

# IEP Improvement Playbook

## Sample

October 2023



# IEP Improvement Playbook Sample

This IEP Improvement Playbook sample highlights a selection of promising practices in the areas of data collection and family engagement. It is intended to support schools and districts as they implement the new IEP forms and consider how to promote system-wide improvement.

The full version of the Playbook, which will be released later in this school year, will outline a step-by-step process that schools and districts can use to examine their current IEP practices, implement changes, and evaluate the results. It will also feature additional strategies from a cohort of "early adopter" schools that have been working on improving their IEP processes.

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# Introduction





# Background on the IEP Improvement Project

In June 2020, the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) selected the Students and Families First Coalition (SFFC) to offer a multi-year professional learning experience on improving the IEP process for a group of "early adopter" districts. This work was intended to take a system-wide view on IEP improvement and complement ongoing efforts by DESE to update IEP guidance documents and forms.

## What is the Students and Families First Coalition?

The SFFC brings together four Massachusetts-based organizations with deep and varied expertise in the elements of the IEP Improvement Project. The members of the coalition are shown in the diagram below.



## **CAST**

CAST serves as the project lead, managing the overall project scope. They use their understanding of special education to equip educators with strategies and processes that positively impact achievement and outcomes for students with disabilities.

## **Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy**

The Rennie Center oversees the improvement process, developing materials to help teams design, implement, and evaluate the use of evidence-based reforms.

## **Perennial Education**

The role of Perennial Education is to ensure that all work is grounded in the understanding and practice of equity (particularly racial equity) and to support the implementation of new processes and practices in a culturally responsive manner.

## **Federation for Children with Special Needs**

The Federation makes certain that family voices are well-represented in the work of schools and districts and that all teams receive appropriate support to improve family engagement processes.

## What was the goal of the early adopters process?

The goal of this process was to build school and district capacity to **identify, analyze, & address** challenges within the IEP and Special Education processes to create the conditions for improvement of student outcomes.



## What do we include in the "IEP process"?

For the SFFC, improving the IEP process requires looking beyond the phases of [referral, evaluation, and eligibility determination](#). Instead, the process must include examining the practices used in general education classrooms and the expectations embedded within a school's culture. Similarly, the IEP process does not end when a student begins receiving

services under an IEP—rather, even post-evaluation, we must continue to think about improving instruction, family engagement, and other elements of the student experience.

The diagram below highlights how the SFFC envisions the components of the IEP process:

Phase	Pre-Evaluation General Education Setting			During Evaluation			Post-Evaluation General Education Setting and Special Education Setting			
Component	Instruction	Assessment	Considering Referral (Intervention)	Evaluation/ Assessment	Making an Eligibility Determination	Writing the IEP	Accommodations and Placement Setting	Staffing	Monitoring Progress on Goals	Re-evaluation
School Culture and Climate – Family and Student Engagement										

## Where do the promising practices listed in the Playbook come from?

This resource provides many examples of work undertaken by early adopters to improve data collection and family engagement within the IEP process. Throughout this resource, school and district names have been made anonymous, though all the strategies described here have been tested and applied within Massachusetts schools and/or districts.

Additional examples of promising practices, along with a full description of the process early adopters used to identify these practices, will be shared as part of the full IEP Improvement Playbook later this year.



# Promising Approaches: Equitable Data Collection





# Building a School Culture around Data Collection

## Promising Approaches

Below is a selection of ideas, in no particular order, that have demonstrated promise in building a culture around data collection within schools and districts. This list is intended to serve as a starting point for your team to generate ideas, but it is by no means exhaustive.

