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The Difference Between IEP Goals and IEP Objectives

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Individualized Education Programs (IEP) Goals and IEP Objectives are terms that can often get mixed up when planning and discussing student progress. But there is a difference between the two. There is also a difference between IEP objectives and state learning standard objectives. Let's dig in a bit more with all these terms:

- **IEP annual goal**

    This is the overall skill the student should achieve by the end of the IEP year (one year from the start date of the IEP, NOT from the start date of the school year). The IEP goal can then be broken down into either short-term objectives or benchmarks as a way to gauge a student's progress.

- **IEP short-term objectives**

    Short-term objectives are one way to break down the overall goal into smaller steps or skills, often in a hierarchical order. Once a student accomplishes all the objectives within the goal, they will have achieved the overall goal.

For example, if the overall goal is for a student to demonstrate increased counting skills to 10 with 80% accuracy, a teacher might break the goal down into smaller objectives or steps, such as:

1. Rote count to 10, with 80% accuracy

2. Demonstrate one to one correspondence while counting, assigning one number per object to 10, with 80% accuracy

3. Connect the number counted to represent "how many" in a set of 10, with 80% accuracy

Notice the performance criteria of 80% accuracy remained the same, but the skill was built upon in a hierarchical sequence.

- **IEP benchmarks**

    IEP benchmarks are another way to break down an IEP goal further. Benchmarks set performance level marks that allow for sequential measurement of progress. Benchmarks can break down the performance level of the IEP goal into more numerical steps, such as increasing the percentage accuracy or trials and aligning those expectations to be reached by the reporting periods of progress (i.e., by month, quarter, trimester, semester, etc.). Benchmarks serve as a measurement of how far a student is in the process of achieving the overall goal. This helps determine if the student is on track to meet the goal by the end of the IEP year (which is one of the important factors in determining ESY eligibility and/or eligibility for an increase in service minutes during the IEP year via an amendment).

    For example, IEP benchmarks for a goal may be broken down into the following increments (pending present level baseline data):

- 20% accuracy by Quarter One

- 40% accuracy by Quarter Two

- 60% accuracy by Quarter Three

- 80% accuracy by Quarter Four

- **State learning standard objective**

    These are the skill codes used to guide grade-level instruction according to the state's learning standards. The objectives are the skills within each learning standard. Every IEP goal should be connected back to a state's learning standard and objective code(s) for that grade level.

- **SMART format**

    Goals should be written according to the SMART acronym, which stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable/Action, Realistic, Timely. The use of short-term objectives or benchmarks help goals to fit the SMART format. The use of SMART format for IEP goal writing is considered "best practice".

- **Best practice**

    Professional measures that are most effective, backed by research or experience

- **Present level statement for an IEP goal**

    This is the statement that identifies how the student is currently functioning and how it impacts their progress in the general education curriculum and/or functional performance. This data determines the starting point of the goal as a baseline. Rate of past progress in the present level statement can help gauge how to write the new goal to make it achievable and realistic as part of SMART format/best practice. For past goals that are unachieved or continue to be built upon from year to year, it is important to include old goal progress data for that skill area. Including past progress in the present level statement greatly assists in the re-writing of a new goal to make it more appropriate.

Based on updates to the federal law of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), benchmarks or short-term objectives are now only required for "children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate academic achievement standards" (Source: https://sites.ed.gov/idea/).* However, many states, such as Illinois, still require the use of benchmarks and short-term objectives at the state level.*

Despite IDEA's statement on this, it is also considered "best practice" for IEP goals to be written in SMART format: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable/**A**ction, **R**ealistic, **T**imely. One way to do this is by breaking the goal down into specific steps via benchmarks or short-term objectives. If you are presented with draft IEP goals that do not include this, it would be a reasonable request to have the goals re-written to fit more of a SMART format through the use of benchmarks or short-term objectives. Remember, the use of either IEP short-term objectives or benchmarks within IEP goals are going to help you gauge your child's progress on each IEP goal. No matter what your state's stance is on the use of these tools, most dedicated professionals would be happy to make this edit for your child if you know to ask!

*Disclaimer: I am NOT a lawyer. I am a non-lawyer advocate and therefore do not provide legal advice/services.
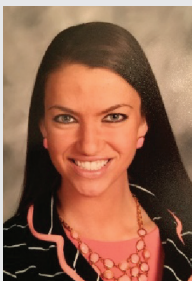
Carly Quinlan is the owner of IEP Consulting, LLC. With eight years of experience as a special education teacher and IEP case manager, and as a sibling of a brother with Down syndrome and autism, she has a unique perspective and knowledge base of the world of IEPs. She has experience and training in Applied Behavior Analysis, Behavior Intervention Plans, advocacy training in special education law as a non-lawyer advocate, as well as ongoing professional development. With many years of experience on both sides of an IEP table and "behind the scenes" of special education services, she can help you navigate the IEP process, ensuring your concerns are heard and addressed through negotiations with the school team. Services include phone consultations, report review, letter writing, meeting preparation assistance, and IEP meeting participation.

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