

USING DIGITAL TEACHER INPUT FORMS IN DEVELOPING PRESENT LEVELS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND FUNCTIONAL PERFORMANCE (PLAAFP)

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Abstract. The Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) section in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) is critical for aligning educational goals with students' current capabilities and needs. However, inconsistencies and legal deficiencies in PLAAFP statements persist due to inadequate data collection and fragmented teacher input. This study evaluates a digital teacher input form designed to enhance PLAAFP development by standardizing teacher feedback aligned with federal and state compliance requirements. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study assesses the tool's legal alignment through a compliance checklist and gauges usability via the System Usability Scale (SUS). Findings show that the digital form supports complete and legally compliant PLAAFP entries and achieves high user satisfaction with a SUS score of 79.2. These results suggest that digital input tools can effectively improve IEP documentation practices and support better student outcomes by enhancing teacher engagement and data quality.

INTRODUCTION

The development of high-quality Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) hinges on the integrity of the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) section. This component offers a detailed account of a student's current capabilities, laying the groundwork for the formulation of measurable annual goals and the provision of appropriate services and accommodations. When completed effectively, PLAAFP statements ensure that educational planning is rooted in observable data and aligned with each learner's unique strengths and needs.

However, educators and stakeholders continue to face challenges in generating consistent, thorough, and legally compliant PLAAFP content. A growing body of evidence suggests that procedural violations in special education are increasing in frequency and complexity. According to the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), the total number of dispute resolution (DR) activities reported under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reached 54,466 cases in the 2022–2023 school year, an alarming 71.6% increase from the 31,736 cases documented in 2011–2012 (CADRE, 2025). These activities encompass state complaints, mediations, due process hearings, and resolution meetings, all of which divert significant instructional resources. Behind each statistic lies an educator's documentation, a district's policy decision, and a family's trust in the school system. This surge reflects not only procedural strain but also systemic challenges in special education service delivery and communication.

Among the most frequently cited issues are deficiencies in PLAAFP statements, which often stem from gaps in data collection and communication among IEP team members, particularly classroom teachers who directly observe and assess students' academic and functional performance. Studies have shown that effective IEPs require both academic and functional performance data that is accurate, current, and reflective of the student's educational environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Yet teacher contributions are often anecdotal, inconsistent, or misaligned with legal standards. Previous research has documented that IEP goals, particularly in the PLAAFP section, often lack alignment with grade-level

expectations and are repeated across years without measurable progress (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). This reflects vague or incomplete development of goals and weak baseline data collection. Advocacy groups, such as the Council for Exceptional Children (2021) emphasize that PLAAFP narratives must be grounded in objective, data-driven accounts that incorporate students' strengths, needs, and transition planning components.

Further highlighting this concern, Kurth et al. (2022) analyzed IEPs for elementary students with complex support needs and found that IEP quality, including PLAAFP statements, goals, and supplementary aids and services, was consistently low across all educational placement types. Their study concluded that placement alone did not predict IEP quality, underscoring the need for systemic improvements in how special education documentation is developed and implemented.

Adding to this, a more recent study by Burns et al. (2023) investigated the connection between PLAAFP quality and student learning outcomes. Based on data from over 200 special education teachers, the study found that the quality of PLAAFP statements was a significant predictor of student achievement, particularly in reading and math. Notably, the PLAAFP statement score accounted for a greater proportion of variance in outcomes than did participation in a single professional development training. These findings further emphasize that improving the quality of PLAAFP content through sustained, meaningful input is not only a compliance concern but directly impacts student progress.

In response to these persistent gaps, federal reviews have emphasized the importance of aligning special education practices with both compliance and outcome indicators. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has long monitored states through the Annual Performance Reports (APR), focusing on both legal compliance and student results (Luster & Coulter, 2012). Although states have shown steady improvement in compliance metrics, national performance on results indicators has remained largely stagnant over time. This raises concerns about an overemphasis on procedural compliance at the expense of educational outcomes. As noted in the analysis, improved compliance has not reliably translated into better student performance. These findings underscore the need for systemic reforms that prioritize not just adherence to IDEA requirements but also meaningful educational results for students with disabilities.

