

CPS Low Incidence Cluster Program Guidance



Office for Students with Disabilities

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Overview

The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) strives to provide specially designed instruction and individualized academic settings to address the needs of all students throughout the district. The purpose of this guidance is to provide school stakeholders with information and best practices as it relates to the preparation, implementation, and continuous support of Low Incidence Programs. Low Incidence disabilities are described as disabilities that occur less frequently in the population; these students may require significantly modified curriculum and additional supports. OSD provides numerous programs that support an array of low incidence disabilities, including Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Low Vision Blindness, Cluster, and Transition.

Chicago Public Schools' Cluster Programs are designed for students ages 3–22 requiring significantly modified curriculum and rigorous, specially designed instruction with moderate or intensive support in a separate setting for the majority (over 61%) of the day, per the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Many students who participate in Cluster Programs need a more supportive setting in their core content areas; beyond this core classroom instruction, students should be alongside their general education peers for as much of the school experience as possible. This can include electives and other specialized classes, lunch, recess, assemblies, field trips, and school events. Successful Cluster Programs are created and supported by a team of educators and partners: Special Education Teachers, Special Education Classroom Assistants (SECAs), Related Service Providers (RSPs), school leaders/administrators, central office staff, parents, and community members. With this guidance, and support from OSD, these teams become the catalyst for making choices that ensure the rightful presence of all students with disabilities who require Low Incidence Programs.

Cluster programs rely on two core instructional components: specially designed instruction (SDI) and a significantly modified curriculum (SMC). SDI refers to the intentional adaptation of content, instructional methods, or delivery to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability. It is a legal requirement under IDEA and applies to all students with disabilities, regardless of setting. In Cluster programs, SDI is delivered with greater intensity and individualization to align with the student's IEP goals and learning profile.

A significantly modified curriculum adjusts what a student is expected to learn, emphasizing foundational, functional, or alternate academic skills. However, it must still be grounded in the same high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum used throughout the school. For example, a student in a third-grade Cluster classroom should receive

instruction that reflects the scope and sequence of the third-grade general education curriculum, modified to meet their individual needs. Together, SDI and a significantly modified curriculum support access to rigorous, meaningful instruction that reflects the student's cognitive, communicative, and functional needs.

In recent years, the number of students placed in Cluster programs has increased significantly. Not all of these placements have been aligned with the individualized learning needs and instructional profiles of students. Too often, students are placed in more restrictive settings due to factors such as staffing challenges, scheduling constraints, or behavioral concerns that could otherwise be addressed in less restrictive environments. This trend has expanded the use of Cluster programming beyond its original intent.

This guidance is intended to reset and clarify the purpose of Cluster programming in Chicago Public Schools. It establishes a shared understanding of who Cluster programs are designed to support, how placements should be determined, and what high-quality instruction and integration look like when implemented with fidelity. By strengthening consistency across schools, we aim to reduce the inappropriate use of restrictive settings, ensure that students are only placed in Cluster programs when truly warranted by their individual learning profiles, and create the conditions for students to experience a rigorous, joyful, and equitable education. This work is essential to upholding our legal obligations, restoring confidence in our placement processes, and advancing our collective responsibility to provide every student with their rightful presence in the school community.

Rightful Presence

Rightful Presence is a transformative framework that actively challenges systems of inequity by dismantling the traditional guest/host dynamic in classrooms. Rightful presence moves beyond inclusion by focusing on reshaping environments to ensure justice, equity, and meaningful belonging for all students, especially those with disabilities.

For students in Cluster programs, rightful presence is not only a right but mutually beneficial for members of the school community. We encourage you to examine your instructional, environmental, procedural, and community engagement practices to ensure all students are considered and included as often as possible.

For additional information, support, and strategies on rightful presence, please review the [OSD website](#) or the professional learning opportunities in the [OSD Professional Learning Library](#).

The Evaluation and Assignment Process

Child Find and Evaluation

The Local Education Agency (LEA) has the responsibility for identifying all children ages birth through 21 who may be eligible for special education and related services. The State Child Find regulations ([23 IL Adm Code 226.100](#)) state:

“Each school district shall be responsible for actively seeking out and identifying all children from birth to age 21 within the district (and including those parentally-placed private school children for whom the district is responsible under [34 CFR 300.131](#)) who may be eligible for special education and related services. Procedures developed to fulfill the Child Find responsibility shall include an annual screening of children under the age of five to identify those who may need early intervention or special education and related services”.

The following individuals can make a referral or request an evaluation:

- CPS school personnel
- Parent/guardian of the student
- An employee of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
- An employee from another state agency
- An employee from a community service agency

Requests for a Full and Individual Evaluation (FIE) from any of the above persons must be submitted to the school principal or local school district representative in writing and be signed and dated (e.g., email and/or paper-based). The request must include an explanation of the presented concerns and any supporting documentation and must be in writing. The local school district representative must assist with transcribing if the parents/guardians are unable to write out their request. When a referral is submitted in compliance with all requirements, the district's response must be provided to the parent/guardian within 14 school days of its receipt. The Parent/Guardian Notification of Decision Regarding a Request for an Evaluation form in Student Services Management (SSM) must be used to communicate this response.

An FIE is the process used to determine a student's needs and eligibility for special education and related services under IDEA. In conducting the evaluation, a variety of assessment tools and strategies must be used to determine whether the student meets eligibility criteria. The IEP team must design the FIE to include assessments in all areas related to the suspected disability in one or more of the following domains, if appropriate: health, vision, hearing, social/emotional status, general intelligence (cognitive functioning), academic performance, communication status, and motor abilities. The evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify the student's special education needs.

