

# FAQs – The Statewide IEP

April 2006, Volume 1

## 1. What is the statewide online IEP project?

The State of Florida has made a policy decision to require all school districts to follow a standardized format for implementing the requirements of state statutes and rules and federal law and regulations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004]) for individual educational plans (IEPs). This policy decision is supported by recommendations of the 2005 Paper Reduction Task Force that recommended the implementation of a statewide, pre-populated, online IEP as a mechanism to reduce paperwork burdens (and thus increase instructional time) for teachers.

Beginning in early 2005 the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services of the Department of Education has facilitated discussions of a Statewide IEP Task Force, consisting of school district and parent representatives and other agencies. The Task Force recommended components of a statewide, online IEP that meet the requirements of state and federal law, reviewed current online systems available in Florida, and identified the data elements that currently are reported through other reporting mechanisms.

The initial rollout of the online format through Sunshine Connections (SC) is intended to leverage the assistance of up to twelve designated districts to test the IEP format, and allow for all other districts to migrate current systems and prepare for full statewide implementation.

## 2. What is Sunshine Connections?

Sunshine Connections (SC) is a uniquely tailored web-based tool that links together all resources needed every day by teachers to provide targeted instructional services around the specific needs of each and every student in the class, at every level, while reducing teacher time spent on paperwork.

## 3. Why is the state requiring one standard IEP format?

Standardization of a Statewide IEP format will provide several benefits:

- The components of the Statewide IEP will be limited to only those requirements of Florida Statutes and rules and federal law and regulations, thereby limiting the scope of the legal document to required elements.
- Once converted to electronic form, the system will allow automatic pre-population of some portions of the IEP from existing state and local data systems (such as student demographic information, assessment data, etc).
- Students' IEPs will easily and seamlessly transfer with students who move among Florida schools, teachers, and districts, thus eliminating lag time associated with student movement.
- Teachers and parents will have a consistent IEP format regardless of where in the state they are located, making communication and understanding easier, particularly for transient families.
- One format will facilitate state efforts to assist districts in training and compliance monitoring.

## 4. What if our school district has an existing IEP solution?

The initial rollout of the online IEP format will work best in districts that do not currently have an online solution. Most school districts, however, either have contracted with a vendor for an IEP solution or have designed their own unique online systems. Components of these systems vary

widely across the state, with some districts requiring more information on local systems than is required by IDEA 2004 and state rules.

Each district may receive guidance and assistance to link unique local systems with the SC environment. It may be necessary to migrate data from local IEP systems into the new centralized IEP system in SC on a phase-in basis.

The web services layer of SC will integrate local and central IEP data based on general standards of exchange. Local adapters may be needed for exchange, such as XML, and possible Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF). 'Local adapters' is what we are calling the IEP Data Connection. It is a translation program that can accept data from the district's own IEP and/or SIS system, and translate it into a form that the IEP Web system can use, and vice-versa. Those districts running common data systems, like SQL, may already have adapters built into their software that we can connect to. Other districts that use other vendors' databases will need to either have an adapter created especially for them, or may have one already available from their vendor. Each district will be evaluated as to what will need to be done to create or connect to an adapter. Once all districts have working local adapters, the adapters can be programmed to work in the background, without any human intervention, in the 'web services layer.'

## **5. How will the IEP project be rolled out?**

The IEP project will be rolled out to designated districts during the 2006-07 academic year and then to all remaining districts. Districts that participate in the initial rollout of the online IEP project will be required to have access to the Sunshine Connections environment prior to July 1, 2006 in order for the exchange of data that pre-populates portions of the IEP to be functional. Districts must also agree to use the online IEP as its only source of the IEP for the 2006-07 year; and agree to serve as a pilot district for purposes of testing the Statewide IEP as part of the SC project.

All other districts will have access to standard templates that can be downloaded, printed and used; have access to stand-alone templates that can be used on desktop and laptop equipment to practice using the templates; and be on a schedule to migrate current systems and practices into the Sunshine Connections environment to secure statewide rollout of the state template.

We will provide a PDF of the IEP form that will be on the IEP Web system for data entry. Districts can get into the public SC site and download the PDF. If districts have the proper Adobe software, they can use it to fill in and print forms on the computer. We are looking at a portable version of the IEP Web system for those users without a connection to the Internet. It will require web server software that is available commercially, and a desktop computer that can run the web server and use our IEP format. The portable system will create a file of data that the user can then save to a disk and mail, or use a dial-up Internet connection to email it to the IEP Data Depository, where it will be imported into the Statewide IEP database. We will have some limited reporting capabilities on the portable system – districts will be able to print the IEP for signature and storage, but not much more for fall. Those districts using the portable system will get first priority for planning to get onto the web system as soon as possible.

