

Closing the Opportunity Gap for Students with Disabilities Through Progress Monitoring Plans

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The purpose of this white paper is to provide educators and leaders information on why ongoing progress monitoring of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals is an important process to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Educators and itinerant staff working with students with disabilities need to be provided with the resources and tools to effectively monitor progress and use data collected on IEP goals to close opportunity gaps. Progress monitoring is also a key component to determining if IEPs are appropriately ambitious and provide meaningful educational benefit to students with disabilities. When the process of reporting progress on IEP goals focuses on “results” as the essential element of achievement, implementing a next generation electronic system of measuring student progress by collecting and analyzing data on IEP annual goals is a necessary next step.

Introduction

Two U.S. Supreme Court cases have changed the way both state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) develop and monitor progress towards goals in IEPs. The first, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (hereafter, *Endrew F.*), set a substantive bar for achievement, accountability, and highlighted the need to ensure special education services provide meaningful educational benefit to students with disabilities. Specifically highlighting, “to meet its substantive obligation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a school must offer an IEP reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress in light of the child’s circumstances.”¹ The *Endrew F.* case reiterated that progress for students with disabilities was achievable and expected; requiring IEP teams to set ambitious but realistic goals to meet the requirements of IDEA.

The second, decided in 2023, was *Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools* (hereafter, *Perez*), which had several implications for school districts. In this case Miguel Luna Perez, a student who was deaf, claimed the district denied him the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE).² The basis for this claim was due to the district’s failure to consistently provide a qualified sign language interpreter and perpetuated the impression that Perez was progressing in school, only to find out months before graduation that he would receive a certificate of completion, not a traditional high school diploma. While there were many aspects involved in the *Perez* case, the Court’s ruling underscored that insufficient progress monitoring can hinder a student’s educational progress, as it prevents educators and parents from making informed decisions and adjusting IEPs to ensure meaningful educational benefit for students with disabilities. Furthermore, in this case, progress reports showed Miguel was making progress, so his parents were not aware of his lack of progress until close to graduation, furthering emphasizing the need for accurate and objective progress monitoring.

This groundbreaking ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court makes it easier for parents of students with disabilities to seek damages from districts under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), in addition to proceeding with IDEA dispute resolution activities. However, under the Perez ruling, parents do not have to exhaust IDEA administrative due process procedures before filing an ADA lawsuit, therefore making districts more susceptible to lawsuits for denial of FAPE and inadequate progress monitoring. To support districts in avoiding unnecessary litigation, progress monitoring tools and resources are a critical component to results-driven accountability (RDA).

According to IDEA, Sec. 300.320(a), each child's IEP must contain a description of:

(2)

- i. A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to—
 - Meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and
 - Meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability:
- ii. For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate academic achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives;

(3) A description of—

- i. How the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals described in paragraph (2) of this section will be measured; and
- ii. When periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward meeting the annual goals (such as through the use of quarterly or other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards) will be provided.

While IDEA outlines specific requirements for progress monitoring, many special educators view an IEP as a burdensome paperwork requirement rather than a collaborative tool to facilitate sound implementation of special education. This impression may be due to poor or limited training.³ Educators must understand the purpose of quality IEP development and progress monitoring is to:

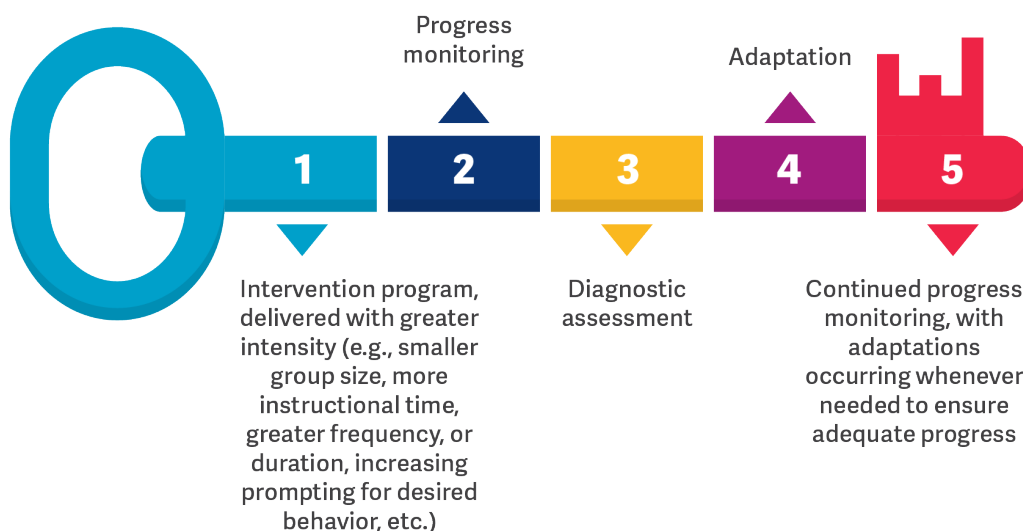
- Make ongoing instructional and service delivery decisions, for both academics and behavior.
- Provide information to parents and staff on a student's progress.
- Determine the rate of progress a child is making to decide if instructional practices and services are effective.
- Analyze formative and summative evidence to determine if students have met their IEP goals.

