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**To:** Directors of Special Education and Pupil Services

**From:** Paul Manriquez, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Learning Support 

**Subject:** What is Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) and Who Can Provide It?

Providing a high-quality public education equitably to all students is key to student success. Educational equity means every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, across race, gender, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, family background, and family income. This is our goal for each and every student and applies equally to students ages 3-21 who receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Special education services are integrated within a school's equitable multilevel system of support (MLSS). The purpose of this guidance is to clarify the department's definition of specially designed instruction (SDI), one type of special education service.

### **What is Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)**

When an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team finds a student eligible to receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), they develop an IEP for the student. Among other things, the IEP describes the services that will be provided to address all the student's disability-related needs (DRNs), so the student can access, engage, and make progress in age or grade level general education curriculum, activities, and environments; and make progress toward their IEP goals. [34 CFR §300.320 \(a\)\(4\)](#). Wisconsin's [College and Career Ready IEP framework](#) supports IEP teams in exploring beliefs and attitudes regarding students with disabilities, building knowledge and skills in order to evaluate and plan special education services, and examining systems and practices which support students, families, and educators.

An IEP team must determine that a student meets one or more of the disability categories and, as a result, requires specially designed instruction in order to be eligible for services under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act. SDI is individually designed and may be provided within an equitable MLSS. Other IEP services include [supplementary aids and services](#), [related services](#), and program modifications or supports for school staff. The provision of SDI is key to ensuring students receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. For more information about documenting and implementing IEP services, see [DPI](#)

[Information Update Bulletin 10.07](#), [DPI Sample Form I-4](#), and [Forms Guidance](#). For more information about FAPE, see [DPI Information Update Bulletin 18.02](#).

The term [specially designed instruction](#) (SDI) is embedded within the Individual with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) definition of [special education](#) and is mirrored in state special education statute. It is defined and set apart from other special education services by the following:

- SDI is instruction in which the content, methodology, or delivery of the instruction is individually adapted to address the student's disability-related needs so the student can access, engage, and make progress in the general education curriculum and meet the standards and expectations that apply to all students of the same age or grade. This is true irrespective of where the instruction is provided.
- SDI is instruction tailored to an individual student. SDI is provided to explicitly and systematically address a student's [area\(s\)](#) of disability-related need and is always linked to one or more IEP goals. SDI may be provided to address any academic or functional skill need determined by the IEP team.
- SDI may include instruction in physical education, speech and language therapy, travel training, vocational instruction, and instruction in other [areas](#).
- SDI is a service, not a place. SDI may be provided in any learning environment, including school, home, community, or other setting.
- SDI must be provided at no cost to the student or the student's [parent\(s\)](#).
- The student's IEP team decides and documents necessary SDI services based on current information from the most recent special education evaluation or reevaluation, a review of IEP goal progress, and other information shared with the team.
- The IEP statement of SDI must include a clear description of the type, amount, frequency, location, and duration of the SDI service(s).
- The IEP must also describe how student progress toward each annual goal will be monitored to guide decisions about the effectiveness of the SDI service(s).
- All students with IEPs must receive SDI. When a student no longer requires SDI, they no longer meet eligibility requirements under IDEA but may continue to be eligible for accommodations and support under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

[34 CFR §300.39](#), [§300.320 \(a\)](#), [§300.8 \(a\)\(2\)\(i\)](#); [Wis. Stat §115.76 \(15\)](#), [Wis. Stat. §115.787\(2\)](#)

## Summary and Examples: What is and What is not SDI

The following table summarizes and provides some examples and non-examples to help illustrate how SDI is set apart from other special education and general education supports.

