



RESEARCH TO PRACTICE #3:  
WRITING MEASURABLE ANNUAL GOALS

DR. MITCHELL YELL

## MEASURABLE ANNUAL GOALS: THE BASICS

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has been the major federal law in special education since 1975 (when it was titled Education for All Handicapped Children Act). The primary purpose of the law is to make a free appropriate public education (FAPE) available to all eligible students with disabilities. The vehicle for ensuring that FAPE is conferred is the individualized education program (IEP).

The IEP must document certain components. Four of these components are the (a) present levels of academic achievement and functional performance statements, (b) annual goals, (c) special education and related services statements, and (d) a method for monitoring a student's progress toward achieving his or her goals.

Although these components have been required in all students' IEPs since 1975, an important change was made to these requirements when the IDEA was reauthorized and amended in 2004. In this reauthorization, called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, Congress changed the second requirement from "annual goals" to "measurable annual goals."

Correctly written measurable annual goals achieve two purposes. First an annual goal is a students' IEP team's estimation of what a student will achieve in one years time given an appropriate education. Second, the goal provides a means or measuring a student's progress in his or her educational program.

Unfortunately research on IEPs has shown that many IEPs do not include goals that are measurable. When goals are not measurable a student's progress toward meeting the goals cannot be measured, which makes IEP goals meaningless, useless, and illegal. In this research to practice guide we describe how to develop goals that are measurable.

## IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF ANNUAL GOALS

### **Goals must be based on an individualized assessment that identifies all of a student's needs.**

The purpose of the assessment requirements, also called the evaluation and identification mandates, of the IDEA are twofold: First a full and individualized assessment provides information to assist a multidisciplinary team to determine if a student has a disability under the IDEA and requires

special education and related services. Second, the assessment is used to develop a student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) upon which the rest of the IEP is based. Too often, multidisciplinary teams focus on the first purpose of assessment, which is eligibility determination, and neglect the second purpose, instructional planning. Unfortunately, without data and information on a student's instructional needs an IEP will not be educationally appropriate and neither will it be legally sound.

The effect of this type of deficiency in an IEP was addressed by a U.S. District Court judge in *Kirby v. Cabell County Board of Education* (2006). In the court's opinion the judge aptly stated the importance of the assessment to ensuring that a student will receive a FAPE:

If the IEP fails to assess the 'child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance' the IEP does not comply with [IDEA]. This deficiency goes to the heart of the IEP; the child's level of academic achievement and functional performance is the foundation on which the IEP must be built. Without a clear identification of [the child's] present levels, the IEP cannot set measurable goals, evaluate the child's progress and determine which educational and related services are needed (P. 694).

A second problem is that often teams include goals in a student's IEP that are not related to his or her educational needs (e.g., goals to improve understanding the civil war or increase higher level thinking skills for a student with significant reading problems). This should be avoided.

### **Goals must be measurable.**

As previously noted, in the reauthorization of the IDEA in 1997, the requirement was changed from "annual goals" to "measurable annual goals." After 1997, the IEP goals continued to focus on remediation of academic or nonacademic problems and were to be based on a student's current level of educational performance but now they had to be measurable. Moreover following the 1997 reauthorization when IEP teams failed to include measurable goals for each area of need that could render an IEP inappropriate, and thus violate the FAPE provisions of the IDEA. Developing measurable annual goals and then measuring them, therefore, is critical to planning and implementing FAPE.

The importance of including measurable annual goals in the IEP was shown in the opinion of the following due process hearing. A hearing officer in New Mexico found that a school district's IEP did not provide FAPE when the:

Student's annual goals in each IEP simply do not contain objective criteria which permit measurement of the student's progress. . . . A goal of 'increasing' reading comprehension skills or 'improving decoding skills' is not a measurable goal . . . . Even if [present levels of performance] were clearly stated, an open-ended statement that Student will 'improve' does not meet the requirement . . . for a 'measurable' goal. The addition of a percentage of accuracy is not helpful where the IEP fails to define a starting point, an ending point, the curriculum in which Student will achieve 80 to 85% accuracy, or a procedure for pre and post-testing (*Rio Rancho Public Schools*, 2003, p. 563).

## **Goals must be measured.**

In addition to the requirement that goals be measurable it is critical that they must actually be measured. In fact, a student's IEP must include a statement of how a student's progress toward the annual goals will be measured. This requirement is a response to the movement toward greater accountability in education and the purpose of this requirement is to inform parents and educators of how a student's progress toward his or her annual goals will be measured. Measuring a student's progress toward his or her goals is essential because without monitoring it will be impossible to determine if the student's program is working. If the goals and objectives of the IEP cannot be measured or evaluated, the IEP will not appropriately address the student's needs, which may result in the denial of FAPE.

The importance of progress monitoring was described as follows in the decision in *Escambia County Public School System*:

Periodic review of progress on the goals and objectives provides the disabled student's teacher with supportive data needed to make a determination of the success of the intervention... (p. 248).

## **Goals must be measured using real data**

When developing a student's goals, IEP teams must make decisions regarding the nature of the data that will be collected and analyzed. Anecdotal data and other subjective procedures are not appropriate for monitoring progress, and should not be the basis of a progress monitoring system. The most appropriate progress monitoring systems are those in which objective numerical data are collected, graphed, analyzed, and used to make instructional decisions. Two examples of such systems are curriculum-based measurement and applied behavior analysis.

