

**The Personal Curriculum and Education Development Plan:
*A Change in How We Think and Act***

Michigan Special Education Advisory Committee

June 2009

The Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is Michigan's Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) mandated State Advisory Panel to the State Board of Education and the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). The members of the SEAC represent a broad diversity of stakeholders (administrators, providers, advocates, parents and consumers) concerned with the education of all children, including students with disabilities. Over the past three years, the SEAC has engaged in considerable learning and dialogue on the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) and Personal Curriculum (PC) option.

In June 2007, the SEAC reported to the Michigan Department of Education and State Board of Education the unintended consequences of Michigan's high school reform initiatives for students with disabilities and identified ways that schools might prevent or minimize them. A major concern for the SEAC was the confusion regarding the PC option. At the request of the State Board of Education, the SEAC took up the challenge of considering the implications of the PC, in particular with regard to its use by students with disabilities. This report represents our most recent thinking and advice with regard to the PC, the Education Development Plan (EDP), and their role in the learning and achievement of students with disabilities.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum: Higher Standards for All

The MMC was designed to raise standards and student performance. Implementing these high standards of the MMC while simultaneously providing for the PC has the ominous feel of attempting to fly a plane while it is still in the process of being built. Local districts are earnestly building that plane: establishing processes and pathways for higher achievement and better education for all students. However, students are currently expected to achieve at these levels whether or not their earlier instruction prepared them to do so. Our concern: some students, in particular those with IEPs, will fall off the plane. In fact, for some of these students, they may be at risk of being pushed out of the plane. Said simply, will a disproportionate number of students receiving special education services not be awarded diplomas under the new graduation requirements of the MMC due to them not being held accountable for meeting higher standards until their later grades?

Preplanning is the key for districts. Preplanning involves and includes district conversations about the MMC and how to meet the requirements of the MMC. It is urgent that districts engage in proactive dialogue with all stakeholders to think through the fundamental changes required to achieve the intent of the MMC and to make decisions regarding those changes. Those conversations are necessary precursors to conversations about the PC.

The Personal Curriculum: Options to Achieve High Standards

The intent of the PC was to remove barriers so that all students could participate in a more challenging curriculum. It is a means to access a more challenging curriculum, not avoid it. Further, the PC is an option for all students, no matter what their level of educational achievement. During the ongoing curriculum development and curriculum alignment with the MMC, districts are challenged to keep children, in particular children with disabilities, on a path to achieve the high standards of the MMC.

It is essential that the integrity of the MMC standards be maintained when developing a PC. The zeal to maintain curricular integrity, however, is resulting in some students, in particular those with disabilities, being left behind or out entirely and perceived as not being capable of achieving within the parameters of the MMC. We disagree with the conclusion that these students cannot or will not achieve these standards. Presently, Michigan has students approaching or in high school who lack the requisite knowledge and skills to perform at the high achievement levels of the MMC and for whom a PC, regardless of its level of personalization, will not provide sufficient adjustment to allow them to demonstrate competence in the required skills of the MMC. There must be flexibility in the PC option to meet the needs of students who have not had the benefit of prerequisite work or skill development necessary to succeed in the MMC.

Operationalizing the Personal Curriculum

The legislation permitting a PC option currently infers that local school boards will determine performance parameters or cut scores for those students who exercise the PC option. Those parameters involve the establishment of cut scores or criteria to determine at what point credit for skill areas of the MMC will be awarded. Guidance on how to do that is scant at best and absent at worse. Making those determinations in the absence of specific guidance as to how to do so, and what the cut scores are, may put local school boards in the difficult situation of acting in the absence of knowing.

The idea of cut scores being set by local school boards whose members have varying levels of understanding about the MMC and what cut scores are is problematic. Given that lack of predictability as to what may result from these locally controlled processes, we can envision some families and students 'shopping' for districts with lower cut scores. This has the potential to pit district against district, districts against the State, districts against parents, and all on the backs of students, in particular students with disabilities.