In alignment with these best practices, a digital teacher input form was developed and implemented in a high school setting to streamline and standardize the collection of teacher feedback. Built around statutory requirements, particularly Florida Statute §1003.57, the form captures critical insights aligned with federal and state mandates. The statute underscores that exceptional student education services must reflect both best practices and regulatory compliance, including the mandate that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment alongside their nondisabled peers (Fla. Stat. §1003.57(1)(e)). Importantly, it also mandates the integration of transition services beginning at age 14 to prepare students for postsecondary success (Fla. Stat. §1003.57(1)(h)).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) similarly mandates that transition services be informed by age-appropriate assessments and designed to support measurable postsecondary goals. Under Section 614(d)(1)(A)(i)(VIII), IEPs must include annual goals aligned with transition planning that reflect the student's strengths, interests, and preferences. Nevertheless, longitudinal data such as the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 reveal that many IEPs still lack meaningful, individualized transition plans (Wagner et al., 2007). The digital input form used in this study includes targeted prompts across multiple domains, including academic performance, communication, self-determination, organization, behavior, and independent living. These prompts support the development of comprehensive and compliant PLAAFP statements.

Court rulings, such as *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (U.S. Supreme Court, 2017), reinforce the need for IEPs to promote more than minimal progress. Instead, they must be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances." Tools that guide structured teacher input help meet this standard by enhancing the quality of PLAAFP entries and subsequent goal development.

This digital approach has the potential to improve not only data quality but also teacher engagement in the IEP process. By offering a structured, user-friendly platform, teachers are more likely to provide complete and relevant input that reflects a student's current educational profile. In turn, this supports the development of student-centered, legally sound, and transition-focused IEPs, thereby improving educational outcomes and reducing the likelihood of disputes or procedural errors.

This study examines the effectiveness of implementing a digital teacher input form to support PLAAFP development. Specifically, it explores the form's capacity to improve the accuracy and efficiency of data collection, enhance teacher participation, and ensure alignment with statutory mandates, including those related to transition planning. The results are expected to contribute to the broader literature on digital innovation in special education and advocate for tools that support compliance, equity, and meaningful student progress.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of a digital teacher input form in supporting the development of high-quality PLAAFP statements. Data gathering was conducted over the course of two academic years, during which the digital input form was used across multiple IEP cycles. The evaluation focused on two main dimensions: the legal compliance of the form's output and the usability experience reported by teachers.

Compliance Review

The alignment of the collected teacher input with federal and state legal requirements was evaluated using a compliance checklist. This checklist was adapted from the IRIS Center (2019) and aligned with IDEA, Florida Statutes, and policy recommendations from the Council for

Exceptional Children (CEC, 2021). According to the checklist, a compliant PLAAFP statement must include:

- A description of the student's needs in academic and/or functional skill areas;
- A statement on the impact of the student's disability on participation in the general education curriculum;
- Documentation of current performance levels to establish baseline data;
- Information to guide the development of annual goals and special education services and supports.

Each completed digital teacher input form was reviewed against these four criteria to determine whether it supported the creation of legally sound and instructionally meaningful PLAAFP statements.

System Usability Scale (SUS)

The usability of the digital input form was assessed using the System Usability Scale (SUS), a standardized instrument for evaluating the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction of digital tools (Sauro, 2018). Participating teachers completed the SUS questionnaire after using the form. The survey consists of ten items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Responses were converted into a composite score ranging from 0 to 100, where scores above 68 are considered above average and those exceeding 80 reflect excellent usability (Sauro, 2018; Blucado, n.d.). These two methods—compliance review and SUS assessment—provided complementary insights into the tool's performance. By analyzing both content quality and user experience, the study generated a comprehensive understanding of the digital form's value in enhancing PLAAFP development and IEP documentation practices.