### **1 Create staff training modules on data collection practices.**

Design staff training modules to standardize data collection practices and routines and to build staff knowledge on different types of student data, the role data plays throughout the IEP process, and the importance of consistent and accurate data collection. Implement modules universally, as a professional development tool for all staff and as part of the onboarding process for new hires. This creates a foundation for a strong schoolwide culture around data collection, including common language and practices, and increases staff buy-in and know-how.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**School A** created training modules to address inconsistent views among staff about what student data mattered most and how to gather data. The modules, delivered through an online platform, introduced all staff (including new hires) to standardized data collection practices and protocols and contextualized the role of data collection within the IEP process. The school designed four modules, covering the following topics:

1. How to hold an IEP meeting
2. Forms and timelines related to the IEP process
3. Writing measurable IEP goals
4. Data collection practices, including IEP progress monitoring

As a private special education school, School A leveraged these trainings to collect more effective data for each student's full IEP team—inclusive of each student's sending district—and enable the team to write stronger IEP goals.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**District B** created online training modules to standardize their approach to eligibility determinations for specific learning disabilities (SLDs). The modules included information and resources on how to identify SLDs and how to conduct a thorough and accurate evaluation, such as:

1. What data to collect
2. How to carry out effective student observation
3. How to write up a student's education history and review of current performance
4. What to consider for English learners

The district began with modules focused on data collection practices in reading to evaluate for SLDs, with plans to expand to other subjects and other disability categories. The modules will be rolled out during a professional development day, but the district will ultimately allow staff to review the information at their own pace and revisit it as needed.



2

## Embed data collection within lesson plans and instructional practices.

Equip teaching staff—through professional development sessions, workshops, or sample resources—to deliberately design lessons to collect meaningful, actionable student data. Support teachers to develop a student evaluation and assessment plan and embed it within their lessons, helping to routinely collect data that accurately reflects students' academic, social, and behavioral performance. Create systems that use data to inform instruction going forward, both for universal practices and targeted supports for students.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School A**, in strengthening their school's culture around data collection, recognized the importance of embedding data collection within lesson plans and mindfully linking evaluation and assessment with instruction. They included professional development on this topic in their staff training modules so that evaluation and assessment results translated into teaching strategies and interventions that aligned with the goals set by each student's full IEP team.

### 3 Provide staff with a data collection toolkit, including standardized tools and templates.

Develop and share straightforward templates that staff can use to collect data. Align different types of data collection templates so that all data measuring student progress in the same areas can be meaningfully compared. Clearly outline who is responsible for collecting which data and how frequently. Store data in a shared document or folder that is accessible to all relevant staff while making sure to sufficiently protect the confidentiality of student records and information. This enhances streamlined, consistent data collection and creates accountability for those collecting the data.

#### *Lessons from the Field*

**School A** provided staff with a universal data collection sheet to record data on academics, social communication, and emotional regulation. The sheet included instructions on who should collect data and how often. Data was stored on shared drives so that all staff who needed it could access it. The school also provided sign-up sheets for classroom staff to help them in clearly delineating who would collect which data. These practices helped School A to bring more effective data back to each student's full IEP team, inclusive of each student's sending district.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**School C** developed a universal data collection toolkit that included tools such as student and family vision planning templates, a person-centered planning tool used to analyze themes from the student and family vision forms, and tools to carry out functional skills assessments. The school has worked to align the different tools so that data can be meaningfully compared and used to chart student progress toward goals. They are conducting staff training on the tools and their use for IEP goal writing and progress monitoring. As a private special education school, School C leveraged these practices to bring back more effective data to each student's full IEP team, inclusive of the student's sending district, so that stronger IEP goals could be written collectively.

4

### **Design evaluation report templates to foster collaborative data sharing.**

Create a unified evaluation report template where all staff participating in student IEP evaluations record their results and recommendations. This helps data collected by psychologists, board-certified behavior analysts, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, teachers, and others to be shared in a way



that is collaborative, consistent, and streamlined. This practice assists staff in preparing for IEP meetings, as contradictory recommendations can be noted prior to the meeting and flagged for discussion. Further, the practice is helpful for families by providing one unified report prior to the IEP meeting rather than separate reports that may follow different formats.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**District D**, realizing the opportunity to streamline and standardize how evaluation reports were written, consulted with special education experts to determine what a unified report should look like. The template they produced as a result helped to foster collaboration among staff, creating a shared protocol that served as a foundation for staff conversations and consultations prior to IEP meetings.

