Writing Effective IEP Goals

Today's Topics:
- Your role in the IEP process
- The three questions an effective IEP goal answers
- Present and current levels of performance
- What a measurable IEP goal should contain
- Necessary information for service delivery grid
- Importance of comparing progress reports to goals
- Important details in writing measurable goals
- Rewriting a sample behavioral goal
- Support areas for students and teachers in schools
- Resources

Your Role in the IEP Process

- Be the parental voice for the child you advocate for.
- Know your rights and the child's rights in special education.
- Realize that schools have short-term goals, the child has long-term needs.
- Collaborate with Team members in the best interest of the child.
- Understand that every year of a child's education matters.

The IEP Team must consider – and when necessary to provide FAPE, include in the IEP – the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior.

--- 34 CFR 300.324(a)(2)(i) and (b)(2); and 300.320(a)(4)
The Two “Rules” of Special Education

To keep your relationship with school professionals intact and functional, follow these two rules:

- **Rule number one:** The special education experience is not about you, it is about the child.
- **Rule number two:** Never forget rule number one. (with thanks to Warren Buffett)

See our blog article “Special Education Etiquette,” for additional suggestions. (http://www.makespecialeducationwork.com/special-education-etiquette-2/)

1. What is the Starting Point?

   **Present Levels of Performance (PLOP, PLEP, PLAAFP)**
   - Occurs at the beginning of the IEP document. Refers to the student's general ability and how the student's disability impacts overall progress.
   - IDEA-04 requires that the IEP contain a description of a student's "Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance."
   - Should indicate which specific academic, emotional, or behavioral areas are affected by the student's disability(s).
   - Includes details on specialized instruction, methodology, modifications, and accommodations needed.
   - Based on testing data and diagnosis, not just subjective anecdotes.

An Effective Goal Answers Three Questions

1. **What is the student’s starting point?**
2. **Where is the student going?**
3. **How is the student going to get there?**

When the answers to these three questions support each other, it improves the chances for success.

1. **What is the Starting Point?**

   **Current Levels of Performance (CLP)**
   - Precedes each IEP goal and contains a description of the student's current ability in the specific skill or behavior covered by that goal.
   - CLP is the starting point for creating a realistic and attainable goal.
   - Testing data is the most effective indicator of current ability.
   - Past achievement, such as grades or participation in an activity, can be helpful in describing current ability, but should not be used exclusively. Be wary of grade inflation.
   - Avoid anecdotal descriptions of behavior without any objective data to back them up.
Example of Tests for Academic Performance

- Differential Ability Scales (DAS), Stanford-Binet (SB: V), or Leiter International Performance Scale (Leiter-R) for general ability (IQ).
- Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (WJ-III ACH), Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-II) or Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA-II) for multiple-subjects.
- Gray Oral Reading Tests (GORT-4), Woodcock-Johnson Diagnostic Reading Battery (WJ III DRB), or Test of Written Language (TOWL-3) for reading and writing.
- KeyMath Diagnostic Inventory (KeyMath-R) or Comprehensive Mathematical Abilities Test (CMAT) for math.

Tests for Behavioral Performance

- **Psychological** evaluation to understand how and why a child is behaving as he or she is so the school can provide a safe environment.
- **Speech and Language** evaluation to determine how to address pragmatic language issues and appropriate socialization.
- **Functional Behavioral Assessment** (FBA) to identify possible trauma triggers to determine the most appropriate educational environment.
- **Occupational Therapy** (OT) evaluation to address fine motor skills and sensory defensiveness (hyper-sensitivity to sounds, touch, etc).

2. Where is the Student Going?

- An IEP goal provides an objective to take a child from the current level of performance to a realistic higher level during the time period covered by the goal.
- It should contain a method for measuring whether or not the goal has been achieved.
- The criteria for measuring progress are clearly defined in the goal and do not require any information other than what is contained in the description of the goal.
- The measurement can be validated by multiple third party observers.
- At any time, it should be possible to determine how much progress a student has made toward attaining the goal.

3. How is the Student Going to Get There?

Even the most well-written goal won't work if there aren't adequate services. There must be adequate time and a properly qualified person to provide the service or it is unrealistic to expect a student to make satisfactory progress.

