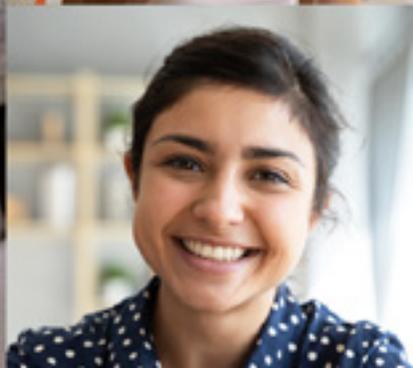# A Comprehensive Guide to the
IEP PROCESS

n2y

A Comprehensive Guide to the
IEP PROCESS

Kelley Spainhour

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What does it take to develop an effective Individualized Education Program (IEP)? Why do some IEPs aptly reflect the strengths of unique learners and characterize their needs with personalized services and goals, while others fall flat with detached language? How can the IEP team ensure the cycle of planning, writing, execution, and progress monitoring actually results in successful outcomes?

The single most important factor in the development and implementation of a strong IEP is the collaboration of the whole team. Collaboration means frequent communication, sharing data, joint brainstorming, and ongoing teamwork. It means proactively seeking the input of other team members and practicing active listening. When an IEP team seeks out and reflects back the voices and solutions of each team member, everyone benefits:

- The student is set up for success at school with supports and instruction that are truly individualized.

- The family is engaged with the school community, because they know their voice matters and they trust the school team.

- The administrators, teachers, related service providers, and other school personnel are confident about compliance and energized by the effectiveness of their work.

Collaboration is critical throughout the entire IEP process. This guide explains why, discusses how to collaborate with all stakeholders, and addresses the significance of the cyclical, ongoing nature of the IEP process.

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Introduction

Imagine you are a fifth-grade teacher in a self-contained inclusion classroom. One of your students, Maria, has an intellectual disability. Maria's favorite subject is language arts. She loved your read-aloud of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis and she especially loved watching the movie clips following each chapter of the book. Maria also loves animals and is always eager to share new facts about animals after watching *Animal Planet* at home.

At her annual IEP meeting in the spring, the team discusses her upcoming transition to middle school. Maria's parents are nervous about the new challenges she will face as a sixth grader: crowded hallways, multiple teachers, and more homework. The IEP team brainstorms different accommodations and services to support her transition, and Maria's sixth-grade year proves to be relatively uneventful. Her success is largely due to the thoughtful accommodations of her fifth-grade IEP team and a diligent, communicative IEP case manager in sixth grade.

Fast forward several years. Maria is now in eleventh grade. At 17, she still loves animals. She regularly expresses interest in working with a veterinarian whenever her teachers and parents explore postsecondary options with her. However, she has had no practical experiences to prepare her for this goal, and the IEP team does not address this vocational ambition specifically. Instead, her transition goals are written broadly. She works on important but general goals such as personal organization and computer literacy. Her parents are supportive but lack insight into how they can help her become a veterinary technician.

Maria graduates high school the following year. She has no immediate plans to attend vocational training or community college. She still enjoys learning about and working with animals but does not see a path for working in a veterinarian's office.

Two years following high school graduation, Maria works at the local grocery store as a bagging clerk. Her parents share that she seems happy.

As her former teacher, you are proud of Maria and thankful to have been part of her educational journey. She made great progress from the time you met her at age 10 to her graduation eight years later. You know it's rare to get to keep up with a student for so many years!

You are also a little sad to learn she is not working with animals in any way. This was her heart's passion, and while an ambitious goal, it was an achievable one.

Was there anything you could have done differently? Maybe her IEP team in the eighth, ninth, or tenth grade could have done something to prepare the way for her to pursue her desired vocation. When should transition planning really start, anyway?

Maria walked across the stage at graduation after several years of positive experiences with her teachers and peers. Yet, in her late middle and high school years, Maria's IEP lacked continuity. There was a change in special education leadership at two different points during her high school career and special education resources were often diverted to higher-needs students whose academic or behavioral needs were more pressing. Her team saw her annual IEP meeting as a compliance goal to meet rather than as a critical opportunity to gather and reflect upon data, write appropriate and relevant goals, and prepare for her future.

Toward the end of her schooling, Maria's IEP process lacked coordination and collaboration. The school was never out of compliance, but in the end, Maria missed opportunities to learn specific skills and gain experiences that would help her transition from the K–12 setting to employment in her desired postsecondary vocation.

The Significance of the IEP Process

An IEP is a confidential legal document that serves as a roadmap for a student's special education experience. It explains how the student's disability impacts learning and covers topics such as academic goals, testing accommodations, therapy hours, transportation services, and much more. The IEP also includes detailed and data-driven information about a student's strengths and weaknesses. Its primary purpose is to establish measurable annual goals for the student and explicitly state the special education and related services that the school will provide for, or on behalf of, the child (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017).

