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# **The Heart of the IEP Considerations Packet**

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## The Heart of the IEP

Drafting Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) is one of the most challenging parts of a special educator's job. IEPs that are collaboratively developed and truly individualized require expertise, time, team spirit, and perseverance. At the core of this process are critical instructional questions such as: Where is the student presently functioning? Where should the student be in a year? How does the student learn? and How will student progress be measured?

The focus of this *Considerations Packet* is the heart of the IEP – the present level of academic achievement and functional performance, annual goals, and short-term objectives or benchmarks. Specifically, you will find information about, examples of, and checklists for creating these three critical elements of the IEP document.

### Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance

The present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (also known as the Present Level of Performance, or PLOP) section of an IEP is a written statement that documents the student's strengths, interests, preferences, and needs (Thoma & Wehman, 2010). These narratives describe areas of need resulting from the student's disability, and these data, in turn, are used to inform the development of an effective educational program for the student (Yell, 2012). Thus, the purpose of the PLOP is to identify "the starting point from which" the student's progress is to be measured (Bateman & Herr, 2006, p. 47). PLOP statements also include a description of how the disability affects the student's involvement and progress in the general curriculum ... (Virginia Department of Education, Division on Special Education and Student Services, 2010, p. 38).

PLOP statements should:

- be expressed in "descriptive language that reflects the student's strengths" (Partnership for People With Disabilities, 2009, p. 12)
  - example words: *well-groomed, goal-directed, adaptable, cooperative, well-mannered, consistent, attentive, spontaneous, animated*
  - example phrases: learns with visual and auditory cues, follows one-step directions, is willing to try again, completes directions when they are repeated, requests assistance when needed
- represent student behaviors that can be seen, heard, measured, or counted
- summarize data in concise, concrete, credible (Gleckel & Koretz, 2008) and current (within a year) terms. For example,
  - specific: "Jay multiplies two-digit numbers with 90% accuracy using a calculator."
  - complete: "Elizabeth copies simple shapes (circles, squares, and triangles) with a crayon."
  - accurate: "When given the necessary utensils, Darren can set up to four place settings at a table with minimal verbal prompting."
- be based on current information gathered from a variety of sources, such as
  - portfolios of work
  - documented observations of classroom performance, behavior, and/or social interactions
  - test results, including standardized and authentic measures
  - interviews with parents, teachers, therapists, administrators, and the student

- address academic areas (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies); functional areas (e.g., behavior, communication, personal management, social competence, and self-determination); and transition (Virginia Department of Education, 2009)
- reference research-based techniques that have proven to be effective or ineffective

Although there is great variability in the way PLOPs are written, the following guidelines help ensure clarity.

1. Use a narrative style.
2. Use language that parents and other team members understand.
3. Begin with the student's strengths in the areas of concern and conclude with the needs.
4. Document each source of information, including the names of the tools used and assessment dates. For example,
  - from the *Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement* given on 9-7-12
  - based on a classroom observation on 10-11-12
  - indicated by the results of the informal reading inventory completed on 10-26-12
  - from a review of the student's writing portfolio from the period 9-7-11 to 9-29-12
5. Explain scores, ratings, and interview formats (e.g., a score at the 6<sup>th</sup> stanine is average performance; a rating of 4 on this test shows significantly substandard performance; the student orally answers 15 out of 20 questions).

The following excerpts are examples of positively worded PLOP statements that begin by focusing on a student's area of concern and end with the student's needs. Further, they incorporate the guidelines listed above for promoting clarity.

**Rita**, age 10, with fine-motor concerns:

Rita produces all upper- and lowercase manuscript letters of the alphabet at the rate of 15 letters per minute by using a model and self-correction skills (teacher interview and classroom observation on 11-16-12). Rita writes three-word sentences unassisted with great effort and limited clarity (parent questionnaire and interview on 11-3-12). Rita reports that her hand hurts after 5 minutes of writing and wishes that she could make all the letters stay on the line instead of piling up on each other (student interview on 11-13-12). She also says that using the computer for story writing in school is fun, and she gets her work done that way. Rita appears to learn handwriting through tracing a model and verbalizing the order of the strokes. Practice is most effective in short, intense segments with student self-evaluation of the written product. In order to increase the speed and legibility of her manuscript handwriting when completing lengthy writing assignments, Rita would benefit from using an electronic device.

