



Guidance

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)

**Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education
May 2026**

This guidance outlines the requirements for specially designed instruction (SDI) to support individualized education program (IEP) Teams, which include parents, in the development of IEPs. Providing specially designed instruction is a necessary component of delivering a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to a student with a disability. This guidance promotes improved outcomes for students with IEPs by emphasizing the importance of supporting students in making progress in the general education curriculum, as well as supporting compliance with the substantive requirements of ensuring students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate to an individual student. What Is SDI?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE) define special education services as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability ([34 CFR §300.39](#) and [R 340.1701c](#)). Specially designed instruction means adapting instruction, as appropriate, to meet the needs of a student with an IEP. This includes adapting the content, methodology, and/or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the student while ensuring student access to the general education curriculum (34 CFR §300.39(b)(3)).

SDI is the vehicle to ensure a student with a disability receives high-quality instruction and services that will result in progress toward academic and functional standards to support graduation and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.

Elements of SDI

The IEP Team must consider *content*, *methodology*, and *delivery* when planning specially designed instruction for a student with a disability.

- *Content* refers to the “what” of SDI. Content encompasses the knowledge and skills needed to ensure a student with a disability can fully engage in the general education environment, including academic, functional, social, and physical domains. The IEP Team reviews a student’s strengths to determine how those assets can be leveraged to increase student participation within the general education environment. Data included within the Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) determines the special education and services, including but not limited to, SDI, modifications, accommodations, and goals needed for each individual student.
- *Methodology* refers to “how” the instruction is delivered. The IEP Team analyzes the instructional strategies and methods that have been effective in the past, as well as those that have proven ineffective for the student. Historical data is reviewed to determine the most suitable instructional methods to ensure a student can successfully access the general education setting. Part B of the IDEA regulations does not expressly mandate the inclusion of specific teachers, materials to be used, or educational methodology in a student’s IEP. *Letter to Hall*, January 12, 1994 (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)).
- *Delivery* of instruction refers to the “who,” “where,” and “when” instruction will be delivered to the student. When determining the delivery of instruction, the IEP Team assesses whether the student will have sufficient opportunities to practice skills and receive targeted feedback. While SDI can occur anywhere, the student is entitled to receive instruction in the LRE, to the maximum extent appropriate for the student.

Understanding SDI: What It Is and What It Isn't

SDI is ...	SDI isn't ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit, focused, and systematic instruction to help the student master IEP goals and objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What a student needs to do or complete (i.e., homework or assignments, etc.).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A service based on data to address the unique needs of the student. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place or schedule.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction that allows a student with a disability to meaningfully access the general education curriculum and demonstrate proficiency on the same content standards as their peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A restatement of the grade-level content standards being taught.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction grounded in valid research, evidence-based practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A commercial program, a particular methodology, or any specific content.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to general education, not in lieu of (Supplement). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In place of general education core instruction (Supplant).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualized to the unique needs of the student. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A justification for setting low expectations or teaching below grade level.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on teaching specific skills a student does not have. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simply providing support or accommodations/modifications.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique instruction written into the IEP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MTSS Tier 3.

Why Is SDI Provided to Students with Disabilities?

All students with disabilities are general education students first. Students with disabilities are not guests in the general education classroom. They are full members of the general education community, with the right to be included and supported within the general education environment. The purpose of special education, including the provision of SDI in the LRE, is to ensure a student with a disability has access to and makes progress in the general education curriculum and meets the same standards that apply to all students. SDI is designed to meet the unique needs of a student with a

disability related to specific exceptionalities, as described in the student's PLAAFP. SDI must be designed to address gaps in academic, behavioral, and/or functional progress toward age- and grade-level standards. SDI is provided for a student with a disability to:

- ensure FAPE
- support graduation and postsecondary outcomes
- ensure access to the general education curriculum
- ensure all school programs, activities, and environments are accessible for the student ([34 CFR §300.110](#))

Providing SDI

SDI must be designed and supervised by a qualified special education teacher or professional in accordance with IDEA and MARSE. While special education personnel lead the design and oversight of SDI, general education teachers may deliver SDI when it is planned collaboratively and monitored by the IEP Team. This includes implementing instructional adaptations, supplementary aids, and services as outlined in the student's IEP to ensure access to and progress in the general education curriculum.

