



Creating Defensible IEPs in the Age of AI



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Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) represents an unprecedented opportunity to transform how schools support students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has longstanding requirements for school teams to create, implement, and monitor Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for eligible students. Generative AI offers IEP teams a 21st-century tool to streamline administrative tasks, enhance individualized planning, align specially designed instruction with student goals and needs, and ultimately reduce barriers to educational access, providing special education professionals with the ability to spend more time on what matters most, improving outcomes for their students.

Realizing the promise of AI in special education, however, requires more than technological innovation; it also demands commitment to the protection of students' data privacy rights. As education agencies increasingly explore AI-enabled solutions, ensuring compliance with the IDEA and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) must remain key principles. When innovation and data privacy protections are thoughtfully balanced, school teams can leverage generative AI to create more responsive, personalized, and equitable learning experiences while maintaining ethical standards for student data use.

Where IEP Teams Are Now

As districts explore the use of AI tools to support the development of student IEPs, they can build a strong foundation for success by aligning their use with applicable state and local guidance related to data privacy, confidentiality, and AI. Providing staff with clear access to approved resources—such as State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) guidance on data privacy and artificial intelligence—can promote confidence, consistency, and informed decision-making. Districts may also benefit from engaging students, families, and other stakeholders in conversations about AI-assisted drafting to foster transparency, trust, and shared understanding. Establishing clear expectations for responsible AI use can help ensure that technology enhances, rather than replaces, professional expertise. As part of these practices, staff should be required to use de-identified information, removing personally identifiable data such as student names, addresses, dates of birth, and disability classifications, when developing prompts, to focus on data that supports educational planning and protects student privacy and confidentiality.

How AI Changes the Work

AI tools can serve as a valuable resource for helping educators draft, refine, and strengthen components of a student's IEP, creating opportunities to increase efficiency while maintaining a strong focus on individualized student outcomes. As with any instructional or planning support tool, educators need to apply their professional expertise to review, customize, and finalize all AI-assisted content so that it reflects students' unique strengths, needs, and educational priorities.

When using AI-generated or AI-revised content, educators can leverage their knowledge of federal, state, and local requirements, SEA and LEA expectations, and best practices for high-quality IEP development to confirm that the final product aligns with applicable standards and Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound (SMART) goal criteria. AI-generated content is most effective when informed by accurate present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, evaluation findings, progress monitoring data, and the vision established by the IEP team.

AI can also help educators explore ideas, organize information, and generate draft language; however, the greatest value comes from combining AI-generated suggestions with professional judgment and student-specific data. For example, educators can review AI-generated goals to confirm that they are directly connected to identified needs, baseline data, and desired outcomes, making adjustments as appropriate to strengthen alignment and relevance for the individual student.



By integrating AI into the IEP development process, educators can enhance productivity while maintaining a strong commitment to individualized planning. Qualified personnel remain central to the process, using their expertise to review, refine, and approve all content before it is incorporated into an IEP, helping technology serve as a support for, rather than a substitute for, the collaborative work of developing meaningful educational programs for students.

What Responsible Adoption Looks Like

As LEAs integrate AI tools into the development of IEPs and related special education documentation, establishing thoughtful review processes can support high-quality, student-centered outcomes. Following the use of AI to draft, revise, or organize content, LEAs should incorporate peer review or secondary review practices to strengthen alignment with student data, evaluation findings, present levels of performance, IEP team decisions, and applicable federal, state, and local guidance. These collaborative review opportunities can help promote consistency, accuracy, and shared ownership of the final product.

LEAs should also determine whether additional documentation or disclosure practices are appropriate when AI tools are used in the development of an IEP or Prior Written Notice. Any disclosure should clearly communicate that AI was used solely as a drafting support tool and that all educational decisions remained under the authority of qualified educators and the IEP team.