**Lance**, age 14, with math calculation concerns:

Lance attends class regularly, attempts all in-class assignments, and completes homework assigned in math class. Lance's math teacher reports that when Lance uses a calculator to complete math computation assignments, his accuracy is between 50 and 60%. Without a calculator, his computation accuracy averages 20%. Additionally, the teacher reports that Lance is off task as much as 60% of a class period (data chart, November 8-19, 2012). The highest frequency of off-task behavior is documented when Lance is required to complete assignments independently. Using the Parental Checklist, Lance's father indicates

that Lance brings home materials for assignments three of five times a week and spends more than 1.5 hours on most math assignments. On 9/15/12, on the math portion of the *Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement*, Lance earned a standard score of 38 (extremely low range), which placed him in the 21st percentile. A percentile rank of 21 indicates that Lance scored as well as or better than 21% of his same-aged peers. Lance needs to learn basic math facts for all four processes.

A carefully researched and well-documented PLOP is the basis for the next part of the IEP – the annual goals. You may wish to use the following Checklist for Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance Descriptions to evaluate your IEP drafts.

### **Checklist for Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance Descriptions**

When you can answer “Yes” to each characteristic, you have a complete and positive description of your student.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
1. Are the descriptions written in a positive manner, stressing what the student can do?		
2. Are only the areas impacted by the student’s disability included? (It is not necessary to address all areas; only those of concern.)		
3. Is the information presented in a narrative style?		
4. Is the information specific, complete, and accurate?		
5. Is the information current (within one year)?		
6. Is the language clear and understandable to non-educators?		
7. Are a variety of instruments used to collect data?		
8. Were the results of standardized tests and authentic measures, such as interviews, observations, and portfolios, included?		
9. Are the names of the instruments and dates used to collect and document the information included?		
10. Are the scores and ratings explained?		
11. Is there evidence of input from the parent(s)?		
12. Is there evidence of input from the student (when applicable)?		
13. Is there evidence of input from general educators?		
14. Does each performance area described begin with the student’s strengths and conclude with the need(s)?		
15. Does each description include how the student learns in the performance area?		
16. Does the description help you picture the student?		

### **Annual Goals**

The purpose of the second part of the Heart of the IEP, the annual goals section of the IEP, is to state clearly both academic and functional goals that the student “reasonably can accomplish in a year” (Virginia Department of Education, Division on Special Education and Student Services, 2010). IEP teams determine appropriate, meaningful annual goals based on the student’s present level of academic and functional performance and articulated needs. The goals teams select and write must be meaningful and measurable. However, neither federal nor state regulations specify how to write such measurable goals.

### ***Meaningful Goals***

IEP team members may wish to consider the following points in order to write meaningful annual goals.

1. Develop a goal that is meaningful and realistic as the team considers the student’s cognitive, physical, and emotional strengths and weaknesses. Discuss the student’s present skill level and the rate at which the student learns. For example, Jiminez is a 14-year-old student who presently reads on the third-grade level. Although it may not be realistic to expect that he will independently read sixth-grade level passages within a calendar year, it is important to ensure that the goal is rigorous enough so that he makes significant progress to close the achievement gap.
2. Prioritize annual goals based on the student’s age, the number of years before the student completes school, and the student’s and family’s vision for the student’s life. For example, Ashleigh, an 11<sup>th</sup>-grade student with intellectual disabilities, plans to live independently upon graduation. Consequently, high-priority goals for Ashleigh would include goals related to education, training, employment, and independent living.
3. Base goals on student needs or weaknesses identified in the PLOP section. There must be a direct relationship between the stated needs and the annual goals. For instance, if Lamar’s writing is described as slow, labored, faint, and with 20% correctly formed letters, there is a direct correlation between his area of need and a keyboarding goal.
4. Write goals that allow the student to access and make progress in the general education curriculum. Such goals generally fall into four areas: literacy skills (e.g., reading, writing, math); social skills (e.g., resisting peer pressure, initiating conversation, taking turns); learning strategies (e.g., studying for tests, organizing school materials, remembering information, writing a report); and transition skills (e.g., personal management, social competence, and self-determination).
5. Use clear, simple language in the IEP. Choose language that can be easily understood by the student’s family, educational professionals, and the student. Ask another member of the IEP team to review and provide feedback on the clarity of the language used in the annual goals. Rephrase any language that is unfamiliar or confusing.
6. Write goals that focus on developing and strengthening skills rather than decreasing behavior that prevents the child from accessing the curriculum. For example, appropriate goals for Mava, a student who disrupts the class by talking during instructional time, would focus on increasing appropriate class participation rather than decreasing talking-out behavior.

