

IEP Components Series

From Present Levels to Progress Measures

By Catherine C. George, Ph.D.

Sharon A. Lynch, Ph.D.

Department of Language, Literacy, & Special Populations
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, Texas

This issue of **NASET's IEP Component Series** was written by Catherine C. George, Ph.D. and Sharon A. Lynch, Ph.D. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act included substantial changes related to Individual Education Programs. These changes require school personnel to provide students with disabilities greater access to the general curriculum. Multidisciplinary teams must implement these changes when developing and measuring a student's IEP. This article highlights some of these changes and offers practical recommendations to assist educators in the IEP development process. Specifically, the present article provides a working guidance document for developing a quality statement of a student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance that leads to individualized benchmarks and goals. Additionally, the authors provide several recommendations regarding methods which can be used to measure student progress on a variety of benchmarks and goals.

Abstract

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act included substantial changes related to Individual Education Programs. These changes require school personnel to provide students with disabilities greater access to the general curriculum. Multidisciplinary teams must implement these changes when developing and measuring a student's IEP. This article highlights some of these changes and offers practical recommendations to assist educators in the IEP development process. Specifically, the present article provides a working guidance document for developing a quality statement of a student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance that leads to individualized benchmarks and goals. Additionally, the authors provide several recommendations regarding methods which can be used to measure student progress on a variety of benchmarks and goals.

From Present Levels to Progress Measures

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide students with disabilities greater access to the general education curriculum. This is evident in the changes to the requirements surrounding the Individual Education Program (IEP). Changes related to the IEP range from development of goals and objectives to progress measurement. IEP development has historically been based on both formal and informal evaluation data, including a student's strengths and needs. IDEA 2004 added the requirement that schools include information related to the student's academic achievement and functional performance.

Specifically, IEP committees should consider the student's access, involvement, and progress in the general education curriculum. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE, 2007), developed the following seven-step process to guide IEP committees in the development of student IEPs:

- Step 1. Consider the grade-level content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled or would be enrolled based on age.
- Step 2. Examine classroom and student data to determine where the student is functioning in relation to the grade-level standards.
- Step 3. Develop the present level of academic achievement and functional performance.
- Step 4. Develop measurable annual goals aligned with grade-level academic content standards.
- Step 5. Assess and report the student's progress throughout the year.
- Step 6. Identify specially designed instruction including accommodations and/or modifications needed to access and progress in the general education curriculum.
- Step 7. Determine the most appropriate assessment option.

IDEA 2004 also changed the requirements related to benchmarks or short-term objectives (STOs) for annual goals. Benchmarks or STOs are only *required* for students who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate standards. Although benchmarks or STOs are not required for students who do not participate in alternate assessments, the IEP committee may decide that additional educational objectives and progress measures would be appropriate. Results from these progress measures, along with the results from state assessments and progress on annual goals, will inform the present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) for the next IEP. It is important that these PLAAFP statements clearly describe the student's current performance so that the IEP committee can determine the student's needs and what the student should be reasonably expected to accomplish in the following year. The diagram in Figure 1 shows this progression from PLAAFP statement to progress monitoring.

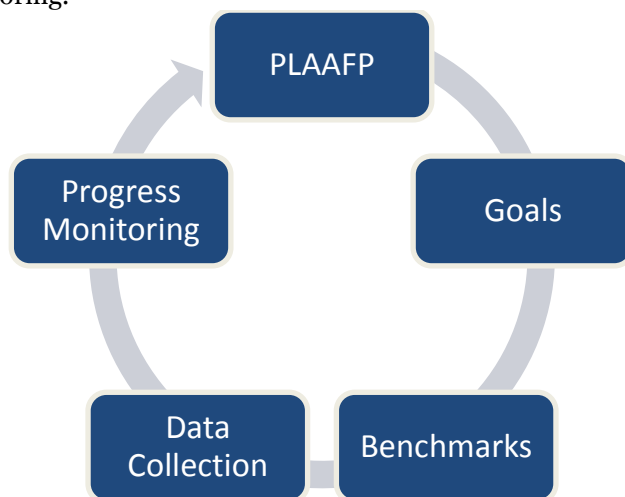


Figure 1. Process from PLAAFP to Progress Monitoring

Developing PLAAFPs

The PLAAFP statement as required by IDEA 2004 must address how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. For preschoolers the PLAAFP statement should address how the disability affects participation in appropriate activities. Over and above the legal requirement, the effective PLAAFP presents a profile of the student that enables the team to consider the child's abilities, along with the curriculum standards and functional needs. These three areas taken together should drive the development of the individualized goals and objectives (Lynch & Adams, 2008).

