Data That Drives Decisions

Using Data to Strengthen IEP Quality and Instructional Practice

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Purpose

Data is the language of special education. It tells the story of growth, need, and effectiveness, but only if we collect it intentionally and use it wisely. High-quality data transforms IEPs from compliance documents into instructional roadmaps. This worksheet helps educators build systems for collecting, interpreting, and applying data to improve student outcomes and strengthen team collaboration.

The Three Questions Behind Every Data Point

1. **What is the student's current level of performance?** *(Baseline)*

2. **What does progress look like over time?** *(Trend)*

3. **How does the data inform next steps?** *(Action)*

When we can answer all three, we're no longer "collecting data"; we're using it to drive learning.

Types of Data in Special Education

Type	Description	Example	Frequency
Quantitative	Numerical, objective, measurable	Reading accuracy %, math computation rate	Daily/weekly
Qualitative	Observational, descriptive	Teacher notes, behavioral observations	Weekly
Permanent Product	Physical evidence of learning	Writing samples, completed tasks	Monthly

Progress Monitoring	Targeted goal-tracking data	Frequency count of social initiations	Weekly/biweekly
Perceptual	Family/student feedback	Student self-ratings, parent reports	Quarterly

*(**Reminder:** Effective programs use a blend of all five types.)*

Building a Data System That Works

Step	What to Do	Example
1. Define the Purpose	Know *why* you're collecting the data.	"Track how often student uses break card independently."
2. Make It Feasible	Use data you can collect *consistently*.	3-minute daily observation or quick tally chart.
3. Align to Goals	Data must link directly to IEP goals.	Goal: "Increase reading fluency." → Measure: words per minute.
4. Graph It	Visuals make trends visible.	Use Google Sheets or hand graphs to visualize growth.
5. Use It in Meetings	Share progress data as the *starting point*, not the afterthought.	Begin IEPs with data review slide.

Data Collection Tools

Goal Type	Example Tool	Description
Academic	Work sample log	Track weekly mastery scores for reading, writing, or math.
Behavioral	Frequency chart / ABC log	Record antecedent, behavior, consequence to identify patterns.
Functional/SEL	Rating scale (1–5)	Student self-rates emotional regulation daily.

Speech/OT/PT	Tally sheet by trial	Measure accuracy or independence across sessions.

*(**Tip**: Keep data visible: clipboards, Google Forms, or QR codes for easy entry.)*

Turning Data into Decisions

Data Pattern	What It Tells You	Instructional Response
Flatline Trend	Student not progressing.	Adjust instructional strategy or increase frequency.
Upward Trend	Student mastering skill.	Maintain or begin fading supports.
Inconsistent Trend	Environment or variable inconsistency.	Review fidelity or external factors.
Downward Trend	Skill regression or lack of generalization.	Re-teach or modify goal.

The "Data-to-Action" Cycle

1. **Collect**: Use consistent, aligned tools.

2. **Analyze**: Identify trends every 2–4 weeks.

3. **Collaborate**: Discuss with team (teacher, BCBA, SLP, family).

4. **Adjust**: Modify instruction, prompts, or setting as needed.

5. **Communicate**: Share data clearly with families.

Data Story Template

(For use in IEP meetings or staff debriefs)

Category	Summary
Baseline:	"Student could identify 4/10 sight words in September."
Intervention:	"Implemented daily 1:1 reading intervention for 10 min."
Progress:	"Student now reads 8/10 with 90% accuracy."
Next Step:	"Increase goal to 15 sight words; reduce prompts."

Common Pitfalls & Fixes

Pitfall	Fix
Collecting data "because we have to"	Link each data set directly to a question you're answering.
Too much data, not enough analysis	Review small, meaningful samples regularly.
Inconsistent staff collection	Train all staff using a common tool and definition.
Ignoring qualitative data	Pair numbers with narrative ("what worked, what didn't").
Storing data without sharing it	Visualize data in meetings for collaborative interpretation.

Reflection Prompts

- Does each IEP goal have a clear, measurable data source?

- Are staff using consistent methods and definitions?

- How often do we analyze and adjust instruction based on data?

- How do we ensure families understand data in plain language?

Building a Data Culture

- Schedule monthly data "huddle-ups" to review student growth.

- Celebrate data-informed wins: connect dots between numbers and narratives.

- Use data for learning, not punishment. Focus on improvement, not perfection.

- Align progress monitoring to school-wide MTSS for a unified system.

Action Starter

- Choose one IEP goal this week.

- Review the most recent 3 data points. What story do they tell?

- Share that insight with your team, and document one instructional adjustment you'll make next week.