Michigan needs a cultural shift with regard to how educators think about school and the awarding of credit. Credit based on seat time is inconsistent with the ideas presented in any guidance document about the PC. This presents an additional challenge for those districts that do not allow other ways of thinking other than seat time. Cut scores need to be based on goals or standards rather than on seat time

or other arbitrary factors. Districts need guidance, specific direction and support to set cut scores that make sense.

The SEAC applauds the efforts of the Michigan Department of Education to provide guidance documents and tools on the PC. Unfortunately, to date those documents have not reduced the confusion that abounds around this topic. Document information is too sketchy about what a PC is and isn't, and how to create and implement a PC. The guidelines as written are too confusing to be useful, with far too much legalese and technical jargon. Creating a PC appears to be too much an inexact science. While the current guidance affords considerable flexibility with regard to the PC, that flexibility is both a bonus and a burden. Districts must know what constitutes the essential expectations of the MMC.

Planning for Student Success: The EDP, the IEP and the PC

The importance of a thoughtful and thorough EDP has never been greater in planning for student success. The decisions made in that planning are key for high school and MMC success. What happens in middle/junior high school can have a profound impact on the educational futures of Michigan youth. All stakeholders must understand the *implications* of planning decisions made years earlier *at the time of that planning*. To understand the implications requires a diverse and discrete knowledge base including knowledge of the unique needs, interests and perspectives of the individual child; clear understanding of the process elements (EDP – IEP – PC – transition plan) and how they are interconnected; and the capacity to articulate the curriculum content (GLCEs, MMC) as well as the ability to discuss the implications of the process decisions. Because these elements represent diverse and discrete knowledge and expertise, a *team* is essential.

Further there must be alignment between the EDP, the IEP and the PC. The EDP must not be a piece of paper or a hurdle that is done by students and quickly forgotten. It is not a singular event, completed and then never revisited. The EDP must be part of a dynamic planning process designed to support the student in achieving his or her own life's goal. The EDP, IEP and the MMC must be tied together intentionally. Teams need support and guidance as to how to talk about the MMC as the course of study.

The PC option is expanded for students with IEPs through Subsection K of Section 380.1278b of the Revised School Code. We wonder if the term *students with disabilities* might be a better characterization of the students for whom these broader choices and guidance apply for several reasons. There are students who were formerly identified as eligible for special education programs and services and thereby, *were* students with IEPs, who no longer need the programs and services of special education. Limiting access to additional flexibility of Subsection K to those students who have a current IEP may have the unintentional consequence of maintaining special education eligibility for some secondary students who have accessed these programs and services in the past and are now able to advocate for and use accommodations to achieve high standards.

Further, we worry and wonder about those students on the margins of achievement: those with 504 plans and those receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) services. Many of these students may benefit from different routes to achieve the high standards of the MMC. We fear that these students may be left out and consequently left behind if there are no additional provisions for them to achieve the standards via a PC. While these students fall outside of the defined responsibility of the SEAC, we believe that failing to support these students in accessing a PC may result in them being referred to special education due to school failure.

Preparation for meeting the standards of the MMC must begin early in a child's education. It is essential that parents understand how early learning leads to success at later grades. Parents may have difficulty understanding the ramifications of decisions made for their child in elementary and early middle school unless there is clear, understandable information. Guidance regarding the PC option needs to be early enough so parents can clearly see the potential consequences of early decisions on their child's preparation to perform years down the road.

Within the guidance document, a number of adverse effects from using a PC are listed. These dire warnings may scare some; however, it is critical that parents hear and know the realities when a decision to use a PC is considered. It is essential that this guidance information be *made easier for parents* to understand so they clearly understand the consequences – positive and negative – of these critical decisions.

