

How Will I Know If My Child is Making Progress?

Children go to school to learn, of course. But parents of children with disabilities often ask, “How will I know my child is learning and making progress?” Parents can answer that question by looking at a variety of data, including information from special education and general education sources and information from outside the school.

Special education sources

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as amended in 2004 (IDEA) is the special education law that emphasizes educational outcomes for students in special education. IDEA guidelines require that schools track educational progress for children with disabilities. Here are four of the best sources:

(1) The results of a student’s most recent evaluation. Students who may have disabilities are evaluated before special education services can begin. This comprehensive evaluation looks at cognitive and behavioral factors, as well as physical and developmental factors in all areas of suspected disability. The initial evaluation provides a baseline for measuring progress and developing an individualized education program (IEP)*. Once a child has an IEP, the school will reevaluate or review existing evaluation data at least once every three years. You can compare the most recent evaluation report with earlier reports to gauge your child’s progress. Parents have a right to obtain copies of evaluation summaries and to have the information explained to them.

(2) Measurable annual goals. Your child’s IEP must include measurable annual goals. For each goal area, the IEP must record your child’s beginning level of performance, either in a section on “present levels of educational performance” or in the goal statement. Each goal statement must outline the skills or behaviors to be changed, the direction of the desired change, and the expected ending level of performance. You will receive reports outlining your child’s progress toward meeting these goals.

(3) Progress reports. The IEP document must identify how often your child’s progress toward annual goals will be measured and how you will be informed of the progress. Parents must be informed at least as often as parents are informed of their nondisabled child’s progress. Periodic report cards, other written reports, and meetings are among the many ways parents can keep informed about their child’s progress. These sources of information help parents determine whether their child’s progress is sufficient to achieve the IEP’s goals within that IEP year.

(4) Annual IEP review. A new IEP is written annually for children in special education. The IEP must include a statement of the child’s present level of educational performance. Parents can compare this statement to the statement made the previous year. For example, how much has the child’s reading level advanced? How much has the child’s on-task behavior increased?

Regular education sources

Children with disabilities have the right to participate in the general curriculum—the curriculum used for nondisabled students—whenever appropriate. Parents can receive additional information from regular education sources.

(1) Classroom teacher information. If your child participates in a regular classroom for all or any part of a day, you can attend teacher’s conferences, open houses, and other typical school events for more information, observations, and feedback about your child’s progress. Daily work, test scores, and report cards can also provide valuable information.

(2) Districtwide assessments. Students have a right to participate in districtwide assessments as appropriate. Examples include the Iowa Basic Skills Test (IBST) and the California Achievement Test (CAT). These tests compare the academic achievement of students across age or grade level. You can also use these tests to see if your child is making progress when the test is administered from year to year.

(3) Statewide assessments. Children with disabilities also have a right to be included in statewide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations or modifications to the test if necessary. If the IEP team determines a child cannot participate in statewide testing, even with accommodations, the school must use an alternative assessment for the student. Statewide assessments are given in grades 3-8, 10 and 11.

Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA-IIIs) are designed to ensure educational accountability in schools across the state. The results help schools and districts identify strengths and weaknesses in curriculum and instruction so schools can adequately prepare students to meet the state's academic standards. Student scores are a rating of 1 (low) to 4 (high). These scores can indicate how your child is progressing in the skills needed to meet Minnesota's academic standards.

The Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS). This alternate assessment measures the progress of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in reading, mathematics, and science. The standards are different from those of the MCA-IIIs, although they are still based on the general curriculum. These tests are given in grades 3-8, 10 and 11. The MTAS uses a variety of activities rather than paper-and-pencil testing. The assessments are administered to each child individually by the child's teacher or other school personnel familiar to the child.

Basic Standards Tests (BSTs) The BSTs are reading, mathematics, and writing tests that students must pass at the state level to receive a diploma from a public high school. The class of 2009 is the last class required to pass the BSTs to graduate. The BSTs will be replaced by GRAD assessments.

Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD) The GRAD will replace the BSTs. Students in the class of 2010 are the first ones required to pass each of the three GRAD tests to graduate from a public high school in Minnesota. The GRAD measures reading, writing, and mathematics proficiency. Student may take the tests more than once.

(4) No Child Left Behind Act. Children with disabilities have a right to be included when schools are evaluated annually to ensure that all students make academic progress. Parents will be informed of how well the child's school is doing in educating certain groups of children, including those with disabilities.

Information from outside the school

School isn't the only source of information on a child's educational progress. Independent evaluation and less formal observations can provide a fuller picture of a child's progress.

Independent evaluation

Children can be assessed at nonschool facilities, sometimes at the expense of the school district and sometimes at the family's expense. In either case, independent evaluation results can be compared to previous testing and other progress indicators.

Observing skills at home and in the community

You can observe whether your child has *generalized* a skill taught in school. This means that your child can use the skill in many environments, such as the home and community, as well as in school. For example, is your child's speech understandable at home and to the server in the restaurant? Can your child do the math worksheet on money and count the change received at the store? Can your child do this skill better than he or she could last year?

What if my child is not making progress?

If you think your child is not making meaningful educational progress, you can request a meeting to discuss revisions to the child's IEP. The school cannot guarantee that a child will achieve the goals in the IEP; however, the school must make a "good faith effort" to assist the child to do so.

An IEP team meeting can be held to discuss and plan revisions to improve opportunity to make progress. Your child may need changes in:

- special education or related services
- assistive technology
- curriculum or method of instruction
- educational setting

If your IEP team cannot agree whether or not your child is making meaningful progress, additional evaluation to provide educational data may be needed. (For more on evaluation see PACER Center handout "Evaluation: What Does It Mean for Your Child?")

**All references to IEP (Individualized Education Program) include IIIP (Individual Interagency Intervention Plans).*