This requires IEPs to move beyond simply an exercise in paperwork and become a blueprint for supporting student outcomes and performance growth through continuous improvement cycles. While IDEA does not have specific requirements for developing a progress monitoring plan, it does require details be provided on how a child's progress will be measured towards annual IEP goals.

Data-Based Individualization and Progress Monitoring Plans

The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) developed the concept of data-based individualization (DBI), which is a systematic method for using assessment data to determine how students are responding to interventions for both academics and behavior.⁴ DBI is typically implemented within the context of a multi-tiered intervention framework and relies on analysis of student-level data to adjust instruction or interventions when students are not

responding or making adequate progress. Five key steps to the DBI process⁴ include:



A critical component of DBI is progress monitoring which is a systematic and planned process for collecting and analyzing data to determine if a student is making expected gains. For students with disabilities, progress is measured through IEP annual goals. Developing and implementing a progress monitoring plan requires educators to use objective measures that are monitored frequently and systematically, as opposed to subjective measures or anecdotal reports that cannot be consistently or easily measured.⁵ DBI and progress monitoring work in tandem to ensure students are making progress towards IEP goals, if students are not making progress, this process provides a data-driven method for instructional decision-making based on a student's individual needs. Progress monitoring tools⁶ should include:



Once an IEP team develops annual goals for a student, they must determine how progress will be measured and shared with parents throughout the IEP period.

There are two common progress monitoring approaches teams can use: mastery measures (MMs) and general outcome measures (GOMs).⁷ MMs assess only one skill taught and allow teachers to evaluate the level of mastery on one specific skill before moving on to another skill. MMs enables educators to make instructional changes in a timely manner if students are not meeting mastery. GOMs monitor student progress over a period of time and allow educators to change instructional practices by identifying students who are not making adequate progress.⁸ Depending on how a student's skills will be assessed should dictate whether MMs or GOMs are used to monitor progress towards IEP goals. Regardless of which measurement is selected, any progress monitoring tool used for IEP goals should meet the following criteria⁸:

- ✓ Include a sufficient number of alternate forms of equal and controlled difficulty to allow for progress monitoring at recommended intervals based on the intervention level;
- ✓ Specify minimum acceptable growth;

- ✓ Provide benchmarks for minimum acceptable end-of-year performance;
- ✓ Provide reliability and validity information for the performance-level score and for growth for students with intensive needs.

Table 1. Comparison of Mastery Measures and General Outcome Measures for Progress Monitoring⁹

Mastery Measures	General Outcome Measures
Describe mastery of a single skill in a series of short-term instructional objectives	Reflect overall competence in the annual curriculum
Represent a logical, not an empirical, hierarchy of skills	Incorporate retention and generalization
Do not reflect maintenance or generalization	Describe an individual student’s long-term growth and development (both current status and rate of development)
Do not relate well to overall achievement or performance on criterion measures (neither performance on a single mastery measure nor number of objectives mastered)	Provide a decision-making model for designing and evaluating interventions

To further underscore the importance of progress monitoring for annual IEP goals, the PROGRESS Center at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) created a tip sheet for progress monitoring annual goals. This tip sheet included key areas for developing a progress monitoring plan⁸ which included:

- ✓ Use objective data and measures (e.g., data reported in numbers, not words) from the performance criteria in annual goals;
- ✓ Develop and maintain a consistent data collection schedule to measure progress frequently and consistently;
- ✓ Identify individuals with appropriate data collection training to collect data on IEP goals;
- ✓ Clearly identify each setting or context that is relevant to where data will be collected.

At present, state and local education agencies continue to use a variety of strategies to monitor, track, and report progress on IEP goals. Some have clearly delineated procedures to guide these interrelated processes, but others do not. Educators continue to struggle with the lack of guidance, support, tools, and resources readily available for high-quality progress monitoring. Providing access to these supports and resources can simplify the data collection process for measuring and reporting progress on students’ annual IEP goals.

Based on the lack of available guidance, tools, and resources, educators often must search for materials that are accessible on the web or create their own progress monitoring tools. The documentation collected is frequently a resource-intensive, paper-based, teacher-dependent process. The extensive portfolios of notebooks and binders compiled run counter to paperwork reduction efforts, and they do not take advantage of emerging technologies and tools that exist to aid teachers in this process. Occasionally, documentation to qualify and substantiate progress made towards IEP goals is not robust or are insufficient in supporting decisions made in IEP meetings. When this happens, the district and/or school becomes far more vulnerable to accusations of non-compliance. This may result in conflicts during IEP meetings which generate complaints, challenges, and costly litigation.