After an evaluation, the IEP team must determine [eligibility](#) for special education and related services within 60 school days after the date the parent/guardian provides written consent to conduct the evaluation. Before the 60th school day, after written consent is provided, the IEP team meets with the parent/guardian to review the evaluation results and determine if the student meets the criteria for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). If the student is deemed eligible for special education services, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed, outlining the student's specific needs and what supports and services will be provided. If the student is not found eligible for special education, the team may consider eligibility under a Section 504 Plan and/or tiered supports through Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Please refer to the [OSD IDEA Procedural Manual](#) for more detailed information regarding the FIE and IEP processes.

IEP Development

The IEP must include 1) a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, 2) a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals, and 3) the special education and related services, supplementary services, and program modifications.

The individualized needs of each student with a disability must be an essential consideration when the IEP Team is developing the IEP to ensure that Specialized Instruction (annual goals) are aligned with state standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled, and in order to demonstrate progress during the annual period covered by the IEP. The IEP must also include the specially designed instruction necessary to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability and ensure access to the general education curriculum, as well as the support services, modifications, and accommodations that will be provided. The IEP Team must take into

consideration any special education instruction that has been provided to the child, the previous rate of academic growth, and whether the current supports and services can help the student reach grade-level expectations in the life of the IEP.

A standards-based IEP must include the major academic content areas and may also include areas related to needs outside the general curriculum (e.g., social skills, life skills). In each academic content area, the goals should promote learning by building on student strengths and preferences while addressing the student's individualized needs. A modified curriculum changes what the student is expected to learn, not the manner in which it is presented.

A small percentage of students (less than 1%) have the most significant cognitive disabilities and are assessed using [alternate academic achievement standards](#), as permitted under [§34 CFR §200.1\(d\)](#) and [§300.160\(c\)](#). These alternate standards must still be aligned with grade-level content standards. For students with significant cognitive disabilities, the IEP Team is responsible for determining whether participation in the alternate assessment is appropriate, based on criteria established by the Illinois State Board of Education.

OSD School Assignment for Students who Require Cluster Programs

Following a comprehensive evaluation, the IEP Team reviews the data and determines whether the student requires a significantly modified curriculum and extensive, direct individualized instruction in academic and adaptive skills. If the team concludes that these supports are necessary for the student to make meaningful progress in the grade- and age-appropriate curriculum, the school-based Case Manager and or the OSD Citywide Assessment Team (CAT) Case Manager submit a School Assignment Request (SAR) in Student Services Management (SSM). The School Assignment Team has up to 10 school days to identify a school closest to the student's home, with the recommended program that can provide the supports and services in the IEP.

Once the School Assignment letter has been created, it is sent to the parent using the preferred method of communication indicated in the SAR. The case managers at the sending school and receiving school will both receive an SSM event notification that the School Assignment letter has been finalized. For more information about the OSD School Assignment Team, refer to the [OSD School Assignment FAQ](#).

School Assignment Review of IEP

The School Assignment Team is responsible for assigning each student to a program that can fully implement the student's IEP. The School Assignment Team does not

override or replace the decisions of the IEP Team; however, if discrepancies are discovered during the IEP review, the School Assignment Team can “decline” or deny a School Assignment Request to ensure that students are receiving supports and services in the appropriate setting.

Examples of discrepancies in an IEP review by the School Assignment Team may include, but are not limited to:

- The IEP indicates that the student receives instruction with standard curriculum; IEP does not include a significantly modified curriculum
- The student is removed for 60% of the day or less (LRE 1 or 2)
- The IEP does not indicate support for all core subject areas
- Discrepancies between Section 7 and other sections of the IEP regarding the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):
 - When sections of the IEP seem to present differing information, there is a need to clarify how these sections align and ensure that the overall IEP reflects a consistent and accurate Team recommendation.
- A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) have been created, but information in the IEP is lacking. It is important to identify how long the BIP has been implemented and what data has been collected regarding the effectiveness of interventions.

When the School Assignment Request is denied, the Case Manager is notified of the reason for the denial. If the Case Manager has questions or concerns regarding the denial of the School Assignment Request, they should contact their [OSD Special Education Coordinator](#) for support.

Cluster Program Description

Students who are in Cluster programs have concurrent needs across domains, including academic, language, speech, social/emotional, behavioral, physical, and/or sensory disabilities. In addition to academics, students typically need support with adaptive, functional, and independent living skills within and beyond the classroom, which can be supplemented with extracurricular programs, community-based field trips, and similar experiences.

Cluster programs are designed for students who need a significantly modified curriculum with moderate or intensive support in a classroom separate from their general education peers for core and other subjects as appropriate. Cluster programs provide strong

structure and repetition, with an emphasis on teaching functional, adaptive, and academic skills.

The descriptions in this section can be a starting place for discussions around appropriate student placement. IEP Teams should always strive to provide students with opportunities for independence and success in the least restrictive setting.

Early Childhood Cluster

Description: Early Childhood Cluster Programs are designed for students who require more intensive support than what is offered in Early Childhood Blended Programs. These classrooms provide specially designed instruction from a special education teacher focused on independent functioning, social-emotional development, and academic growth. With a lower student-to-teacher ratio, Early Childhood Cluster classrooms offer increased opportunities for structured peer interaction and individualized support. In addition to a significantly modified curriculum, these programs are designed to address each student's physical, communication, cognitive, and functional needs.

Typical Student Profile: Students typically found eligible for an Early Childhood Cluster Program are significantly below widely held [early learning and development expectations and standards](#) based on age. With consideration to the student's disability, data is analyzed to identify the student's areas of deficit and need to determine the most appropriate setting for instruction. Data sources should include psychology reports, Smart Teach Reports, Cognitive-Adaptive Assessments, etc.

IEP teams should be grounded in developmental milestones outlined in SmartTeach (TSG) when making instructional setting determinations. Per the developmental continuum, students in Age Cycles 2-5 are expected to emerge in many academic and functional milestones. To ensure instruction is being provided in the least restrictive environment, consider the individual student's abilities and how they might be best served and expanded upon through data-driven, specially designed instruction and accommodations and modifications while upholding rigorous and developmentally appropriate instruction.

