

Updated Guidance on Lesson Planning for Speech-Language Specialists (SLSs)

Aligned with Current New Jersey Standards and Practice

While lesson plan requirements are governed by individual district contracts, the New Jersey Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NJSHA) supports purposeful planning of speech-language therapy prior to service delivery. Advance planning promotes effective therapy, ensures alignment with IEP goals and objectives, and supports high-quality services for students with disabilities.

In many districts, lesson plans are required of instructional staff within timelines established by collective bargaining agreements. Speech-Language Specialists (SLSs), as related service providers, often comply with planning expectations that reflect the nature of their services rather than traditional classroom instruction. Planning expectations for SLSs should therefore be reasonable, appropriate, and reflective of their distinct role.

Distinction Between Instruction and Related Services

SLSs in New Jersey are certified under the Educational Services Certificate, not an instructional certificate. As recognized by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) in both certification and evaluation frameworks, SLSs provide therapy services, not curriculum-based instruction. This distinction is embedded in:

- N.J.A.C. 6A:14 (Special Education Code)
- NJ Educator Evaluation System (NJEEES)
- Federal IDEA requirements governing related services

Teachers develop lesson plans that address curricular goals applicable to all students in a class. In contrast, SLSs address IEP goals and objectives, which vary within therapy groups and are designed to support students' access to and progress in the general education curriculum, not to teach the curriculum itself.

Appropriate Formats for SLS Planning

Given the individualized nature of speech-language therapy, lesson plan formats used by classroom teachers are often ill-suited to SLS practice. A single therapy session may target multiple students, each with distinct IEP goals; a group of up to five students may involve ten or more individualized objectives within one session.

Requiring SLSs to use whole-class instructional lesson plan templates is:

- Redundant, as IEP goals are already formally documented
- Inefficient and burdensome
- Misaligned with the therapeutic service delivery model

- Inconsistent with Medicaid documentation requirements

Planning documentation for SLSs should therefore focus on the salient elements of therapy, including:

- Procedures and strategies
- Materials and supports
- Data collection and progress monitoring
- Home practice or carryover activities

This approach demonstrates advance planning while recognizing the complexity and individualized nature of related services.

Alignment with Medicaid and Accountability Requirements

Many New Jersey districts participate in the Medicaid School-Based Services Program (MSBSP) under NJ FamilyCare/Medicaid. Medicaid regulations require individualized documentation of services provided on specific dates, including progress toward IEP goals.

Maintaining individual session logs or student-based documentation:

- Supports Medicaid reimbursement
- Ensures compliance with healthcare documentation standards
- Facilitates progress monitoring and data-based decision-making
- Demonstrates provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Requiring both teacher-style group lesson plans and individualized Medicaid documentation would significantly reduce time available for legally mandated responsibilities such as evaluations, observations, IEP meetings, progress reporting, and compliance activities. Moreover, failure to adhere to Medicaid documentation standards may place districts at risk for audit findings or allegations of noncompliance.

Professional Collaboration and Contractual Considerations

If concerns regarding lesson plan formats arise, SLSs are encouraged to engage in collaborative discussions with administrators and to keep their education association (union) informed. These conversations should emphasize:

- The legal requirement that services be driven by IEP goals
- The distinction between instructional planning and therapeutic planning
- The contractual nature of lesson plan requirements
- Medicaid documentation obligations applicable to related services

Unions and administrators should also consider whether other instructional staff, such as school psychologists, social workers, or guidance counselors, are being required to submit lesson plans using teacher formats. As members of the same certification category, consistency in expectations across related services is both appropriate and necessary.

Ongoing education of administrators and union leadership regarding the role and responsibilities of SLSs is essential to ensure policies remain legally sound, educationally appropriate, and administratively feasible.

Current State Requirements

At this time, there is no statewide NJDOE mandate prescribing lesson plan formats for Speech-Language Specialists. Planning requirements remain a local, contractual matter and should reflect the nature of the services provided.

NJSHA encourages members to notify the School Affairs Committee of any new or conflicting guidance related to lesson planning expectations for SLSs, so that emerging issues can be monitored and addressed.