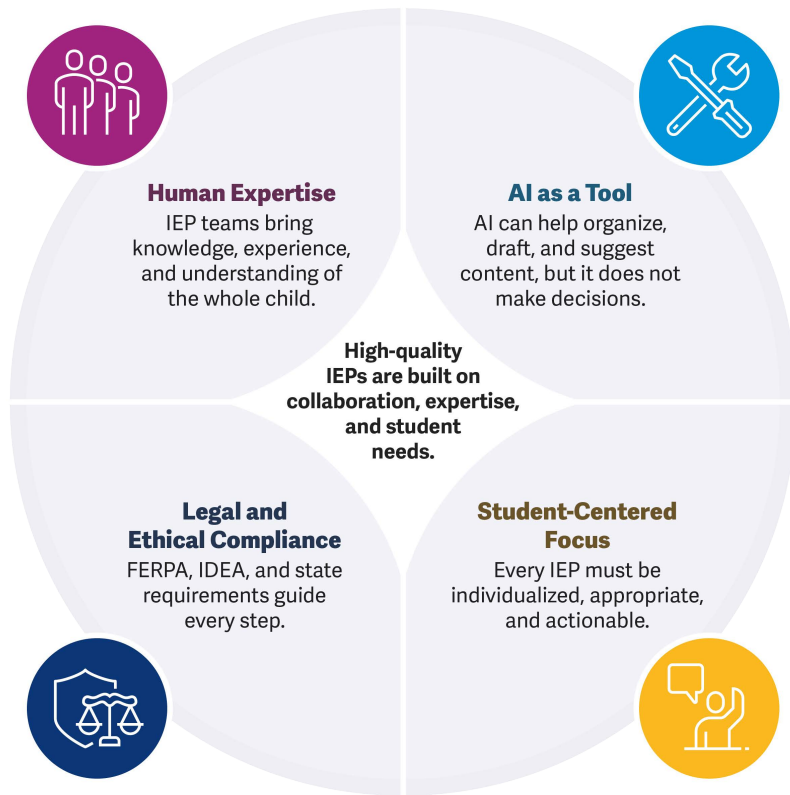
An AI Disclosure Example:

"Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to support the drafting, revision, or organization of portions of this document. The use of AI was limited to assisting with written expression, clarity, formatting, and/or organization and did not replace the professional judgment, analysis, or decision-making responsibilities of the IEP team. All student-specific information, educational data, recommendations, services, supports, and proposed actions were reviewed, verified, and approved by appropriate LEA personnel and IEP team members. The IEP team remains solely responsible for ensuring that this document is individualized, accurate, educationally appropriate, and compliant with all applicable federal, state, and local requirements."

The use of AI does not alter the LEA's responsibility to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) or compliance with IDEA and state special education regulations. All final decisions, determinations, services, supports, placements, and educational recommendations should be made by the IEP team based on the student's unique needs and the team's professional judgment. AI-generated content should be viewed only as a preliminary drafting aid and must never be accepted without human review, validation, and approval.

By combining the efficiency of AI with the knowledge and experience of special education professionals, LEAs can leverage technology to support high-quality documentation while keeping student-centered decision-making at the heart of the process.

AI as a Support, Not a Substitute *Using Artificial Intelligence Responsibly in IEP Development*



Guiding Principles



Collaborate

AI should enhance teamwork, not replace it.



Protect

Safeguard student data, privacy, and confidentiality at all times.



Verify

Always review, fact-check, and ensure accuracy.



Ensure Equity

Use AI in ways that promote access, fairness, and inclusive outcomes.



Own the Outcome

The LEA and IEP team retain full responsibility for the final IEP.

AI can support the process.
The IEP team leads with purpose.

When used responsibly, AI can save time and enhance document quality so educators can focus on what matters most: students and their success.

To support districts and schools in using AI to develop IEPs and other student-related documents, Public Consulting Group has created the following checklist of considerations. This checklist is intended to help districts recognize the importance of thoughtful AI use and ensure that AI is being used in an ethical and responsible manner.

