

Monitoring Your Child's IEP: A Focus on Reading

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To maximize the performance of struggling readers, teachers must frequently and systematically monitor their progress and, if progress is flagging or exceeding expectations, adjust instruction accordingly. Despite research evidence showing the importance of such efforts and special education's legal mandate to monitor students' progress, many teachers and Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams fail to do so, or do so ineffectively. Therefore, it is critical that parents (a) encourage school personnel to effectively monitor and report on their children's progress and (b) independently monitor progress. To help parents with these tasks, this article presents several practical suggestions.

Parents of children in special education often complain that school districts promise the world, but deliver little:

They tell us they'll provide Carla with expert one-to-one reading. The expert is an assistant who works with her 10 minutes a day. They're always telling us they have Carla's best interests at heart and that her inclusion teachers carry out her IEP. She struggles in science, but her science teacher ignores the modifications in her IEP. The school gets our signatures and ignores us till next year. They hardly monitor Carla's progress. And when they do, the information they give us is worthless.

Unfortunately, these last comments—"... they hardly monitor, the information is worthless ..."—are heard all too frequently, as attested to by the professional literature. Several authorities have noted that many Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams fail to develop and execute progress monitoring plans, fail to use appropriate measures, fail to obtain meaningful data, and fail to measure progress with sufficient frequency (Etscheidt, 2006; Pemberton, 2003). As a consequence, many children work to escape from lessons that are boringly easy or excruciatingly frustrating. If teachers monitor progress infrequently, children may get stuck—for several months or more—with work that bores or frustrates them. In either case, learning suffers. If your child is in this situation, you must work to have school personnel frequently monitor your child's progress in ways that ensure meaningful progress and high motivation.

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Fortunately, involving yourself in your child's education and insisting that school personnel monitor her progress are key components of the recent federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA-2004).¹ In IDEA-2004, Congress was clear about the role of parents: Parents are members of their child's IEP Team, the Team that plans their child's education (34 C.F.R. §300.321 IEP Team).² As IEP Team members, parents should involve themselves in their child's education. They should work with school personnel to write their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP), which federal courts consider the core of a child's special education program:

The IEP is more than a mere exercise in public relations. It forms the basis for a handicapped child's entitlement for an individualized and appropriate education. Thus, the importance of the development of the IEP to meet the individualized needs of a handicapped child cannot be underestimated. (Greer v. Rome City School District, 1991)

As a member of the IEP Team, IDEA-2004 gives parents the right to work with school personnel to develop the entire IEP, including these key components:

A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance 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 ... A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child ... to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals; To be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program)

¹The opinions and interpretations in this article are not legal advice, as the authors are not attorneys. Rather, they are offered by special educators who are required to understand federal and state special education laws and who have taught graduate classes about such laws.

²Throughout this article, we refer to the regulations for IDEA-2004; the reference is 34 C.F.R., which stands for Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations; § stands for section. Because the regulations are very important, we urge you to study them in their entirety. You can download a copy from <http://IDEA.ed.gov> or request a copy from your congressional representative or school district. We also urge you to ask your school district for a copy of your state's current special education statute and regulations; as with the federal regulations, it's important that you study them. By increasing your knowledge of federal and state regulations, you increase your power.

Thus, as a parent of a child who is eligible for special education, you have the right—by law—to actively involve yourself in planning your child’s program. Moreover, you are encouraged to do so. But that’s not all. You have a right to insist that the IEP Team develop a plan to monitor and report the progress your child makes in meeting her IEP goals. Here’s exactly what IDEA-2004’s new rules say:

The IEP must include a description of ... how the child’s progress toward meeting the [IEP’s] annual goals will be measured; and ... 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. (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program)

The good news is that monitoring “progress toward meeting ... annual goals” supports good decision making and helps to focus instruction. If teachers use the information derived from frequently monitoring students’ progress on tasks related to students’ IEP goals, they can use this information to make tasks moderately challenging rather than boringly easy or excruciatingly frustrating. This helps ensure meaningful progress. Teachers can also use this information to inform parents of their children’s progress. And by knowing how well your child is doing—whether or not she’s making good progress toward meeting her IEP goals—you can develop more effective ways to support her. You also know if you need to meet with the IEP Team to develop a new IEP that improves instruction and removes barriers to learning.

Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is a way for teachers to gather useful information for guiding their instructional programming (Safer & Fleishman, 2005). First, teachers determine the student’s current levels of performance; for example, by having Kierstin silently read and orally answer questions from her fourth-grade history book, her teacher might conclude that Kierstin can currently answer 60% of the comprehension questions from new passages of approximately 450 words. Second, teachers use the student’s current levels of performance to establish ambitious but realistic achievement goals. Given Kierstin’s current performance, the following would be ambitious but realistic: By the end of the second marking period, Kierstin will silently read three new passages of approximately 500 words from her fourth-grade history book and orally and correctly answer 4 of 5 questions (80%) about each passage. Third, teachers determine the rate of progress: If Kierstin’s current rate of progress continues, by the end of the third marking period she should be able to orally and correctly answer 90% of the questions asked about any new 600-650 word selection she silently reads in her fourth-grade history book. By continually analyzing Kierstin’s success in

answering content-area comprehension questions and by analyzing her data patterns, her teachers have much or all of the information they need to determine when and how to modify instruction (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004; Stecker & Fuchs, 2000). Finally, if Kierstin does not make adequate progress, they have the information necessary to justify a request for help from a reading specialist or a meeting to modify Kierstin's IEP.