Cluster Program with Moderate Support

Description: The Cluster Program with Moderate Support is designed for students with a range of disabilities who engage in rigorous instruction via a significantly modified curriculum with mild to moderate supports. Specially Designed Instruction utilizes evidence-based strategies requiring small group instruction with 1:1 reinforcement of skills in one or more domains.

Typical Student Profile: Students who require this program may have mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (typically associated with an IQ below 55 and at or above 40), that exist concurrently with impairments or deficits in adaptive functioning (i.e. communication, self-care, home living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self-directions, functional academic skills, work leisure, health, and safety).

Cluster Program with Intensive Support

Description: The Cluster Program with Intensive Support is designed for students with a range of disabilities who engage in rigorous instruction via a significantly modified curriculum with intensive supports. Instruction utilizes evidence-based strategies requiring 1:1 instruction with 1:1 or small group reinforcement of skills in several domains. In addition, the instruction includes a sharp focus on adaptive living and independent living skills, which may require more intensive support from related service staff and/or SECA staff.

Typical Student Profile: Students who require this Cluster setting have the most significant intellectual disabilities (typically associated with an IQ below 40). Students requiring intensive support often have additional adaptive and independent functioning needs and/or require adult support on an ongoing and persistent basis. In addition, these students typically need medical care throughout the day as a result of a chronic debilitating condition(s) and meets at least one of the following criteria:

- is technology dependent for life or health-sustaining functions
- requires complex medication regimens or medical interventions to maintain or to improve their health status
- Requires ongoing assessment or intervention to prevent serious decline of health status or medical complications that put life, health, or development at risk¹

Staffing & Resources

Staffing: Schools with Cluster programs receive an allocation of materials, funding, and staffing to support those programs. Positions are allocated by program as follows:

| Types of Cluster Programs | Legacy Programs (opened prior to SY26) | New Programs (newly opened for SY26) |
|---------------------------|---|---|
|---------------------------|---|---|

¹ "Medically Fragile Children - Fidelis Care."

<https://www.fideliscare.org/Member/Helpful-Tools/Health-Resources/Medically-Fragile-Children>. Accessed 6 July. 2023.

| | Teacher | SECA | Teacher | SECA |
|--|---------|------|---------|------|
| Early Childhood Cluster (formerly called EC Intensive) | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Moderate Support | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Intensive Support | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 |

This programmatic allocation may be supplemented with additional SECA positions for cluster students with dedicated SECA support included in the student's IEP. Each class is assigned at least one SECA to support shared services. Any subsequent allocation is to provide anticipated dedicated support as students are enrolled in the class. Any appeals will first consider the additional allocated position before approving additional SECAs.

Classroom Materials: OSD will centrally purchase or provide funding for supplemental curricular materials, speciality furniture, and classroom assistive technology for each new Low Incidence Cluster classroom opening that year using this [materials list](#). Schools with new cluster classrooms will also receive an additional \$3,000 to support purchasing commodities and supplies. All other commodities and supplies should be factored into the school budget (i.e., funds to support Community Based Instruction) to ensure students have necessary resources for a joyful and equitable learning experience. New or legacy schools can also [request changing tables](#), paid for by OSD.

Who is Cluster Not For?

While every student's needs must be considered on an individualized basis through the IEP process, there are common characteristics that may indicate a Cluster program is **not** an appropriate placement. Cluster programs are designed for students with significant, concurrent needs across multiple domains and are not intended as a default solution for challenges that can be addressed through services in less restrictive settings. A student should not be placed in a Cluster program if:

- The student is able to access grade-level content with the use of accommodations, modifications, and/or specially designed instruction in a general education setting.
- The student is making meaningful progress toward grade-level academic skills with support provided in a self-contained/resource setting.

- The student does not require instruction that significantly alters learning outcomes or standards, but instead benefits from adapted methods of access to the general curriculum.
- Placement is being considered primarily due to disruptive behavior or social-emotional challenges, rather than a demonstrated need for a significantly modified curriculum and intensive support across domains.
- The primary concern is chronic absenteeism or inconsistent school attendance, rather than the need for a significantly modified curriculum and intensive support.
- The student is experiencing a temporary regression or short-term challenge that may resolve with targeted interventions and does not indicate a long-term need for placement in a more restrictive setting.
- The student demonstrates average intellectual and adaptive functioning, and placement is being considered due to school-level capacity, staffing, or convenience.

Cluster placement decisions must be grounded in comprehensive data and a demonstrated need for a significantly modified curriculum—not based on program availability, staffing capacity, or behavioral management needs alone.

Best Practices For A Rigorous, Joyful, and Equitable Experience

While this list is non-exhaustive, these best practices aim to provide guidance for ensuring the environment, curriculum, and instruction in cluster programs provide a rigorous, joyful, and equitable daily learning experience for all students.

Environment

Students in Cluster placements thrive in environments that are thoughtfully designed to meet their unique needs while promoting equitable access, independence, and engagement. These environments should:

1. Be Accessible

- Ensure all physical spaces, materials, and resources are fully accessible to students with **a wide range of abilities**.
- Include adaptive equipment, assistive technology, accessible communication systems, and modified learning tools that enable participation and promote independence.

2. Provide Comparable Resources

- Offer resources, materials, and opportunities that are comparable to those available to their general education peers.

- Foster equity by ensuring students have access to high-quality, engaging learning experiences.

3. Foster Safety and Welcoming Atmospheres

- Create a space where students feel emotionally and physically safe, valued, and respected.
- Establish a welcoming and inclusive environment that celebrates diversity and promotes a sense of belonging.

4. Support Hands-On Learning

- Incorporate opportunities for tactile, experiential, and real-world learning to reinforce skills and deepen understanding.
- Provide materials and activities that encourage exploration and active engagement.