This is the function of the service delivery grid, which lists how each goal will be achieved by specifying the:

- **Type of service**
- **Start and end dates for the service**
- **Where and how often**
- **Type of professional who is responsible, not just “sped staff.”**
Service Delivery Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Consultation (Indirect Services to School Personnel and Parents)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Goal #</td>
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<tr>
<th>B. Special Education and Related Services in General Education Classroom (Direct Service)</th>
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<td>Focus on Goal #</td>
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<tr>
<th>C. Special Education and Related Services in Other Settings (Direct Service)</th>
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<td>Focus on Goal #</td>
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We recommend having the information in the grid written into the description of the goal as well. The grid often appears pages after the goal in the IEP where it can be overlooked by both you and the service providers. The duplication serves to remind everyone that the most important part of a goal is achieving it.

IEP Progress Reports

- Schools send reports on the progress a student is making toward IEP goals at least as often as general education report cards.
- Compare these reports with the goals each quarter.
- If you feel the reports aren't accurate or are too vague, put your concerns in writing to your liaison to document them.
- Review previous year's goals. If a goal repeats from year to year, the student isn't making progress.

When Teams Write IEP Goals

- **Use words and concepts that everyone can understand.**
  (not: [Student] will continue to spiral new skills and apply them to word problems.)

- **Be explicit about what will be measured and how.**
  ([Student] will complete math review sheets and attend review sessions 9 out of 10 times prior to tests.)

- **Specify how frequently performance should be measured.**
  ([Student] will refrain from inappropriate touching other students on a daily basis.)

- **State who will measure progress.**
  ([Student] will turn in completed homework 90% of the time as recorded by resource room teacher.)

Words and Details Matter in IEP Goals

**When you see IEP goals like these (actual IEP goals):**

- [Student] will improve his consistency with written language.
- [Student] will explore strategies to increase her problem solving success.
- [Student] will talk directly with adults about his behavior and academic responsibilities 80% of the time.

**Ask yourself:**

How will the student improve “consistency” or “explore strategies”? How frequent is “consistently” anyway? How do you measure talking with adults 80% of the time, and who is doing the measuring?
Define Problem Behaviors

Instead of Writing: Specify How:

Trish is aggressive. Trish hits other students during recess when she does not get her way.

Carlos is disruptive. Carlos makes irrelevant and inappropriate comments during class discussion.

Jan is hyperactive. Jan leaves her assigned area without permission.

Jan completes only portions of her independent work.

Jan blurts out answers without raising her hand.

Example of An Unmeasurable Goal
(From the IEP of a 3rd grade student)

Measurable Annual Goal: [Student] will increase self-confidence.

Benchmarks/Objectives:
[Student] will explore and recognize his strengths.
[Student] will utilize his strengths to accomplish tasks.

Evaluation: Observation by classroom teacher, resource teacher, guidance counselor, and parents.

What is a Measurable Goal?

A goal must have an outcome that can be objectively measured. Avoid vague, “feel good” statements that only describe an outcome. [Student] will demonstrate skills in relaxing to reduce body and mental tension.

The measurement criteria must be described in the goal. [Student] will improve P.E. fitness testing scores 100% as measured by the regular physical education fitness testing program.

You should be able to objectively determine how much progress has been made at any time. [Student] will catch a ball 2 out of 3 times by extending his arms while reaching for the ball.

Behavioral Goal

From page 98, Writing Measurable IEP Goals and Objectives, by Bateman & Herr

CLP: Jessica does not participate appropriately in small group projects (2-5 students). She always disrupts and then leaves the group, usually with highly inappropriate comments (e.g., “You idiots” “Why can't you do this right?”) to other group members.

Goal: In 9 of 10 opportunities, Jessica will participate appropriately and cooperatively and will remain with the group and contribute to the project.

Benchmark: When prompted, Jessica will make positive statements to other students in the class at least 9 out of 10 trials.

Benchmark: When assigned to a small group to work on a project, Jessica will remain with the group for the entire time and will make only positive statements to the other group members on 9 out of 10 trials.