Next Generation Progress Monitoring with Data Collection of IEP Annual Goals

There are many SEAs and LEAs that have embraced technology and automation through the implementation of electronic IEP systems. Whether the IEP processes are automated via technology or not, most do not have a robust means for monitoring progress towards IEP goals, nor for collecting and reporting data. Some efforts have been made to utilize electronic progress monitoring tools that incorporate data collection technology. These solutions align with the requirement for progress monitoring in IDEA, resulting in a focus on improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities.¹⁰ Electronic tools are also being used to support the implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), including progress monitoring for both academic and behavioral supports.¹¹

National trends reflect that more districts are utilizing high-tech solutions as well as common training and technical assistance measures to support the fidelity of implementation for monitoring student progress on their IEP annual goals. EDPlan™ Progress Track, an electronic data collection system, was designed for progress monitoring IEP annual goals and is a practical solution to time- and resource-intensive special education paperwork. Additionally, EDPlan Progress Track is an efficient and effective use of technology that supports high-quality progress monitoring.

Use of Technology Solutions for Progress Monitoring

Public Consulting Group (PCG) has partnered with 3,200 school districts and 34 states. Over 25 million IEPs have been created in PCG's EDPlan special education management system. Across the country, one in every five special education student's IEPs are managed in PCG systems, which include monitoring processes for implementing the IDEA requirements of periodic reporting of student progress.

Furthermore, school districts serving over 144,000 students with disabilities have moved to strengthen their processes by using EDPlan Progress Track, a system that integrates with electronic IEP systems, to close the achievement gap and improve outcomes and results for students with disabilities.



Benefits Reported by School Districts Implementing EDPlan Progress Track Technology Solution

- Strengthens evidence available to IEP team members to support periodic reporting of progress
- Improves fidelity: Consistent data collection across LEAs
- Fosters team collaboration and parent discussion
- Saves time: Efficient and effective use of technology
- Auto calculates progress based on data collected
- Auto calculates trend and aim lines
- Graph generation to provide visual representation of progress
- Helps build progress monitoring and data collection habits
- Saves paper



Benefits Reported by Special Education Leaders in the Field¹²

- Meets IDEA requirements compliance for measuring and reporting progress
- Provides a systematic approach to data collection
- Provides longitudinal data on student progress
- Guides instruction by assisting teachers in making data-informed decisions
- Charts progress on goals/objectives
- Has relevant and current information to inform Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance (PLAAPF)



Importance of EDPlan Progress Track

- Informs instruction and alters variables to better address individual student needs
- Accelerates learning because students are receiving well-designed and calibrated appropriate instruction
- Enables more efficient communication with families and other professionals about students' progress and higher expectations for students by teachers
- Provides technical advantages for quantifying progress
- Documents student progress for accountability purposes

“Our teachers feel like they are on the cutting edge of a system that has the potential to significantly impact student achievement. They love the clarity and usability of the system. The integration of progress monitoring and the IEP system reduces redundant data entry and ensures compliance with the IEP.”

- Kevin M. Kirst, Director of Special Education and Student Services Albemarle County Public Schools

The IEP process that is most aligned with RDA's focus on improving outcomes and results for students with disabilities is monitoring student progress. In 2021-22, the number of children and youth ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 7.3 million, or about 15 percent of all public-school students.¹³ These students are entitled to the accountability necessary to measure and track progress on the goals delineated in their IEPs to sustain growth and receive the accompanying educational benefits.

Formalized progress monitoring provides parents and teachers with data aligned to goals and the necessary information for targeted instruction to proactively impact student achievement and facilitate problem solving. This process is also instrumental in efforts to strengthen and calibrate IEPs to provide educational benefits for students with disabilities. Both the RDA and Supreme Court standards for an appropriate education heighten the importance of collecting data to monitor progress towards IEP goals, and targeted, specially designed instruction for students with disabilities.

Collecting data for progress monitoring towards IEP annual goals is an evidenced-based process that aligns to the seven essential practices featured by the National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO). NCEO has chronicled how five school districts with very different demographics used assessment and accountability as an impetus for positive change.¹⁴

Monitoring the academic progress of students provides formative results and aligns with best practices around IEP development and classroom instruction. Research has demonstrated that when educators use student progress monitoring, teacher decision making improves, and students become more aware of their performance.

A significant body of research conducted over the last 30 years has demonstrated this methodology to be a reliable and valid predictor of subsequent performance on a variety of measures, and thus useful for a wide range of instructional decisions.¹⁵ EDPlan Progress Track's electronic data collection system for monitoring of IEP goals is a viable solution for SEAs and LEAs to consider when implementing a systematic process that offers guidance, support, and resources for teachers.

