

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)

Michigan practice under MDE Office of Special Education guidance, IDEA, and controlling case law

MDE OSE • IDEA • 6th Circuit / U.S. Supreme Court

For educators, administrators, and IEP teams

Core message: SDI is not a place or a worksheet change. It is individualized instruction, written into the IEP, designed to address disability-related need and enable progress in the general curriculum.



What SDI is under IDEA and Michigan rules

Federal law and Michigan rules align: special education means specially designed instruction at no cost to parents, meeting unique disability-related needs.

34 C.F.R. § 300.39 defines SDI as adapting the **content, methodology, or delivery** of instruction to address the child's unique needs and ensure access to the general curriculum.

Michigan MARSE uses the same core definition and adds that special education is meant to develop the student's maximum potential.

In practice: SDI = individualized instruction, not a location

This is why a district cannot satisfy SDI with generic interventions, a program label, or a schedule alone.



Guidance Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)

Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education
January 2026

This guidance outlines the requirements for specially designed instruction (SDI) to support individualized education program (IEP) Teams, which include parents, in the development of IEPs. Providing specially designed instruction is a necessary component of delivering a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to a student with a disability. This guidance supports compliance with the substantive requirements of ensuring students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate. This guidance also emphasizes the importance of supporting students in making progress in the general education curriculum that is appropriate in light of each student's individual circumstances.

What is SDI?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE) define special education services as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability [34 CFR §300.39](#) and [3160.1201](#). Specially designed instruction means adapting instruction, as appropriate, to meet the needs of a student with an IEP. This includes adapting the content, methodology, and/or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the student while ensuring student access to the general education curriculum (34 CFR §300.39(b)(3)).

SDI is the vehicle to ensure a student with a disability receives high-quality instruction and services that will result in progress toward academic and functional standards to support graduation and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.



Guidance

Appropriate Placement in Special Education Settings

Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education (MDE OSE)
September 2024

Special Education Program Placement

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a civil rights law that guarantees a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to each eligible student with a disability. FAPE includes the delivery of specially designed instruction by "qualified personnel," which is defined as someone who is "appropriately and adequately prepared and trained, including those personnel who have the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities."

The Michigan Compiled Laws (MCL), the Michigan Teacher Certification Code, and the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE) collectively establish the qualifications for special education personnel and also set preparation and training standards to ensure these personnel possess both content knowledge and skills.

Ensuring an appropriately and adequately prepared and trained educator with content knowledge and skills is assigned to teach in each Michigan classroom is critical to student achievement and foundational to improving outcomes for students with disabilities. The purpose of this document is to aide district and building leaders in understanding legal requirements as they pertain to special education personnel so they can make appropriate decisions regarding placement of personnel in special education programs, which guarantees students with disabilities will receive specially designed instruction from qualified personnel.



Understanding SDI: What It Is and What It Isn't

SDI is ...	SDI isn't ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Explicit, focused, and systematic instruction to help the student master IEP goals and objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What a student needs to do or complete (i.e., homework or assignments, etc.).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A service based on data to address the unique needs of the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A place or schedule.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Instruction that allows a student with a disability to meaningfully access the general education curriculum and demonstrate proficiency on the same content standards as their peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A restatement of the grade-level content standards being taught.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Instruction grounded in valid research, evidence-based practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A commercial program, a particular methodology, or any specific content.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">In addition to general education, not in lieu of (Supplement).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">In place of general education core instruction (Supplant).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individualized to the unique needs of the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A justification for setting low expectations or teaching below grade level.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Based on teaching specific skills a student does not have.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Simply providing support or accommodations/modifications.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Unique instruction written into the IEP.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">MTSS Tier 3.

Why SDI is Provided to Students with Disabilities?

All students with disabilities are general education students first. Students with disabilities are not guests in the general education classroom. They are full members of the general education community, with the right to be included and supported within the general education environment. The purpose of special education, including the provision of SDI in the LRE, is to ensure a student with a disability has access to and makes progress in the general education curriculum and meets the same standards that apply to all students. SDI is designed to meet the unique needs of a student with a



The three design levers of SDI

Michigan's 2026 guidance tells IEP teams to plan SDI through three questions: what will be taught, how it will be taught, and who/where/when it will be delivered.

1 Content

The “what.”