**5**

## **Create structured opportunities for teachers to summarize and reflect on student data.**

Provide teachers with a written tool that they can use, especially before writing an evaluation report or IEP, to summarize student data. This tool should also allow educators to formalize and record their reflections on a student's strengths and the kinds of

interventions that play to those strengths, based on what has or has not been working. This kind of data lays the groundwork for tiered supports that are intentional, individualized, and centered on student strengths rather than deficits.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School A** included a teacher reflection tool in their data collection toolbox to foster individualization and an empathy-forward approach in designing tiered interventions and IEP goals in conjunction with each student's full IEP team, inclusive of each student's sending district.

# Gathering Family and Student Data

## Promising Approaches

Below is a selection of ideas, in no particular order, that have demonstrated promise in gathering family and student data within schools and districts. This list is intended to serve as a starting point for your team to generate ideas but is by no means exhaustive.

### **1 Create tools to include student and family vision planning in the IEP process.**

To center student and family voices in the IEP planning process, create vision planning tools for students and families and establish them as integral components of the IEP process. These tools, intended to be used prior to an IEP meeting, allow students and their families to record their future aspirations so that school staff can plan IEP goals in line with their visions.

- Families may complete vision planning by filling out a document on their own or with support from a staff member. Encourage families to envision their goals for their student's future across various life domains (e.g., employment, living situation, health, and social well-being).



- Students may complete vision planning by filling out a document on their own or with support from a staff member. Make the document accessible (e.g., by providing visuals) and offer students the choice to document their vision in a way that centers their voice (such as by recording a video). Prompt students to consider their strengths and interests to envision what a happy and successful life looks like for them.

Create tools to assist the IEP team in extracting trends from the vision planning templates prior to an IEP meeting so that they can be translated into concrete IEP goals and services.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School C** created a student vision tool and parent-guardian vision tool that are completed for every student as part of the IEP process, thereby equipping each student's full IEP team, inclusive of each student's sending district, with valuable input from students and their families. The school tailored the student vision tool for student use, adding visuals and references to functional living skills and removing any irrelevant sections for a student's age group. Students are invited to attend IEP meetings to present their vision so that their voice is centered.

The student vision tool prompts students to consider topics such as:

1. Their favorite school subject
2. What they want to do for fun in the future
3. What they want to do for work in the future
4. Where they want to live in the future
5. Who they want to help them in the future

The school also developed a person-centered planning tool that the full IEP team uses to look for overlap between the student and family visions as they develop IEP goals, with the student vision taking priority.

## **2 Implement functional skills assessments that measure students' progress toward meeting quality-of-life standards.**

Identify and implement evaluations and assessments that measure students' functional skills—that is, skills that accomplish meaningful outcomes for the student and their independence, dignity, opportunities, and quality of life. Align the assessments with quality-of-life standards and the life domains used for student and family vision planning (e.g., employment,

living situation, health, social well-being, community involvement) so that data can be pulled from specific sections of the assessments to monitor progress towards the student's vision. Train staff on the administration of such assessments and how to use the data for progress monitoring and writing functional skills into students' IEP goals.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School C** has implemented functional living skills assessments centered on quality-of-life standards for students in order to bring more effective data back to each student's full IEP team, inclusive of each student's sending district. They utilized two clinical tools, namely:

- The Assessment for Functional Living Skills (AFLS)
- The Essential for Living (EFL) Quick Assessment

The school has worked to integrate these assessments into a broader data collection system, categorizing sections of the assessments to match their student and family vision planning tools so that assessment data can be used to monitor progress toward a student's specific goals.