RESULTS

PLAAFP Compliance Review

Over the course of two academic years, the digital teacher input form was evaluated for its alignment with federal requirements using a compliance checklist adapted from the IRIS Center (2019). This checklist outlines four essential components mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) section. These components are:

1. Description of the student's needs in academic and/or functional skill areas
2. Statement on the impact of the student's disability on their involvement in the general education curriculum
3. Documentation of the student's current levels of performance to establish baseline data
4. Information to guide the development of annual goals and appropriate special education services and supports

To assess compliance, each digital teacher input submission was reviewed against these four criteria. The tool was found to successfully capture all required elements, ensuring that

teacher responses provided a clear and structured foundation for IEP goal development. Figure 5 illustrates the compliance checklist used during the review process, which served as the rubric for evaluating whether the tool facilitated legally sufficient PLAAFP content.

PLAAFP Compliance Checklist	YES	NO
Description of the student's needs in academic and/or functional skill areas		
Statement on the impact of the student's disability on involvement in the general education curriculum		
Documentation of the student's current levels of performance to establish baseline data		
Information to guide the development of annual goals and appropriate special education services and supports		

Figure 1. IDEA-Compliant PLAAFP Checklist. This checklist, adapted from the IRIS Center (2019), identifies the minimum legal requirements for PLAAFP statements in IEPs. The digital teacher input form was evaluated using this framework and demonstrated full alignment with each component.

Usability Evaluation Using the System Usability Scale (SUS)

To further analyze usability, the study employed the System Usability Scale (SUS). The SUS was modified to fit the context of the IEP Teacher Input Form and distributed to instructional staff. Out of all participants, 28 teachers submitted completed surveys. The resulting SUS mean score was 79.2 (see figure 2). According to standard SUS interpretive benchmarks, this score corresponds to an A– grade and places the tool within the 85th–89th percentile of usability performance among comparable systems (Sauro, 2018; Blucado, n.d.) (see figure 3).

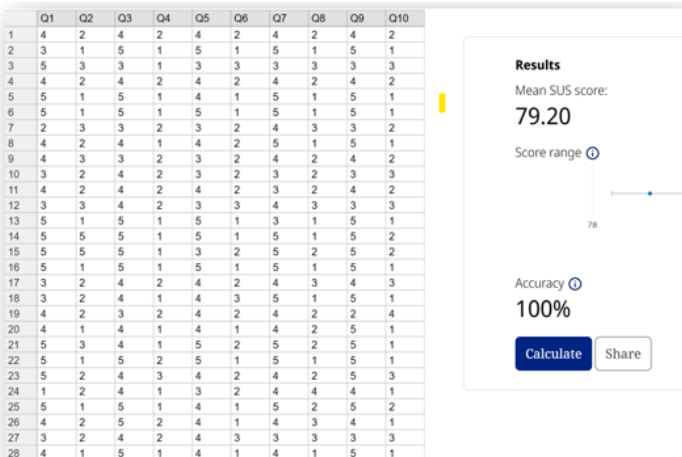


Figure 2. System Usability Scale (SUS) Score Calculation Interface. This figure displays the raw data submitted by 28 teachers, processed using Blucado’s SUS Calculator. The resulting mean SUS score was 79.20, with 100% data accuracy. This score reflects a high level of perceived usability and places the digital input form in the 85th–89th percentile among comparable systems (Blucado, n.d.).