5. Include Clear Systems and Structures

- Implement well-defined routines, expectations, and transitions to maximize student engagement and minimize disruptions.
- Use visual schedules, timers, and structured work systems to support on-task behaviors.

6. School-Wide Considerations

- Ensure special education teachers are able to collaborate departmentally for robust professional development and practice sharing. Consider building leaders who can support this development.
- Scheduling for students in Cluster programs must reflect a balance between individual student needs and the parameters of the instructional day. While students should have access to the same number of minutes in content areas as their general education peers, their IEP-driven services may require additional instructional supports. These must be scheduled within the available instructional time and documented in a way that is both individualized and practically implementable. IEP Teams may recommend more intensive support in specific content areas (e.g., additional ELA instruction) when warranted by the student's needs. However, total service minutes should not exceed the actual number of instructional minutes in the school day. When students require increased time in a particular subject, IEP Teams should consider adjusting other instructional blocks accordingly, while maintaining a full and equitable learning experience. Cluster program scheduling should be developed in collaboration with school scheduling teams and aligned to general education course offerings to the greatest extent possible. All schedules must support meaningful access, uphold the integrity of the IEP, and be feasible within the structure of the school day.

- Please utilize the [School Scheduling Guidance](#) for more information

7. Ensure Collaborative Procedures for Staff

- Develop clear protocols and procedures for all staff members to ensure cohesive and effective support for students (i.e., arrival/dismissal routines, responsibilities of teachers and SECAs during instructional blocks, medical care for students).
- Encourage regular collaboration among general education teachers, special education teachers, SECAs, holistic teachers, and specialists to align strategies and maintain consistency.

By meeting these environmental needs, classrooms for students in cluster placements can provide an atmosphere for meaningful learning, positive behavior, and holistic development, empowering every student to reach their fullest potential. Examples can be reviewed [here](#).

Curriculum

High-quality curriculum should be standards aligned, reflect student's identities and lived experiences, engage students in topics, problems, and people that impact them and their communities, and drive instruction that is responsive to all students' needs. A significantly modified curriculum includes all of these qualities. It is not a separate or alternate program, but a thoughtful adaptation of the same high-quality curriculum used across the school. Through backward planning, educators adjust content, instructional methods, and pacing to meet students at their independent level while maintaining alignment to grade-level standards. When implemented effectively, a significantly modified curriculum ensures meaningful access to rigorous, relevant instruction and supports students in building academic, functional, and critical thinking skills.

As with any other instructional setting, the use of a high-quality curriculum for students in cluster programs is required. Students in cluster programs should receive a significantly modified curriculum that reflects the [Essential Elements](#) to ensure access to rigorous and relevant learning opportunities as the student demonstrates mastery and progresses towards grade level standards. Currently, OSD provides all Clusters teachers with access to Unique Learning System (ULS) and News2You (N2Y).

Key features of all high-quality curriculum:

1. Standards-Based Curriculum

- The curriculum emphasizes ELA, Math, Science, and Social Science, providing access to state standards and [Dynamic Learning Maps Essential Elements](#).
 - Lessons are differentiated to accommodate varied learning levels, ensuring all students can participate meaningfully in grade-level content.
2. **Differentiated Tasks**
 - Activities are designed to accommodate various learning abilities and needs, enabling all students to access, participate in, and progress through standards-based activities.
 3. **Assessments and Evidence-Based Supports**
 - Integrated tools and strategies help educators monitor progress and deliver effective, research-backed instruction tailored to student needs.

Key features of a significantly modified curriculum also include:

1. **Altered Learning Outcomes:** Instruction focuses on functional, foundational, or alternative academic skills that align to grade-level standards. Grade-level standards may not be present in all lessons.
2. **Pacing and Instructional Methods:** Content delivery is adapted to align with the student's cognitive, communicative, and developmental needs, often incorporating individualized scaffolds and multimodal instruction.
3. **Assessment and Evaluation:** Student progress is measured based on IEP goals and alternative assessments rather than standardized grade-level benchmarks.
4. **Emphasis on Life Skills:** For some students, the curriculum integrates daily living, vocational, and social-emotional skills to support independence and post-secondary readiness.

Selecting a curriculum with the above features ensures meaningful access to joyful education while honoring the diverse abilities of students who require intensive support, promoting their academic, social, and functional development.

It is important to note that a significantly modified curriculum should only be utilized to support instruction when a student's IEP indicates the need for a significantly modified curriculum. Students who receive services in a separate setting, not a Cluster program, should have access to the general education curriculum.

Instruction

The curriculum in Cluster classrooms is thoughtfully designed to ensure that students with significant needs receive meaningful and effective instruction. By leveraging

high-leverage practices (HLPs), educators create an engaging and rigorous learning environment tailored to each student's unique abilities and needs.

Cluster classrooms must follow the same [scheduling guidance](#) as general education classrooms. This includes providing core instruction in literacy, math, science, and social science that meets or exceeds the required [minimum instructional minutes](#) for each subject area. While instructional block components may look different in Cluster classrooms, they must still align with [content-specific guidelines](#) to ensure students receive instruction comparable in quality and scope to their grade-level peers. It is not acceptable to reduce instructional time for Cluster students—such as providing fewer minutes of science to an 8th grade Cluster classroom than to general education students in the same grade.

Educators should also include explicit instruction in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Beyond core content, students' daily schedules must align with their same-age general education peers for exploratory classes, lunch, and recess to support rightful presence and full participation in the school community.

Key features of **Effective Instruction**:

1. **Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)**

- Instruction is individualized to meet students' specific learning goals as outlined in their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). SDI addresses academic, functional, and social-emotional needs, ensuring alignment with state standards and essential elements.