Benchmark: When assigned to a small group to work on a project, Jessica will make positive comments to the other members of the group, will make positive suggestions to contribute to the project work, and will remain with the group on 9 of 10 trials.
For a More Effective Goal, the Team Needs to Consider:

- A data driven CLP, such as can be obtained from a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA).
- What situations trigger the student behavior?
- Who is going to help the student learn how to make positive comments and work on participation in groups?
- There must be objective criteria that will demonstrate an improvement in behavior.
- If the Team creates a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) from the FBA, it should define the intervention by school personnel for certain targeted behaviors, not just rely on the child self-regulating.

First, a Data Driven CLP

According to our hypothetical FBA, Jessica has difficulty when other girls are taunting her. This is usually in transition times and is preceded by an upcoming period of social time such as recess, lunch, or small group projects. Jessica's response is to criticize or make hurtful comments about the other girls ("You idiots" "Why can't you do this right?")

The result of the behavior is usually hurt feelings and Jessica's separation from the other girls, which serves to remove Jessica from the social group. The function and/or purpose of the behavior is likely to be that Jessica is purposely attempting to avoid having to interact with and be accepted by peers. The behavior seems to be a performance deficit, because Jessica only displays this behavior when she feels pressured to be accepted by the other girls or to interact with them.

Next, Goal and Benchmarks

**Goal:** In 9 out of 10 opportunities in a small group setting of 2-5 students, Jessica will participate appropriately and cooperatively by the end of the school year. She will remain with the group and contribute to the project or activity.

**Benchmark:** With the help of the guidance counselor, in private sessions once a week for 30 minutes, Jessica will learn how to make positive comments to peers and work on projects with them. The guidance counselor will also include Jessica in small group sessions to practice these skills once a week.

**Benchmark:** When prompted, Jessica will make positive statements to others in her group 9 out of 10 times.

**Benchmark:** When assigned to a small group project, Jessica will remain with the group the entire time.

Finally, Evaluation Criteria

**Evaluation:** The guidance counselor will observe the number of positive interactions Jessica has with peers in group sessions. By the end of the school year, Jessica will have twice as many positive interactions in a session as when the sessions started. Teachers who lead the small group project sessions or monitor recess will observe Jessica and provide written feedback to parents on a monthly basis.
Special Education Support and Services Areas
From OSEP Advisory Letter, August 1, 2016 - “Ensuring Equity and Providing Behavioral Supports to Students with Disabilities”

- Reinforcement of school expectations for behavior in general education classroom (section B on the grid)
- Violence prevention programs (section C)
- Anger management groups (section C)
- Counseling for mental health issues (section C)

Supplementary Aids and Services
From OSEP Advisory Letter, August 1, 2016

- Meetings with a behavioral coach (section C on the grid)
- Social skills instruction (section C)
- Meetings with a counselor (section C)

Program Modifications and Supports for School Personnel
(From OSEP Advisory Letter, August 1, 2016)

- Training and coaching for school personnel to address behavioral needs (section A on the grid)
- Supports to help school personnel better implement effective instructional and behavioral management standards (section A)
- Support for specific behavioral interventions (section A)

An Effective IEP Goal:

- Answers three questions: What is the student's starting point, Where is the student going, and How is the student going to get there?
- Measures current performance levels through testing. Observation and anecdotes are not enough on their own.
- Must have a specific time limit, be measurable, and should contain all the information needed to determine if the goal has been achieved.
- Has adequate service delivery. Type of service, start and end dates, where and how often provided, and a qualified professional responsible for providing the service must all be specified.
- Contains measurable evaluation criteria and the person responsible for measuring it. Progress should be measurable at any time during the time period defined by the goal.
- Progress reports should reflect actual progress toward achieving the goal. Question any report that seems vague or unrealistic.
Resources

Parents Have the Power to Make Special Education Work, Chapter 7: “Writing Effective IEP Goals”

Writing Measurable IEP Goals and Objectives by Barbara D. Bateman and Cynthia M. Herr


Federation for Children with Special Needs:
http://fcsn.org/rtsc/resources-for-everyone/further-reading/

Wrightslaw Special Education Law and Advocacy:
http://www.wrightslaw.com/