

MEMORANDUM

TO: District/School Administrators, Educators, Families and Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and Other Interested Parties
FROM: Russell Johnston, Ph.D., Senior Associate Commissioner and State Director of Special Education
DATE: December 20, 2018
RE: IEP Improvement Project Update– Research, Planning and Recommendation Report

Since 2014, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has been engaged in a process to improve the development and implementation of high-quality IEPs through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Improvement Project. The ultimate goal of this project is to ensure that each student with a disability has the best possible outcomes and increased access to general curriculum content and the life of the school. To achieve these goals, DESE seeks to improve the IEP process and, once that process is well established, ensure that available IEP information technology (IT) solutions promote its effective implementation.

Historical Context of the IEP Improvement Project

As part of the initial IEP Improvement Project efforts, DESE solicited extensive stakeholder feedback, including from practitioners, parents, and students, as to how best to improve the development and implementation of high-quality IEPs. Based on the feedback, DESE determined that the new IEP process should reflect a data-based cycle of inquiry that supports both compliance and results. Please see the [Massachusetts IEP Improvement Project](#) website for more detailed information on the early stages of the project.

AnLar's Research

For the next phase of the IEP Improvement Project, in February 2018, DESE contracted with AnLar, a Washington, D.C. based consulting firm to conduct research and, based upon the research, provide DESE with a Research, Planning and Recommendation Report. AnLar's research focused on two areas: evidence-based special education policies, practices, and procedure; and market research on a cost-effective IT solution to meet the goals of the project. AnLar's research included a national literature review of best practices on IEP development, and a series of surveys, focus groups and interviews with stakeholders, including families and directors of special education. AnLar partnered with the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology (CELT) to provide expertise on the IT aspect of its research.

AnLar's Recommendations

AnLar recently completed its Research Planning and Recommendation Report. The report contains the following three recommendations:

1. DESE should improve IEP practices as a focused effort that precedes any efforts to pursue a technical solution.
2. Based on current stakeholder feedback, there is low desire and need for the state to develop and host a statewide IEP solution. Instead, DESE should consider providing grants to vendors or

consortiums of districts to enhance existing technical solutions to meet the requirements of the revised IEP development process (once established).

3. DESE should develop a project governance structure that includes a communication and stakeholder engagement plan, and establishes a core group of stakeholders to guide and advise DESE throughout the duration of the project.

For more information regarding AnLar's research and recommendations, we invite you to read the five-page executive summary that accompanies this memo. To request a copy of the full 150-page report, please contact the Special Education Planning and Policy Development Office at specialeducation@doe.mass.edu, or call 781-338-3375.

DESE's next steps

Based on AnLar's report and our own prior research, DESE's next steps include:

- Resource development
 - Update *Is Special Education the Right Service?* (ISERS)
 - Create *IEP Writing Guide* reflecting new IEP development process
 - Create new IEP template
 - Update *Parents' Guide to Special Education*
- Develop and implement stakeholder engagement plan
- Implement resources beginning in SY20 (small scale), and continuously refine
- Evaluate IT options based on implementation of new IEP and resources

Conclusion

Updated information on the status of the IEP Improvement Project will continue to be posted on DESE's website: (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/ImproveIEP/>). Your continued input is critical in advancing the project, and we appreciate your steadfast commitment to improving outcomes for our students with disabilities.

Massachusetts IEP Improvement Project Research, Planning, and Recommendation Report

November 29, 2018



Executive Summary

Report Purpose and Methods

In 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) calling for a vendor to develop a comprehensive Research, Planning, and Recommendation Report to inform the next steps of the *IEP Improvement Project*. AnLar, LLC was awarded this contract and with their partner, CELT, began working with DESE and EOE-IT in February 2018. To develop this report, AnLar has completed the following activities:

- Conducted a review of extant documents provided by DESE;
- Conducted two stakeholder surveys, one for education professionals and one for families;
- Conducted three virtual focus groups for constituency groups across the state;
- Conducted an extensive literature review of IEP practices and the use of technology to support best practices in IEP development and implementation;
- Completed a 50-state scan of both IEP practices and the use of IEP vendors;
- Conducted a survey of educational vendors;
- Conducted interviews of national special education experts; and
- Conducted interviews with state special education directors.

