

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Note: The information included in this document presumes a broad understanding of such basic concepts as individual education programs (IEPs), IEP teams, and instructional accommodations, among others. Readers who require a primer on these topics will find many informative resources on the IRIS Center's Website, <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>

Introduction to LRE

Least restrictive environment (LRE) is a guiding principle in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). LRE plays a critical role in determining not only *where* a student will spend her time in school but also *how* special education services will be provided. Specifically, the LRE requirement within IDEA necessitates that:

- Students with disabilities receive their education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate
- Students should not be removed from the general education classroom unless learning cannot be achieved even with the use of supplementary aids and services

LRE is determined on a case-by-case basis during the development of a student's individualized education program (IEP). During this process, the IEP team—a multidisciplinary group of professionals and the student's parents—discuss what individualized program of instruction and related services (also referred to as services and supports) the student requires based on her present levels of performance and areas of strengths and needs. These services and supports should enable the student to:

- Make progress toward meeting identified academic or functional annual goals
- Be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum, as well as to participate in extracurricular (e.g., drama club) and other nonacademic (e.g., a school football game) activities
- Take part in these activities with other students, both with and without disabilities

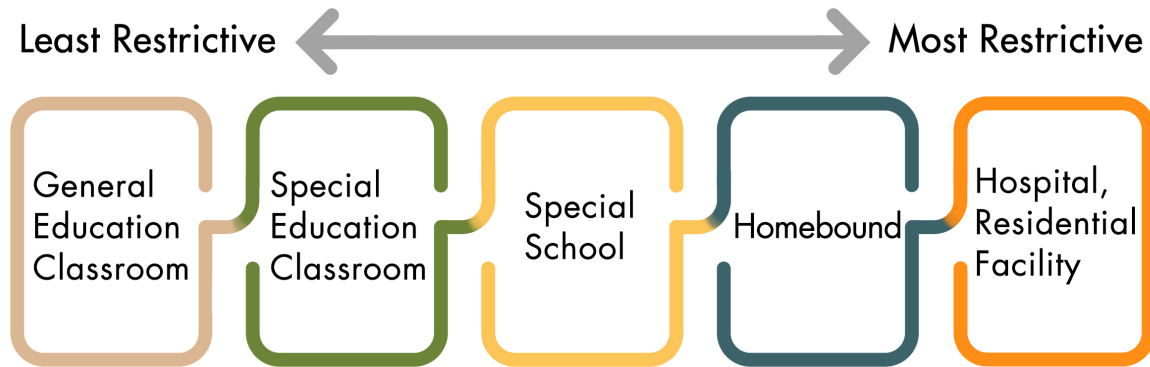
The term “environment” in least restrictive environment can be interpreted to imply that LRE is a place or location. In fact, LRE does not merely refer to a particular setting. Rather, identifying the LRE involves making program decisions about *what* services and supports a student needs to be successful and *where* and *how* those services and supports can be provided effectively.

FYI

IDEA is the law guaranteeing students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that meets their individual needs.

Continuum of Alternative Placements for Services

Because LRE is determined by the student's individualized program of instruction and related services rather than by setting, IDEA requires that school districts create a continuum of alternative placement options. This continuum represents a range of educational placements in which an IEP can be implemented to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. These placement options range from the least restrictive setting (i.e., general education classroom) to the most restrictive ones (e.g., residential facility).



When using this continuum to determine where services and supports will be provided, the IEP team should first make an effort to place—and maintain—the student in the general education setting. Recall that according to IDEA, students with disabilities should be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. In addition, the law indicates that, when needed, supplementary aids and services must be provided to enable the student to be educated in the general education classroom. However, when the nature or severity of the disability is such that satisfactory progress cannot be achieved in this setting, even with supplementary aids and services, placement in a more restrictive setting(s) might be necessary to ensure an appropriate education.

i FYI

Placement options are fluid. A student might receive some services in one setting and other services in a different setting. Further, placements can change over time based on factors such as changes in a student's progress or needs. For some students, the general education classroom is not necessarily the least restrictive setting.

? Did You Know?

According to the definition included in IDEA (at§300.42):

“Supplementary aids and services means aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate.”

Even within the broad categories of placements—ranging from least restrictive to most restrictive—there are multiple ways services and supports can be delivered. The table on the following pages describes a few of these options.