To implement the assessments, a psychologist at the school developed coaching modules and is introducing them to one small cohort of teaching staff at a time, while also training select staff to become trainers for their peers. This gradual roll-out builds buy-in and allows more support for staff in learning how to collect functional skills data so that each student's full IEP team is better equipped to write and monitor functional skills goals.

As a result of these assessments, students' IEPs have become more centered on supporting progress toward quality-of-life standards, better preparing students for the future they envision.

# Promising Approaches: Family Engagement & School Culture



# Supporting Families with the IEP Process

## Promising Approaches

Below is a selection of ideas, in no particular order, that have demonstrated promise in supporting families with the IEP process within schools and districts. This list is intended to serve as a starting point for your team to generate ideas but is by no means exhaustive.

### **1 Create an online IEP resource hub for families.**

Create a Google site, webpage, or social media account to share IEP-related resources with families, including information on current initiatives and the IEP process. Make the resource hub as accessible as possible so that information can be easily found and digested in manageable amounts and is free from complicated jargon. Be mindful of families in need of translated resources.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**District E** began work on a website containing resources informing families about the special education referral process, tiered interventions, and the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan. This site will help them to centralize resources in one place and engage families in a more proactive way.

**2**

## **Create a welcoming and accessible environment during IEP meetings.**

Help families to feel comfortable during IEP meetings and understand that their voice is highly valued in crafting the IEP.

This can be accomplished through many practices:

- Include a photo of the student in the room during the meeting.
- Communicate to families the value of their input and emphasize their agency in the IEP planning process.
- Introduce families to every staff member in the room.
- Prompt staff to avoid technical jargon in communicating with families.
- Provide translation and interpretation services for family members who have limited proficiency in English, and communicate in plain language with all families.
- Slow down the pace of meetings.
- Manage meeting time effectively so that the IEP planning portion of the meeting does not feel rushed.

## *Lessons from the Field*

Staff at **School F** are intentional about how they enter the IEP meeting so families don't feel overwhelmed. The special education teacher leading the meeting brings staff in gradually so that they can introduce themselves to the family one at a time—typically beginning with the school psychologist, then specialists, then the student's general education teacher, and ending with the adjustment counselor, who most families already know.

3

### **Center student strengths by “strength mapping” in IEP meetings.**

Adopt an asset-based tone rather than a deficit-based tone during IEP meetings by using “strength mapping”—a practice whereby the meeting begins with each attendee stating one strength that the student possesses. Record strengths on a poster as a web of attributes surrounding the student's name, and hang the poster on the wall throughout the meeting, as a reminder to center the student's capabilities in planning the IEP. At the end of the meeting, allow the family to take the poster home with them.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School F** has implemented “strength mapping” in every IEP meeting to great success. They have found that the exercise empowers families to be active participants throughout the meeting. Families and students love having the strength map to take home, and many students choose to display it in their bedrooms.

4

## **Offer pre- and post-IEP meetings for families.**

If possible, offer a one-on-one meeting with families prior to and following the IEP meeting, being flexible with the format of the meeting (video call, phone call, or in-person). In-person meetings may be held during drop-off or dismissal times for convenience, or at other times that are convenient for families. Offer interpretation and translation services as needed to make meetings accessible.

- If a pre-meeting is held, cover what to expect during the IEP meeting: who will be there, where it will take place, and what the agenda will look like. Emphasize that the family’s voice and engagement will be valued and encouraged during the meeting. A pre-meeting generally takes 15-20 minutes.



- If a post-meeting is held, discuss the student's IEP section by section so that the family fully understands the services that will be provided. Encourage the family to ask questions. A post-meeting generally takes 30-45 minutes.