2. **Instructional Practices**

- Explicit Instruction: Teachers provide clear, structured lessons that include modeling, guided practice, and opportunities for independent application.
- Scaffolded Supports: Tasks are broken into manageable steps, with supports gradually removed as students gain mastery.
- Assistive and Instructional Technologies: As appropriate, students should have access to technology to support communication and or engagement.
- Positive Behavioral Supports: Proactive strategies and reinforcements promote engagement and create a supportive learning environment.

3. **Evidence-Based Practices to Promote Learning**

- Frequent Monitoring and Feedback: Educators use formative assessments and observational tools to monitor progress and provide timely, actionable feedback.
- Task Analysis and Functional Skills: Lessons integrate academic content with real-life applications to build independence and functional abilities.

4. Career Connected Learning

- The Office of Early College and Career Education (ECCE) maximizes each student's time at CPS to develop the skills, knowledge, and mindset they need to succeed in the workplace and their community. The journey to success is unique to each student, and ECCE and OSD are committed to providing pathways that accelerate and support their goals and plans for life beyond high school. ECCE prioritizes increasing student outcomes in 5 key areas: College and Career Pathways Endorsement; Career-focused Instruction; Transitional Learning; Dual Credit and Dual Enrollment; and Professional and Work-based Learning for Students. All students are encouraged to explore pathways that align with their skills and postsecondary goals. For more information on this programming, please visit the [ECCE website](#).

Supporting multilingual learners in Cluster settings requires a culturally responsive, language-rich approach that honors each student's unique communication profile and dual language identity. Effective instruction should integrate language development, specially designed instruction, and collaboration across disciplines to promote academic and linguistic success. Key features of effective instruction to support Multilingual/English Learners (ELs) in Cluster programs:

1. Create a Language-Rich, Inclusive Learning Environment

- Use bilingual visual supports, language scaffolds, gestures, and simplified instructions to enhance comprehension.
- Incorporate students' home languages into tools such as visual schedules, picture cues, and labeled classroom materials.
- Pair students with peers who model appropriate language use and social interactions.
- Include students' home languages and cultural references to foster belonging and language growth.
- Use short, repetitive phrases to support acquisition and retention.
- Integrate realia (real objects) to connect instruction with lived experiences.
- Provide access to AAC devices with multilingual capabilities, as appropriate.
- Embed culturally and linguistically responsive practices that treat culture and first language as assets to learning.

2. Align Instructional Goals and Collaboration

- Align IEP goals with both academic and language acquisition needs.

- Combine English language development with subject-specific instruction (e.g., teaching vocabulary in context with reading comprehension).
- Collaborate across roles—including the English Language Program Teacher (ELPT), bilingual specialist, ESL-endorsed teacher, special education teacher, related service providers, and low-incidence specialists (e.g., DHH, vision, mobility, audiology)—to develop cohesive, integrated strategies.
- Use ongoing progress monitoring to track both academic achievement and language proficiency, adjusting support as needed.

3. **Engage Families as Active Partners**

- Provide translated materials and interpreter support whenever possible to ensure clear, accessible communication.
- Share culturally relevant resources and strategies that support learning at home.
- Empower families with knowledge and tools to effectively advocate for their child's learning and language development.

By integrating language support, specialized instruction, and strong family partnerships, multilingual students who require both English language development and Cluster programming will be better positioned to thrive academically, linguistically, socially, and emotionally. These strategies affirm students' identities, promote independence, and ensure access to high-quality learning experiences across settings.

Behavior

Behavioral challenges alone do not qualify a student for placement in a Cluster program. All students with disabilities—including those with significant behavioral needs—are entitled to access the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which they can make progress with appropriate supports and services.

Principles for Behavior Support in Cluster Settings

- Behavior does not dictate placement. Students should not be placed in a more restrictive setting solely due to disruptive behavior or lack of staff training.
- Support plans must be individualized. Each student's behavioral needs must be addressed through Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) developed by the IEP Team.
- Environmental design matters. Cluster classrooms should include clear routines, structured visual supports, proactive behavior strategies, and trauma-informed practices.

- Staff must be trained. Special education teachers, SECAs, and related service providers should be trained in de-escalation, reinforcement strategies, and communication support tools.
- Data must guide intervention. Behavioral data should be collected consistently and reviewed regularly to inform ongoing adjustments to supports and interventions.

When to Conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

An FBA should be completed if:

- A student exhibits persistent behaviors that interfere with learning.
- A behavior is resulting in exclusion from instruction (e.g., removal from class).
- A student's IEP includes services in a separate setting due in part to behavioral needs.

FBAs must lead to a meaningful, proactive BIP. This plan should focus on teaching replacement behaviors, adapting environments, and reinforcing success—not simply managing or suppressing behavior.

Crisis Planning and Supports

For students with medical, sensory, or behavioral conditions that place them at risk for escalation, the IEP Team should consider:

- A Crisis Plan aligned to district protocols
- Positive Behavior Supports embedded across the day
- Staff debrief protocols following incidents

Assessment

Students in Cluster programs receive instruction aligned to their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals through a significantly modified curriculum. While some students with the most significant cognitive and adaptive needs may participate in the alternate state assessment (DLM-AA), eligibility is determined by stringent criteria. According to ISBE, many students with cognitive disabilities will not qualify for the DLM-AA and must take the regular state assessment with or without accommodations. Eligibility requires intellectual functioning well below average (typically associated with an IQ below 55) and significant deficits in adaptive behavior across multiple domains. Therefore, participation in DLM-AA is not automatically appropriate for all students in a Cluster program.

The IEP team must make a **data-informed decision** about which state assessment—general or alternate—is most appropriate based on the individual student's learning profile. To determine eligibility for DLM-AA, teams should use the [ISBE Alternate Assessment Participation Guidelines](#) as part of the IEP decision-making process.