A Federal District Court in Virginia addressed the importance of data collection in *County School Board of Henrico County, Virginia v. R.T.* (2006). The parents of a young child with autism, R.T. placed their son in a private school because he had failed to make progress in the school district's program. The boy's teacher and other school district personnel countered that R.T. had made progress in the school's program. The court, however, did find the testimony credible because the evidence of R.T.'s progress was based only on anecdotal information and no data had been collected. The Court wrote, "(the teacher's) assessment of R.T. is entitled to little weight because it is based on anecdotal, rather than systematic, data collection (P. 685). In *Board of Education of the Rhinebeck Central School District* a school district's IEP was invalid because no legitimate data was collected to show student progress. In fact, the student's goals were measured by teacher observation. According to the decision "although subjective teacher observation provides valuable information, teacher observation is not an adequate method of monitoring student progress" and "Without supporting data, teacher observation is opinion which cannot be verified" (p. 148) Similarly in a case from Federal District Court in New Jersey the judge ruled a school district's IEP was invalid because the measurement of student progress fell woefully short" because it relied on teacher observations and not objective, scientific data. Clearly serious problems, for a school district and

students, can occur when attempts to monitor progress are made based on subjective observations or evaluations rather than actual data.

### **Goals should be ambitious.**

A student's IEP must be reasonably calculated to provide an educational program that confers meaningful provide educational benefit. Courts have ruled that what constitutes meaningful educational benefit must be made on a case-by-case basis considering the unique educational needs of a student. One of the most important variables in the determination of educational benefit are a student's annual goals, because they represent the IEP team's prediction of a student growth over one year, when the student is provided with the individualized educational program spelled out in the IEP. When goals are written that called for minimal growth such goals can become a legal problem. This is because it is likely even if a school has data to show that the goal was achieved, a court could decide that the amount of growth did not constitute meaningful educational benefit.

For example in a case heard by a federal district court in South Caroline (Shannon Carter v. Florence County School District Four), the judge determined that an IEP developed for Shannon Carter, a student with a learning disability, was not appropriate because even if the student's goals had been met her progress would have been inadequate. In this particular case, the IEP team had written annual goals calling for 4 months growth over the entire school year.

The IEP should be reasonable, but ambitious goals. Never have school district's IEPs been invalidated by a court because the goals been too ambitious; it is likely they could be invalidated if a court fins they are not ambitious enough.

## **DEVELOPING MEASURABLE ANNUAL GOALS**

After we understand the essential characteristic of an annual IEP goal a critical step remains: Writing a goal that is measurable and both guides instruction and provides an objective format for monitoring and assessing a student's educational progress. There are three important components of a measurable annual goal:

- 1) What the student will do,
- 2) The conditions under which the student will do this, and
- 3) How well it must be done.

Robert Mager (1998) referred to these three elements as target behavior, conditions, and criteria for acceptable performance. Specific information is required in these three areas:

**Target Behavior:** The target behavior component of the goals specifies what we want to change. The target behavior must be written in terms of a verb that can be observed (e.g., read aloud, match, list, compute, write). That is, the behavior must be observable, measurable, verifiable, and repeatable. This component must NOT be written using verbs that can only be inferred (e.g., appreciates, respects, understands, enjoys). Target behaviors that can only be inferred are NOT measurable because they are invisible or open to many interpretations.

**Condition:** The condition is a description of the conditions that will be imposed on the student when he or she demonstrates their mastery of the goal (e.g., given a story starter and three minutes in which to write, given a reading passage from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading textbook, given 100 randomly selected single digit multiplication and division problems). This information tells a teacher how to measure a change in the student’s behavior. It can include information on the context or environment in which the student’s behavior will be measured or the materials that will be used to measure behavior.

**Criteria for Acceptable Performance:** The criteria for acceptable performance are the standards against which the student’s performance will be judged. The criterion tells us if a student has achieved his or her goal. There are many ways to describe the criteria of acceptable performance, such as speed, accuracy, quality, or fluency (i.e., a measure of speed and accuracy).

For example, the following are two examples of well-written measurable IEP annual goals and the three critical components.

Example 1: In 36 weeks when given a randomly selected passage from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading textbook Doug will read aloud 84 words correctly in one minute.

### Critical Components of Annual Goals

Target Behavior	Condition	Criteria for Acceptable Performance
<u>read aloud</u>	<u>In 36 weeks when given a randomly selected passage from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading textbook</u>	<u>84 words correctly in one minute</u>

Example 2: In 36 weeks Jeremy will successfully complete 90% of the homework assigned in his social studies and science classes with 90% correct answers.

Target Behavior	Condition	Criteria for Acceptable Performance
<p><u>successfully complete</u></p> <p><u>homework</u></p>	<p><u>In 36 weeks...</u></p> <p><u>homework assigned in his social studies and science classes</u></p>	<p><u>90% of the homework...</u></p> <p><u>90% correct answers.</u></p>

### Guides to Writing Measurable Annual Goals

Bateman, B.D. (2007). From Gobbledygook to clearly written annual IEP goals. Verona WI: Attainment Company.

Johnston, T.C. (2010). Data without tears: How to write measurable educational goals and collect meaningful data. Champaign, IL: Research Press

Kosinsky, C. (2008). IEP goals that make a difference: An administrator's guide to improving the process. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications

Mager, R.F. (1998). Preparing instructional objectives: A critical tool in the development of effective instruction. Atlanta, GA: Center for Effective Performance

### References

*Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Sch. Dist. v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176 (1982).

*Kirby v. Cabell County Board of Education*, 46 IDELR § 156 (S.D. W. VA 2006)

*Rio Rancho Pub. Sch.*, 40 IDELR 140 (SEA N.M. 2003).

*Shannon Cater v. Florence School District Four*, 17 EHLR 452 (D.SC 1991).

*Spielberg v. Henrico County Pub. School*, 853 F.2d 256 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988).