Placement Continuum	Examples of How Services and Supports Can Be Delivered	Sample Scenarios
General Education Classroom	<p>Students receive instruction in the general education classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services are provided by the general education teacher, with accommodations or modifications as needed • Instruction is supported with specialized materials, equipment, or instructional methods 	<p>Amy, a student with low vision, receives instruction in the general education classroom with accommodations of preferential seating near the whiteboard and enlarged text.</p>
	<p>Students receive instruction in the general education classroom with support from a special education teacher.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most, if not all, instruction is provided by the general education teacher, with accommodations or modifications as needed • Services provided by the special education teacher might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Consultation and collaboration with the general education teacher to plan and provide instruction ◦ Individualized or small-group instruction based on the student's needs 	<p>Mateo, a 4th-grade student with a learning disability, receives the majority of instruction from his general education teacher. However, during mathematics class the special education teacher comes to the general education classroom to work with Mateo and a small group of students with disabilities who have similar goals.</p>
Special Education Classroom	<p>Students receive instruction in a special education classroom for a portion of their school day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of the instruction is provided in the general education classroom, with accommodations or modifications as needed • Services provided by the special education teacher might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Individualized or small-group instruction in a separate classroom, often referred to as a <i>resource room</i> or <i>"pull out"</i> ◦ Consultation and collaboration with the general education teacher to plan and provide instruction <p><i>Note: Students remain with their peers without disabilities most of the time.</i></p>	<p>Amara, a 3rd-grader with a learning disability, receives the majority of instruction from the general education teacher. She receives specialized reading instruction in the resource room from the special education teacher for 45 minutes each day.</p>

Placement Continuum	Examples of How Services and Supports Can Be Delivered	Sample Scenarios
Special Education Classroom	<p>The majority of the instruction is provided in the special education classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General education teachers, including those in nonacademic periods (e.g., P.E., art, music), consult with the special education teacher to provide effective instruction or support • Services provided by the special education teacher might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Specialized instruction in a separate classroom, provided in a small group for students with similar characteristics or needs, often referred to as a <i>self-contained classroom</i> ◦ Consultation with the general education teachers to plan and provide individualized instruction aligned with the general education curriculum <p><i>Note: Students can spend a portion of the day (e.g., social studies, P.E., music, lunch) with peers without disabilities.</i></p>	<p>Blane, a middle school student with autism spectrum disorder, receives instruction for the majority of the day in a self-contained classroom. She participates alongside peers without disabilities in the general education classroom during lunch, computer time, and P.E.</p>
Special Schools	<p>Students receive instruction for the majority of the school day in a separate public or private facility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services are provided in a school that is designed, staffed, and resourced for the care and education of students with similar disability related needs <p><i>Note: Although most students return to their homes during non-school hours, residential options might be available for those who live farther away.</i></p>	<p>Devo is deaf. His IEP team, including his parents, determined that his state's school for the deaf would best serve his needs. He attends this school during the day and returns home after school.</p>
Homebound	<p>Students receive instruction at home for the majority of the school day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students in homebound settings might have physical or mental health challenges that prevent or restrict participation at school • Services provided by a homebound teacher might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Individualized instruction per a schedule convenient to the student's needs ◦ Consultation and collaboration with the general and special education teachers to plan and provide instruction 	<p>Foster, an 8th-grade student, has a rare genetic disorder that affects both his physical and cognitive skills. He attends school for three periods each day then returns home. After a rest, he receives homebound instruction for another two hours. His homebound teacher collaborates with his general and special education teachers to provide instruction to help him meet his annual goals.</p>

Placement Continuum	Examples of How Services and Supports Can Be Delivered	Sample Scenarios
Hospital, Residential Facility	<p>Students receive instruction in a hospital for the majority of the school day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students in hospital settings might have physical or mental health challenges that require admission for an extended period of time Services provided by an education professional in the hospital might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individualized instruction per a schedule convenient to the student's needs Consultation and collaboration with the general and special education teachers to plan and provide instruction 	Foster's health (see previous) deteriorates, and his doctor admits him to the hospital. He receives instruction for four hours per day. The teacher who works with him schedules his instruction around his medical treatments and other health needs.
	<p>Students receive instruction in a public or private residential facility for the majority of the school day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some students with disabilities might have such significant physical or mental health challenges that they require the types of services provided in a residential facility <p><i>Note: The facilities are not always operated by the school district.</i></p>	Isha is a 16-year-old student with an emotional and behavioral disorder. Her IEP team determines that her needs would best be met at a residential treatment facility. Isha receives instruction from teachers at the facility, in addition to the mental health services and supports she needs.