Dynamic Learning Maps - Alternate Assessment (DLM-AA)

DLM-AA is the ISBE-required alternative assessment for students in grades 3-11 with the most significant cognitive disabilities. As determined by the IEP, students participate in DLM if participation in the state's regular assessment is not appropriate, even with accommodations. DLM-AA creates an opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge in ELA, math, and science, helping parents and educators set high academic expectations for their students. The assessment is built in multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and understandings across the learning map, aligned with the Essential Elements. The learning map model connects the knowledge, skills, and understandings necessary to meet academic content standards. The learning map connects concepts and skills in nodes to help teachers connect learning to the Essential Elements and avoid teaching skills in complete isolation. Essential Elements are grade specific expectations, aligned with common core general education standards designed to help drive instruction for students. Results from DLM-AA should be used to inform instruction, develop high quality IEPs, and show student achievement.

Student Annual Needs Determination Inventory (SANDI)

Student Annual Needs Determination Inventory (SANDI) is a district-provided alternative assessment for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities who access a significantly modified curriculum. SANDI is available to all schools with Cluster programs for students in PreK-12th grade. SANDI is designed to support teachers in understanding student performance, identifying areas of need, and informing instructional practice. Data is used to help teachers target areas of need, draft present levels of performance aligned to state standards, and develop appropriate IEP goals. SANDI is recommended to be administered twice a year - BOY (fall) and EOY (spring).

Alternate ACCESS

English Learners (ELs) are required to take the ACCESS exam annually to measure progress towards English proficiency. [WIDA Alternate ACCESS](#) is a test administered to students in grades K-12 who are identified as English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities. WIDA Alternate ACCESS measures students' English language skills in Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing. Please collaborate with your school's ELPT to determine if Alternate ACCESS is a good choice for your ELs.

Student Reintegration and Transition Plan

IEPs are living documents that should be visited as often as necessary. The school-based IEP team should regularly monitor the student's progress with the significantly modified curriculum. This involves collecting data on academic achievement, social skills, and assessing whether the student is benefiting from the program. If the student has demonstrated consistent progress toward goals in the IEP through qualitative and quantitative data, it may indicate readiness for transition out of the Cluster program.

Dismissing a student from a cluster program involves a careful and structured process that prioritizes the student's educational needs and rights. Ensuring that students receive services with their general education peers to the greatest extent possible is one cornerstone of FAPE and a shared responsibility of all stakeholders. Based on the evidence and data gathered and IEP Team discussions, the team can make a decision regarding the dismissal from the Cluster program.

Data-Driven Discussions and IEP Meeting

If necessary, the team may decide to conduct additional assessments to gather updated information on the student's current skills and areas of need. Some examples of evidence and additional information include:

- **Assessment Data:** Academic, behavioral and functional assessments can be used to demonstrate student achievements, abilities, and areas of need. These can include standardized testing, classroom observations and other relevant data showing current levels of performance.
- **Social and Emotional Assessment:** Transitioning out of a Cluster program requires a student to interact in a less restrictive environment. Establish a plan for monitoring social readiness and emotional well-being.
- **Teacher / RSP Input:** Feedback from the General Education Teacher, Special Education teacher, and Related Service Providers (RSPs) is vital in determining a student's readiness to access the general education curriculum with appropriate support, services, and accommodations in place.
- **Parent / Guardian Participation:** The student's family can provide valuable insight into the student's strengths and challenges of transitioning out of a Cluster program.

A formal IEP meeting must be convened to consider whether the student's current placement in a Cluster program continues to be appropriate. Parents or guardians must be invited and engaged in the decision-making process. The team should review the student's progress, relevant data, the effectiveness of the current supports, and the potential for placement in a less restrictive setting that can meet the student's needs. All

decisions should reflect the legal mandate of providing services in the least restrictive environment.

Reintegration Plan

If the IEP team has made a data-driven decision that a student may benefit from increased time in a less restrictive environment, this opportunity can be attempted on a trial basis. The IEP team should discuss the appropriate setting(s) for the student, taking into account all areas of need—academic, social-emotional, communication, functional, and behavioral. The recommended trial period is approximately 4 to 6 weeks. The trial should be documented through a revision of the student's IEP, including updates to the LRE Grid/Setting, Meeting Notes, and any other relevant sections. After the trial, the IEP team should reconvene and review data gathered during the period to determine the most appropriate ongoing placement and supports across settings.

If the IEP team determines that the student's needs are best met in a separate class setting, the rationale and trial period may be captured in the IEP Notes section.

Transition Plan

If the IEP Team determines that a student no longer requires a Cluster program, the team must develop a comprehensive transition plan as part of the IEP. This plan outlines how the student will be supported in a less restrictive environment and ensures that the shift in placement is both thoughtful and well-structured. The plan should reflect changes to the student's present levels of performance, goals, services, and learning environment. These updates must be documented in the IEP, including the LRE grid, service pages, and Notes section.

The transition plan should address several key areas. First, it should identify any instructional supports, curriculum modifications, or accommodations the student will need to succeed in the new setting. In some cases, professional development or consultation may be necessary to ensure general education staff are prepared to support the student effectively. Social-emotional and peer integration supports should also be considered to help the student navigate new routines, relationships, and expectations. Additionally, the IEP Team should establish a short-term progress monitoring plan—typically lasting four to six weeks—to review how the student is adjusting and whether additional changes are needed.

Once the IEP Team agrees on a change in placement, the school must notify the OSD School Assignment Team so that the student can be removed from the centralized Cluster assignment system. The IEP Team is responsible for clearly communicating the

next steps to the student's family. If the student is transitioning mid-year and the current school has the capacity to support the student's needs in a less restrictive setting, the student may remain at that school for the remainder of the academic year. The family may also choose to have their child continue at the current school beyond that, and the school must honor that preference as long as it can implement the student's updated IEP. If the family chooses to explore other school options, the student may enroll in their neighborhood school or apply to programs through GoCPS. Transportation eligibility should be reviewed and updated as needed.

