

NASET's HOW TO Series

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How To Determine Benchmarks or Short-Term Objectives

In the past, **benchmarks or short-term objectives** were required elements in every child's IEP. No longer, however. Now, benchmarks or short-term objectives are required **only** for children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards.

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IDEA's Exact Words

Here's the verbatim requirement for this component of the IEP.

(ii) For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives... §300.320(a)(2)(ii)

The Purpose of Benchmarks and Short-Term Objectives

One of the changes made by the 2004 Amendments to IDEA concerns the requirement for benchmarks or short-term objectives in IEPs. Previously, benchmarks or short-term objectives were required to be developed in correlation with a child's annual IEP goals. While this requirement changed in the 2004 reauthorization, their general purpose has not.

Benchmarks indicate the interim steps a child will take to reach an annual goal. They also serve as a measurement gauge to monitor a child's progress and determine if the child is making sufficient progress towards attaining an annual goal. Using a roadmap analogy, benchmarks and short-term objectives are used to divide the trip to the final destination into concrete, smaller steps.

An Example

Here's an example of an annual goal with short-term objectives for a student named David. The IEP team developed David's reading goal and objectives by looking at the information in his **present level** statement. Then they determined the skills that David needs to learn in order for him to be able to read at a 5th grade level.

Annual Goal: David will achieve a reading score at the 5th grade level or above, as measured by the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI).

Short-term Objectives

1. By October, when given a list of 20 unfamiliar words that contain short-vowel sounds, David will decode them with 90% accuracy on each of 5 trials.
2. By October, when given 20 unfamiliar words that contain long-vowel sounds, David will decode them with 90% accuracy on each of 5 trials.
3. By December, David will correctly pronounce 20 words with 90% accuracy on each of 5 trials to demonstrate understanding of the rule that where one vowel follows another, the first vowel is pronounced with a long sound and the second vowel is silent (orde**al**, co**ast**).
4. By December, David will correctly separate 20 words by syllables with 90% accuracy on each of 5 trials to demonstrate understanding of the rule that each syllable in a word must contain a vowel (les-**son**).

For Whom Are Benchmarks or Objectives Required?

As was said above, **now benchmarks or short-term objectives are required only for children who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards** (e.g., an alternate, non-standard curriculum). Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards are intended for children with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

While this type of alternate assessment must be linked to grade-level content, it typically does not *fully* represent grade-level content, only a sampling of it. Moreover, this type of alternate assessment may be linked to "extended content standards" that a state develops, standards that may restrict or

simplify grade-level content in order to make it accessible to children with the most significant cognitive disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 18). The state may define these content standards in grade clusters (e.g., grades 3-5).

And for Other Children? At a State's Discretion

Interestingly, states may still choose to use benchmarks with other children, but this is a matter left up to local discretion, as the Department of Education (2006) states:

Benchmarks and short-term objectives were specifically removed from...the Act. However, because benchmarks and short-term objectives were originally intended to assist parents in monitoring their child's progress toward meeting the child's annual goals, we believe a State could, if it chose to do so, determine the extent to which short-term objectives and benchmarks would be used. However, ...a State that chooses to require benchmarks or short-term objectives in IEPs in that State would have to identify in writing to the LEAs located in the State and to the Secretary that such rule, regulation, or policy is a State-imposed requirement, which is not required by Part B of the Act or the Federal regulations. (71 Fed. Reg. at 46663)