

Do Your Annual Goals Measure Up?

Key points:

- Avoid words like 'trouble' in present levels of performance
- Write goals that relate to present levels of performance
- Develop goals that are challenging, purposeful for student

Follow these suggestions for writing better PLOPs, goals

As an IEP team leader, you know IEPs must contain present levels of performance as well as goals and objectives. But do you craft proper PLOPs and goals?

There are a number of pitfalls IEP teams fall into when developing IEPs, says [Deborah Mattison](#), a parent attorney for [Wiggins, Childs, Quinn & Pantazis, LLC](#) in Birmingham, Ala. These include vague PLOPs and goals that are not challenging.

"Also, I hardly ever see present levels of performance that are connected to appropriate goals," she says.

Dodge common errors in IEP writing by following these tips:

Avoid ambiguous phrases

Steer clear of using words such as "trouble" or "difficulty" in your present levels of performance, says [Deborah Mattison](#), a parent attorney for [Wiggins, Childs, Quinn & Pantazis, LLC](#) in Birmingham, Ala. "You have to describe what the trouble is," she says.

For example, don't write, "Student has some trouble with writing legibly and has trouble spelling and using correct punctuation."

This is not a well-written PLOP, Mattison says. It doesn't state why the child has trouble writing, so it will be hard to identify how to fix the problem, she says.

"'Trouble writing legibly' could mean a number of things," Mattison says. "Does he lack fine motor skills to form letters? Can he form letters but lacks processing skills to know how to complete sentences in written form? The child may truly require OT services but may instead get a lot of reminders to 'write carefully' since nobody knows that's what he requires."

Reviewing the student's records and evaluations will help you write descriptive PLOPs, she says. Take, for example, evaluation data that identifies decoding as a student's area of need. Rather than writing, "The student has trouble reading," the IEP team can write an appropriate PLOP, such as, "Student can decode two out of 10 unfamiliar words in 10 seconds."

PLOPs should be as specific as possible, Mattison says. This will help determine whether a child makes progress. For example, if a goal states, "Student will write complete sentences using sizing, spacing and punctuation with 80 percent accuracy," the PLOP should indicate the percentage of time the student currently does that so the team can ascertain how much progress he makes, she says.

Connect PLOPs to goals

IEP goals must relate to present levels of performance, says [Deborah Mattison](#), a parent attorney for [Wiggins, Childs, Quinn & Pantazis, LLC](#) in Birmingham, Ala.

For example, you have a problem if your PLOP says, "Student does not respond consistently to sounds, nor does she produce sounds, due to her cognitive deficits," and your goal says, "The student will participate in classroom activities concerning features of the earth, including water, faults, beaches and ice caps."

The problem here, Mattison says, is the PLOP and goal have nothing to do with one another. The PLOP does not identify whether the student currently can identify any features of the earth.

"Does she really not know what a beach is? This is a question you can ask the parent," Mattison says. "The mom could easily say, 'Sure she does. We go to the beach every summer.' You can use that information to develop a PLOP that relates to the goal."

Additionally, Mattison says, the IEP team needs to write another goal that addresses the student's inability to respond consistently to sounds and produce sounds. "While that may seem obvious, it doesn't always happen, because districts can get caught up developing goals for students based on the curriculum and sometimes forget to write functional goals for the student," she says.

Write challenging, meaningful goals

Make sure the goals you develop for a student are not too easy to attain, says [Deborah Mattison](#), a parent attorney for [Wiggins, Childs, Quinn & Pantazis, LLC](#) in Birmingham, Ala.

Take, for example, this present level of performance: "The student can tell you where she lives (city and state). She can listen to books about history and can give you the history details about stories that have been read to her."

This related goal may not be challenging enough for the student:

"The student will be able to name the president of the United States and identify two rights given to Americans."

The problem here, Mattison says, is that the student can already restate history details when something is read to her. "It is possible that the student will be able to learn the name of the president easily," she says.

Another problem with the above goal, she says, is it does not clarify what the student will do with the information she learns. "Why is it important for the student to identify two rights of citizenship? And does it matter which two rights she learns?" Mattison asks. Don't get so caught up tying goals to state standards that you overlook whether the goal is useful to the student, she says.

Parents can help determine meaningful goals, Mattison says. "Ask them to name three things they want to see their child accomplish in the next year," she says. "The IEP team can then discuss whether those goals are reasonable."

For example, if a parent says she wants her child to earn an A in algebra, but the child doesn't know the multiplication tables, then the parent's goal is not realistic, she says. The IEP team can consider more appropriate math goals.

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