SDI Is:	SDI IS Not:
<p>Explicit, focused, individualized, and systematic <b>instruction</b> in any of the <a href="#">six areas</a> of academic or functional skills (academics, cognitive learning, communication, independence and self-determination, physical and health, social and emotional learning) specified in an <b>IEP goal</b> such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reading, math, or other academic instruction and teacher-guided practice</li> <li>● Language and communication skill building, including sign language and braille instruction</li> <li>● Instruction in targeted social and emotional learning skills, such as perspective-taking</li> <li>● Instruction in skills needed for independence and self-determination, such as how to use social narratives, visual schedules, and self-regulation strategies</li> <li>● Generalization training in natural environments</li> <li>● Instruction in using accommodations or other supplementary aids and services such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ teaching student cues and reminders that will be used by teachers</li> <li>○ teaching a student how to effectively and independently use assistive technology</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Specially designed <b>instruction</b> is more than accommodations used to support student access and engagement in instruction.</p>	<p>Any support that is <b>not</b> explicit, focused, individualized, and systematic instruction in a skill(s) specified in an IEP goal. SDI is <b>not</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Universally designed general education instruction that is not intentionally tailored to a student's IEP goals.</li> <li>● Supplementary aids or services provided to allow access and engagement without accompanying goal-based instruction, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Behavior support strategies embedded within academic instruction</li> <li>○ Cues and reminders to keep the student engaged during whole group instruction</li> <li>○ Assistive technology such as graphic organizers, visuals, fidgets, or other equipment or devices that help the student independently engage in classroom activities</li> <li>○ "As needed help" during study hall</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Instruction using <b>content*</b>, <b>methodology*</b>, or <b>delivery*</b> that is <b>individually adapted</b> to a student's DRNs and linked to IEP goal(s) such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A universal or core curricular program or intervention with supplemental or individualized teaching methods or activities such as individualized scaffolding, alternative chunking of content, alternate algorithms, pre-teaching or reteaching content using materials and methods matched to student needs, etc.</li> </ul> <p><small>*Content-what the student will learn, linked to standards *Methodology- instructional design of content; teaching methods and learning strategies; how</small></p>	<p>Instruction without substantive changes to content, methodology, or delivery tailored to an individual student, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A universal curricular program or standard protocol general education intervention implemented without any substantive instructional adaptations for the individual student</li> <li>● A "one size fits all" curricular program based on a student's label (e.g., a curriculum used only for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, etc.)</li> </ul>

SDI Is:	SDI IS Not:
* <b>Delivery</b> - instructional context or conditions; <i>where/when</i>	
Instruction in skills needed to access, engage, and make progress in general education and meet <b>age and grade-level standards and expectations</b>	Instruction based on lowered expectations or teaching only below age or grade-level skills
A service provided to a student	A place a student goes
<p><b>Required</b> (not just beneficial) instruction with a set <b>amount, frequency, and duration</b> provided in a specified <b>location</b> as documented on a student's IEP, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Daily, 15-minute mini-lessons on specific math (or other area) content and learning strategies provided before the introduction of a new math concept during general education instruction</li> </ul>	<p>SDI is <b>not</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Intermittent, “on the fly” or “as needed” instruction without specifying the required amount and frequency.</li> <li>● Every interaction with a special education teacher or every minute spent in a special education room is not SDI; for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A student playing a computer game as a reward, while the special education teacher works with others</li> <li>○ A special education teacher supporting a student during general education instruction without providing scheduled instruction directly tied to an IEP goal(s)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
SDI is considered effective when the student makes sufficient progress per the IEP goal statement	SDI is <b>not</b> considered effective when the student does not make sufficient IEP goal progress

### Who Can Provide Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are responsible for assigning staff to implement the special education services described on a student's IEP. All staff involved in implementing any part of a student's IEP must be appropriately trained and licensed. In Wisconsin, while any staff may provide supplementary aids and services, only licensed special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and [reading teachers](#) may provide SDI, with the limited exception noted below. The term “special education teacher,” as used in this document, refers to educators holding any of these three types of licenses.

Other teaching staff, including general education teachers, may provide SDI under certain circumstances. A general education teacher may provide a student's SDI when involved in a co-teaching situation in which the special education teacher and general education teacher serve as full-time co-teachers and co-plan and co-implement instruction in a general education classroom. In these circumstances, the general education teacher and the special education teacher share equal responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction. While in such circumstances, the teachers are colleagues and co-plan any SDI that the general educator

will provide, the special education teacher is ultimately responsible for the provision of the SDI and the monitoring of student IEP goal progress, as outlined in the student's IEP.

Paraprofessionals may continue to support the provision of SDI under the direction and supervision of a special education teacher or speech and language pathologist. See [DPI Bulletin 10.05](#) or [The Use of Paraprofessionals to Support Speech-Language Pathologists](#) for additional guidance around the use of paraprofessionals in special education.

### **Additional Resources**

[Wisconsin Policies and Procedures, Sample Special Education Forms, and Notices](#)

[Wisconsin DPI: National Organizations to Support Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices for Students with IEPs](#)

[High Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities](#)

[\\*Public Schools of North Carolina \(2019\). Considerations for Specially Designed Instruction](#)