Grade	SUS	Percentile range	Adjective	Acceptable	NPS
A+	84.1-100	96-100	Best Imaginable	Acceptable	Promoter
A	80.8-84.0	90-95	Excellent	Acceptable	Promoter
A-	78.9-80.7	85-89		Acceptable	Promoter
B	74.1-77.1	70-79		Acceptable	Passive
B-	72.6-74.0	65-69		Acceptable	Passive
C+	71.1-72.5	60-64	Good	Acceptable	Passive
C	65.0-71.0	41-59		Marginal	Passive
C-	62.7-64.9	35-40		Marginal	Passive
D	51.7-62.6	15-34	OK	Marginal	Detractor
F	25.1-51.6	2-14	Poor	Not Acceptable	Detractor
F-	0-25	0-1.9	Worst Imaginable	Not Acceptable	Detractor

Figure 3. *SUS Grading and Percentile Interpretation Table*. This chart, adapted from MeasuringU, categorizes System Usability Scale (SUS) scores by letter grade, percentile range, adjective descriptors, acceptability rating, and Net Promoter Score (NPS). A SUS score of 79.2 falls in the A- range, placing the digital input form in the 85th–89th percentile with a “Promoter” usability rating and “Acceptable” designation (Sauro, 2018).

This percentile ranking indicates that the tool outperforms 85% to 89% of similar digital platforms in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and user satisfaction (see figure 4).

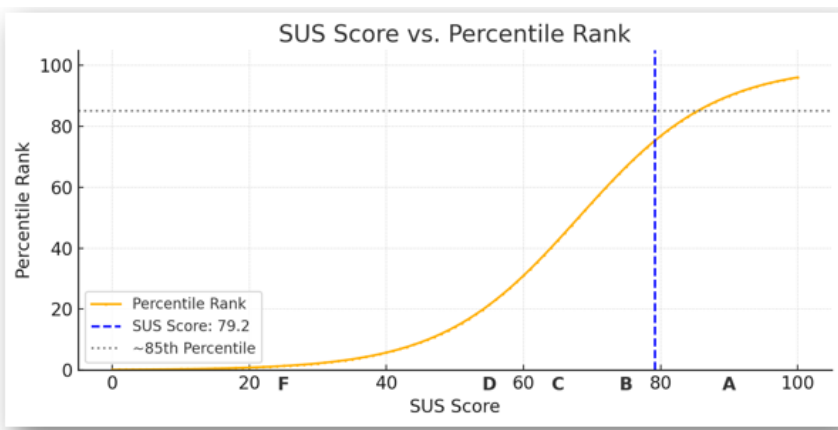


Figure 4. *System Usability Scale (SUS) Percentile Rank Visualization*. This graph illustrates the SUS score of 79.2 using a blue dashed line, corresponding to the 85th percentile. This positioning indicates that the digital teacher input form scored higher in usability than approximately 85% of other comparable systems. The data reflect strong user satisfaction and effectiveness in the context of IEP data collection (Sauro, 2018).

The digital input form was rated “excellent” in usability and categorized under the “highly acceptable” range of the SUS acceptability scale. Furthermore, it falls within the “promoter” category, meaning users are more likely to recommend the tool over alternatives such as handwritten forms or email-based submissions (see figure 5).

