure improvement plans are developed where needed, enhance transparency, and address the current inequity where special education services are not formally evaluated through the state's accountability system.

## CAPACITY BUILDING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREAS

### **Prioritize top-down education for administrators**

Focus professional development efforts on curriculum supervisors, assistant principals, principals, and superintendents who make decisions about IEP staffing, programming, and resources but may lack deep understanding of IEP technical requirements and compliance.

### **Strengthen teacher preparation in IEP development**

Provide targeted training for both general and special education teachers on creating quality IEPs, including what information to include, how to track data, and how to write meaningful content without fear of administrative critique during teacher evaluations.

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# ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

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## PLAAFP-NEEDS-GOALS STRUCTURE

### **Create standardized PLAAFP-to-Needs-to-Goals formatting**

Develop structured guidance and templates for administrators and teachers that clearly define the progression from PLAAFP to needs to goals, reducing ambiguity and improving consistency.

## PARENT EDUCATION AND EXPECTATION SETTING

### **Develop realistic expectation-setting resources for families**

Create materials that help parents understand what schools can realistically offer within FAPE requirements and district budgets, while maintaining advocacy for appropriate services.

## SPEECH-ONLY IEP CONSIDERATIONS

### **Address recommendations' impact on ESLS IEPs**

Ensure that recommendations account for how they apply to students who are Eligible for Speech Language Services (ESLS).

## EVIDENCE-BASED AND ASSET-BASED APPROACH

### **Ensure recommendations use strength-based frameworks**

Move away from deficit models in all guidance documents and training materials, focusing instead on student strengths and evidence-based practices.

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# ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

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## IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATION

Several respondents emphasized the importance of being realistic about what different stakeholders (CST members, related service providers, teachers, administrators) can implement, and stressed that excessive or unfunded mandates could be counterproductive to the ultimate goal of improving IEP quality and student outcomes.

## CERTIFICATION REVISION CONSIDERATION

### **Revitalize the Teacher of the Handicapped (TOH) Certification**

Restore the Teacher of the Handicapped (TOH) certification alongside, or in lieu of, the current Teacher of Students with Disabilities certification to provide more specialized, categorical training pathways. Multiple working group members noted that the shift to a single, broader certification has reduced opportunities for high-quality, disability-specific special education training, which negatively impacts IEP development, implementation, and service delivery.

# IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The working group recognizes that effective implementation of these recommendations will require strategic planning, resource allocation, and phased rollout. The following considerations emerged from working group discussions:



## PHASED IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH

The working group suggests a phased approach that:

- Prioritizes foundational elements such as consistent PLAAFP structures and SMART goal frameworks
- Pilots new tools and systems with diverse districts before statewide rollout
- Provides sufficient training and support before mandating new requirements
- Builds capacity across the system through train-the-trainer models and communities of practice

## RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Successful implementation will require investment in:

- Professional development infrastructure and delivery systems
- Technology platforms for statewide IEP systems and progress monitoring tools
- Translation services and multilingual materials
- Technical assistance personnel to support district implementation
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems

## EQUITY AND ACCESS

Implementation must explicitly address equity considerations, ensuring that all districts—regardless of size, resources, or demographics—have access to necessary tools, training, and support. Particular attention should be paid to eliminating cost barriers, providing multilingual resources, and ensuring accessibility for families with varying levels of technological access.

## MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The NJDOE should establish clear metrics and monitoring systems to track implementation progress and outcomes. Regular evaluation and adjustment will be essential to ensure that recommendations achieve their intended impact on IEP quality and student outcomes.

# CONCLUSION

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The IEP Working Group's recommendations represent a comprehensive, stakeholder-driven approach to strengthening New Jersey's special education system. Through collaborative engagement across diverse perspectives and roles, the working group identified perceived barriers and developed actionable solutions that address the full lifecycle of the IEP process—from development through implementation to family engagement.

These 17 recommendations have been informed by research, grounded in the lived experiences of practitioners and families, and refined through consensus-building processes. They reflect a shared commitment to ensuring that every student with a disability receives a high-quality, individualized education program that is developed collaboratively, implemented with fidelity, and monitored effectively.

The working group recognizes that meaningful improvement requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and strategic implementation.

This report fulfills the mandate of P.L. 2025, c. 107, and represents a significant step forward in New Jersey's ongoing commitment to excellence in special education. The working group extends gratitude to the NJDOE Office of Special Education for the opportunity to contribute to this important work and for the commitment to amplifying diverse stakeholder voices in shaping policy and practice.