Preparing

- ☐ Clarify purpose of AI use (drafting, revising, translating)
- ☐ Understand the limitations of whatever AI tool you are using; most open-source or free tools are based upon national data and may not reflect state or local context
- ☐ Be clear on the state and LEA data privacy and AI usage policies
- ☐ Where available, verify whether the tool you are using is on an approved list by your LEA
- ☐ Understand whether the data you provide is used to train AI models; assume all prompts and searches are public and will be used for further model refinement unless otherwise stated
- ☐ Anticipate how stakeholders may feel about the use of AI in IEP creation and be prepared to address their concerns thoughtfully
- ☐ Develop prompts that are de-identified while still providing enough context to generate meaningful outputs
- ☐ Ensure personable, provable student data is already included in the relevant sections of the IEP
- ☐ Use current data drawn from multiple sources

Employing

- ☐ Review outputs to confirm they reflect individualized student needs
- ☐ Check for alignment between current performance and goals/objectives
- ☐ Make sure all SMART components are included in AI-generated goals
- ☐ Check that all goals are measurable and outline how progress will be monitored
- ☐ Ensure the language is parent-friendly and easy to understand
- ☐ Confirm the wording fits your district's terminology and vernacular
- ☐ Include student strengths and needs, specific to the individual student
- ☐ Avoid generic or overly broad accommodation lists
- ☐ Review for bias, inappropriate assumptions, and stigmatizing language

Quality Checking

- ☐ Verify all AI-generated content for accuracy
- ☐ Adjust, edit, or reject AI-generated content as needed
- ☐ Make sure data and dates are not copied or pasted incorrectly
- ☐ Add a disclaimer if AI was used for revision and document how AI was used (generation vs revision)
- ☐ Consider having 1–2 peer reviewers review the draft
- ☐ Have peer reviewers check alignment of baseline data, goals/objectives, services, and supports
- ☐ Confirm the IEP team makes final decisions
- ☐ Maintain internal documentation of AI tool use and review process
- ☐ Confirm alignment with IDEA requirements and individualization

Human Oversight



Preparing

- Clarify purpose
- No PII (Personally Identifiable Information)
- Use current, verifiable student data
- AI-generated vs. AI-revised



Employing

- Individualize content
- Align goals to data
- Check SMART goals
- Parent-friendly language
- Match district terminology
- Review for bias



Quality Checking

- Verify accuracy
- Edit or reject as needed
- Check dates/data
- Document AI use
- Peer review
- Final Decisions by IEP team
- Collect data and monitor student progress

Accountability for the content of an IEP cannot be delegated to an AI system. Regardless of the tools used during the drafting process, the LEA and IEP team retain full responsibility for the accuracy, appropriateness, legality, and individualization of the final document.

About the Authors



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Dr. Jennifer Baribeau is a Senior Managing Education Advisor at Public Consulting Group with more than 12 years of leadership experience in special education. She has led over 20 district and state reviews focused on program evaluation, IEP quality, inclusive practices, staffing models, behavioral supports, and strategic improvement planning. Jennifer contributes to PCG's Special Education Thought Leadership work and supports Progress Track, a national product line, through EDPlan360's wraparound approach to technology implementation and change management. A former district leader in Massachusetts and Connecticut, she has taught graduate courses at Harvard, UMass Amherst, and Springfield College. She holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.



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Mr. Klett is an Advisor at Public Consulting Group with more than 17 years of experience improving special education systems, policy, compliance, operations, and instructional practice. Previously, he held leadership roles with the Texas Education Agency and Denver Public Schools, where he led statewide monitoring and technical assistance initiatives focused on student outcomes, inclusive practices, and significant disproportionality. He has also developed special education teacher training programs and taught graduate courses at the University of Denver. He holds an M.A. in Educational Psychology from the University of Northern Colorado and a B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.



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To learn more about how PCG can help your district strengthen IEP Quality and compliance, please contact us today.



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