Developing and implementing an IEP that truly meets the unique needs of a student with a disability is possible only when the IEP team views its development and implementation as a meaningful process.

The IEP process cyclically moves through four key stages: planning, writing, executing, and progress monitoring and reporting, and then back to planning again. Integrally important to each stage is collaboration with all stakeholders.

Most experienced IEP case managers follow this process. Yet, writing the IEP just days before its due date without significant conversation or input from other members of the team is not uncommon. It is an easy pitfall for many special education teachers who are overwhelmed by large caseloads and demanding teaching responsibilities. When this happens, goals are often written as impersonal, broad copies of state standards, and the narrative within the present levels of performance statements is often a string of test scores rather than a strengths-oriented description of the student's abilities.

Carrying out the entire IEP process with fidelity results in an individualized education program that is truly student centered. The IEP is more meaningful to the teachers providing the specialized instruction or general education curriculum because they have had a hand in its design. Compliance issues are less frequent when administrators are involved throughout the entire cycle of the IEP because they are more likely to be communicating with families frequently, keeping up with important due dates, and addressing concerns as they arise.

Planning · Writing · Collaboration · Executing · Progress Monitoring

Collaboration Is Key

Collaboration with the whole multidisciplinary team is essential to the creation of a comprehensive, effective IEP. How can a pair of co-teachers draft appropriate reading goals for a student without soliciting input from the student's speech and language pathologist? How might a student's day be affected if the team fails to include the parent's perspective on a new behavior chart? What if a student is highly motivated to learn a particular skill, such as making change from dollar bills or counting coins, and that skill is not reflected anywhere in his IEP?

THE IEP TEAM

To this end, the multidisciplinary IEP team must include certain individuals who are specified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These include:

- A parent or guardian

- The student (when appropriate)

- A special educator

- A general educator

- A school or district representative who is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and school resource availability

- Related service providers (when appropriate)

- Someone who can interpret the results of an evaluation and determine instructional implications (such as a special education teacher or school psychologist)

- Other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the student

Reference : IDEA §300.321, 2004

It is also wise to consult the individuals in a child's life who may not be required members of the IEP team but who still have an important impact on the child's educational journey. A student's pediatrician, athletic coach, or community mentor, for example, may have helpful data and insight to offer the team. Every member of the IEP team, including and especially the student and his or her parents, plays a key role in the IEP process. Three of these roles are examined in greater depth below.

THE STUDENT'S ROLE

The student with the disability is at the very heart of the IEP. The reason special education exists at all is to ensure unique learners are equipped with the support they need to be active participants in their education. Although IDEA requires students age 14 and older to be invited to their own IEP meetings, there is no minimum age requirement to attend. Every child is different, but many experts suggest that children can benefit from and contribute to their IEP meeting from a young age—even as young as six years old (CHADD, 2017). Students who learn self-advocacy skills exhibit increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills (Martin, et al., 2006). They gain practice in goal setting, teamwork, asking for and receiving help, expressing their strengths and interests, negotiating, and resolving differences. Students who regularly attend their own IEP meetings also develop a greater understanding of their disability and legal rights and are better prepared to continue advocating for themselves as they transition to postsecondary education and careers.

Teachers and parents can help students learn self-advocacy by providing plenty of opportunities for practice. Students may start with observing a 10-minute portion of an IEP meeting, gradually learn to share their strengths and present their ideas, and eventually take ownership by leading part or all the meeting. It is impossible to have a student-centered IEP without directly involving the student.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Special education teachers are integral to the development and implementation of the IEP. They are responsible for providing specialized instruction and services, including the accommodations and modifications that allow the student to participate in the general education setting.

There is a wide range of service delivery options for students with disabilities. Some students only have an hour of consultation per month with a special education teacher for reading support. Other students are in a full-time special education setting with very little or no interaction with their nondisabled peers and require significant specialized services just to be able to attend school.

Regardless of the setting and amount of service provided, it is the teacher's job to know the student well. Ideally, the special education teacher understands the nuances of a student's academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses and the specific ways the student's disability impacts learning. This allows the teacher to contribute appropriately challenging and personalized solutions to the IEP process and leads to the creation of goals that are meaningful, ambitious, and realistic.

THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE

Administrators in charge of special education compliance at a school have an important job! From a legal perspective, they are responsible for ensuring the school maintains compliance with IDEA for all students with disabilities and those suspected of having disabilities. It is their job to oversee the entire process with efficacy and integrity, from the initial referral for special education evaluation to the development and implementation of the IEP. At IEP meetings, the administrator may also serve as what IDEA describes as a "representative of the public agency," a designated member of the team who is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and resource availability (IDEA §300.321, 2004). The administrator may need to make decisions or offer guidance about certain aspects of the IEP, such as the coordination of transportation services for a student who uses a wheelchair and requires a lift.