## **6. What is the overall design being used for the IEP?**

The initial rollout of the Statewide IEP will be through a unique web presence built from an infrastructure supported with a SQL Server back end data environment and .NET (dot Net) user interface. The program will be a separate interface accessible through the restricted area of SC specific to the roles defined through the login process. This type of architecture will require the

use of XML web services to communicate between systems and connect for purposes of data transfer.

**7. How will teachers access the online IEP?**

The state's new online web-based resource for teachers called "Sunshine Connections" (SC) will serve as the main portal to the IEP. Eventually many functions available at the district level, will occur with only one login to SC that will enable the teacher access to all district resources. The automated, pre-populated version of the Statewide IEP will be available only to those districts that volunteer to both be online with SC and to serve as test districts for the initial release of the online IEP.

**8. Are roles and securities part of SC?**

Yes. Currently SC has three pre-defined roles: (1) "primary" teacher role linked to individual class rosters, (2) "principal" role linked to data for all students in that school (also used for guidance counselors, etc.), and (3) "superintendent" role linked to summary data respective to individual schools. All data associated with the three roles are reported to SC by the district. Additional personnel roles will be added to support the IEP process.

For purposes of the IEP the teacher and principal roles are most relevant, however, SC will (by the Back-to-School 2006 Release) provide district administrators with the ability to assign specialized roles outside the three primary roles as determined necessary.

**9. How does a centralized Statewide IEP intend to communicate the data needed by districts?**

The Statewide IEP will be based on the IEP elements required by state statutes and rules and federal law (IDEA 2004) and regulations, so the data elements of the IEP are secured at that level. The SQL Server data environment will provide data storage for state and local data required for the standardized IEP. The IEP will be incorporated into SC in order to leverage the ability of its communication and connection systems, and to pull in data available both at the state and local levels to pre-populate some components of the IEP. The interface of SC (for state data) and the IEP component (for additional local data not regularly reported to the state) will engage the variety of student information systems implemented across the state; active local participation in this effort will be imperative to link each district to the system.

**10. How will the exchange of data and information occur?**

SC currently maximizes the data provided by school districts through existing reporting mechanisms, in particular through the six surveys collected through the year, to pull data associated with teacher and student data. In order for more "live" data to be exchanged, the SC and the districts will be provided with directions for adapters or agents that will reside at the local level. To the extent possible, SC will be used as the one point of contact for the depository of district uploads to avoid duplicate or excessive reporting.

**11. What technologies will be needed to exchange data between the districts and the state?**

"Dot Net" (.Net) technology with XML web services will be used to integrate local data with centralized IEP data in the SQL Server database environment. Web services adapters at the districts do not have to be written in .Net; they could be written in Java if that is the local development platform of choice because we are using standard XML and possible SIF.

Sunshine Connections will leverage the server farm provided at the state level and the environment of SC to make data available only to authenticated users.

Implementation of a Statewide IEP will require the successful integration of data from both the state and local levels to ensure all information is up-to-date. SC is intended as the interface that links depositories of state (typically longitudinal data) and local (typically within the current year) data about students into one place for user interface. State data can be easily pulled, but linking to “live” or current local data will be dependent on district protocol.

**12. What data will the state use to populate IEPs?**

Data reports used for SC are aligned with regular state reporting requirements; however, some adjustments may be needed in the future to ensure robust data for exchange across districts.

Florida requires six district data submissions: Survey 1 in July; Survey 2 in October (used for funding and accountability purposes); Survey 3 in February (used for funding and accountability purposes); Survey 4 in June; Survey 5 in August and Survey 9 in December.

For the IEP, about half of the pre-populated data will come from the state while the other half of the data will be unique to each student and each district system.

**13. Will the online IEP meet all federal and state requirements, including signatures?**

Yes. The online IEP is being created consistent with both state and federal requirements, including the ability to print documents for signature as is required by federal law. The Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services will make standardized forms available as part of this development process.

**14. What happens if the data that pre-populates the IEP is incorrect for my students?**

The system will provide an opportunity for teachers to note and flag for district administrators any inconsistencies or problems. The initial designated districts are specifically expected to assist with identification of these problems.

**15. How will the reliability of student data in the IEP be maintained?**

Sunshine Connections is built on a system of trust that bridges communication between state and local data systems. About half of the student data for an IEP comes from the state (previous year FCAT data, demographic data, etc) with the other half coming from local systems (current contact information, current test information, students needs, etc.). The IEP will not pre-populate data derived by IEP teams, such as curricular needs.

To ensure quality data on every student’s IEP, the system will establish a standard protocol of regular uploads of information and data as defined by the project. School districts currently push data through FTP (file transfer protocol, a standard way to transmit data over the Internet) files to ensure data accuracy. Districts will be responsible for maintenance and the regular upload of student data and records.