When electronic progress monitoring is implemented, educators build habits and incorporate progress monitoring requirements into their daily activities. At the same time, data collection is simplified and becomes well integrated in students' IEPs and classrooms. Using an electronic process for progress monitoring behavior specific goals was likewise deemed a viable technology solution by the Council for Exceptional Children.¹⁶

Summary

Progress monitoring occurs naturally in the routines of our daily lives. For example, we use technology to monitor our weight, breathing, blood pressure, heart rate, steps walked, budgeting, real estate, and the stock market. Technology solutions have helped us simplify and implement efficient and accessible processes for monitoring and collecting useful data in areas with which we are keenly interested, and making decisions about, being accountable for, and improving results. So why not apply these next generation solutions to improve the "quality" of the IEP process for monitoring progress through the collection and analysis of data on IEP annual goals?

EDPlan's Progress Track solution supports and strengthens the efforts of SEAs and LEAs to establish and implement processes for students with IEP annual goals in a compliant, accountable, and results-driven manner. Focusing on improving outcomes and results for students with disabilities is in accordance with the stipulations set forth in IDEA, as well as RDA. A web-based solution, EDPlan Progress Track provides the standardization, structure, guidance, and support to facilitate the following:

- ✓ Simplified data collection
- ✓ Applied measurement approach
- ✓ Problem solving
- ✓ Graphic representation of progress
- ✓ Easily understood format for teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents
- ✓ Progress and trends for individual students and groups of students across multiple grades and schools
- ✓ Alerts users to compliance requirements
- ✓ Reporting capabilities at the classroom, school, and district level

These supports help school personnel focus on data-based decision making and problem solving around students IEP goals while helping to mitigate some MTSS implementation challenges.¹⁷

A high-quality IEP meets all compliance requirements of state and federal laws and regulations, and reflects decisions based on the active and meaningful involvement of all members of the IEP team. The IEP provides a clear statement of expected outcomes and the special education services and supports to be provided to the student.¹⁸

IDEA requires periodic reporting of each student's progress towards meeting annual goals. Using the robust electronic EDPlan Progress Track technology solution provides stakeholders with the essential information they need to address any lack of expected student progress, and confidently engage in the MTSS problem solving process to review instruction/intervention approaches and modify IEPs when necessary.

About the Authors

Dr. Jennifer Baribeau is a Senior Advisor in Special Education with Public Consulting Group (PCG) and has more than 12 years of service in the Special Education field. After transitioning from the business sector, Dr. Baribeau served in a variety of leadership roles in special education throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut. In these various roles, Dr. Baribeau led program management and reform and developed policies and practices to support special education at the district level. Dr. Baribeau has presented on a variety of topics including understanding implicit bias in our work as educators, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), inclusive practices, and suspension practices for students with emotional disabilities. Dr. Baribeau was also an independent consultant for the Urban Collaborative at Arizona State University. In this role, she worked with districts and state agencies to assess needs, evaluate special education programs, promote culturally responsive educational systems, and help leaders design policies that promote improved student achievement for all. She received her Bachelor of Science in Business Management with a focus on Entrepreneurship from Westfield State University and her Ph.D. in Education from the University of Massachusetts. Jennifer served on the Board for the Massachusetts Council for Exceptional Children and prior to her leadership roles in education, she managed grant-funded projects for gang-involved and emotionally impaired youth in Massachusetts. Dr. Baribeau has taught graduate courses on special education, inclusive practices, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Massachusetts, and Springfield College.

Dr. Jennifer Meller is an Associate Manager at Public Consulting Group (PCG), leading the firm's efforts in providing districts with comprehensive special education program evaluations and technical assistance in the areas of staffing, stakeholder engagement, compliance, finance, data use, and best instructional practices for students with disabilities. A special education subject matter expert (SME) at PCG, Dr. Meller's experience is built upon her practitioner-oriented background and education policy work across several dozen states across the U.S. Currently, Dr. Meller focuses on engagements that support districts and state departments of education with special education with identifying and implementing best practices. She also assists districts in several states with implementing IEP special education technology systems that are both procedurally compliant and outcomes focused. She designed and has administered PCG's national survey on the use of IEP systems and regularly authors thought leadership pieces about special education. Prior to joining PCG, Dr. Meller was the Director of Operations in the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Specialized Instructional Services, where she focused on implementing student focused data management systems, oversaw several multi-million-dollar federal grants, and was responsible for policy and compliance. She earned an Ed.D. in Educational and Organizational Leadership and an MS. Ed. in Higher Education Management, both from the University of Pennsylvania. She also has a Bachelor of Arts in English from Dickinson College.

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Endnotes

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