Special education administrators keep track of compliance timelines and due dates, coordinate testing accommodations, monitor student progress, analyze trends, and address complaints if they arise. They may also hold other responsibilities, such as coaching special education teachers or facilitating professional development for staff. The administrator may also act as the point person for families who are concerned about their child's progress and may be called upon to mediate for various groups and teams within the school.

Depending on the school/district, the special education administrator may hold different titles such as special education coordinator, special education director, lead special education teacher, or assistant principal for special populations.

Planning the IEP

For students who are new to special education, the planning phase of the IEP process begins with the initial referral for special education and ensuing evaluations. A team planning the initial IEP will consider the data that prompted the initial referral, such as response-to-intervention (RTI) data, teacher observation, parent report, and/or health records. The team will also consider the results of the evaluations, student records, grades, work samples, and more. For students who are not new to special education, the planning phase is ongoing throughout the school year with a heightened focus in the couple of months leading up to the annual IEP meeting.

The IEP case manager is the point person throughout the life cycle of the IEP process. It may be helpful to think of the case manager as the IEP team leader or "master organizer." The case manager is not more important than any other member of the IEP team. However, it is the case manager's responsibility to maintain compliance with the legal timeframe of the IEP, ensure everyone's voice is heard and accurately reflected in the development of the IEP, and produce a student-centered, standards-aligned, comprehensive IEP document.

Throughout the planning phase, the IEP case manager will aim to:

- Collaborate with all stakeholders

- Gather and analyze data

- Address the needs of the whole child

- Maintain compliance

Collaborate with All Stakeholders

The importance of collaboration in the IEP process cannot be overstated. Working together is critical to the development of a strong, student-centered IEP, and it is the best way to create and facilitate meaningful learning opportunities that pave the way for the student's postsecondary goals.

At the start of the school year, or when the case manager receives a new student in her caseload, it is best practice to make a list of all the relevant individuals in the child's educational life. The list will look very similar to the list of individuals required to attend the IEP meeting, but may also include "outside providers" or other important people in a student's life, such as a grandparent who cares for the student every weekend, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), or a clinical speech therapist.

Regular communication with individuals in a student's special needs orbit should happen throughout the school year, not just in the weeks leading up to the IEP meeting. Everyone who works in a school carries a full plate of responsibilities and wears many hats. It's understandable that many case managers find it challenging to gather valuable information from every member of the team well in advance of the IEP meeting. One way to ensure the case manager receives input from everyone on a regular basis is to send automated reminders at periodic intervals, such as every two to three weeks. In the reminder email or note, the case manager could ask teachers and other team members to share one piece of data related to the student's overall progress. Data may be directly related to an IEP goal, such as the student's performance on a recent quiz. It may also be anecdotal, such as a teacher's observations of a student's interactions with peers at recess. Using a checklist or multiple-choice questionnaire on occasions helps make the communication process efficient.

Some key stakeholders, such as a student's private psychologist, may be more challenging to reach due to scheduling constraints. In these cases, the case manager should plan to reach out several weeks or a few months in advance of the IEP meeting.
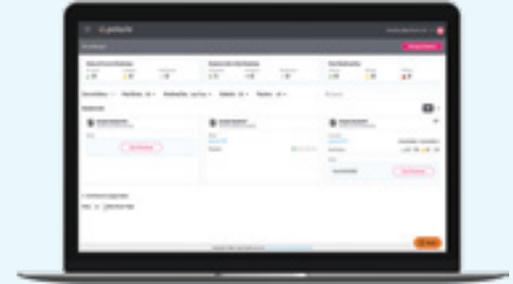
Until now, there's been no reliable way to coordinate the quantities of varied data, reporting, observations, and input from IEP team members—administrators, teachers, therapists, other service providers, families, and students. n2y's Polaris is an online collaborative solution that revolutionizes the work of the compliance team, creating a culture of trust in an inviting environment that features helpful point-of-use prompts and supports to guide all team members through the complex IEP process and keep the focus on student success.

Gather and Analyze Data

An IEP is only as strong as the data that informs it. Creating a truly individualized, strengths-based, and standards-aligned IEP requires the use of robust and reliable data. That means teachers must adopt a mindset of always gathering and recording data. One way to do this is through formative assessments.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Formative assessments offer daily or weekly opportunities to learn about a student's strengths and needs. They take many forms and all of them contribute in different but meaningful ways to the narrative of the student's ongoing progress.
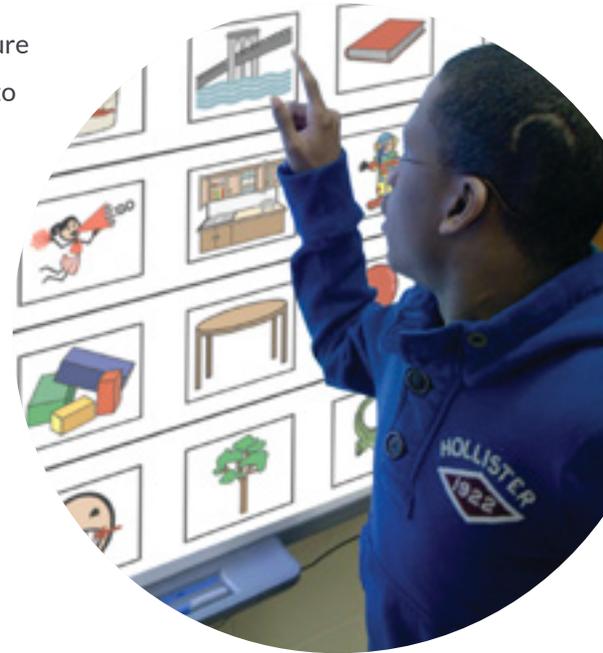
FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES

- Classwork (including warm-ups, traditional independent seatwork, and exit tickets)

- Whiteboard work completed in a small-group or whole-class setting

- Verbal answers to a whole-class question written on chart paper

- Interactive notebook recordings on a KWL chart, journal prompt, or other activity

- Essay or paragraph writing samples

- Online quizzes or polls

- Teacher observations of behavior, peer interaction, or physical movement

- Rubric scores from a partner-work project

- Interview assessments (casually chatting with a student to garner information about what he or she understood from the lesson)

> Creating a truly individualized, strengths-based, and standards-aligned IEP requires the use of robust and reliable data.

- Results and observations from think-pair-share or any other cooperative learning activity

- Visual representations of the student's learning, ranging from a picture summary of a text to creating photography or videography at home to represent synthesized learning

- Self-assessment tools such as checklists, surveys, and questionnaires

- Sticky note answers to verbal or written questions

- Self-reflection using emojis, colored cups, or leveled clips

- Weekly quizzes

- Parent reports of homework time, use of life skill (such as cooking or laundry), reading frequency or fluency, or other activity

This list is not exhaustive. There are as many types of formative assessments as there are ways to teach. Being thoughtful about the types of data needed to create a robust IEP will help the team compile a variety of data points to create a true, full picture of the student's needs.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Summative assessments are another important way to measure a student's progress. Different from formative assessments, which are intended to provide ongoing feedback to the teacher about student progress, summative assessments are intended to evaluate a student's learning at the end of an instructional period by measuring it against a benchmark. Summative assessment data will be collected less frequently than data from formative assessments, but they are excellent tools for quarterly progress reports for students who have IEP goals with quarterly objectives or benchmarks.

For example, an elementary school student with reading fluency goals may take the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test three to four times per year. DIBELS is a standardized test of early basic literacy skills. The results of the assessment would show the student's progress throughout the year, and compare it

against a set of standardized benchmarks. This data would be reported on the student's quarterly progress report and the IEP goals and supports may be amended as a result of the data.

Data from summative assessments should be objective and numerical to ensure the progress report is a true, accurate picture of a student's learning.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES

- Standardized assessment, such as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) test

- Unit test

- Midterm exam

- Research paper

- End-of-term recital

- Creative portfolio

To gain a complete picture of a student's progress, data from both formative and summative assessments is needed.

Address the Whole Child

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that develops high-quality programs, resources, and services for educators. The ASCD Whole Child Approach was launched in 2007 with the goal of changing the conversation in education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes long-term development and success of children (Whole Child, 2015). It ensures students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged—the five tenets of whole-child education.

To plan the IEP with a whole-child approach in mind, the IEP team must reach beyond developing appropriate academic and therapeutic goals. The team can use various sections of the IEP, such as the sections for the present levels of performance narrative and the section dedicated to supplementary aids and services, to note the different kinds of supports that meet the holistic needs of the student. As the team plans the IEP, it should think through how to incorporate these five tenets.

HEALTH

Contact information for the student's pediatrician and/or specialists should be included as well as the strategy for managing medication or medical procedures (such as catheterization) that must take place at school. This information is often included in a separate file with the school nurse. It should also be captured in the IEP to present a whole picture of the student's needs.

SAFETY

If the student was found to have behavioral or social-emotional needs in the formal evaluation process, then the IEP will specifically address these needs. But, for many students who do not have documented emotional or behavioral disabilities, there is no discussion within the IEP of social and emotional learning (SEL), though it is still relevant and necessary. Perhaps this can be accomplished by ensuring the student participates in the inclusion class's weekly SEL lesson, receives consultation from the school guidance counselor, or completes a self-reflection inventory on a quarterly basis.

ENGAGEMENT

When planning the IEP, it is helpful to note when, where, and how the student best engages with school. One way to formally support a student's engagement is to provide a flexible scheduling accommodation to allow him to complete assessments during the time of day in which he is most engaged. Engagement is about more than the time of day when a student feels most awake, of course. It can also help to note which teachers are most effective in capturing the student's interest or how the student prefers to learn new information.

SUPPORT

Who in the student's life and who in the school building helps the student feel safe, secure, valued, and heard? Does the student have a mentor at school or in the community? Who does she turn to when she needs help, academic or otherwise? A strong support network acts as a safety net for students when they encounter stressful situations. Actively identifying the people in a student's support network is empowering for the student because it helps her learn to ask for and accept help.