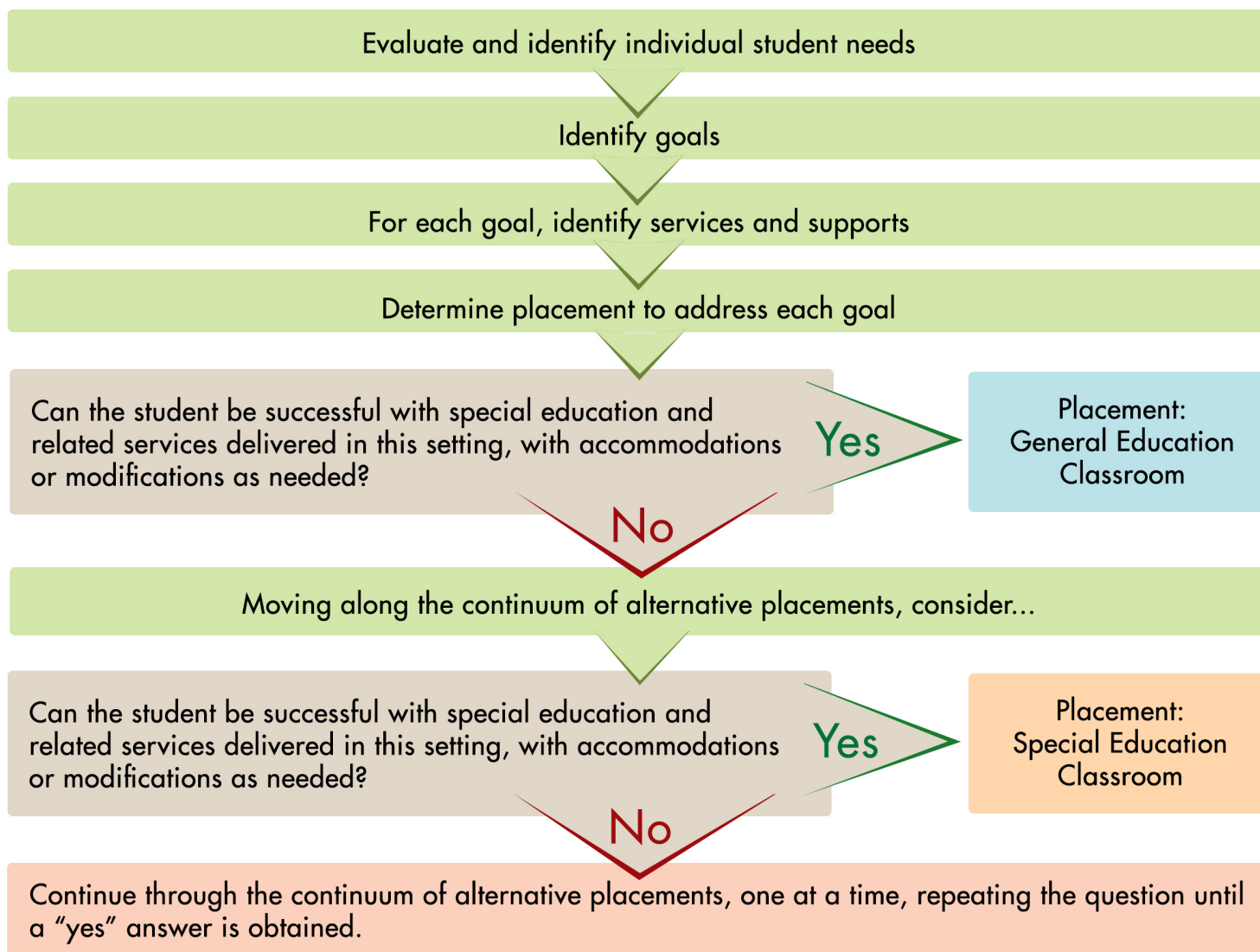
Making Placement Decisions for Services

Placement decisions are made at least annually by a group of individuals that includes the student's parents and others who are knowledgeable about the student, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options. When making placement decisions, the team, which could be the IEP team, should consider the full range of options that might be appropriate based on the individual needs of the student and the environment in which the student will most likely make progress. The IEP team must document the reasons for any decision that results in the student's services being delivered outside of the general education classroom.

Because of the individualized nature of the LRE, there are no simple rules to determine how or where services and supports will be provided. As they seek to make placement decisions, IEP teams should:

- Keep in mind that decisions are individualized to the student and should not be based on a specific disability category
- Adopt an organized method to determine the LRE for a student

The graphic on the next page illustrates one decision-making process for determining the LRE. As the IEP team works through the process, they collectively move closer to determining a student's individualized placement. Keep in mind that a student might receive services and supports in different settings throughout the day based on what is needed to achieve each annual goal.



