

Legal Brief

Misperceptions and Facts About Specially Designed Instruction



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Meeting the needs of students with autism and developmental disabilities in schools can be a complex task. Special education teachers, general education teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals may each play a part in providing special education services to ensure that a student is supported to learn and make progress in the general education curriculum. Current school practices and procedures combined with misperceptions that are intentionally or unintentionally propagated can impact the way educators view and interpret what the law says about the provision of special education services.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines special education as “specially designed instruction (SDI), at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.” The core of special education is SDI. So how does IDEA define SDI? According to IDEA Section 1401,

“(3) Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction—

(i) To address the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability; and

(ii) To ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children.”

Educators should be equipped with strategies on how

to adapt the content, methodology, and delivery of instruction in a way that meets the needs of students with disabilities and ensures that they can meet general education curriculum standards.

Importance of SDI

Providing high quality SDI to students with autism and developmental disabilities (and students with disabilities in general) is essential to ensuring that their needs are met and that they have access to the general education curriculum (Sabia et al., 2020). For students with autism and developmental disabilities, SDI can include many instructional strategies, such as simplifying content, the provision of systematic instruction and prompting, and the use of visual aids in instruction.

Equally important as the strategies that could be incorporated into SDI, however, is clarity on how SDI fits into the larger context of the school: Who can implement SDI? Where can it be implemented? How does it relate to other instructional frameworks like multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) or universal design for learning (UDL)? Ambiguity on the answers to these questions can lead to very real misperceptions that translate into rigid and potentially harmful implementation of SDI by education staff at the state, district, and school level.

Misperceptions and Facts

Misperception: Because it is a special education mandate, SDI cannot be delivered in a general education classroom.

Fact: IDEA does not mandate where SDI is delivered.

The goal of IDEA is to support students in inclusive settings whenever possible. This means that SDI can be delivered anywhere as long as it aligns with the students’ Individualized Education Program (IEP) and their least restrictive environment (PROGRESS Center, 2020). If SDI could only be delivered in special education classrooms, then SDI would be antithetical to the intent of the law and the least restrictive environment.

Misperception: SDI must be delivered by a

special education teacher because they are the one trained in educating students with disabilities.

Fact: SDI should be planned by a special education teacher but, in many cases, can be delivered by any school staff.

General education and special education teachers often work collaboratively to plan and implement SDI. In an inclusive classroom, general education teachers may provide SDI alongside their standard instruction, with support from special education teachers and other professionals (Sabia & Thurlow, 2022; Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction et al., 2021). This collaborative approach allows for the sharing of expertise and resources, allowing students with disabilities to be supported effectively throughout their day by multiple educators.

Misperception: SDI is not the same as universal design for learning (UDL) or differentiated instruction.

Fact: SDI, UDL, and differentiated instruction are all used to increase access to learning (IRIS Center & TIES Center, 2022).

Sometimes, UDL and differentiated instruction may include strategies that might be related to a student's needed SDI. Teachers are encouraged to differentiate or universally design their instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students. SDI is essentially a form of differentiation. In classrooms where UDL is used, students with disabilities may require fewer individualized supports because planning for a wide variety of learners is built into instruction for all learners. Teachers should be skilled in adapting their teaching methods to address the unique needs of each student.

Misperception: In a multitiered system of support, SDI would be considered tier 3, because that is special education.

Fact: In MTSS, SDI should be delivered, as needed, in any tier of instruction that the student with disability receives (Thurlow et al., 2020).

All students should receive Tier 1 instruction, where students with disabilities will likely require SDI to ensure

that their instruction is accessible and effective.

Conclusion

Education teams require knowledge and skill in the strategies needed to implement SDI and meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, they also require knowledge in how SDI fits into the larger school context to enable their SDI to be effective in meeting the students' needs so they can make progress in the general education curriculum. District and school leaders may need to analyze and address potential misperceptions to ensure that students with disabilities are provided high quality special education services in their least restrictive environment.

References & Resources

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