



# SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES

## Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill: A CCR IEP Resource

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### Overview

Recent, relevant, reliable, and valid information about a student’s educational performance and needs play a central role in all IEP team activities and decisions including special education evaluation, IEP development, instructional planning, and reviewing student progress. IDEA outlines specific academic and functional areas that IEP teams must consider when identifying each student’s unique disability-related needs, whether during an evaluation or IEP development as follows:

With respect to special education evaluations (including all initial evaluations and reevaluations):

- As part of an initial evaluation and any reevaluation the IEP team must review existing evaluation data on the child, including evaluations and information provided by the parents; current classroom-based, local, or state assessments, and classroom-based observations; and observations by teachers and related services providers. On the basis of that review the IEP team must identify what additional data, if any, are needed to determine whether the child is or continues to be a child with a disability and the educational needs of the child; the present levels of academic achievement and related developmental needs of the child and whether the child needs or continues to need special education and related services 34 CFR 300.305(a).
- The child is assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities. [CFR 300.304\(c\)\(4\)](#)
- In evaluating each child with a disability, the evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child's special education and related services needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified. [34 CFR 300.304\(c\)\(6\)](#)
- In interpreting evaluation data, IEP teams must draw upon information from a variety of sources including aptitude and achievement tests, parent input, and teacher recommendations, as well as information about the child's physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior. [CFR 300.306\(c\)\(1\)](#)

With respect to IEP development, review, and revision:

- In developing each child's IEP, the IEP team must consider.... the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child. [34 CFR 300.324\(a\)\(1\)\(iv\)](#)
- Each student's IEP must include a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum; or for preschool children how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities. [CFR 300.320\(a\)\(1\)](#)

## Purpose

The department developed this resource to support educators, families, and others who engage with students who are experiencing educational challenges. The purpose of this document is to share the department's working definitions of the academic and functional areas referenced in IDEA and to provide general guidance regarding IEP team consideration of these areas. This document includes definitions and examples of each of the areas as well as guidance IEP teams may find helpful as they plan and conduct special education evaluations and develop, review and revise student IEPs.

## The Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

The six areas outlined below provide a focused definition of discrete categories of observable and measurable student academic and functional skill (or behavior). No assumptions are made about ecological or other factors that may cause or influence student performance in any of the six areas or affect the assessment of performance

within the six areas. For example, trauma, mental health, nutrition, cultural and linguistic diversity, or other complex factors may help explain why a student demonstrated a certain skill level or behavior response. The effects of such factors are of great importance during both evaluation and IEP development processes and should be considered when selecting measurement tools and when interpreting and using assessment data and other information to make educational decisions. While not addressed in this document, the influence of such ecological or other factors and their important role in IEP team activities and decisions is addressed in other guidance. For this reason, the Six Areas may be especially helpful when IEP teams use a problem-solving or inquiry-based approach such as utilizing the [RIOT/ICEL Matrix](#).

Strengths or needs in any of the six areas do not either predetermine or exclude a student from special education eligibility nor from receiving any particular type of special education service. Student strengths and needs in each area should be explored in relation to each student's age, developmental level, home language, and cultural and ethnic norms and background. An IEP team can discuss how a student's strengths and needs in each area affect the student's access, engagement, and progress in age or grade-level curriculum, instruction and other activities, and environments. When used to develop developmentally and educationally relevant questions, each area should be discussed in relation to different conditions for learning (i.e. environments, supports, potential barriers, teaching methods, group size, relationships, etc.). For example, "what are the conditions when the student is most successful at demonstrating reading skill?"

The Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill cover all areas that IDEA requires IEP teams to consider and includes Academics, Cognitive Learning, Communication, Independence and Self-Determination, Physical Health, and Social Emotional Learning. It is important to note that the areas represent interrelated knowledge, skills, and habits. Any one skill or attribute, such as self-regulation, often interacts with and affects a student's responses within one or more of the other six areas. Even when a skill seems to fall clearly within only one area, it is likely that factors in at least one other area is influencing that student's responses and vice versa. For example, a student who has observed reading challenges may also be experiencing challenges in communication, executive functioning, health, or emotional responses which affect their reading skill. The Six Areas include the following:

### **Academics**

Includes knowledge, skills, and habits within specific content areas such as reading, written language, mathematics, science, disciplinary literacy, etc.

### **Cognitive Learning**

This area includes skills and habits involved in processing and comprehending information gathered through the senses to acquire and use knowledge and skills. There are several theoretical models of cognition and learning that have a sound base of research that support them. Examples of cognitive learning skills include but are not limited to executive functioning skills (i.e. planning, focus, organization, impulse control), information processing skills (i.e. storing information, memory, cognitive fluency), problem solving, knowledge, and reasoning. Examples of specific importance to early learners (ages 3-6),

include but are not limited to imitation, discrimination, representation, classification, sequencing, and problem solving as observed in a child's play.