Skills and knowledge the student needs to engage in academic, functional, social, or physical domains.

Uses PLAAFP data to identify the actual instructional target.

2 Methodology

The “how.”

Instructional routines, pacing, explicitness, practice, prompting, feedback, grouping, and evidence-based methods.

Chosen from what has worked — and not worked — for this student.

3 Delivery

The “who, where, and when.”

The provider, setting, frequency, duration, and opportunities for practice in the LRE.

SDI can happen in general education, separate settings, or both.

What SDI is — and what it is not

SDI is ...

- explicit, focused, and systematic instruction tied to IEP goals
- a service based on data about the student's disability-related needs
- instruction that supplements — not replaces — core general education
- individualized teaching of missing skills, strategies, and access tools
- written into the IEP and monitored for participation and progress

SDI is not ...

- a place, a class period, or a special education schedule by itself
- a commercial program name or a generic intervention label
- homework reduction alone, or “extra help” without instructional design
- the same support package used for every student with a category label
- a reason to lower expectations or teach permanently below grade-level standards

Who delivers SDI in Michigan?

Michigan guidance is direct: SDI must be designed and supervised by qualified special education personnel. General educators may deliver planned pieces of SDI when the instruction is collaboratively designed and monitored through the IEP.

- Qualified staff = appropriately prepared, trained, and possessing the needed content knowledge and skills.
 - Paraprofessionals may support and reinforce instruction under supervision, but they may not replace the special education teacher/provider for planning or introducing SDI.
 - The IEP must make roles clear so implementation is consistent across providers and settings.
 - Document the support, delivery plan, responsibilities, and evidence of participation/progress.
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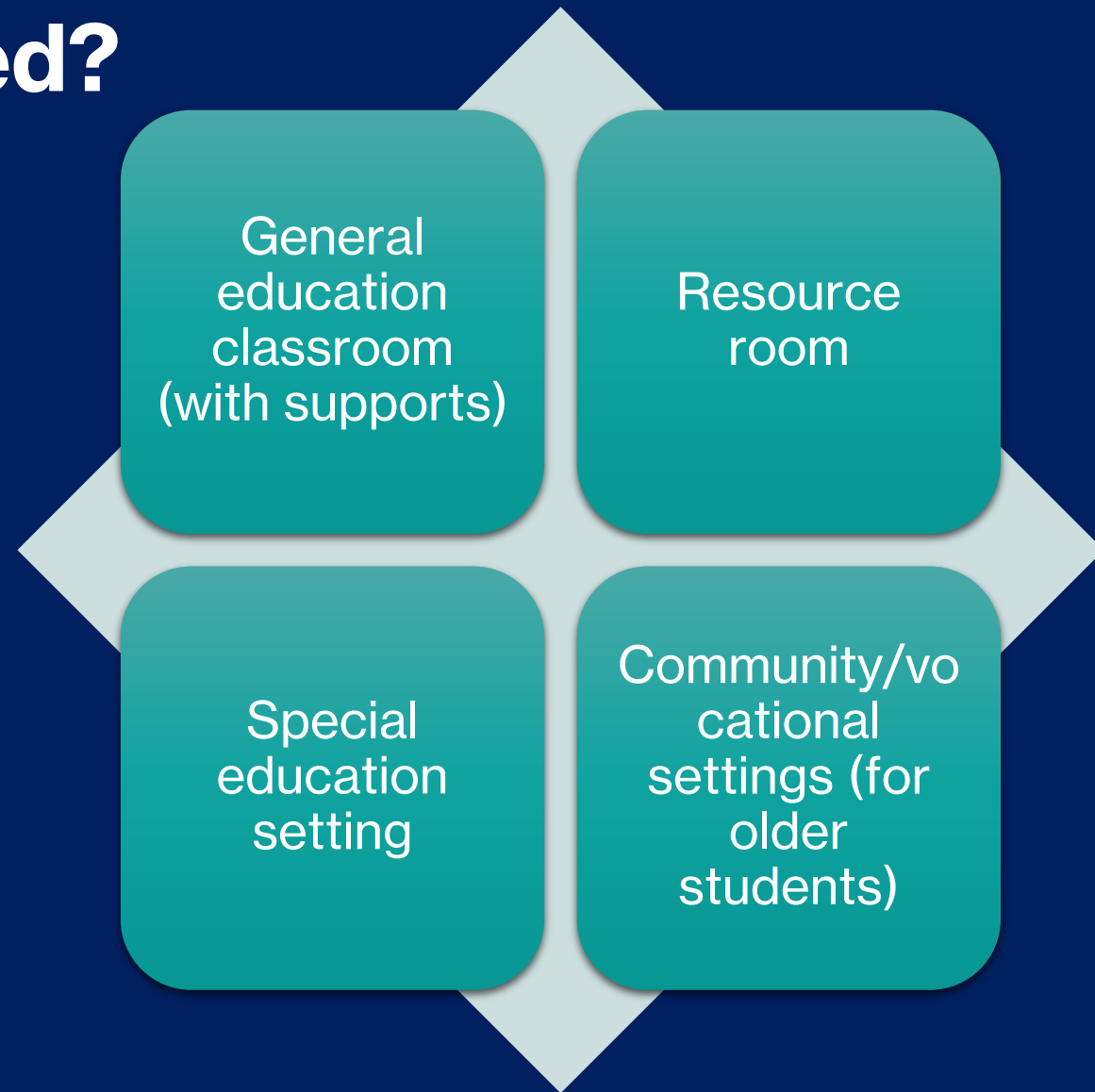
Why Is SDI Critical?