Generally, the field was very responsive to the request for feedback, opinion or information. However, some categories have limited responses due to individuals declining or simply not responding to requests for input. The following is a breakdown of the activities listed above by the numbers:

- 155 extant documents received from DESE;
- 3,315 responses to the family survey received;
- 2,562 responses to the special education professional survey received;
- 21 individuals from 12 Massachusetts organizations related to special education participated in virtual focus groups;
- 7 survey responses from 6 vendor companies received;
- 4 interviews with national special education experts completed; and
- 9 interviews with state special education staff (including directors of special education) completed.

Implications for the IEP Improvement Project

Today, the advanced state of technology offers a strategic opportunity to support IEP teams in making individualized service decisions and in implementing IEPs effectively through powerful online tools. DESE has a vision that as the work in the *IEP Improvement Project* moves forward, it will result in an IEP that is *process rather than form driven*, and truly focuses team conversations on each child's unique characteristics, learning styles, strengths and needs to develop the IEP. As a field, special education is moving away from focusing solely on compliance towards focusing on the results or impacts of special education. Through this project, DESE's vision is to create IEP development and implementation processes that de-emphasize filling out the lines and boxes of a form, and focus on critical thinking, planning and instruction to meet each child's needs and to optimize their potential to reach their individualized goals and to succeed in life once they leave high school.

With this report, Massachusetts has conducted one of the first in-depth reviews of existing online IEP systems in an attempt to gather lessons learned, engage the field, and be thoughtful about the approach to improving the experience for every child with an IEP. This report is one of the first attempts by a state to comprehensively gather data from all leading stakeholders through interviews, surveys, conversations, focus groups, literature reviews, and other methods. The numbers presented above reflect feedback from over 5,000 individuals representing multiple roles and expertise in the field. Paired with the review of numerous academic, research and policy articles and a 50-state analysis of existing online IEP practices, policies and online systems, this is arguably the most comprehensive analysis of the state of IEP practices and online IEP solutions conducted to date.

The information gathered for the full report has been summarized here into three sections:

- Individualized Education Program (IEP) Practices;
- Online IEP Solutions; and
- Recommendations.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Practices

A quality IEP process encompasses many practices, but four practices are key to ensuring that the IEP process is high-quality and leads to improved instruction and achievement of outcomes:

- The use of functional and ongoing assessment to gather information about a child to inform both planning and instruction;
- Engaging in effective teaming and collaboration with all the members of the IEP team to build upon the expertise of each individual, including families, general educators, special educators, related service providers, school and district administrators, and the child with a disability;
- Using effective family engagement throughout the IEP development and implementation process; and
- Ensuring meaningful and effective student engagement as the foundation for life-long self-advocacy and self-determination for individuals with disabilities.

It is clear through the many data collection methods used to gather information, including interviews with national experts and state directors of special education, that the field continues to have issues consistently implementing these core practices. The respondents to the surveys for special education professionals and families within MA indicate that this is also true for the districts in the state, and that it is not limited to one core practice, but rather difficulty in consistently implementing each of them to varying degrees. For example, families reported varying levels of engagement with their IEP teams, but rarely reported engagement at the level of full partnership and participation on their child's IEP team. Additionally, teaming and collaboration continues to be challenged by short process timelines, expertise in IEP development, availability (e.g., related service personnel traveling to serve multiple districts) and the artificial divide between special and general education. Functional assessment is often stymied by short evaluation timelines, lack of knowledge about good assessment practices, and the practice of streamlining assessments by using the same methods and tools for every child, regardless of their individual needs or concerns. Until all of the IEP processes are examined carefully at the state level and significant guidance (such as a written policy and procedure manual and practice guides) and professional development (such as workshops, webinars, mentorship and coaching) are provided, districts will continue to have issues creating and implementing policies, procedures, and practices at the local level that are efficient and effective, consistent with state expectations, and lead to the enactment of a high-quality IEP process.