A quality PLAAFP statement begins with the student profile that paints a picture of the child and his or her abilities. The student profile should be based on assessment data, such as the date of the last Full and Individual Evaluation and the disability condition, as well as the level at which the child functions in grade-level curriculum (Capizzi, 2008). For each academic area, the PLAAFP statement should tell what the student is able to do with and without supports, and describe the type of supports that the student needs for success (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). For some students, particularly those with more severe disabilities, they will access the general curriculum through prerequisite skills or extended standards (Browder & Spooner, 2011). The student profile can also address how the individual responds to grade-level curriculum with modifications and accommodations. Additionally, this descriptive statement can include information such as the student's preferred reinforcers, the child's communication methods and ability to communicate needs, the use of assistive technology, problem behaviors and effective solutions, medical and health needs, social interactions and preferences, and relevant sociological information such as recent moves or family changes.

Teachers need to develop PLAAFP statements for academic and functional areas that address individual student needs. A chart for developing effective PLAAFP statements is included in Figure 2. After writing the descriptive foundation statement for the PLAAFP, the next portion addresses the student's present level of educational performance in specific academic or functional areas, along with the source of the information.

Item	Description
According to the Full Individual Evaluation (FIE) dated <date>, <name> is a student with <disability conditions>	
According to the FIE, <Name> can read and write at the <grade> level. If student is not able to read or write this portion is not addressed, or may be addressed via language activities	
<He/She> accesses <Subject> state standards through <prerequisite skills, grade level standards with accommodations, etc.>.	
<Name> is able to <describe how student responds with modifications and accommodations.	
When <he/she> needs help, <Describe how the student initiates communication and asks for help>	
<Name> is able to <describe how the student communicates>	
<He/She> <describe social interactions and preferences>	
<Describe any challenging behaviors, including what triggers the behavior and what calms him/her>	
<Describe effective reinforcers in the classroom>	
<Describe any medical or health needs that the student has>	
<Describe any relevant sociological information such as recent moves, family changes>	
<Describe parent priorities and concerns>	

ACADEMIC AREA _____

Based on classroom observations and assessments <list assessment sources>, <Name> can <list skills that the student can perform in the academic area along with the accommodations required for each skill>	
According to <list source of data such as IEP dated 00/yy/20xx, FIE, classroom tests/observations> <Name> does not <list skills that student has not yet mastered that are important to target for instruction>	

Figure 2. Working document for PLAAFP statements

From PLAAFP to Quality IEP Objectives

A well-constructed PLAAFP statement should lead to goals and objectives that are individualized to the child. Teachers should consider students' needs in their environments and in the general curriculum, along with present levels of performance, in designing her goals and short-term objectives. For students who take alternate assessments, both goals and STOs or benchmarks are required by IDEA 2004. Annual goals should reflect the team's best estimate of the student's ability to master the next logical step within a year's time, based on the present level of performance (Capizzi, 2008). In developing ambitious yet realistic goals, the team should consider current assessment data, the present level of performance, and the time required to master current objectives (Lynch & Adams, 2006).

In addition to goals and objectives that are related to the general education curriculum as required by IDEA 2004, many students with significant disabilities need instruction in the areas of communication, socialization, and self-help (Koegel, & Schreibman, 2008; Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, & Jung, 2010). The IEP by definition is individualized and often students with disabilities have educational needs that go beyond academic instruction (Etscheidt, 2006). The ability to communicate needs, socialize with peers, feed oneself, and care for toileting needs is critical and these skills are expected in inclusive environments (Lynch & Adams, 2008). Functional skills also are important in gaining access to vocational opportunities, employment settings, and adult living environments (Koegel, & Schreibman, 2008). The content of the IEP should be related to the individual needs of the student and the concerns of the family as indicated in the PLAAFP statement.