Offer a one-on-one meeting with students prior to the IEP meeting to explain in a supportive way why their parents will be coming to the school for the meeting and what to expect following the meeting. Encourage the student to ask questions.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School G** began hosting pre-IEP meetings with students and found they were an effective way to convey to students that their voice and engagement are important for the process. Students also better understood expectations around the IEP process, including their participation in it.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**School F** holds pre- and post-IEP meetings for families. Staff have found that these conversations greatly increase parents' comfort asking questions and generally engaging with school staff. Meetings include interpretation services using district interpreters and have been especially helpful for parents with limited literacy. As a result of these meetings, the school has had very few IEPs rejected by families. The school began offering these meetings for families coming in to discuss an initial IEP evaluation, but they have plans to expand the practice to re-evaluations and annual meetings as well.

**5**

### **In conducting outreach, meet families where they are.**

Make family engagement convenient and accessible for families by going to places where families already are—both within the school context (e.g., have a staff presence at student drop-off and pick-up and school sporting events) and outside of school (e.g., have a staff presence at sites where community services are provided or conduct home visits). Leverage existing relationships with community partners (such as out-of-school-time providers and food pantries) to visit their sites and connect with families. In

doing so, it is effective to identify a common family need and fulfill that need, if possible, as an avenue for engagement—for example, set up a table and give out school supplies to open the door for conversation. Invite multilingual staff or interpreters to assist with engagement to promote accessibility for more families.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School F** partnered with their local food pantry to set up a table during food distribution hours. School personnel staffed the table and distributed socks to families as a means to initiate conversation. Given the success of the initiative, the school began partnering with the food pantry to distribute various kinds of supply packages to families throughout the year. The school also established a presence at dinners hosted by their local Boys and Girls Club. This work quickly fostered trust and camaraderie so that families felt increasingly comfortable engaging with staff and reaching out with questions.

6

## Meet with students prior to grade-level or school transitions.

Hold meetings for students on IEPs who will soon be moving to a new grade or an upper school. Ask students what they want to get out of their new experience, where they feel confident, and where they feel anxious. Then ask them to chart their vision for the future, and record this vision to help inform revisions to their IEP. This practice centers student voice and helps students envision a positive future as they embark on a potentially challenging transition.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School F** held transition meetings for students entering kindergarten and 6th grade. Students felt supported in discussing their hopes and fears for the impending change, and the school recorded each student's vision to assist with IEP planning. The school found it critical to carve out opportunities for student voice to take center stage in order to shape students' goals and identify needed supports.

7

## Create or engage institutional channels for family engagement.

If your school does not have a Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC), consider starting one. If your school does have a SEPAC, increase communication and engagement with the SEPAC as a means of garnering family input about IEP process improvements and the implementation of new initiatives.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School A** revived their SEPAC after realizing the need to strengthen family engagement in order to increase IEP quality. Creating a SEPAC specifically for School A, a private special education school with students from many sending districts, equipped the school with a more direct channel for family engagement, enabling them to more effectively gather families' feedback that could be shared with school administrators and sending districts. The school found that virtual SEPAC meetings were more effective than in-person ones, as families could attend without needing to arrange childcare.

# Gaining Buy-In for Equitable School Culture

## Promising Approaches

Below is a selection of ideas, in no particular order, that have demonstrated promise in gaining buy-in for building an equitable culture within schools and districts. This list is intended to serve as a starting point for your team to generate ideas but is by no means exhaustive.

### **1 Create pathways to invest in diverse staff talent.**

Build training modules and mentorship structures to expand teaching opportunities for professionals from diverse backgrounds, especially professionals of color. For example, provide training and mentorship to help professionals with the state's [Structured Guidance and Supports \(SG&S\) process](#), Sheltered English Immersion endorsement, or autism endorsement. Having this infrastructure in place enables the school to recruit and invest in a more diverse array of staff who may not have had access to other licensure pathways.



## *Lessons from the Field*

**School A** created a series of SG&S training modules, enabling them to recruit and train a diverse cohort of staff. Modules were accompanied by one-on-one coaching by a teacher mentor/coach, a new role the school established to provide ongoing support to staff.