CHALLENGE

All students deserve to be academically challenged in order to be adequately prepared for their future aspirations. The IEP team should be aware of what motivates the student. What is she interested in pursuing after high school and what are ambitious, achievable goals that will help her get there? Whether students are pursuing a traditional four-year college degree or working toward independent living skills, IEP teams can develop an educational program that harnesses students' strengths to create motivating goals and opportunities.

Source: ASCD, 2015

> Whether a child receives weekly, monthly, or quarterly progress reports, the team should be collecting and analyzing data about the student's academic, behavioral, therapeutic, and/or functional progress regularly.

Maintain Compliance

The timeframe for becoming eligible for special education services starts when the parent or guardian signs the form consenting to evaluation and concludes at the eligibility determination meeting. IDEA requires this process to happen within 60 days, though some states have created their own timeframes for conducting the initial evaluation (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2019). After the student is found eligible, the IEP team typically has 30 days to develop the IEP.

It is the IEP case manager's job to stay on top of the IEP calendar and keep the various team members informed of upcoming meetings. It is also the case manager's responsibility to keep detailed planning notes and to solicit data and input from all other members of the team. These planning notes ensure that progress monitoring is

collaborative and ongoing rather than a rushed collection of information just prior to the IEP meeting. Whether a child receives weekly, monthly, or quarterly progress reports, the team should be collecting and analyzing data about the student's academic, behavioral, therapeutic, and/or functional progress regularly. Ultimately, compliance is about more than meeting the legal deadlines. Making sure everyone's voice is heard at the IEP table is a critical component of maintaining compliance with the spirit of IDEA.

Writing the IEP

Once the IEP team has completed its planning process, it's time to write the IEP. As with planning, writing should involve the whole team. As teachers, service providers, and parents provide updates about the student's academic and behavioral progress, the IEP case manager should be saving documents, recording data, making notes, and drafting outlines for progress and goal updates. An IEP that reflects the input of the whole team and includes analyzed data about the holistic needs of the student must be drafted well in advance of the IEP meeting. Here are four primary considerations for the writing process.
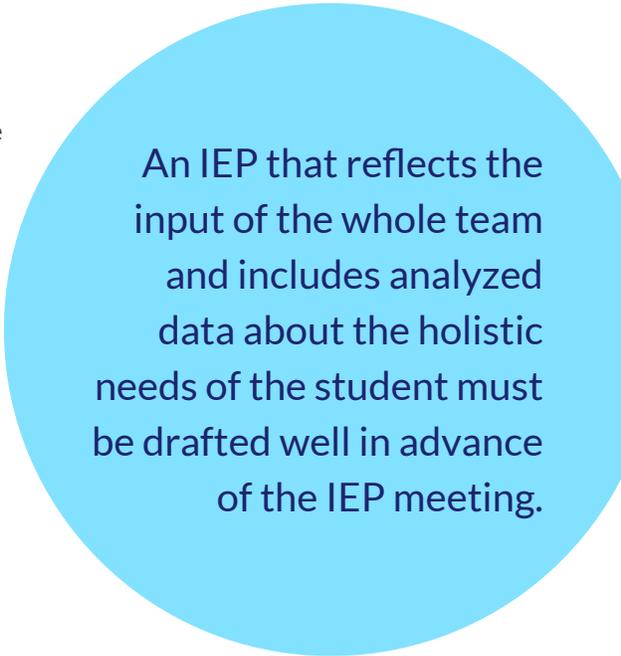
> An IEP that reflects the input of the whole team and includes analyzed data about the holistic needs of the student must be drafted well in advance of the IEP meeting.

Use Reliable Data

Reliable, meaningful data is necessary for writing an effective IEP. Without it, IEP teams cannot write comprehensive present level of performance statements or strong, measurable goals. Good data tells the IEP team when the student is making progress toward goals and when the student is not progressing. Reliable data is also timely, meaning it is recent. It provides an accurate picture of a student's current performance and helps the team know if it needs to make changes. Reliable data incorporates a variety of sources, not just the report of one teacher or the results of one assessment.

Sometimes, data is unreliable because the data collection process is inconsistent or inadequate. This can happen when there is not a clear collection method or process in place. For example, consider a student who has a behavioral goal for transitioning from her classroom to specials without wandering or running away from the class. Perhaps it is

written like this, "Given no more than two verbal prompts, Kelsey will transition from her classroom to specials (music, art, P.E.) without eloping for at least 40% of daily opportunities across an entire quarter." How is the team collecting data about Kelsey's transition in the hallway? To accurately measure her progress toward this goal, teachers need to be recording her transition behavior daily. Teachers or paraprofessionals may record her transition data on a clipboard, behavior chart, or through an online behavior management system. Setting up a data collection process takes extra work on the front end but pays dividends as the team sits down to write a strong IEP.