## **Communication**

This area includes knowledge, skills, and habits in the understanding and use of language for communication including speech skills (sound production, fluency, voice), social and pragmatic language abilities, and includes understanding of students with limited verbal communication that require the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems. This area also incorporates consideration of language difference (e.g., home language or use of dialect) as it applies to communication within school environments.

## **Independence and Self-Determination**

This area includes life-long knowledge, skills, and habits relating to self-identifying individual strengths and needs; asking for help; self-advocacy; negotiating support; self-care and hygiene; safety; navigating community settings; organization; goal setting; work and employment skills; decision-making; maintaining and generalizing skills across environments, people, and contexts; and use of technology, social media, and assistive technology.

## **Physical and Health**

This area includes physical conditions relating to vision, hearing, and other senses (e.g., vestibular, proprioception, olfactory, taste, oral, auditory, visual, tactile); as well as skills in areas of gross and fine motor; motor planning; feeding, eating, and swallowing; touch; balance; endurance; alertness; attention; vitality; auditory and visual processing; orientation and mobility; and other areas of physical health.

## **Social and Emotional Learning**

This area includes knowledge, skills, and habits relating to social and reciprocal adult and peer relationships; identifying and communicating individual needs; perspective taking; emotional awareness and expression; managing transitions; self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence; self-management and regulation; play skills; resiliency; and receiving and responding to feedback.

## **Using the Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill as Part of a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation**

The IDEA requires that assessments used within a comprehensive special education evaluation be non-discriminatory on a racial or ethnic basis. Considering each of the six areas at the start of a comprehensive special education evaluation, during the review of existing data, assists IEP teams in addressing racial, ethnic, and other types of bias that may influence decisions on what information is needed to complete the evaluation.

For more information about conducting culturally responsive special education evaluations and addressing systemic and racial referral and evaluation bias within an equitable MLSS, see the [Addressing Bias in a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation section of this framework](#). For information and implementation guidance on the entire

special education evaluation process, refer to the Department's [Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation](#) webpage.

Consideration of the Six Areas is most helpful at the start of the evaluation process during the review of existing data and evaluation planning. Using the Six Areas to guide discussion about student strength and concerns can help IEP teams more efficiently identify important information that already exists and what additional data and other information may be needed to complete the evaluation. As mentioned previously, consideration of the Areas may be supported by using a problem-solving framework or inquiry-based framework such as [RIOT-ICEL](#). The Six Areas are not an exhaustive list of potential areas for assessment and does not provide guidance on the specific types of assessment tools that may be used to gather additional information (e.g., norm-referenced, criterion-referenced and dynamic assessments; observations in varied environments; progress monitoring probes, etc.).

It is important to remember that the data used to apply disability category criteria during a special education evaluation is generally insufficient for identifying all of a student's disability-related needs. For this reason, IEP teams should ensure that assessments and other information used during a special education evaluation are tailored to assess specific areas of educational need, rather than only data aligned with disability category criteria. It is also important to note that considering all Six Areas during the evaluation process does not necessarily mean assessments be conducted to collect additional information about each of the six areas. IEP teams identify areas of concern and determine whether additional information is necessary to explore these areas.

Before compiling and reviewing existing data, we encourage IEP teams to generate [developmentally and educationally relevant questions](#) using this document as a guide. Asking the right developmentally and educationally relevant questions can help identify which areas may be interacting to create barriers to learning and may uncover strengths that can be used as assets to promote learning. For example, when evaluating a student who is suspected of being deaf or hard of hearing, it seems obvious that assessment data will be needed in the physical and health area. However, the IEP team must also consider the potential impact of this physical and health characteristic on each of the other areas. For example, a hearing impairment can have an educationally relevant effect, both in terms of strengths and needs, on a child's functioning in any of the other areas. Asking developmentally and educationally relevant questions about ALL six areas at the start of the evaluation process is critical to determining the effects of this individual student's disability and keeps the team from over-focusing on the student's disability category. While individual academic or functional skills within a single area may be explored in isolation, it is imperative that IEP teams understand that such skills do not exist in a vacuum and consider all assessment data within the context of a comprehensive special education evaluation to truly understand the student's strengths and needs.