When examining the content of the IEP, there are three criteria that all goals and objectives should meet: the "dead man" or "potato test," the "complete stranger test," and the "so what" test (Westling & Fox, 2014). Quality IEP goals and objectives should address active rather than passive behaviors (Downing, 1988; Westling & Fox, 2014). An example of a "dead man" objective is, "Jarred will be positioned in a standing frame for 20 minutes per day." Since this is teacher behavior and not dependent on student actions, it should be re-written as an active objective such as, "Jarred will hold head erect for 5 minutes while positioned in a standing frame."

Objectives need to be specific and measurable, and descriptive enough to enable a complete stranger to understand what the student is supposed to do (Ruble et al., 2010; Westling & Fox, 2014). Instead of saying, "Kenisha will interact appropriately with peers in the classroom," the objective needs more specificity, and can be re-written as, "Kenisha will verbally initiate interactions with peers at least three times during a 30-minute period in classroom centers." The exact content of that objective would be dependent on the skills that the team targets for Kenisha.

Social validity is another indicator of quality for goals and objectives (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006; Westling & Fox, 2014), so goals should also pass the "so what" test. If parents, peers, and significant others do not value the skill that is addressed on the IEP, then the mastery of the skill is not likely to generalize or improve the quality of life for the individual with disabilities. For example, the IEP team may write a transition objective for Brian to master the steps in a task analysis to ride the local bus to his vocational training site, but if there is no bus service near Brian's home or if his family members consider riding public transportation inappropriate for him, then the objective does little to promote Brian's effective transition to adult employment or services. These three tests for IEP goals are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Tests for IEP Goals and Objectives

Test	Questions to ask
Dead Man or Potato Test	Am I measuring active or passive behavior?
Complete Stranger Test	Would a stranger understand this IEP?
“So what?” Test	Is this goal/objective socially valid?

IDEA 2004 requires that the IEP contain an explanation regarding how a student’s progress will be monitored and how often the results will be shared (e.g. report cards). Progress monitoring should occur often enough to determine if the instruction is effective or if changes should be made. Student progress should be monitored in order to check for the student’s understanding of the material and to detect changes or errors in the student’s work.

From Benchmarks to Progress Measures

Criteria for IEP goals should be referenced to the environment where they will be used (Lynch & Adams, 2008). Some objectives need to be mastered with 100% accuracy, such as crossing the street or toileting. Although some contend that 70% is passing and should be used for all goals and objectives, this is not referenced to the child’s needs and also constitutes a *pattern* of services rather than *individualized* services. Additionally, students with disabilities need 80-90% mastery of academic skills in order to promote generalization (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2013). Rather than always using percentage of accuracy, some goals and objectives lend themselves better to other indicators of mastery, particularly in regard to measurable benchmarks.

Increasing Criterion.

When developing benchmark criteria that are not referenced to grades on a paper, it may be more effective to use criteria that better reflect the instructional milieu. If training is integrated throughout the day, the team can write benchmark measures such as, “Jonna will ask for needed materials during daily classroom tasks, 4/5 consecutive opportunities.” If Jonna is not currently performing this skill at all, the team can develop benchmarks for 1/5, 2/5, and 3/5 opportunities with the target goal set for 4/5 opportunities.

Level of Prompt.

An alternative to setting benchmarks using ratio data is to document the level of prompt needed to elicit the behavior (Westling & Fox, 2014). The level of prompts should be selected based on the individual needs of the student. Although some students may need to begin working on a skill (such as using a spoon) with full physical prompts and then move to partial physical prompts and gestural prompts, others may begin with direct verbal prompts (use your spoon), and move to indirect verbal prompts (what do you need to do?), and finally to positional prompts (spoon in the food) or picture prompts (photo of the child eating with a spoon).

Length of Time.

Benchmarks also can be written using duration criteria (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). Social skills such as staying seated, engaging in cooperative play, and working on independent academic tasks may show improvement by how long the student is able to engage in them.

Additionally, for students with significant physical disabilities, how long they can hold their head up, maintain lip closure, or sit erect in a wheelchair can also be measured by duration, increasing the number of minutes that the child is expected to perform the behavior.

Rate Data.