2

### **Create a standing diversity committee.**

Create a standing committee made up of administrators, staff, family representatives, and student representatives. Task the committee with recommending policies and initiatives to better support staff and students of diverse backgrounds, especially staff and students of color, and to create a school culture that actively attracts and values diversity.

## *Lessons from the Field*

After collecting and analyzing IEP-related data, **School A** decided to create a diversity committee to strengthen staff diversity and family engagement through equity-centered procedures. The school directed the committee to remain in contact with the IEP improvement team so that the needs of diverse students, families, and staff would be centered in all new initiatives.

### **3 Create synergy between the English learner education department and special education department.**

Bridging the teams responsible for English learner (EL) education and special education can help to better coordinate services for dually identified students. Build connections between EL and special education staff and students through joint initiatives or structured inter-team communication.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**School H**, a large high school, set out to create conversation and collaboration between its EL department and special education department, each of which conducted the majority of its work independently. The school organized a joint Valentine’s Day party for students and staff from both the EL department and special education department in order to build familiarity, with the goal of supporting stronger cross-department partnerships and supports for dually identified students. The EL department and special education department now gather monthly to continue their collaboration.

4

### **Start an email newsletter that celebrates successes in special education.**

Create a weekly or monthly newsletter to share good news from the special education department, including student success stories (assuming that appropriate permission has been obtained to enable these stories to be shared publicly). Engage staff collaboratively in writing the newsletter to promote an asset-based culture within the department. Send the newsletter to staff and families to uplift student strengths and achievements schoolwide.

### *Lessons from the Field*

In order to shift the school's special education culture to be more asset-based and centered on students' strengths, **School H** began planning a weekly newsletter to share student successes and highlight a student of the week.

5

### **Strengthen co-teaching practices to support placements in inclusion classrooms.**

Offer professional development sessions on co-teaching best practices so that co-teaching environments offer effective and accessible instruction for all students. Such PD sessions can also focus on aligning instructional practices in substantially separate settings and inclusion settings, enabling some students to move more seamlessly into co-taught inclusion classrooms while strengthening the sense of shared school culture across all classrooms.

## *Lessons from the Field*

**School I** held a co-teaching academy to support accessible and engaging instruction for all students. This academy adhered to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and fostered an inclusive classroom culture. Because of this PD, the school has seen pedagogical shifts in how general education and special education teachers approach their lessons, especially in co-taught classrooms, resulting in decreased reliance on pull-out services and an increase in placements within inclusion classrooms.

## **6 Strategically grow buy-in to make lasting cultural shifts.**

To build buy-in for deep cultural change, it is often effective to introduce new initiatives and frameworks to a small group and allow investment in these practices to grow organically. For example, select a small group of staff to be trained on a new pedagogical approach and equip them to serve as formal or informal ambassadors to their peers. Or, hold drop-in sessions for staff to come receive coaching on how to apply a new pedagogical approach in their instruction. Focus on small changes and methods of sharing information via pre-existing networks of

relationships, as this is often more effective and sustainable than top-down mandates. However, there are times when a universal mandate, such as a required all-staff professional development session, may be effective at building familiarity among staff for a new shared framework.

### *Lessons from the Field*

**School G** used strategic methods to embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within school culture. They held all-staff professional development to introduce teachers to foundational UDL practices and principles and selected a small group to receive more in-depth UDL training, with the goal that this small group will be able to provide UDL training to their peers. By then presenting UDL work at staff meetings, sending periodic UDL resources to teachers via email, seeking support from department heads, and identifying ways to connect UDL to other schoolwide initiatives (such as project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and “vision of the graduate” competencies), the school kept attention on UDL while allowing practices to spread organically. They found that this created less resistance to change than a top-down approach and ultimately built strong support for UDL among teaching staff.



# Feedback Survey



# IEP Improvement Playbook: Takeaways and Next Steps

**We want to hear from you!**

Complete this short survey to share your thoughts on how the Playbook examples will inform your school's or district's next steps:

[GO TO SURVEY](#)

