

Participation in General Education: From Compliance to Inclusion

A Practical Guide for Educators and Teams

Introduction

The Participation in the General Education Setting section of the IEP is not just a compliance checkbox. It is the heart of a student's right to access meaningful learning and social opportunities alongside peers. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students must be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.

Effective participation language in an IEP should reflect a commitment to inclusion, backed by specific supports and a clear rationale for any time spent outside the general education classroom. This worksheet provides tools, checklists, and examples that you can apply in your next IEP meeting or classroom planning session.

Educational Model vs. Clinical/Medical Model

Educational Model (Public School Lens)	Clinical/Medical Model
Focuses on effective educational progress within the general curriculum.	Focuses on diagnosis, impairment, and medical treatment.
Defines success through growth in academic, social, emotional, and functional skills in the school context.	Defines success through symptom reduction or meeting developmental milestones.
Uses instructional accommodations, modifications, and supports to promote access.	Uses therapeutic interventions as the primary means of addressing needs.
Seeks to maintain student in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with peers.	Often assumes specialized or segregated settings may be necessary for treatment.
Collaborative decision-making with educators, specialists, and families centered on the student's school functioning.	Decision-making centered on medical expertise and treatment plans.

Key takeaway: In public education, the standard is not “normal functioning”, but rather it is providing support and services that allow the student to make meaningful progress in the general education curriculum.

Inclusive Practice Checklist:

- The IEP describes specific accommodations and supports for participation in general education.
- Removal from general education is justified with clear, specific reasons tied to the student’s needs.
- Co-teaching, push-in support, or collaborative planning is used before considering pull-out.
- Social participation (lunch, recess, clubs, electives) is intentionally planned and documented.
- General education teachers receive written and verbal briefings on accommodations and supports.
- Assistive technology and supplementary aids are identified and implemented.
- Planning includes ongoing collaboration between general and special education staff.

Examples of Accommodations and Supports for Inclusion

Instructional Supports

- Teacher-provided graphic organizers
- Pre-teaching of key vocabulary
- Breaking multi-step tasks into smaller steps

Environmental Supports

- Preferential seating
- Noise-reducing headphones
- Access to movement breaks

Social-Emotional Supports

- Peer mentoring or buddy system

- Scheduled check-ins with a support staff member
- Social stories or role-play for upcoming activities

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Pitfall	Better Practice
“Student will participate in general education.” (no detail)	Specify how and with what supports — e.g., “Student will participate in general education math with visual supports, graphic organizers, and peer note-sharing.”
Removing the student without trying accommodations first.	Exhaust supplementary aids and services before considering removal.
Ignoring social participation opportunities.	Intentionally include lunch, recess, field trips, and clubs in the participation plan.

Sample Advocacy Scripts

In an IEP Meeting:

“Before we consider removal from general education, can we review the accommodations and supports that have already been tried, and discuss if there are additional strategies we can implement in the general setting?”

With a General Education Teacher:

“This student’s IEP lists a push-in support during science. Let’s look at upcoming lessons to identify where I can model accommodations or provide in-class assistance.”

With a Parent:

Our goal is for your child to be included with peers as much as possible. Here’s how we can make that happen while still meeting their unique learning needs.

Action Starter: Things You Can Try Tomorrow

- Review one student’s IEP “Participation in General Education” section. Highlight any vague statements and re-write them with specific supports, settings, and rationale.

- Schedule a 15-minute meeting between the general and special education teacher to plan inclusion supports for the next unit.
- Identify one new supplementary aid or service you can introduce in the general setting before considering pull-out.