As presented in the detailed findings in the full report, there are three overall themes that emerge from the findings and research about IEP processes and practices, as follows:

- Theme 1: A quality IEP process from referral through transitions must be defined and be in place first; no matter how good an online solution may be, it will not be replaced by the individuals involved in the IEP process being well trained and supported to implement a quality process.
- Theme 2: Ongoing professional development and technical assistance must be a priority to ensure consistency across districts. Additionally, the state should provide updated written guidance, information and resources with district responsibilities clearly outlined, including the expectation that districts build their own policies, procedures and practices based upon these responsibilities. These must be disseminated to the field by DESE in a timely way.
- Theme 3: Stakeholders want and need continued input into the development of the IEP process.

Online IEP Solutions

An online Individualized Education Program (IEP) system implementation, in concept, can and should be less of an IT project and more of an educational reform initiative. If done correctly, the system implementation provides a powerful opportunity to promote and instill proven best practices for IEP management that focus on student results rather than compliance alone. If available, IEP systems that support and promote the use of best practices provide a powerful opportunity to ensure a child's growth and goals are no longer lost if a student moves across district lines or changes teachers. A comprehensive understanding of the student and data driven decision making based on accurate, in depth information is nearly impossible without such a system, ideally providing the teacher, parent, and any other authorized user a full understanding of the child's educational experience.

Despite the promise ushered in by the development of online statewide IT IEP systems, no system currently exists that focuses on the process and the practices of IEP development. Those that are in use continue to be focused on the compliance of IEP development. As reported in interviews of state directors of special education and national experts, states have not seen the type of practice reforms expected through the implementation of these systems. Many of the leading products are developed on older technologies that do not capitalize on the functions and features that help both analysis and user understanding. Worse, many of the systems are limited in their use, often digitizing IEP forms and storing data, with little attention beyond this simple function. After spending potentially hundreds of millions of state dollars on systems, many of these implementations have fallen short of expectations.

As presented in the detailed findings in the full report, there are three overall themes that emerge from the findings and research about IEP systems, as follows:

- Theme 1: Most IEP systems simply reflect the processes and procedures already in existence and it is a misconception to expect an IT system could be built to change processes.
- Theme 2: Online IEP systems in existence are built primarily to meet needs around compliance for federal law, not for classroom or local-level decision making to improve outcomes.
- Theme 3: The online systems currently in use in Massachusetts districts are not fully meeting the needs of local programs, students, or families.
- Theme 4: In terms of the Massachusetts stakeholder feedback, many stakeholder groups doubted DESE's ability to manage the successful delivery of a statewide IEP system.

Recommendations

The themes detailed here reflect the extensive policy research, outreach to leading special education experts, and one of the most extensive stakeholder engagements conducted around this topic. AnLar's significant experience with IEP processes, implementation and current IT solutions as well as our experience with state-level education systems, leads to the *following three recommendations to DESE for consideration*:

- **Recommendation #1:** *Since the MA DESE is interested in reshaping practices and procedures for the IEP within the state, this should be done as a focused effort that precedes any efforts to pursue a technical solution.* This includes:
 - Reviewing each process within the development and implementation of an IEP in light of the four core best practices, and making decisions about how DESE expects districts, schools and IEP teams to implement those practices;
 - Developing new guidance documents and providing training, professional development and technical assistance to districts to support understanding and use of the core practices; and
 - Piloting and refining the revised IEP process (for at least 6 months) prior to finalizing the process and moving on to technological development.
- **Recommendation #2:** *Based on current stakeholder feedback, there is low confidence, desire and need for the state to develop and host a statewide IEP solution. Instead, the state should provide vendors or consortiums of districts on behalf of their vendor, grants to enhance existing solutions to meet the intent, purposes and requirements with the desired revised IEP practices and processes (once established).*
- **Recommendation #3:** *DESE should begin by creating a project governance structure that engages key district and state stakeholders and that actively guides the development of the IEP process, best practice development and next steps for the IT solution.* This should include:
 - A detailed, written stakeholder engagement plan that outlines the who, what, how, when and why of stakeholder participation in the development of the revised IEP process and the next steps with the online solution;
 - A detailed, written communication plan that outlines how DESE will communicate about the IEP Improvement Project activities and solicit feedback and information from key stakeholders; and
 - Establishing a core group of stakeholders that represent the many groups and roles in special education to guide and advise DESE throughout the duration of the project.