SchwabLearning.org

Close

How to Know if Your Child's Making Progress toward IEP Goals

By the time "Mrs. Bailey" contacted me to evaluate her son, "Kevin," she had been receiving quarterly progress reports from his public school for five years, telling her that her son was making progress toward achieving the academic goals listed in his Individualized Education Program (IEP). However, her observations of Kevin's homework and the graded school work that came home didn't match the school's evaluation, and she wanted me to provide a "second opinion." My evaluation of Kevin confirmed his mother's concerns — he had deficits in math calculation and written expression skills. In fact, Kevin's written expression skills were severely delayed and fell in the first percentile — meaning that 99 percent of students his age performed better on the test. Naturally, Mrs. Bailey felt astonished, frustrated, and guilty about not realizing Kevin's lack of progress sooner in his schooling.

Parents of children with learning disabilities (LD) who are receiving special education services receive regular reports of progress on their children's IEP goals, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). In my experience as a school psychologist and educational consultant, most often these progress reports don't really provide parents specific information, based on assessment data, as to whether their child is making progress or not.

There are several key factors that can have a positive impact on determining whether or not a child makes real, measurable progress. These include:

- a comprehensive evaluation that identifies a child's strengths and weaknesses; and appropriately identifies a child's educational needs
- explicitly stated present levels of performance
- appropriate and measurable goals/objectives
- effective instructional methods, and
- continuous progress monitoring

When I ask parents how their child's progress toward goals and objectives is being monitored and reported to them, most often the response is "I'm not sure" or "I don't know." As in Mrs. Bailey's case, it can be years before parents realize that their child is not making progress — or that the achievement gap between their child and his peers has actually widened while receiving special education services. So, how can you really know if your child is making progress? What should you do if you don't think your child is "making expected progress" toward IEP goals and objectives?

To help you play a proactive role in monitoring your child's IEP, this article will provide detailed information about each of these key factors as it relates to your child's special education services.

Comprehensive Evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation should include assessments tailored to the problems for which the child was referred for evaluation. The "reason for referral," part of the evaluation documents for the IEP, describes the child's learning problems, as well as any factors contributing to academic performance difficulties. To get a complete picture of a child's abilities and skills in the home and school environments, evaluation procedures should include **all** of the following:

- individually administered standardized tests, such as IQ and achievement tests
- curriculum-based assessments (e.g., Curriculum-Based Measurement)
- current classroom-based, local, or state assessments
- work samples indicative of the child's learning difficulties
- interviews (with teacher, parent, and child)
- observational data
- review of records
- rating scales (if appropriate)

The evaluation should identify **specific points** where a child's learning processes break down, and how that impacts his classroom learning. In Kevin's case, his last reevaluation had just been conducted 6 months prior to when I evaluated him — when he was in 7th grade. At that time he was administered a brief IQ test, a standardized achievement test, and a speech/language evaluation. The examiner reported that Kevin no longer demonstrated the processing deficits that were identified in his initial evaluation, and that he was compensating for his difficulties. However, further investigation — specifically of data in Kevin's cumulative file — revealed that he did not meet state standards in reading, math, or writing!

Typically, a school district evaluation will identify an area of unexpected academic weakness and determine whether the weakness is severe enough that the child requires special education services in order to benefit from the general education program. A comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation — most often conducted by a private professional, but sometimes by a school district — typically looks at a fuller range of academic strengths and weaknesses, and at how a child processes information in several areas. In my experience, the better you understand your child's learning problems, the greater the chances that you can persuade the school to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation. And, of course, if you disagree with the school evaluation, you always have the legal right to request that an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) be conducted at district expense.

Explicitly Stated "Present Levels of Performance"

Results of a comprehensive evaluation should concretely identify your child's strengths and weaknesses which can then be used to develop your child's IEP. Present Levels of Performance (PLOP) should provide you baseline data **in very specific terms** about what your child can and cannot do in a particular academic or functional area. For example, a statement of a child's present level of performance in reading might be: "Julia can read words, both in isolation and in context, containing short vowels and silent 'e.' However, she is only able to read words containing vowel teams (i.e. /ai/, /ea/, /oa/, /ee/) and dipthongs (i.e. /oi/, /oy/, /oo/, /au/) in isolation with 30% accuracy."