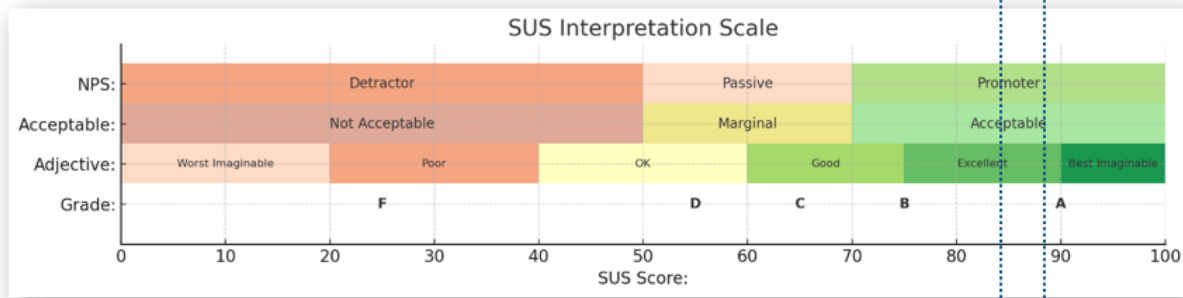


Figure 5. *System Usability Scale (SUS) Interpretation Spectrum*. This figure presents the interpretive ranges for SUS scores based on adjective ratings, acceptability, Net Promoter Score (NPS) classification, and grade. A SUS score of 79.2, marked by the blue dashed line, falls within the “Excellent” range, is deemed “Acceptable,” and classifies as a “Promoter,” reflecting high user satisfaction and endorsement (Sauro, 2018).

Overall, the digital input form successfully supports the creation of legally compliant and instructionally meaningful PLAAFP statements. The data demonstrate that the tool is both practical and scalable, enhancing teacher engagement and enabling more accurate and timely IEP development. These findings position the digital teacher input form as a model for improving documentation processes in special education settings, with potential applications across districts seeking to modernize and standardize IEP development practices.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to evaluate the effectiveness of a digital teacher input form in improving the development of Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) statements within Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The findings provide strong evidence that digital tools can meaningfully enhance the legal compliance, usability, and overall quality of PLAAFP documentation when aligned with statutory benchmarks and educator workflows.

The analysis confirmed that the digital form successfully addressed all four federally required components of the PLAAFP, as outlined by the IRIS Center (2019). These include identifying students' academic and functional needs, stating the impact of the disability on general education participation, documenting baseline performance, and supporting the formulation of measurable goals and services. This legal compliance is crucial in light of the ongoing scrutiny placed on IEP quality, especially following the *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* decision, which emphasized the need for “appropriately ambitious” educational goals tied to a student’s circumstances.

Usability testing using the System Usability Scale (SUS) further validated the tool’s effectiveness from the educators’ perspective. A SUS mean score of 79.2 places the digital form within the 85th to 89th percentile of comparable systems, indicating that users found it efficient, effective, and satisfying to use (Sauro, 2018). These results are consistent with existing literature affirming the benefits of structured, digital IEP documentation tools. High usability is not a trivial factor; it

is directly tied to teacher engagement and the likelihood that critical student data will be entered accurately and completely.

The study also reinforces the value of simplifying documentation in a high-stakes, compliance-driven context. Research and reports from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2019) have shown that vague or incomplete PLAAFP statements are a common source of due process complaints. By guiding educators through structured fields aligned with policy standards, the digital form mitigates the risk of omission or legal insufficiency and ultimately supports both procedural safeguards and instructional planning.

A major contribution of this study is the practical demonstration of how technology, specifically well-designed digital forms, can bridge gaps between compliance and individualized, student-centered planning. While this version of the tool proved effective, it represents only a foundational model. Future enhancements could include artificial intelligence (AI) integration and automation, allowing for real-time feedback, predictive text that aligns with legal standards, and automated linkage between teacher input, goal writing, and service recommendations. This would reduce manual input, improve consistency across IEPs, and support educators in meeting documentation expectations without overwhelming them.

Despite its strengths, the study has limitations. It was confined to a single high school context, which may not reflect variability in educator experience, caseload, or access to technology in other settings. Moreover, while usability and compliance were assessed, the study did not track longitudinal outcomes for students whose IEPs were developed using the tool. Future research should explore how digital inputs influence IEP goal quality, student outcomes, and parent engagement. Comparative studies across schools or districts could also illuminate scalability and contextual adaptations needed for broader implementation.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that a digital teacher input form, when aligned with legal standards and supported by usability testing, can significantly improve the quality and efficiency of PLAAFP statements. It contributes to the growing body of research on digital transformation in special education and offers a replicable model for improving IEP documentation. As schools continue to integrate digital platforms into their workflows, tools like this can promote both compliance and meaningful educational planning, particularly when enhanced by AI-driven features that support real-time quality assurance and teacher support.

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