

IEP Components Series

Annual Goals, in a Nutshell

In a manner of speaking, annual goals are like a road map. Where's the child heading this year? What will he or she work on, both academically and in terms of functional development? What does the IEP team feel the child can achieve by the end of the year—again, academically and functionally? A well-written goal should be (a) positive, and (b) describe a skill that can be seen and measured. It answers the questions:

“Who? . . . will achieve?

What? . . . skill or behavior?

How? . . . in what manner or at what level?

Where? . . . in what setting or under what conditions?

When? . . . by what time? an ending date?” (Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden, 1997).

IDEA's Exact Words

(2)(i) A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to— (A) Meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and (B) Meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability... [§300.320(a)(2)(i)(A) and (B)]

The Close Tie Between the “Present Levels” Statement and the Annual Goals

IDEA uses the terms “academic and functional” to describe the kind of goals that need to be written. If you read the separate article about the [“present levels”](#) statement, you'll recognize both terms. Their use here, with respect to annual goals, indicates that the writing of measurable annual goals flows from the content of the “present levels” statement, where the IEP team described the child's present levels of academic and functional performance. As you can also tell by IDEA's verbatim words above, a child's annual goals must be crafted with careful attention to enabling the child to be involved in, and make progress in, the general education curriculum. Again, we see in IDEA's language the close tie between the “present levels” statement and the annual goals that are then developed. The “present levels” statement must include a description of how the child's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. This information will be useful to the IEP team in developing annual goals that are mindful of the child's participation in general education (Rebhorn & Küpper, 2007). But that's not all. As IDEA also indicates, the child may have other educational needs that result from his or her disability. Those needs must be addressed through measurable annual goals in the IEP as well.

Using Prompting Questions

While each state and/or local school district typically develops its own version of the IEP form, the one absolute universal from district to district and state to state is that the IEP must contain the required information described in §§300.320 and 300.324. It can be a challenge, to say the least, to create on paper a living,

breathing, appropriate educational plan and to translate that plan into effective implementation. Some IEP forms lend themselves well to the IEP development process by incorporating descriptive, dynamic, and concrete language. One such example comes from the [Implementation Guide](#) developed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (2008), portions of which are quoted below as examples of how the development of an effective IEP can be facilitated by prompts that ask probing questions, pose appropriate considerations, and provide a format that promotes the capture of comprehensive information on, and for, a child. On the Massachusetts Implementation Guide, the very first prompt given for the development of annual goals says:

There must be a direct correlation between the annual goal(s) and the present level of educational performance. (p. 4)

The next series of prompts asks:

- What can the student currently do?
- What challenging, yet attainable, goal can we expect the student to meet by the end of this IEP period?
- How will we know that the student has reached this goal? (p. 4)

And finally, the Implementation Guide adds:

In order for the student to make progress in the general education curriculum and life of the school, academic and functional goals should continue to be skill based, measurable and reflect individual student needs based upon the disability. (p. 4)

Using these types of prompts, or posing similar ones, will help IEP teams develop annual goals for children in a logical, sequential, simple, yet comprehensive manner that connects all the related pieces and leads to an effective, appropriate IEP. It's also useful to keep in mind that the crafting of annual goals for a child involves considering each area of that child's needs related to the general curriculum, nonacademic and/or extracurricular activities, and any other educational needs that result from the child's disability. Writing goals can be one of the most challenging parts of developing the IEP. One reason for this is because the goals may cover so many different areas.

Addressing the Child's Academic and Functional Needs

Depending upon the child's needs, some goals may target areas of the general education curriculum. Answering a prompting question such as "what does the child need to learn or do *academically*?" indicates what goals might be appropriate for that child. Examples could include learning to identify a range of sight words, write more proficiently, or learn basic number facts or solve more complicated word problems. Other goals may target learning that comes from a special education or individualized curriculum, such as reading Braille. Another area for goals might be what the child needs to learn or be able to do *functionally*. These type of goals don't come under a typical "academic" curriculum. But if a child has functional needs that impact participation in the educational environment, such as learning to eat independently, use public transportation, or communicate with an augmentative communication device, then goals to meet these needs would be important to include in the IEP. The same is true of goals to address social or emotional needs, such as impulse control, anger management, or appropriate behavioral alternatives.