Adapted from Kansas Special Education Process Handbook (p. 124), Kansas State Department of Education, 2018.

Factors To Consider

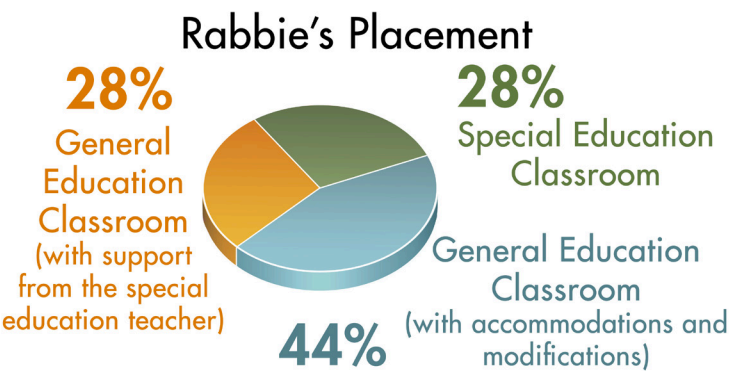
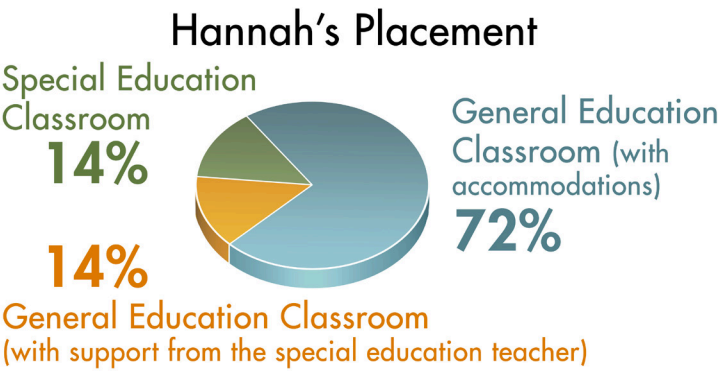
When contemplating each placement option, the IEP team should consider the following.

- **Individualization:** Based on a student's unique needs and goals and taking into account parent and student preferences
- **Benefit to the student:** The likely academic, behavioral, functional, and social-emotional benefits
- **Effect on peers:** The effect the student's presence might have on the education of other students in the classroom, both favorable and less-favorable (e.g., encouraging the development of empathy and understanding, effects on instructional time)
- **Appropriateness and inclusion:** A balance between the delivery of an appropriate education that will result in the student making progress and being educated with students without disabilities
- **Use of supplementary aids and services:** How accommodations or modifications (e.g., extended time, modified assignments, special equipment) can support the student

Examples of Placement Decisions

It is important to understand that placement is not an either/or decision; rather, students might receive services and supports across a combination of settings. In the examples below, Hannah and Robbie receive services and supports in multiple settings. Although they have similar disabilities, the ways in which their services and supports are provided are different, based on each student’s individual needs.

Student: Hannah Age/Grade: 12 years old/6th Disability: Learning Disability (dyslexia), ADHD	Student: Robbie Age/Grade: 12 years old/6th Disability: Learning Disability (dyslexia, dysgraphia), ADHD
Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reads three years below grade level• Limited academic vocabulary (written)• Difficulty with reading comprehension• Poor time-management skills, struggles to perform tasks within the classroom at the same rate as peers	Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reads five years below grade level• Limited academic vocabulary (oral and written)• Difficulty organizing thoughts in writing• Easily distracted during instruction and testing• Poor time-management skills, struggles to complete assignments on time
Placements General education classroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hannah receives instruction in the general education classroom with accommodations.• Hannah receives support in the general education classroom from the special education teacher or an assistant during reading. Special education classroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hannah receives specialized reading instruction that targets comprehension skills; she receives this instruction in a special education classroom (i.e., resource room).	Placements General education classroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Robbie receives instruction in the general education classroom with accommodations and modifications for all classes except during the English/Language Arts (ELA) block.• Robbie receives support in the general education classroom from the special education teacher or an assistant during mathematics and science instruction. Special education classroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• During the ELA block, Robbie receives specialized reading instruction that targets decoding, fluency, and comprehension; he receives this instruction in a special education classroom (i.e., resource room).• During this time, Robbie also receives intensive writing instruction in the resource room.



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