Goals and objectives would then be written to increase Julia's accuracy in reading words with vowel teams and dipthongs. Baseline data provide a starting point for determining whether the child makes the expected improvement in learning over a given period of time. In addition, IDEA requires that, in order for a child to be eligible for special education services under the Specific Learning Disability category, school districts must have "data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement, at reasonable intervals, reflecting formal assessment of student progress during instruction, which was provided to the child's parents." This documentation is very helpful when identifying a child's present level of performance.

A word of caution: I routinely see results of **achievement** tests reported where there is supposed to be a statement of the child's present level of performance. For example, I've seen "WIAT-II Word

Reading SS 80" for present level of performance on IEP goal pages. However, achievement tests are designed to measure the performance of many children at a single point in time, rather than to document a single child's progress over time, as PLOP requires. The PLOP sets the starting point for your particular child's work toward goals.

Appropriate, Measurable Goals and Benchmarks

Annual goals and benchmarks in your child's IEP should be measurable and linked to your child's present levels of performance, as well as to your state's academic content standards. (Note: "Benchmarks" are measurable steps toward a child's IEP goals. Although IDEA 2004 eliminated the legal requirement for benchmarks, regular progress reports are still mandated by law, and many schools continue to use the term "benchmarks.") Many times parents tell me that when goals are reviewed during IEP meetings, they are unsure as to whether their child's goals are either appropriate or measurable. Here are a few questions you can ask to find out:

- How will progress toward these goals be measured?
- How will you monitor my child's progress?
- How will you document my child's progress?
- How will you communicate with me regarding my child's progress?

In my experience, IEP goals and benchmarks often lack specificity. For example, it is very common for special educators to write goals in terms of grade-level attainment, which is very confusing for parents if they don't know what the curriculum standards are. To illustrate, here is an annual goal created by the school for one of my clients: "'Danny' will increase his written expression skills to the beginning fourth-grade level." After a discussion in the IEP meeting about third-grade and beginning fourth-grade writing expectations (based on grade-level curriculum), the special education teacher changed Danny's annual goal and added benchmarks that specifically identified a sequence of writing skills for the child to master over the next year.

Here is Danny's **revised annual goal**: "Danny will write two to three paragraphs on a given topic, using correct mechanics (capitalization, ending punctuation), spelling, grammar, sentence structure, and organization." His **benchmarks** were:

- "Danny will generate his ideas in correct sequence to formulate two to three paragraphs, using and completing graphic organizers before writing.
- Danny will write complete sentences containing correct grammar with 80% accuracy.
- Danny will write a four- to five-sentence paragraph that contains a topic sentence, two to three supporting details, and a concluding sentence.
- Danny will be able to correct 80% of his errors using a proofreading checklist with the specific number of errors for each proofreading area (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure) with progressively fewer adult cues."

When goals are written this way, you can monitor your child's school work to make sure he is progressing toward these goals, confident that they are based on grade-level and state content standards.

Scientifically Based Instruction

To progress in their learning, kids with LD also need high quality instruction that:

- is scientifically based
- is tailored to individual needs
- employs a scientifically proven instructional methodology to address deficits in an academic area

There are a number of websites that provide reviews of reading programs, instructional interventions, and curricula. They include:

- Florida Center for Reading Research
  http://www.fcrr.org
- What Works Clearinghouse
  http://www.whatworks.ed.gov
- The Access Center
  http://www.k8accesscenter.org
- Big Ideas in Reading
  http://reading.uoregon.edu
- Intervention Central
  http://www.interventioncentral.org
- National Institute for Literacy
  http://www.nifl.gov

In addition to being scientifically based, instruction must also be tailored to a child's specific learning needs. Parents often ask, "Isn't a child's IEP supposed to recommend effective instruction based on a child's unique learning needs?" Yes, but often it doesn't. Rather than tailoring services to meet the individual child's needs, special education programs or services recommended for children with LD are often "cookie-cutter, "one-size-fits-all," or whatever instructional materials the district has available.