7. Annual goals may be tied to grade-level standards that the student has not mastered due to his or her disability. “The standard does not become the goal but rather the goal reflects the specialized instruction the student needs in order to learn the skills to access the general education curriculum and be able to achieve the standard” (Partnership for People With Disabilities, 2009, p. 16). Special and general education teachers collaborating to determine the student’s strengths and weaknesses relative to grade-level standards will help identify targeted skills. Examples of these types of goals are included below.

- Goal (focus on math SOL 8.15): *Using concrete materials, pictorial representation, and paper and pencil to illustrate the steps performed, Amanda will solve, with 80% accuracy, two-step linear equations and inequalities, as measured by classroom assignments, teacher observations, and tests.*
- Goal (focus on reading SOL 8.4): *Using grade-level vocabulary, William will use affixes and knowledge of word origins to construct and decode words with 80% accuracy, as measured by teacher-constructed assessments within one year’s time.*

### ***Measurable Goals***

Effective and measurable goals describe observable behaviors, identify learning or performance targets, and are quantifiable in some way. Goals such as “The student will make measurable progress in reading” or “The student will increase math skills” are neither quantifiable nor specific. Measurable goals specify the frequency, accuracy, rate, and duration of performance targets for the student.

Measurable annual goals may be constructed by including these four parts:

- Timeframe
- Condition
- Observable skill or behavior
- Criterion

### **Examples of Annual Goals**

<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Condition</b>	<b>Observable Skill or Behavior</b>	<b>Criterion</b>
By June 1, 2014,	when provided a weekly vocabulary list,	Lucy will decode multi-syllable words	with 90% accuracy.
By June 1, 2014	when given mathematics word problems,	Roman will apply the correct formula to solve the problem	in 8 out of 10 attempts.
By June 1, 2014,	when provided with a writing prompt,	Aaron will organize, write, and edit a five-sentence paragraph with no more than three errors	each time a writing prompt is given.
By June 1, 2014,	when requesting assistance with an assignment,	Jesse will quietly raise his hand and wait silently for assistance	in 90% of the opportunities.

### ***Measuring Progress Toward Annual Goals***

The annual goals section of the IEP specifies how progress toward each annual goal will be measured. There are many ways to measure progress, including the following:

- Classroom participation
- Checklist
- Classwork and homework
- Criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests
- Documented observation
- Special projects
- Tests and quizzes
- Written and oral reports

A checklist for drafting meaningful and measurable annual goals is provided below. The chart on page 9 provides examples of procedures, schedules, and criteria for measuring progress on annual goals.

### Annual Goals Checklist

Use this checklist to analyze the content of the annual goals you draft on your IEPs.

Yes	No	
<b>Are the goals meaningful?</b>		
		1. Are the goals practical and relevant to the student's academic and functional needs?
		2. Do the goals reflect the student's and the family's vision for the student's life?
		3. Are the goals prioritized when the student's age and remaining school years are considered?
		4. Do the goals reflect appropriate growth?
		5. Can the goals be accomplished within one year?
		6. Can the goals be justified based on information provided in the present level of academic achievement and functional performance?
		7. Do goals address additional or unique skills the student needs to be able to access the general education curriculum?
		8. If needed, are literacy skills, learning strategies, social skills, and transition areas addressed?
		9. If appropriate, are goals included for learning positive replacement behaviors?
		10. Is the language jargon-free and understandable to all IEP team members and others, including parents, who interact with the student?
<b>Are the goals measurable?</b>		
		1. Does each goal include a timeframe, condition, specific skill/behavior, and measurement criterion?
		2. Do the goals address increasing performance on targeted skills rather than decreasing skill deficits or negative behaviors?
		3. Are the skills observable and measurable?
		4. Does each goal contain information about the student's expected target performance?
<b>Are the techniques for measuring progress specified?</b>		
		1. Is there a statement of how progress toward each annual goal will be measured?
		2. Are a variety of measures (e.g., classwork, homework, observation, checklists, tests,

		quizzes, projects, reports) used to determine progress?
		3. Are the measures reasonable, given resources and time?
		4. Are the measures, as much as possible, the same as those used for students without disabilities?

### Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks

The third, and final, part of the Heart of the IEP is the short-term objectives or benchmarks. Although this section is not a requirement for all students with disabilities, for students who take alternate assessments aligned with alternate achievement standards, the IEP must include a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives (STOs) (Virginia Department of Education, Division on Special Education and Student Services, 2010, p. 38). These elements describe the skills the student will acquire in order to meet an annual goal. STOs and benchmarks address skills that generalize across curriculum areas, rather than specific curricula or programs. Likewise, both contain common elements (timeframe, condition, skill or behavior, and criterion). Nevertheless, there are differences between them that bear further exploring (see below).

Short-term objectives provide a progression of subskills that move the student towards mastery of the annual goal (Gleckel & Koretz, 2008). Consider these STO examples for the first two annual goals in the chart on page 5:

Timeframe	Condition	Skill or Behavior	Criteria
By November 1, 2013,	when given a list of 15 vocabulary words,	Lucy will decode one-syllable words	with 90% accuracy.
By November 1, 2013,	when provided a writing prompt,	Aaron will complete a graphic organizer to plan his paragraph	each time a writing assignment is given.

Decoding one-syllable words is a subskill of decoding multisyllable words targeted in the annual goal. Similarly, completing a graphic organizer to plan a paragraph is a subskill of writing a five-sentence paragraph as targeted in another annual goal.

### Benchmarks

Benchmarks provide intermediate steps of increasing progress towards mastery of the annual goal (Yell, 2012). Benchmarks are measurable indicators of student progress. They are broader than short-term objectives and typically address major milestones. Examples include the following:

Benchmarks are particularly useful when describing a change in the percent, the accuracy, or the rate of the **same** skill or behavior to be developed. Consider Jesse, who needs to develop skill in quietly requesting assistance. The benchmark is a good choice to measure progress because the behavior (quietly requesting assistance) is not changing. The change is in the percent of the opportunities. Therefore, appropriate benchmarks might look like this:

in 60% of the opportunities by December 15  
in 80% of the opportunities by April 15

in 90% of the opportunities by June 15

Or consider Roman, who needs to develop skills in solving math problems. The behavior of applying the correct formula to solve a problem will not change. The change is in the number of successful attempts. Therefore, appropriate benchmarks might look like this:

in 6 out of 10 attempts by December 15

in 8 out of 10 attempts by April 15

in 10 out of 10 attempts by June 15

IEP teams may use either or both short-term objectives and benchmarks for different goals on the same IEP. However, STOs and benchmarks may not be combined under the same annual goal. So, which measure should IEP teams choose? The answer is: either one. To help make a decision, the following guideline may be useful: When the skill or behavior leading to the annual goal remains essentially the same, but the percent, accuracy, or rate changes over time, choose the benchmark. But when the skills leading to the annual goal are different, choose the short-term objective.

Drafting truly individualized IEPs will continue to challenge collaborative teams. Clarity of expression may be improved by incorporating the ideas presented in this packet. Practice and experience will improve the process and the resulting plan.

**Examples of Procedures, Schedules, and Criteria for Measuring Annual Goals, Short-Term Objectives, and Benchmarks**

<b>Procedures</b> <i>How the skill or behavior will be measured</i>	<b>Schedules</b> <i>How often the measurement will occur</i>	<b>Criteria</b> <i>How well the student is expected to do</i>
Teacher-made tests	Weekly	___ % accuracy
Checklist of behaviors	Daily	8 out of 10 trials
Duration recording	Two times daily	For at least ___ minutes
Teacher observation with anecdotal records	___ times weekly	Every class period
Student self-evaluation	Monthly	Within ___ minutes
Probe sheets	Every ___ weeks	At a rate of ___ per minute
Precision timings	Each marking period	With fewer than ___ errors
Completion of worksheets and assignments	During ___ classes	Legibly and within the lines
Teacher-student conferences	For a unit	Correctly for ___ consecutive days
Anecdotal records	Before/after class	Without teacher prompts
Weekly work and/or behavior contracts	By the end of the week	With ___% improvement over baseline
Portfolios/journal entries	When asked to do so	___ times per interval or period

Adapted from a handout created by Lori Korinek, Ph.D., Professor, The College of William and Mary. Used with permission.

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### **Additional Resources**

Resources are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Visit our website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/> for a complete listing of all materials. Select the Library link and search by "IEP".

This *Considerations Packet* was prepared by Carolyn Ito, June 2001. Updated by Debbie Grosser, February 2013.