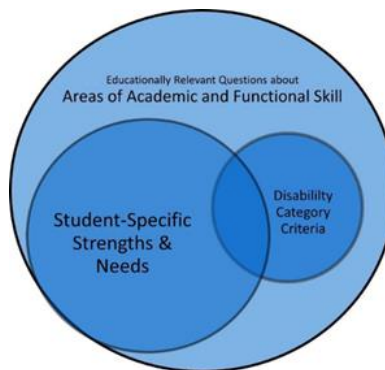
Considering all Six Areas at beginning of the evaluation process increases the likelihood that the IEP team will not miss anything important, will complete a comprehensive evaluation, and will subsequently develop an IEP that capitalizes on student strengths and addresses all of an eligible student's disability-related educational needs. If the student is

not found eligible upon initial evaluation or reevaluation, information on academic and functional skills in any of the six areas is used to develop general education recommendations, including when a student is found eligible for protection under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The following graphic summarizes the relationship between the six areas and the questions every comprehensive special education evaluation must answer:

- 1) Does the student meet (or continue to meet) criteria for a disability category and as a result requires special education and,
- 2) What are the student's educational needs helpful for IEP development, irrespective of the student's category of disability.

### Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation Linkages between Sources of Information



### Using the Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill for IEP Development, Review and Revision

According to the federal Office of Special Education Programs, an appropriately developed and implemented IEP is the primary vehicle for providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) [[OSERS Guidance on FAPE](#) (November 16, 2015)]. An “appropriately developed” IEP relies on recent and relevant information about a student’s current levels of academic and functional performance. Present level information, in part, helps supports and guide the team as they describe the observed effects of the student’s disability and resulting areas of disability-related need. The identified needs, along with current performance data serve as the foundation for the student’s IEP goals and services.

The Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill provide an excellent resource to ensure IEP teams review and address all of a student’s disability-related needs during IEP development. IEP teams are encouraged to use the department’s [CCR IEP 5 Step process](#) when developing, reviewing, and revising IEPs. The process specifically highlights several places where the Six Areas should be considered during [Step 1](#) and [Step 2](#). Detailed information and implementation resources for CCR IEP 5 Step process can be found on the department’s [CCR IEP Webpage](#). In addition, the department’s [IEP form I-4](#) and accompanying [forms guidance](#) provides several prompts for the IEP team to consider the 6 Areas. The following paragraphs highlight a number of ways IEP teams are encouraged use the 6 Areas during IEP development.

Before an IEP team meets to develop or review and revise an IEP, IEP team members are asked to prepare for the meeting as part of CCR IEP Step 1 by compiling data and other information about the student's current academic and functional performance. Such information may include data from recent age anchored, grade level, district, school and classroom assessments; observations, IEP or regular education progress reports, information provided by the parent or outside providers, recent comprehensive special education evaluation, and other information. It is important to include information reflecting family and student's voice, observations, and viewpoints on strengths, interests, and areas of concern. The information is used during the meeting to help identify areas of student strength and need and to document the student's present levels of academic and functional performance in comparison to age or grade level standards and expectations. Current information related to all 6 areas should be compiled and reviewed so that the team can identify both student strengths and weakness. With respect to areas in which the student may not be meeting age or grade level expectations, it is important to consider all areas of academic and functional skill affected by the student's disability, irrespective of the disability category in which the student has been identified. [IEP form I-4](#) specifically prompts IEP teams to consider each of the 6 areas in Section I, Information about the student.

Identifying the effects of a student's disability and subsequent disability-related needs during Step 2 of the CCR IEP development process is another time when it is helpful to refer to the 6 Areas. IEP teams are encouraged to ask if the observed effects of the student's disability and resulting disability-related needs may be directly connected to any of the Six Areas in which the student is not meeting age or grade level academic or functional standards or expectations. Discussion about the observed effects of the student's disability helps the team identify the specific areas of disability-related need that must be addressed with IEP goals and services. This discussion is critical for clarifying how the disability affects the student's access, engagement, and participation in academic and other school activities across educational settings. It is especially helpful when determining the targets of IEP goals and how student progress should be measured. IEP goals and services should seek to lift barriers and minimize the challenging effects of a student's disability. Referring to the 6 Areas can help ensuring that all potential areas of need have been considered and accurately identified.

## Summary

The Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill represent within-student "skills and behaviors" that are critical for conducting comprehensive special educational evaluations and for developing effective IEPs. The Areas can be used to develop the educationally relevant questions that guide a comprehensive evaluation or reevaluation. During IEP development and review, they provide a foundation for reviewing a student's current level of educational performance and for identifying and describing the effects of a student's disability and areas of disability-related need during Steps 1 and 2 of the CCR IEP process. Ultimately, the use of the Six Areas increases the likelihood that the IEP team will not miss anything important during either the evaluation or IEP processes and the IEP developed a result will include goals and services that will best address each student's unique educational needs.



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