Write SMART Goals

A strong IEP goal is a SMART IEP goal, meaning it is specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and realistic, and time-bound. Writing SMART IEP goals is important, in part, because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires IEP goals to be measurable (IDEA §300.320a, 2004). An IEP team cannot know if a student is making progress toward his or her goal if there is no way to count, see, hear, or otherwise observe progress. To this end, well-written IEP goals include language that describes how the goal will be measured. It might note that the skill will be measured through weekly probes or a checklist, for example.

SMART IEP goals must also be attainable, or realistic, for students with disabilities. To ensure the IEP goal is attainable, it is best to start by looking at the data. For example, if the student's last running record exam showed she is reading at an early third-grade level, it is probably not realistic to write an IEP reading goal with a fluency objective that reflects mid fourth-grade proficiency by the next quarter. Another important way to ensure IEP goals are attainable is to consult all IEP team members including, and especially, the student and parents. Students who provide input toward IEP goal development are more likely to be invested in working toward the goal. All IEP teams must prioritize areas to focus on when writing IEP goals. Using the student's strengths and preferences is a great way to help identify the priorities.
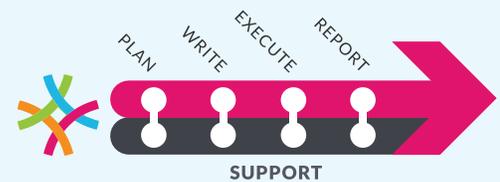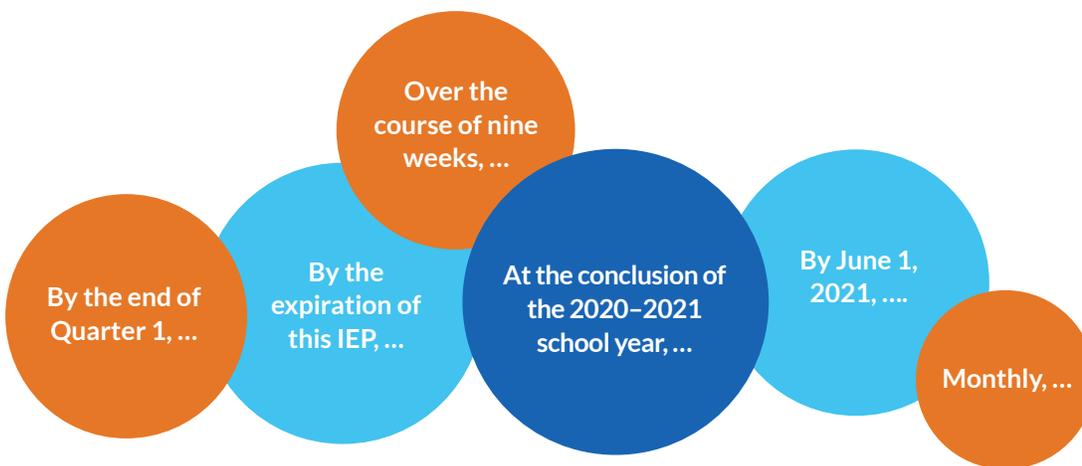
Polaris helps the entire IEP team gather information; develop and write performance-based, individualized, standards-aligned SMART goals; ensure goal-driven execution; monitor and report progress; and support student growth. And at every stage, the team can be confident that their work is driven by current student performance data, for the most personalized and positive outcomes possible.

Results-oriented IEP goals clearly specify what the student will do to accomplish the goal. This part of the IEP goal states the action a student will take, such as writing, calculating, looking, or reciting, for example.

Timely IEP goals have a clear time frame or end date. This provides structure for the IEP team as it considers a student's progress over the course of one school year and from year to year.

COMMON PHRASES FOR MARKING TIME IN IEP GOALS

Over the course of nine weeks, …

By the end of Quarter 1, …

By the expiration of this IEP, …

At the conclusion of the 2020–2021 school year, …

By June 1, 2021, ….

Monthly, …

Align the IEP to State Standards

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education issued a letter to school districts across the country clarifying that IEPs must be aligned to the state standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In the guidance letter, the Department of Education emphasized two important points:

1 Research demonstrates that children with disabilities can learn grade-level content and make meaningful academic progress when provided with appropriate instruction and supports; and

2 Low expectations lead to children with disabilities receiving less rigorous instruction and below grade-level content standards.

With this mandate to align IEPs to grade-level standards, teachers sometimes fall into the trap of writing IEP goals that simply copy the language of the standard itself, making the goal extremely broad. Standards are purposefully written to reflect a compilation of smaller objectives and range of skills. They are not meant to be taught and mastered in one day. For example, one sixth-grade Common Core Math Standard in the Number System domain is listed below:

Fluently add, subtract, multiply, and divide multi-digit decimals using the standard algorithm for each operation.

CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.6.NS.B.3

SMALLER OBJECTIVES OF A STANDARD

Embedded within this standard are more than a dozen smaller objectives that a student must be able to achieve in order to demonstrate mastery. To name a few, a student must be able to:

- Understand place value, including thousandths, hundredths, tenths, units/ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, etc.

- Add multi-digit numbers (including "regrouping")

- Subtract multi-digit numbers (including "borrowing")

- Understand the inverse relationship between addition and subtraction

- Multiply single-digit and multi-digit numbers using multiple strategies

- Divide two- and three-digit dividends by one- and two-digit divisors

- Understand the inverse relationship between multiplication and division

Each of these bullet points could easily be broken down further into additional objectives. So, to write an IEP goal for a sixth-grade student using the exact language of the standard above would be a mistake. It would be unhelpful to teachers and service providers working with the student and would likely harm the student's chances for demonstrating meaningful progress.

EXAMPLE OF GOAL THAT IS TOO BROAD

Chris will add, subtract, multiply, and divide multi-digit decimals with 80% accuracy in four out of five trials by the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

EXAMPLE OF GOAL THAT IS SPECIFIC AND MEASURABLE

Given direct instruction, Chris will add up to two-digit numbers with decimals to the hundredths place, including regrouping, with 75% accuracy in at least four trials on formative assessments (quizzes, exit tickets, classwork samples) by the expiration of this IEP.

Teachers may choose to prioritize part of the standard, as shown above. Some standards deemed critical may be broken into different goals or written as one goal with multiple objectives. Decisions about IEP goal priority should be made in collaboration with the whole IEP team and based on a thorough understanding of the student's abilities.

Involve the Whole Team

Just as the whole team is needed to gather and analyze data and brainstorm solutions, the whole team is also invited and encouraged to contribute to the writing (or drafting) of the IEP. Most special education teachers write the academic goals and most related service providers write the therapeutic goals. To increase family engagement, student motivation, and IEP continuity across school years, students and parents ought to have a direct say in goal development as well as in the services and accommodations outlined in the IEP. In the collaboration process, it is important for the IEP case manager to remind the team to write meaningful goals that are also SMART goals aligned to standards. As the team brainstorms possible goals, the IEP case manager may serve as a guide, providing feedback to help make sure each goal is SMART and standards based.

AN EXAMPLE OF TEAM COLLABORATION:

A student, Jamal, had a brain tumor when he was three years old. He underwent a successful surgery to remove the tumor and participated in an intensive rehabilitation program immediately following the surgery to help him regain age-appropriate independence. Now, as a first-grade student, Jamal has an IEP and receives academic and therapeutic support. He has goals in reading, writing, math, gross motor development, fine motor control, and speech and language. Jamal's special education teacher and physical therapist have noticed he frequently struggles to keep pace with his class when they walk up and down the stairs going to and from lunch every day. He has fallen twice. Jamal's parents are worried for his physical safety as he walks to lunch and they are concerned about his emotional well-being since he struggles to "keep pace" with his peers.

Jamal's annual IEP meeting is still a few months away, but his special education teacher (and IEP case manager) has been checking in with the physical therapist every other week. She frequently communicates with Jamal's mother through email. Jamal's physical therapist proposes a goal about navigating the steps with the help of an aide and suggests Jamal should enter and exit the lunchroom after his peers to allow for additional time. When the case manager shares this idea with Jamal's parents, they express worry about a perceived stigma of Jamal having a one-to-one aide. They ask if the physical therapist can rewrite the goal to encourage more independence. After extensive conversation among the parents, case manager, physical therapist, and general education teacher, the team agrees to rewrite the goal to encourage Jamal's independence. The goal emphasizes the need for consistent verbal cues and a nonreciprocal (non-alternating) step pattern.

HOW THE RESULTING SMART GOAL MIGHT READ:

During classroom transitions, Jamal will independently walk up and down one flight of stairs (10 steps) with a nonreciprocal step pattern using the right handrail for support with verbal cues from a teacher or other adult to keep pace with his class on 70% of trials for nine consecutive weeks.

Executing the IEP

The next phase of the IEP process is to deliver the carefully planned services and supports outlined in the IEP. The execution phase of IEP is just as important as the planning and writing phases. Without collaborative and data-driven planning, the writing will be flimsy. An IEP written without SMART goals that align to standards doesn't translate well to teaching practice. And, without an effective teaching and therapeutic team to execute the IEP, it will not likely be successful.

Each member of the IEP team has an important and specific job to execute the IEP with fidelity. IDEA requires schools to ensure school personnel understand their responsibilities and have the necessary skills and training to implement the IEP (IDEA, § 1462, 2004). In part, this means that everyone on the team must have access to the full IEP. The IEP is a confidential legal document, so some case managers provide a one-page summary for other members of the IEP team instead of sharing the complete document. The one-pager may be a useful summary to reference for certain discussions, but the full document is necessary for members of the IEP team, including general and special education teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and other relevant school staff. School personnel must also understand their specific responsibilities for IEP implementation and be informed of the accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided to the student (Iris Center, 2019).