SDI is the hallmark of an IEP, and an IEP is the vehicle for providing FAPE. Therefore, FAPE includes the provision of specially designed instruction by qualified staff. Qualified is defined in [34 CFR §300.156](#) of the IDEA and specifically means appropriately and adequately prepared and trained personnel, including those personnel who have the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities. Districts are responsible for assigning qualified staff to implement the special education services, including the provision of SDI, as specified in a student's IEP.

Noncertified personnel, including but not limited to, paraprofessionals, teacher aides, interventionists, while able to provide support, are not certified to deliver SDI. Therefore, a paraprofessional is not permitted to plan lessons, introduce new content or instructional methods, or replace the special education teacher or related service provider. However, under direct supervision from credentialed educators or related service personnel, a paraprofessional can reinforce previously introduced concepts, monitor student academic progress and/or behavior, or facilitate the use of assistive technology. For additional resources, refer to the [Utilization of Noncertified Personnel](#) for clarification on the conditions governing the assignment of noncertified personnel

employed within specific education programs, or the [Memorandum to State Directors of Special Education, OSEP 2022](#)).

The MARSE outlines teaching personnel who may provide SDI. The listing in rule [R 340.1701b\(a\)](#) is not inclusive of all the personnel who could provide SDI.

Components of Documenting SDI

Documenting SDI is a critical part of ensuring a student with a disability receives the individualized support outlined in their IEP. Accurate and thorough documentation helps ensure accountability, promotes consistency across service providers, and supports ongoing monitoring of student progress. The following components should be clearly addressed when documenting SDI:

- Clearly state the special education support and instructional strategy required to meet the unique needs of the student.
- Clarify how instruction will be delivered.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities.
- Explain how the instruction aligns with the student's specific IEP goals and/or objectives.
- Document evidence of student participation and progress.
- Document collaboration and communication related to SDI implementation.

Documentation of SDI

SDI is focused on tailoring instruction to meet the unique learning needs of a student, and it includes the following elements, which are described in the program and services section of the IEP ([34 CFR §300.320\(a\)\(4\)\(7\)](#)).

- Type: The specific nature of the service (direct instruction, support services).
- Frequency: The number of times the service is provided within a particular period (daily, weekly). If the services are less than daily or weekly, then the conditions for the provision of the services must be clearly specified.
- Duration: How long each "session" will last (number of minutes) and when services will begin and end (starting and ending dates).

- Location: Where the service is delivered (in a general education classroom, resource program, or other setting).

It is important to note that SDI is determined by the amount of time needed to deliver the necessary instruction, not by the student's general class schedule, and IEP Teams must evaluate and document the time required for systematic, explicit instruction that directly supports the student's goals.

General Considerations

How SDI Differs from Differentiated Instruction

SDI is developed by the IEP Team, linked to a goal, and is a civil right guaranteed by IDEA. In contrast, differentiated instruction involves modifying the content, design, or delivery of instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students. Like SDI, adaptations are planned based on formative assessments and other student data and are then incorporated into the universal instruction provided to all students. In practice, differentiated instruction might involve a teacher creating multiple types of small-group activities to support and accommodate varying skill levels and preferences among students.

While differentiated instruction is valuable for supporting student access, engagement, and progress, it is not designed by the IEP Team to address specific IEP goals. It is also not intended to fulfill the instructional requirements of SDI. Additionally, differentiated instruction does not have to be specifically provided by a qualified special education teacher or provider, and can be provided by a general education teacher, paraprofessional, or interventionist.

Additional Resources

For additional information about SDI, please reference the following document:

- [IEP Tip Sheet: What is Special Education? A Focus on Specially Designed Instruction](#). (2021, May). SDI IEP tips [Tip sheet]. PROGRESS Center, American Institutes for Research.

This guidance does not impose any requirements beyond those required under applicable laws and regulations.