School districts do not typically specify in the IEP what instructional method(s) will be used to assist a child in achieving his goals. One way for a parent to address this issue is to ask the district to describe specific, scientifically proven instructional components when a child's educational needs are being discussed. For example, for a child with a reading disability I would indicate that multisensory, explicit, structured reading instruction has been shown to improve reading skills. Many school districts do not discuss what instructional method(s) will be used, or whether that method has been deemed appropriate for a child to make adequate progress on his IEP goals. So, during IEP meetings, ask about the methodology that will be used to help your child make progress in her particular areas of academic deficit, especially about whether it is research based.

Continuous Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is a key element of a child's IEP, but most schools don't monitor a child's progress using continuous, objective data collection that is easily communicated to parents. Kids with LD need systematic and frequent progress monitoring to determine academic growth. Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used both to assess a child's academic performance, and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Academic performance is measured

weekly or monthly. Progress toward meeting the child's goals is measured by comparing expected rates to actual rates of learning. Instructional techniques are adjusted to meet individual learning needs based on these measurements. The benefits of progress monitoring include accelerated learning for students — because they receive instruction that is more appropriate to their individual needs — better informed instructional decisions, and higher teacher expectations for students.

The most common method used to monitor student progress is called Curriculum-Based Measurement or CBM. CBM is research-validated and uses short-duration assessments to monitor progress in reading, math, spelling, and writing. CBM procedures are reliable, valid, and standardized. Student performance is graphed over time to determine progress and the effectiveness of instructional programming. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (http://dibels.uoregon.edu) is an example of CBM that assesses early literacy and pre-reading skills, as well as predicts later reading proficiency.

But best practices in progress monitoring are not in place in all schools. I still encounter the practice among special educators of administering a standardized, norm-reference achievement test prior to the child's annual review IEP meeting to determine a child's academic progress. Again, as was noted earlier in regard to assessing present levels of performance, individually administered norm-referenced achievement tests, (such as the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-III: Tests of Achievement; or the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-II) are designed to compare a child's performance to that of his age peers at a single point in time, not to measure the progress of an individual child over time.

If the school reports that your child is making progress toward his IEP goals, and you don't agree, your first step is to ask what methods special education personnel are using to routinely monitor and evaluate your child's progress on IEP goals. Most goal sheets in a child's IEP document have columns to identify these progress-monitoring methods and specific dates when progress will be reviewed, typically at the end of each quarter.

Unfortunately, I've found that progress monitoring evaluation procedures typically include "teacher observations," "review of work," and/or "teacher-made tests," and progress is reviewed only once per quarter. This approach isn't sufficient to determine adequate progress toward goals, or to determine if the current instructional method is effective. Again, when you have a question about your child's progress, ask your child's special education teacher or any other service provider to show you the data documenting your child's progress.

Further information about progress monitoring can be found on the Internet:

- National Center on Student Progress Monitoring
  http://www.studentprogress.org
- Research Institute on Progress Monitoring
  http://www.progressmonitoring.net

When In Doubt, Ask

As the parent of a child receiving special education services, you are entitled to data-based information that clearly demonstrates what progress, if any, your child is making. Because without data, it's just someone's opinion. If you aren't sure whether your child is making progress or how

much progress he's making, schedule a meeting with his special education teacher to discuss how your child's progress is being monitored and measured, and how that information will be regularly communicated to you. If questions and concerns continue after talking with special education personnel, it may be appropriate to request an IEP meeting to get further clarification about your child's progress. When you understand the essential components of an effective IEP, you can advocate confidently — and successfully — for your child's progress toward IEP goals.

 Created: 02/02/2007

About the Contributors

Gina Robuck, M.Ed., has 10 years' experience as a school psychologist, and has worked with children from preschool through high school. Currently, she provides consulting, advocacy, and evaluation services to families of children with special needs, and assists school-based teams to identify and address students' educational needs.