The Importance of “Annual” and “Measurable”

Another aspect of writing annual goals is contained in the word “annual.” What might the child be expected to achieve in a year? A well-written goal must describe the skill or level of performance that the child is expected to reach by a given time, at least in a year. And there’s something else that’s very important. Can you measure whether or not the child has achieved the goal? The 2004 Amendments to IDEA, like its predecessors, requires that the annual goals be measurable. The IEP team must be able to tell if the goal has been reached, because the child’s performance can be counted, seen, heard, or somehow measured.

Not surprisingly, writing IEP goals that are measurable challenges many an IEP team. You may find Wrightslaw’s resource on Smart IEPs very helpful. “SMART” stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. To read more about writing IEP goals that are SMART, visit: <http://www.wrightslaw.com/nltr/10/nl.0511.htm>

Many states also develop guides for IEP teams, so teams should check with their LEA or State Department of Education to see if such IEP guidance is available. While some may have been written to conform with IDEA ’97 and are not yet updated for the 2004 Amendments, they will nonetheless provide illuminating examples and/or exercises that people can use to become more proficient at writing these very important elements in a child’s IEP. Briefly here, let’s take apart two examples of measurable annual goals and see what their elements are.

Example 1: Including a Performance Indicator

David will achieve a reading score at the 5th grade level or above, as measured by the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI). (Rebhorn, 2009)

Here we see that the goal is for David to be reading at a 5th grade level or above by the end of the school year. The measurable part of the statement comes at the end: “*as measured by...*” The named reading inventory will serve as the tool for measuring David’s progress. This is a common way in which goals are made measurable—by specifying a grade- or age-level performance indicator, especially one that’s been established through district or state standards, or within a curriculum, within scope-and-sequence materials that the school/district/state uses.

Example 2: Indicating a Rate

By the end of the year, Elise will be able to use her augmentative communication device to produce a thought, comment, or idea in 3 out of 5 trials with no more than 50% teacher prompts or cues.

Here again, the measurable part of the annual goal is found in the closing phrase. “In 3 out of 5 trials...” There are conditions included to further specify what “acceptable performance” will mean: “...with no more than 50% teacher prompts or cues.” Indicating a rate (80% of the time, with 75% success, with 90% accuracy) is another common way that IEPs teams make annual goals measurable.

More Examples of Measurable Annual Goal Statements

The four critical components of a well-written goal are:

Timeframe is usually specified in the number of weeks or a certain date for completion. A year is the maximum allowed length for the timeframe.

- In 36 instructional weeks...
- By November 19, 2008....
- By the end of 2008-09 school year...

Conditions specify the circumstances that prompt the child's performance of an observable behavior. Conditions are dependent on the behavior being measured and involve the application of skills or knowledge.

- When presented with 2nd grade level text...
- Given a mixed 4th grade level math calculation probe....
- Given a story prompt and 30 minutes to write...

Conditions may also integrate a related service:

- Given appropriate equipment.....
- Given assistive technology.....
- Given a pencil grip.....

Behavior clearly identifies the performance that is being monitored, usually reflects an action or can be directly observed, and is measurable.

- Sarah will read...
- Claude will write the correct solutions...
- Mary will score...
- Tom will participate in the group....
- Jane will indicate her wants and needs.....
- Chris will write.....

Criterion identifies how much, how often, or to what standards the behavior must occur in order to demonstrate that the goal has been reached. The goal criterion specifies the amount of growth the child or youth is expected to make by the end of the annual goal period.

- 96 words per minute with 5 or fewer errors.
- 85% or more correct for all problems presented.
- Earning 4 or better when graded according to the 6-trait writing rubric. (pp. 25-27)

What About Objectives?

You might be asking yourself, why not break the annual goals down into semester goals, or better still, short-term objectives? Little steps along the way, not one bigger annual step. The answer to that question is that, in the past, these annual goals were paired with short-term objectives or benchmarks of progress.

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