In alignment with CPS policy, this transition does not constitute a school transfer. The student's current school—where they are actively enrolled—is considered their *home school*, and they remain enrolled there unless a parent or guardian initiates a transfer. A school may not unilaterally withdraw or reassign a student based on a change in special education placement. If the home school is able to implement the updated IEP in a less restrictive setting, the student continues receiving services at that school. Should the family choose to explore other school options, they may do so through the CPS enrollment process. All procedures related to enrollment, withdrawal, and records transfer must follow [CPS Board Policy 703.1\(VII\)](#) and other relevant enrollment guidance.

Families should expect to be fully engaged in this process. They will participate in the IEP meeting where the change in placement is discussed, receive a clear explanation of how the student will be supported in the new setting, and be informed of the timeline for implementation. Follow-up meetings should be scheduled to review the student's progress and ensure the new setting continues to meet the student's needs. By approaching this transition with clear planning, open communication, and strong collaboration, schools can ensure that students moving out of Cluster programs experience continued success in the least restrictive environment.

Note: Preschool students being removed from an EC Blended or EC Cluster program can apply for Gen Ed Preschool programming via [Chicago Early Learning](#) (CEL) once it is determined that neither of these settings are needed to access the curriculum. CEL is the application system for students ages 3-5 years seeking a Preschool Program in Chicago Public Schools. After applying, Preschool students will receive an offer letter via CEL and will be enrolled in general education preschool seats. CEL is not neighborhood bound, therefore families are able to select preschool sites of their choice that have seats available, which includes both half day and full day programming districtwide. For students who are exiting EC Blended, every effort should be made to offer a student a Gen Ed seat in their existing classroom, while remaining within the ISBE ratio guidance for Preschool.

Planning to Fade SECA Support

As part of a student's transition from a Cluster program to a less restrictive setting, the IEP Team may consider developing a plan to gradually reduce one-on-one adult support, when appropriate. Fading SECA support can be a critical step in promoting student independence, skill generalization, and access to inclusive environments.

The following are steps to support the fading of SECA support while maintaining the skills and independence acquired by students:

1. Reconvene an IEP meeting to facilitate discussion around the fading process. Start by discussing the current types and levels of assistance the student is receiving from a SECA.
 - a. Observational data, progress monitoring data, and staff input will be crucial in determining the current level of SECA support the student is receiving. (See optional [SECA Input Form](#))
2. After reviewing current types and assistance the student is receiving from a SECA, use this data to identify alternative less restrictive supports.
 - a. It may be helpful to identify why the student needs the current level of support from a SECA for a specific task, then consider what else, other than 1:1 adult support, might help. [Questions to Consider to Foster Student Independence](#) may help drive this discussion.
3. Review the assistance currently provided and brainstorm alternatives.
 - a. Use observational data and staff input provided to clarify current levels of adult support provided across all subjects and activities, then work as a team to brainstorm less intrusive alternatives.
 - b. It may also be helpful to identify why the student needs that level of adult support for a specific task, then consider what else (other than 1:1 adult help) might help
 - c. Discussing the questions included in the independence and inclusion checklist may help when brainstorming target times for reducing the level of direct adult assistance
 - d. When brainstorming, it may also help to discuss "least intrusive" support options and review alternatives to side-by-side adult support as well as tips for SECAs and other adults about fading support and using appropriate prompt levels
4. Outline the plan to reduce the types and levels of adult support and assistance provided.

- a. Specify the criteria for fading measures to be used in a written plan for fading. Include information about who will review progress on the plan and how often it will be reviewed.
5. Incorporate the plan to fade adults into the IEP.
 - a. Develop goals and objectives that contain reduced levels of support and prompting to be used as measures of need for close adult support (e.g., moving from physical prompting to verbal prompting).
 - b. Determine if a specific plan to motivate the student to work independently needs to be developed and added to the IEP as accommodations or as a part of the FBA/BIP.
 - c. Specify accommodations/modifications to be provided as needed or as requested by the student (in place of direct adult support).
 - d. Indicate specific activities and times in the day when the student may still require close adult support in the IEP (as a service or elsewhere), such as personal care.

Reintegration Considerations:

In accordance with the [CPS Enrollment and Transfer Policy](#), students who have transitioned out of a Cluster program and are enrolled in a selective enrollment or magnet school remain enrolled at their current school, which is considered their home school. A change in special education placement does not constitute a school transfer. Students may continue through the highest grade level offered by the school unless the parent or guardian initiates a transfer. Placement and reintegration decisions must be made collaboratively by the IEP Team and OSD, in partnership with the parent or guardian, and aligned with the student's IEP and the least restrictive environment requirements.

Professional Learning, Resources, and Support

OSD teams work to support Cluster programs through collaboration with teachers, SECAs, and school and network leaders. See below for additional resources and support.

Professional Learning

- [Cluster Professional Development Opportunities](#)

This document contains information on professional developments and PLCs to improve the practices of teachers and SECAs who work in a Cluster classroom across CPS.

Resources

- [Code of Federal Regulations: Participation in Assessments](#)
- [Development & Implementation of IEP in LRE \(IDEA\)](#)
- [Program Guidance for Early Childhood Special Education](#)
- IEP Development for Cluster Programs: [K-12+ Cluster IEP Guidance](#)
- [Quality Indicators Of Specially Designed Instruction](#): This tool was created to inform planning and instruction. This tool is not a teacher evaluation tool and does not replace the CPS Framework for Teaching.
- [BOY Best Practices Checklist for Low Incidence Cluster & Separate Setting Teachers](#): Teachers and SECAs can use this checklist to prepare a new or reassigned Cluster classroom.
- [ULS Getting Started Guide](#): This is a guide for Cluster teachers to get started with setting up their account and classroom within the n2y platform. Please contact your Special Education Administrator to acquire an account.
- [Official CPS/n2y User Guide](#): This is a comprehensive user guide for Cluster teachers to utilize Unique Learning System and News2You.
- [Modified Second Step Pacing Guide](#): This significantly modified pacing guide was created to support Cluster teachers with implementing tier 1 SEL curriculum aligned with district-wide curriculum. The guide includes lesson plans, supporting materials, suggested modifications, and objectives. To find out more and opt into implementation, complete this [form](#).
- [District-Wide Cluster Google Classroom](#): This is a space created to share resources, build community among Cluster teachers, and post updates and announcements.
- [Child Find - LEA Responsibility](#)
- [K-12+ Cluster IEP Guidance](#)
This document is a reference guide for Case Managers and other IEP Team members to support quality Cluster IEPs.
- [OMME Comprehensive EL Resource Toolkit](#)

Please refer to the [CPS Procedural Manual](#) for additional information.