Engaging parents throughout each step of the IEP process, including implementation, builds a culture of trust and collaboration and helps to set the tone for the whole IEP year. It also has legal ramifications:

A 2017 Supreme Court case, *Endrew F. v Douglas County School District*, involved a boy, Drew, who had made almost no progress toward his IEP goals. His parents argued he was entitled to more under the law. The school system argued that the boy only had the right to de minimis, or minimal, benefit from the IEP. Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in his decision for a unanimous court that IDEA requires an educational program to be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (*Endrew F. vs. Douglas County School District. U.S. 15-827*, 2017). In his decision, Justice Roberts also wrote that IDEA requires IEPs be developed with the expertise from the school and input from the parents (Lee, 2017).

Progress Monitoring and Reporting

The fourth phase of the IEP process is progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is the process of collecting data, reporting data, and analyzing data to make instructional decisions. Data drives decisions to change the IEP if something isn't working and keeps services in place if the data shows the supports are helping. To use data effectively, IEP teams must decide when to collect data, what data to collect, how it will be recorded, and who is responsible for collecting it.

WHEN

A student's progress should be measured frequently and systematically, for example, every three weeks or twice per week. If progress is only measured twice per year on end-of-semester exams, for example, teachers cannot make data-based changes to their instruction or amend the IEP services and supports in time to make a difference for the student.

WHAT

There are thousands of data points an IEP team could collect, report, and analyze. IEP teams should monitor and report progress on the academic and functional areas directly related to the child's areas of need that are documented on the IEP. The data collected must speak to the specific goals and objectives on the IEP. For example, consider a student with a math goal involving decimal operations. It would be an inefficient and disorganized use of resources for the student's IEP team to monitor progress on identifying shapes and their attributes. Instead, teachers could plan to administer a sequential series of quick weekly probes to identify the student's progress toward adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing decimals of one-digit, two-digit, and three-digit numbers.

HOW

Anecdotal data is useful in some contexts because it helps give shape to the story of the whole child. But, for the purpose of making instructional decisions and changes to the IEP, it is appropriate to develop a progress monitoring system that uses objective numerical data that can be collected frequently, graphed, and analyzed (Iris Center, 2019). Behavior observation checklists and progress monitoring probes (e.g., reading fluency check, quick multiplication quiz, short exit-ticket assessment) are examples of objective measures.

WHO

The types of data each person on the IEP team is responsible for collecting should be identified. General education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers can all collect and record data. Certain types of data analysis may require specific training and expertise, though, so it is important to clarify exactly what needs to be done. For example, a behavior specialist may be the only member of an IEP team qualified to collect the data necessary for a functional behavioral assessment (FBA), whereas a paraprofessional may be appropriate for scoring and recording math quizzes.

Progress Monitoring and IDEA

Progress monitoring is required by IDEA, which states that IEP teams must document how a student's progress toward meeting each annual goal will be measured and when periodic reports on that progress will be provided to parents (IDEA, 2004).

REPORTING PROGRESS

Progress reports should be distributed at a frequency that makes sense for the individual child and his or her IEP goals. Some IEP progress reports are provided to families quarterly alongside report cards, and other students with IEPs receive weekly progress reports. The purpose of progress reports is to inform parents of the child's growth. It is also one way to hold the team accountable for keeping accurate, timely data.
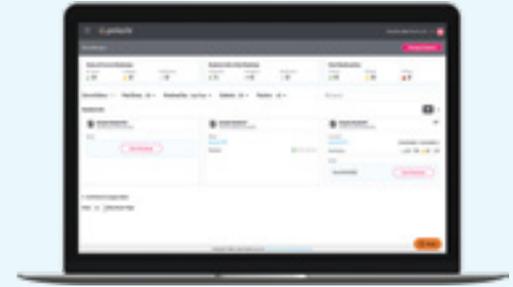
polaris™

Providing all IEP team members with easy access to current student performance data and other relevant information, Polaris facilitates and integrates stakeholder communication, input, task completion, and reviews while offering timeline and progress notifications to keep all participants on track. It documents when all tasks related to an IEP have been completed, all assessments administered, and all recommended supports and instruction implemented, ultimately ensuring student mastery and team compliance at every stage of the process.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing an effective IEP is hard work. It is no small feat to sync the schedules of a busy multidisciplinary team or compile the data and ideas of each team member. It takes time to thoughtfully construct meaningful, SMART IEP goals that incorporate a student's strengths and align to standards. Engaging families and responding to feedback is a big part of the process. The strongest IEP teams are those that work together all year long to share the responsibility and vision for creating truly individualized education programs for children with disabilities. They collaborate before, during, and after IEP meetings—planning and writing together, executing as a team, and analyzing the data collaboratively. True teamwork and ongoing communication are what make the difference for each and every student throughout the IEP process.

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