Similar to duration data and the use of increasing criteria, rate data provide an effective measure of progress for behaviors that occur during a designated period (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). If teachers are working with a child with Autism on social conversation during direct instruction in the classroom, the team may want to measure progress during a time that the child can use this skill. For example, the measure may be an indicator of the child initiating social conversation with peers during a 20-minute center time; the benchmark may begin with one time, then increase to two, three, or four times during a 20-minute period. This type of data is effective when planning for generalization from a direct instruction format to a setting that enables the student to apply what he or she has learned.

Fluency Measures.

There are many tasks that students are able to perform, but unless they have mastered them fluently (Snell & Brown, 2011), they are not able to use them in the context of more complex applications. Examples include letter-sound naming, performing basic math facts, reading words, and writing a check. Each of these skills must be performed quickly and accurately in order to be applied in more complex tasks or used in the natural environment. In this case, the indicators of progress on benchmarks are decreasing periods of time needed to perform the task.

Number of Steps in a Task Analysis.

Some goals and benchmarks do not lend themselves to discrete trials, but consist of a set of ordered steps in a task analysis (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). One way of measuring progress on such a set of skills is to develop a list of the steps required for the task, and when the student is working on the task, record which steps are performed correctly and which steps are not. In this way, students who are progressing perform an increasing number of steps (Westling & Fox, 2014). For example, when a student learns to put on a jacket, he or she may only be able to get the dominant arm into the jacket initially, but after instruction can put both arms in the jacket and pull it closed, but cannot yet latch the zipper or zip it. In this case the child initially performs 1 of 5 steps correctly, but after instruction performs 3 of 5 steps; additional benchmarks can be set for 4 of 5, and 5 of 5 correct steps in the task analysis.

Generalization Across People, Places, and Materials.

Many times students, particularly those with Autism or Intellectual Disabilities, are able to perform targeted skills at the desired criterion in the classroom, but they are not able to generalize their skills (Snell & Brown, 2011). Knowing this, IEP committees can develop goals and benchmarks to address generalization across persons, places, and materials. For example, if the goal is for the child to drink 2 ounces of liquid from a cup, then benchmarks for generalization can be written for the child to perform this skill in several places (classroom, cafeteria, community outings), in the presence of several different persons (teacher, assistant, only peers), and with several types of materials (small and mid-sized plastic cups, paper cup). Additionally, the proximity of the instructor sometimes affects the ability of the student to perform the skill, especially for those students with Autism. The methods that we have discussed for measuring progress are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Methods for Measuring IEP Progress

Methods of Measuring Progress	Examples of Measures
Increasing Criterion	1/5 opportunities, 3/5 opportunities
Level of Prompt	Physical, verbal, gestural, positional prompts
Length of Time	Increase number of minutes child will perform the task
Rate Data	Number of times the behavior occurs within a defined amount of time
Fluency Measures	Decrease the amount of time needed to perform a task
Number of Steps in a Task Analysis	Perform 1/5 steps, then 2/5 steps, and so on
Generalization	Perform task across people, places, or materials

Summary and Conclusions

The student's profile should include information such as how the student's disability impacts his or her progress in the general curriculum, health information, and current academic and functional abilities. This descriptive foundation for the PLAAFP will drive the goals and objectives. Goals and objectives should be specific, active rather than passive, and have social validity. Progress should be monitored often enough to detect changes and to inform ongoing instruction. The authors have presented an example of a working document which may be used to construct a well-planned PLAAFP (Figure 1). The authors have also provided a brief explanation of seven data collection methods (Table 2) which may be used to monitor progress and to assess student mastery of concepts or skills. In addition to informing instruction, progress monitoring data should also be used to construct the PLAAFP in preparation for the student's next annual IEP meeting.

Decisions regarding IEP development, implementation, and measurement are made each year at a student's annual IEP meeting. It is critical that the decisions made in these meetings are described, recorded and communicated clearly so that educators who will be working with the student in the following year are able to provide and monitor instruction as intended. A well-planned, descriptive PLAAFP statement can be extremely helpful in initiating this process that leads to meaningful and individualized IEP goals and STOs, and accurate progress monitoring.

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Author Information

Catherine C. George, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Special Education
ccg018@shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University
Department of Language, Literacy, & Special Populations
Box 2119
Huntsville, TX 77341-2119

Sharon A. Lynch, Ph.D.
Professor of Special Education
lynch@shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University
Department of Language, Literacy, & Special Populations
Box 2119
Huntsville, TX 77341-2119