Office for Students with Disabilities Support Teams

- [Special Education Administrator](#) (SEA): SEAs enhance the quality of instructional practices for students with disabilities by implementing data-driven consultation and coaching cycles with school teams, fostering intentional collaboration among stakeholders.
- [Behavior Support Team](#) (BST): The Behavior Support Team provides consultation, modeling, and coaching to school teams encountering students with disabilities

who exhibit challenging behavior, including support to conduct Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and write Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs).

- [Assistive Tech \(ATRC\)](#): The ATRC Team provides consultations, assessments, devices, and training, based on referrals as part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. The goal is to help students access their curriculum when traditional methods are not effective. The ATRC Team may provide access to devices and tools that are not available at the school level, or train teams on how to use the tools they already have.
- [District Representative](#) (DR): DRs assist in monitoring special education programs, IEPs, and related services to ensure compliance with federal and state regulations and CPS policies and procedures.

Glossary

Alternate ACCESS: A version of the ACCESS test administered to English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities to assess progress in English language proficiency.

Alternate Assessment (DLM-AA): The Dynamic Learning Maps-Alternate Assessment, used to measure the academic achievement of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in ELA, math, and science.

Assistive and Instructional Technologies: Tools and devices that support student access, communication, or engagement in learning, such as AAC devices, visual schedules, or adapted keyboards.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): Methods of communication used to support or replace spoken language, including devices with speech output, picture boards, and communication apps.

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): A formalized plan, developed as part of the IEP, to address challenging behaviors through proactive strategies, instruction, and reinforcement.

Case Manager: A school-based staff member responsible for overseeing the IEP process, service delivery, and communication with families for students receiving special education services.

Cluster Program: A CPS special education program for students with significant disabilities who require a significantly modified curriculum and moderate or intensive support in a separate setting for the majority of the day.

Concurrent Needs: When a student requires support across multiple domains, such as academic, communication, adaptive, behavioral, sensory, and physical functioning.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH): A low-incidence disability category that includes students with partial or complete hearing loss who may require specialized instruction, accommodations, and assistive technology to access language and the curriculum.

Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM): A system of alternate academic standards and assessments designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. In accordance with federal and state guidance, no more than 1% of the total student

population should participate in the alternate assessment. Eligibility for DLM is not based solely on disability category or participation in a Cluster program and must be determined using strict criteria that confirm the student's cognitive and adaptive functioning is profoundly impacted across settings.

Early Childhood Blended Program: A preschool program that includes both students with disabilities and typically developing peers in an inclusive setting.

Early Childhood Cluster Program: A specialized preschool classroom for students who require more intensive support than what is provided in a blended setting.

Essential Elements: Standards aligned with general education curriculum, used for instruction and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): A legal guarantee under IDEA that students with disabilities receive individualized instruction and services at no cost to families.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA): An evaluation process to identify the cause and function of a student's behavior, which informs the development of a BIP.

General Education Curriculum: The standard academic curriculum taught to all students, aligned to grade-level learning standards.

GoCPS: The centralized CPS enrollment and application system used to apply for non-neighborhood schools and specialized programs.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legally binding plan developed by the IEP team to outline a student's present levels, goals, services, and placement.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): The educational setting that allows a student with disabilities to be educated with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

Low Incidence Disability: A disability that occurs less frequently in the population and typically requires specialized supports, such as Intellectual Disability, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, or visual impairments.

Multilingual Learner (MLL): A student who is in the process of developing English proficiency and may receive English language development services.

Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD): The CPS department responsible for the oversight, implementation, and support of special education services and programs.

Rightful Presence: A framework that emphasizes students with disabilities being fully present, valued, and integrated in all aspects of school life.

School Assignment Request (SAR): The formal process in Student Services Management (SSM) used to request a placement in a Cluster program.

School Assignment Team: The CPS team that reviews SARs and assigns students to appropriate Cluster programs based on their IEP needs.

SECA (Special Education Classroom Assistant): A paraprofessional staff member assigned to support students with disabilities in the classroom.

Significantly Modified Curriculum (SMC): A curriculum designed to meet the individualized learning needs of students with significant cognitive and adaptive disabilities, aligned with high-quality grade-level content.

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI): Instruction that is adapted in content, method, or delivery to address the unique needs of a student with a disability, as outlined in the IEP.

Student Annual Needs Determination Inventory (SANDI): A CPS-provided alternative assessment used to measure academic and functional skills of students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Student Services Management (SSM): The CPS data system used to manage special education documentation, including IEPs and school assignment requests.

Transition Plan: A documented plan in the IEP to support a student transitioning out of a Cluster program to a less restrictive setting.

Transition Support: A coordinated set of services, activities, and supports that help students with disabilities move successfully from one educational setting to another, such as from a Cluster program to a general education environment or from high school to post-secondary life.

Unique Learning System (ULS): An online curriculum platform used by CPS Cluster classrooms to provide standards-aligned, modified academic instruction for students with significant disabilities.

Vision Impairment: A low-incidence disability that includes partial sight, blindness, or visual processing challenges that affect a student's ability to access the educational environment. Students may require accommodations, assistive technology, and support from vision specialists.