

The Goldilocks Approach to Moving from the Alternate to the General Assessment: Ensuring 'Just Right' Placement Changes for Students with Disabilities

A School Leader's Decision-Making Tool

Introduction

Evidence¹ shows that when Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams switch students from the state alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) to the state general assessment, they may also change a student's placement from a separate special education classroom to a general education classroom to ensure robust access to grade-level academic content standards based on the grade-level academic achievement expectations. Once this change in placement determination has occurred, the team may change the student's class schedule. The manner of change may occur abruptly, over an extended period, or somewhere in between.

The Goldilocks Principle is known as the “just right” concept. When considering the transition of a student from one placement to another, the IEP team does not want to transition the student abruptly, i.e., “too hot,” or too slowly, i.e., “too cold.” Instead, a team may consider how to transition a student that is neither “too hot” nor “too cold” but “just right” to ensure that they have access to their state's academic content standards and rigorous learning in a timely manner, as well as the support and preparation they need to be successful.

This resource highlights how instructional teams, with the support of school personnel, can prepare students, general education classroom teachers, related service providers, and families or guardians for placement transitions using the Goldilocks Principle. All students have varying needs, so no one approach will work for every student, and there is no universal timeline for implementation. Use this resource to guide your discussion on individualizing for each student.

¹Bowman, J. A., Ghore, G. S., Sommerness, J. E., & Lazarus, S. S. (2024). *A mixed methods study on teaching students who moved from the AA-AAAS to general state assessment* (MIDAS Report 102). Making Improved Decisions for Students on the Cusp of Alternate Assessment Participation Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement from Multiple Sources (MIDAS).

The Goldilocks Approach

Preparation of...	"Too Hot" Transition	"Just Right" Transition	"Too Cold" Transition
The Family or Guardian	The family or guardian is notified for the first time during an IEP team meeting of a change in placement, effective immediately.	<p>After notifying the family or guardian in an IEP meeting, school personnel share the latest information, such as the name(s) of the new teacher(s), changes to schedule or transportation, resources on instructional and assessment expectations, and technology/software needs.</p> <p>New teachers send a welcome message or email to the family or guardian.</p>	School personnel and families or guardians engage in extensive back-and-forth discussions of the change of placement, and the family or guardian experiences short trials in general education classes and switching back and forth between self-contained classrooms and general education classrooms.
The Student	The student is given a quick heads-up that they are going to be in a different class next week.	<p>School staff discuss the transition in a way the student understands.</p> <p>The student gradually transitions into the general education classroom for more parts of their day.</p> <p>Supports include an introduction to classroom rules and routines, a peer mentor, regular academic and informal check-ins with the general and special education teachers, a visual schedule of the day, a classroom routine checklist for reference, and, if applicable, the addition and teaching of new vocabulary to the student's augmentative and alternative communication system.</p>	School staff wait to transition the student until the student masters one more academic or behavioral goal and until the student shows that they are "ready" for the pacing of a general education class.

Preparation of...	"Too Hot" Transition	"Just Right" Transition	"Too Cold" Transition
The Instructional Team	Instructional responsibilities shift immediately after the IEP meeting decision to change placement	<p>The team identifies supports that the student needs to succeed in the general education classroom and begins implementing them in the planned period that best meets the needs of the student (e.g., 2-3 weeks). A plan is in place to revise the identified supports, as needed, so the student is comfortable and successful.</p> <p>The team reviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past special education support and effectiveness • General education content • New learning environment(s) • New routines that need to be followed • Barriers to learning (e.g., reading at a lower reading level) • Solutions (e.g., digital text availability) 	The transition is delayed until the teachers feel ready, the team knows there is training and support entirely in place, and the supports are used with fidelity 100% of the time.
The General Education Classroom	There is a desk or space available for the student.	The student transitions once they have a desk, are on the class roster and enrolled in relevant class(es) in learning management systems, have met a few peers, have visual and communication supports (e.g., core board posted in the classroom, visual schedule), accessible classroom materials (e.g., audiobooks, assistive technology), and mobility supports available (e.g., classroom is accessible, orientation and mobility supports necessary for	<p>The classroom is not ready for the student until:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some unspecified time in the future when everyone is "ready." • The master schedule allows for weekly co-planning between general and special education teachers. • The entire school is trained in

Preparation of...	"Too Hot" Transition	"Just Right" Transition	"Too Cold" Transition
		students who are blind/visually impaired or who use a wheelchair or other mobility assists).	special education compliance and universal design principles.

"Just Right" Transition Checklist

- ☐ Share the latest information with family or guardian
 - ☐ Name and contact information of new teacher(s)
 - ☐ Changes to schedule or transportation
 - ☐ Resources on instructional and assessment expectations
 - ☐ Technology/software needs
 - ☐ How the general – special education team will support the student
 - ☐ How the IEP team is preparing the student for the transition
- ☐ Discuss the transition with the student in a way they can understand
- ☐ Create the student's new schedule
- ☐ Ensure the student is on the general education teacher class roster
- ☐ Ensure all instructional team teachers have access to the student's online learning platform (if present) and assessment data
- ☐ Plan for gradual change of the student's daily schedule, including structured and unstructured times
 - ☐ If in elementary school, join the class for lunch or recess
 - ☐ Join the new class(es) for a brief period of class time
 - ☐ Transition to a brief time of the day in general education classroom(s)
 - ☐ Transition to a longer time of the day in the general education classroom(s)
- ☐ Develop collaborative structures for teachers
- ☐ Identify professional learning needs to communicate to the principal
- ☐ Assign the student to a desk
- ☐ Assign the student to any devices and materials provided to other students in the classroom (e.g., tablets, laptops, textbooks)
- ☐ Provide instructions and practice time for the student to gain familiarity with new devices and materials
- ☐ Introduce the student to a few classmates
- ☐ Identify and prepare a peer mentor
- ☐ Plan and begin to implement structures and supports to use in the general education classrooms
- ☐ Ensure IEP supports are in place

- ☐ Visual and communication supports
- ☐ Accessible classroom materials
- ☐ Orientation and mobility supports
- ☐ Other instructional and assessment accommodations

Conclusion

The Goldilocks Approach provides teams with a practical tool for making thoughtful, individualized decisions when transitioning students with disabilities from alternate to general assessments and classroom settings. By avoiding transitions that are either too abrupt (“too hot”) or unnecessarily delayed (“too cold”), IEP teams can implement “just right” changes that balance moving quickly with being prepared. This approach recognizes that while students need timely access to grade-level content and challenging learning opportunities, they also need the right supports, advance preparation, and gradual integration to ensure success in their new learning environment.

Effective use of this tool requires collaboration among everyone involved —families, students, general education teachers, special education teachers, and other school leaders—to systematically address all aspects of placement transitions. The Goldilocks tool offers clear guidance for preparing students, teachers, and classrooms while avoiding common pitfalls such as last-minute changes or endless delays. By using this resource to individualize transition plans, schools can honor both the legal right of students with disabilities to access the general curriculum and their need for appropriate support.

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