The future for Michigan's children hangs in the balance between our ability as educators, parents and advocates to support the achievement of high standards while providing different paths to demonstrate that achievement. The PC holds great promise as a tool for alternate means to demonstrate mastery. It is a component of a long-range plan for student success that formally begins with the EDP and, for students with disabilities, includes their IEP and transition plan. The SEAC will continue its dialogue around issues related to the implementation of the MMC and the PC and looks forward to the day when all of our students achieve the high standards we have articulated for them.

Recommendations

These recommendations emphasize activities, innovative ways of thinking, and restructuring to carry out the work that must be accomplished in the months and years ahead. As such, the recommendations may not necessarily require additional budget allocations, but rather a change in how we think about the requirements of the MMC and the PC.

1. *The MDE and SBE provide technical assistance to districts in understanding proficiency, as well as the process for the establishment of "cut scores":* Given the existing knowledge base about the PC and the determination of what constitutes sufficient performance for the awarding of credit, we believe

that additional guidance and support is critical. Fully appreciating Michigan's long tradition of local control of education, we fear that in the absence of more direction with regard to cut scores, inherent inequities between districts will emerge. Some districts may set floors for cut scores so low that they do not change practice. Others may attempt to establish them, but not clearly understand how. If the intent of the MMC was to increase the likelihood that Algebra I in the Copper Country is equivalent to Algebra I in Bloomfield Hills, we need help with the establishment of cut scores.

2. *The MDE provide technical assistance on the intentional connection between the PC and the following elements:*
 - a. *EDP*
 - b. *IEP*
 - c. *MMC*
 - d. *Transition plans*
 - e. *Career crosswalks/Career and Technical Education*
3. *The MDE review and simplify all information and guidance with regard to the PC: The SEAC is most appreciative of the guidance and guidance documents. We believe the information in the guides, while critical, needs to be simplified so everyone can understand what a PC is, who can get one, when a student can get one, and why a student might need one. One idea is to organize all material into a comprehensive guide. An outline of such a guide is found in Appendix A.*
4. *The MDE facilitate technical assistance and the provision of training through the federally funded Parent Training Information Centers on the elements described in this report. The request for or suggestion of a PC requires informed parents. Our fear is that in the absence of a clear and easy way to understand information about the PC, some parents may ask how to get one for their child (and how soon) without really knowing what it is, or worse yet, what it means. While we hope that the new guidance documents will allay some of these concerns, we believe technical assistance and training for parents of students with disabilities is critical. Further, we believe all parents need access to this information.*
5. *The SBE support legislation that would allow students with 504 plans, ESL services, or who previously had an IEP, access to the Subsection K provision of the PC.*
6. *The SEAC continue to study and keep current on the PC options and guidance to support implementation of this option. We believe it is essential that the PC stay on our 'radar screen' so we can advise the SBE and MDE on issues that may arise.*

Appendix A: Outline: Comprehensive Document on the Personal Curriculum

- I. Purpose of PC = diploma
- II. Chart of Michigan Merit Curriculum Requirements
- III. Who can get a PC
 - A. Accelerated
 - B. 504 student
 - C. IEP student
 1. Subsection K
 - D. ESL student
 - E. Transfer students
 - F. Algebra II from 1.0 credit to .5 credit
- IV. Steps to access a PC
 - A. Forms to fill out
 - B. Structure of PC team (counselor or designee, principal, psychologist, child/parent)
 - C. Role of superintendent
- V. Sections by role
 - A. Local school board: cut scores, forms, development frame for cut scores, definitions,
 1. Ideally cut scores might be done at an ISD level to minimize shopping for lower cut scores
 - B. MS/HS principal – setting up teams/designees
 - C. MS/HS counselor – Develop PC with parent/student, develop EDP with students
 - D. Parents – request PC
 - E. Students (if 18 years of older)
 - F. Special education/general education teachers – designee for counselor
 - G. School psychologist – role for special education
 - H. Superintendent – approval or not
- VI. Questions and answers