

How OBJECTIVE is the IEP in Measuring Your Child's Learning?
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Parents often contact me expressing concerns about the special education and related services their child is receiving. Surprise!!! Before I meet with the parent(s), I encourage them to send me

1. A copy of the current IEP,
2. The most recent triennial (they may be the same), and
3. Reports that are meant to inform parents about their child's progress toward achieving goals on the IEP.

When I review these requested documents, I often am dismayed to realize that I will have to give the parents unpleasant information like:

- Working on the same goals year after year indicates inadequate progress. Goals are to be annual" and are so designated by Federal Law, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Subjective data collected to indicate progress is not acceptable. It is the least reliable manner of data collection because it is ordinarily an opinion of the reporter. The reporter is usually an observer who often reports anecdotally. Data to support that progress toward the goals has occurred should be objective, or impersonal, not an opinion or guesstimate". Objective data collection can, among others, take the form of samples of work or evaluation results, like pre-or post-tests.
- Baseline determination is by far, one of the greatest weaknesses in goal/objective development. Based on data collected regarding the targeted behavior, skill, or activity to be acquired or improved, a current level of performance (the basis for the baseline) can be identified. The baseline is the point from which the student starts the current IEP. This level of performance can then be used for comparison to some future level of performance that will indicate growth toward the goal. If gathered for the annual review or triennial or other staffing, it could become the new baseline.
- A second component that frequently characterizes inadequate baselines is the inclusion of subjective comments that do not lend themselves to measurement. Words like "emerging skills", "not yet proficient", "inconsistent", "not observed", "making progress", and the like, are vague, immeasurable descriptors that are not helpful in assisting ANYONE plot where the student is achieving right now. They do not represent a current level of performance but rather, an

adjective of that level of performance. The baseline should be a clear, measurable indicator of the student's level of performance. To use subjective comments makes it impossible to report growth when the IEP is reviewed again. How does one describe growth from "inconsistent"?

Please recognize that at this point in the school-parent relationship, parents often begin to feel alienated and intimidated, possibly inferior. When parents ask, "What does 'inconsistent' mean and how will it be measured?", staff response is usual, "The teacher will know" or "The teacher understands", benevolently accompanied by a kindly chuckle. How charming that a parent would want to know this. The question remains unanswered.

It is imperative and sad to note that ONLY parents who make it an issue to have accurate baselines and measurable goals and objectives-----GET THEM! The same staffing team members may convene with another set of parents an hour later and revert to the same, poor practice unless they, too, draw attention to the correction of baselines and other important information parents want included.

Some Important Definitions

Some of the confusion in development of the IEP could be confusion in word meanings, especially since the important words we are discussing have very similar meanings and in fact, are synonyms for each other, should you review a *Webster's Dictionary*.

1. A **goal** is a general statement of a specific level of achievement desired in an area of need identified on the IEP and acquired within a particular time frame. Simply put, a generic statement about what is to be learned by a certain time.
2. The **objective** is an impersonal statement of skill acquisition that imposes the conditions of the needed skill, behavior or activity described in the goal. The conditions can include the increase in the level of performance necessary for successful completion of the objective, or frequency of occurrence that should be expected to denote success by a certain date. Easily said, the objective describes student outcomes that are (a) specific, (b) measurable, (c) short-term, and (d) observable.
3. A **benchmark** is a standard of measurement to denote growth or progress along the way to successful achievement of the goal.

I can see how easily educators would want to use these terms interchangeably. I hope that the following sample is helpful in demonstrating the subtle differences:

ANNUAL GOAL: John will identify ten colors.

BASELINE: John points to one color.

OBJECTIVE: John will identify additional three colors by pointing.

BENCHMARK: John will identify additional three colors by pointing 8 of 10 trials within three months from (date of IEP).

Equally important is for the parent and team to be aware of these things:

- What are the ten colors John will be expected to know in one year?
- What is the color John already recognizes?
- What are the targeted colors for the next three months?
- When the three months has elapsed, parents will want a progress report that says “John identifies (red, green, yellow, & blue) 8 of 10 trials.” If John has not been successful, then the information should be reported in terms that CLEARLY indicate a level of performance. “John identifies red 10 of 10 trials, green 5 of 10 trials, yellow 8 of 10 trials, and blue 8 of 10 trials.”

Tip:

Parents will want to know what colors are to be worked on so they can support the school with informal practice in other settings. (“Oh, there are the yellow arches at McDonald’s” or “Let’s go into the blue bedroom”, etc.)

The ABCDs of Writing the Objective

Good objective writing involves consideration of the content of the objective statement. Years of research by educators, psychologists, and professionals interested in the challenge of helping students acquire knowledge have yielded four mandatory ingredients. These are the ABCDs to which I earlier referred:

A. The **Audience**, or the “who” is the learner.

The audience will always be the child that is the subject of the IEP.

Because this is an IEP, stress should be on the individual child by name.

Don’t accept “canned” goals or objectives that start out with “The student will...” We have been talking about “John”.

B. The **Behavior**, or what you want the learner to see, hear, smell, taste, or feel.

The behavior must be observable, even if it is of an abstract nature. “John will have the opportunity to identify 10 colors” is not a behavior that is measurable. Everyone always has the opportunity. It’s using the opportunity that is important. “John will identify 10 colors...” The objective could easily be written so that John will write the name of the color, say the color, pick up the color, etc. Those are behaviors we can see and document. A list of sample “behavior” words is attached to this document.

C. The **Condition**, or under what circumstances is skill demonstrated. The condition for John to use for showing what has been learned is “pointing”. It is implied (but it could be included in the written objective) that John will point independently. The objective could easily be written so that John will point with 5 verbal prompts, with physical assistance, when cued, etc. An important condition to be included is the date John should have met with success in learning the skill. If he doesn’t achieve the desired outcome by the target date, then the team needs to consider the conditions

D. The **Degree**, or the level of skill to be demonstrated to show successful learning has occurred.

Degree refers to the level of performance must be shown for the team to feel confident that the skill is one that the student can implement spontaneously when the skill is needed. It is the time that John can move to maintaining the skill. Although we all strive for 100%, there are those things that if we do them 80 to 90% of the time we can accept. On the other hand, to cross the street successfully 80% of the time isn’t okay? Consider the importance of degree before you accept success of the objective.