- Targets barriers to learning from the disability

- Builds academic, behavioral, and functional skills

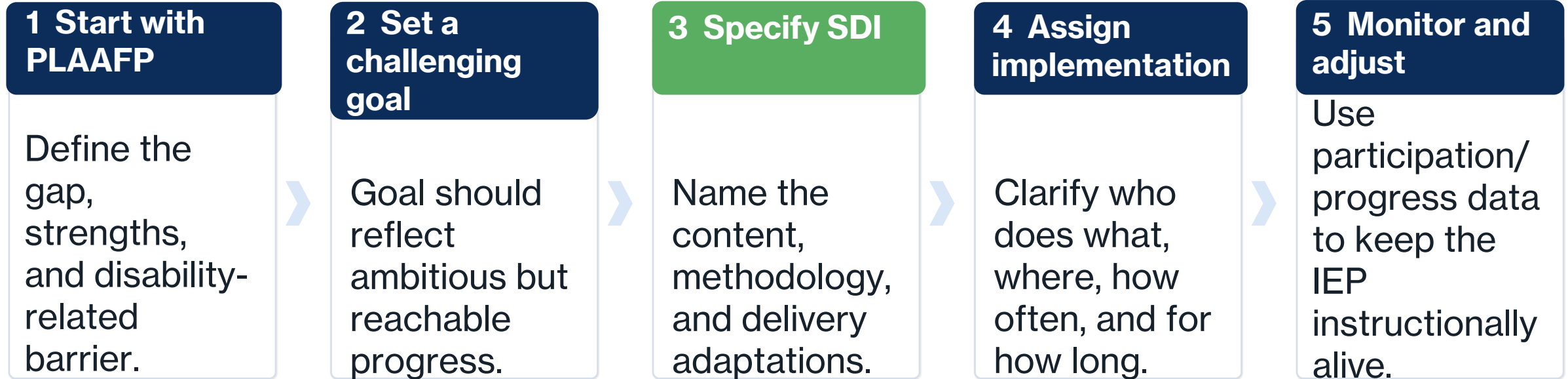
- Promotes meaningful progress

Where Is SDI Delivered?



A practical SDI design sequence for IEP teams

The work is not “**choose a program.**” The work is translating disability-related need into instruction that can be delivered, monitored, and adjusted.



Illustrative example: “Because decoding and language-processing weaknesses limit grade-level text access, the student receives explicit multisensory word-reading instruction 4x/week for 30 minutes in and across ELA, with guided practice, corrective feedback, and assistive text-to-speech support documented in the IEP.”

Case law that shapes SDI practice in Michigan

Michigan districts operate under U.S. Supreme Court precedent and Sixth Circuit law. These cases reinforce that SDI must be individualized, ambitious, procedurally sound, and delivered in the LRE.

Rowley (U.S. Supreme Court, 1982)

FAPE requires educational instruction specially designed to meet unique needs and enough benefit to make access meaningful.

