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Number 512



Least Restrictive Environment

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The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), in general, refers to the setting in which a student receives special education services. Specifically, LRE refers to a federal law requiring every school district to ensure students with disabilities are educated with typically developing students as much as possible. How that plays out depends on the individual needs of a student.



When a student enters special education, a team of professionals and the student's parents draft an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a document detailing the ins and outs of a student's special education services. Federal law requires that an IEP describe how a student's disability impedes access to the general education curriculum. From this description, the services a student will receive, how often delivery will occur and by whom are decided. Sometimes the IEP team determines a student is unable to participate fully in the general education setting even with supplementary aids and services and requires removal from this setting to a special classroom, program, or school. If the level of LRE is not feasible in the general education classroom, this determination is made only after attempting education in the general education setting.

No single factor exists when determining LRE, but a school district should consider the following:

- Does the student benefit more academically in the general education classroom with supplemental aids and services, or in the special education classroom?
- Where will the student receive maximum nonacademic benefit (i.e., social interaction) with typically developing peers?
- Does the student's disability affect the teacher and other students in the classroom negatively? In other words, if a student's behavior or need for direct instruction takes up a large portion of the classroom teacher's time, education in the general education setting may not be appropriate.

School districts may not make LRE decisions based solely on the following:

- Category of disability
- Severity of disability
- System/schedule of delivery
- Availability of services
- Availability of space
- Administrative convenience

Students who receive education in a special classroom or program have the right under federal law to participate in nonacademic and extracurricular activities as appropriate. This means that a school district must maximize a student's opportunities to participate with typically developing peers at lunch, recess, clubs, etc. The law requires an IEP to include a statement describing the related services provided allowing students to participate in nonacademic activities. Finally, the IEP team must document its rationale for a student's placement in a special education program (if removed from the general education classroom), as well as a student's level of participation in nonacademic activities.

An IEP that effectively addresses LRE should include the following:

1. IEP goals addressing a student's educational needs.
2. A description of how the curriculum is accessible to the student. Does the curriculum need modifying? Which supplemental aids and services are required? Etc.
3. If a student is not fully participating in the general education curriculum, IEP goals should relate to and be based on the activities and curriculum of the general education classroom.

If you have questions about any part of your child's IEP, contact the case manager and ask for clarification. IEP team members (parents included) have the right to call a meeting at any time to discuss progress, make changes, or add services when warranted to a student's IEP.

References:

"Special Education Rights and Responsibilities," Disability Rights California, accessed 11/21/2017, <http://www.disabilityrightsca.org/pubs/504001Ch07.pdf>.

"Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): What You Need to Know," by Amanda Morin (2017). Accessed 11/21/2017, <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/special-education-basics/least-restrictive-environment-lre-what-you-need-to-know>

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