Endrew F. (U.S. Supreme Court, 2017)

IEPs must be reasonably calculated to enable progress that is appropriately ambitious in light of the child's circumstances.

Deal v. Hamilton County (6th Cir., 2004)

Districts may not predetermine services or rely on a one-size-fits-all program; the placement decision must flow from the child's IEP.

L.H. v. Hamilton County (6th Cir., 2018)

The right question is not just where the child sits; it is whether the educational approach actually provides LRE and appropriate individualized progress.

Dong / Somberg (6th Cir., Michigan cases)

Procedural compliance matters, but technical deviations alone are not enough; meaningful relief is available when a Michigan district denies FAPE.

Common SDI mistakes — and better Michigan practice

Mistake	Better practice
“Special education reading support” with no instructional detail	Specify the skill, method, frequency, duration, setting, and provider.
Using the same program/package for every student with a disability label	Start from this student’s PLAAFP and individual response data.
Treating SDI as a separate place rather than instruction that can occur across settings	Decide delivery in the LRE based on need, not on schedule convenience.
Assigning paraprofessionals to carry the instructional load	Keep design/supervision with qualified staff; use paraprofessionals to reinforce under supervision.
Confusing classroom differentiation with SDI	Differentiate for many; write SDI for the student’s IEP goals and disability-related needs.

Why this matters legally: Endrew F. raises the ambition bar; Deal rejects predetermined, one-size-fits-all programming; MDE guidance requires clear SDI documentation and qualified implementation.

SDI vs. Accommodations

SDI:

- Changes how or what is taught
- For students with IEPs
- Delivered by special educators

Accommodations:

- Changes how learning is accessed
- For any student
- Implemented by general educators

What Makes SDI High-Quality?

- Individualized
based on IEP

- Aligned to
grade-level
standards

- Uses
evidence-based
practices

- Monitored for
progress and
adjusted

A working checklist for Michigan IEP teams

Instructional design

- Can we state the disability-related need in plain language?
- Are the goals challenging and tied to progress in the general curriculum?
- Did we describe SDI through content, methodology, and delivery?
- Is the SDI individualized rather than copied from another IEP?

Implementation quality

- Did we identify qualified staff and clarify each person's role?
- Is delivery planned in the LRE to the maximum extent appropriate?
- Will the IEP show frequency, duration, location/setting, and progress evidence?
- Could another educator implement this with fidelity from the written plan?

If the answer to several checklist items is “no,” the issue is usually not compliance paperwork – it is unfinished instructional design.

Practical strategies, teaching techniques, and resources for SDI

These become SDI when they are matched to the student's disability-related needs and written into the IEP through content, methodology, frequency, duration, and setting.

1. Plan the instruction

Start with the precise skill gap from the PLAAFP and the annual goal.

Break complex skills into teachable steps or routines.

Preteach vocabulary, directions, and prerequisite concepts.

Use scaffolds intentionally: models, sentence frames, manipulatives, visuals, guided notes.

Plan cumulative review and more opportunities to respond than peers may need.

2. Teach explicitly

Use Anita Archer-style explicit instruction routines: “I do, we do, you do.”

Model with think-alouds and clear exemplars/non-examples.

Keep a brisk pace with active participation: choral responses, partner turns, response cards, whiteboards.

Check for understanding frequently and correct errors immediately and directly.

Fade prompts over time so students move toward independence and generalization.

3. Use strong resources

Michigan OSE SDI Guidance (2026) for the definition and IEP expectations.

MDE literacy and content-area guidance for evidence-based practices matched to student need.

Anita Archer / Explicit Instruction videos and routines for teacher modeling and coaching.

High-Leverage Practices in Special Education for collaboration, assessment, and instruction.

Use coaching tools, fidelity checklists, and student progress data to decide whether the SDI is working.

Strong SDI is not a purchased program by itself; it is the intentional design of instruction for this learner.

Bottom line

In Michigan, SDI is the instructional engine of FAPE.

When the IEP identifies need, sets ambitious goals, specifies content/methodology/delivery, assigns qualified implementers, and monitors progress, SDI becomes visible, defensible, and effective.

Primary resources

- MDE OSE Special Education page
- MDE OSE SDI Guidance (Jan. 2026)
- 34 C.F.R. § 300.39 and MARSE R 340.1701c

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