Despite the simplicity of its framework, progress monitoring can be powerful. Often, it improves instructional decision making, enables teachers to design more effective instruction, improves the consistency of instructional programs, and increases achievement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2002; Grossen et al., 2002; Safer & Fleishman, 2005). Additionally, progress monitoring reliably predicts academic achievement (Deno, 2003; Good & Jefferson, 1998).³

Now that you have a general understanding of your rights, the importance of frequent monitoring, the legal requirement for monitoring, and the logic of progress monitoring, we would like to offer specific suggestions for monitoring progress. First, two cautions.

First caution. Our suggestions are just that, suggestions. Like everything in psychology and education, they cannot guarantee success; they cannot guarantee to help your child in meaningful ways. Nevertheless, each suggestion has a major virtue: It can improve the odds that your child will achieve her IEP goals.

Second caution. Treat teachers and other school personnel with respect, regardless of how frustrated you are. This means that when they're out of earshot and you speak about them, do so with genuine respect. If you think or speak about them with disrespect, disrespect will seep into your conversations with them, making them defensive and resistant. Unless you have been a teacher, you probably do not know what teachers know: Teaching is hard, exhausting work, with few rewards, much isolation, much criticism, and few resources, which often means little time to do what should be done.

So, when asking teachers for their cooperation, treat them as they deserve—with respect. And even if you think they don't deserve respect, remember this: They can “yes you to death,” but cooperate only superficially. Ultimately, you depend on their belief that what you're asking makes sense, is doable, can help your child, will not overwhelm them, and has legal implications. But just as important, you depend on their good will. If you treat them with genuine respect, they are more likely to reciprocate and cooperate. With this in mind, here are our suggestions.

³ Although this article emphasizes reading, progress monitoring may be used to improve all areas of academics, as well as functional abilities (e.g., making friends, working in teams).

Our Suggestions

Suggestion 1. Insist that the IEP's goals are measurable. IDEA-2004 requires that each IEP contain “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” (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program). It also requires a description of how the child’s progress toward meeting these goals will be measured, and a statement of when the school will periodically report on progress toward meeting the IEP’s goals (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program).

To ensure that each annual goal is measurable, ask for several short-term objectives that logically reflect small steps toward achieving the goal, steps that clearly indicate whether or not your child is likely to achieve the goal. We suggest that you think of short-term objectives as small steps or subgoals your child can achieve—without becoming frustrated or stressed—in one marking period. Thus, if your child’s reading goal is to quickly recognize, by June, all the sight words in the Dolch list (an old but widely used list of common words), and her school has four marking periods, each marking period would have one objective. Here’s a clear, measurable objective to measure mastery of the Dolch list:

Given 20 of the 80 sight words that Alexis did not know when tested with the Dolch Word List in early September, Alexis will correctly pronounce each of these 20 words when they’re individually presented on flash cards. She will correctly pronounce each word within one second of exposure, on five consecutive school days, by the end of the first marking period.

Note that measurable short-term objectives consist of five parts:

1. The behavior to be observed (Alexis will correctly pronounce each word).
2. The name of the student who will perform the behavior (Alexis).
3. The criteria for mastery (Alexis will correctly pronounce each of the 20 words within one second of exposure, on five consecutive school days).
4. The conditions under which the behavior will occur (20 words will be individually presented on flash cards by the teacher or an aide).
5. The target date for attainment (end of the first marking period).

Generally, objectives with these five parts can be easily measured. By including a reasonable target date, one Alexis can meet if she makes a moderate effort, both teachers and parents can readily determine if she's making sufficient progress. By measuring the objectives, teachers are measuring the goal: Once all four objectives are achieved—one for each marking period—the goal is achieved.

Unfortunately, for most children in most states, IDEA-2004 has eliminated the requirement that their IEPs contain measurable short-term objectives.⁴ Fortunately, some states, like New Jersey, have kept this requirement. If your state has not, you can still ask the IEP Team (of which you are a member) to include short-term objectives. If they refuse, insist that your child's IEP include other valid ways of measuring progress. Even without short-term objectives, IDEA-2004 requires this.

If an IEP Team will not use valid procedures and include progress monitoring steps and timelines to monitor a child's progress in meeting her "measurable annual goals" (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program), they are negating their obligation to measure progress and are nullifying one of IDEA-2004's basic principles: To properly inform parents of their child's status and progress so they can make informed decisions. It's also negating its responsibility to adjust instruction so the child achieves her IEP goals. In line with this, note the U.S. Third Circuit Court's conclusion:

A school district that knows or should know that a child has an inappropriate IEP or is not receiving more than a de minimis educational benefit must, of course, correct the situation... If it fails to do so, a disabled child is entitled to compensatory education. (M.C. on behalf of J.C. v. Central Regional School District, 1996)

Also note that the federal regulations for IDEA-2004 make it clear that schools must provide children (and those who instruct them) with what they need to achieve their IEP goals:

[The IEP] must include ... a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services ... to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child—To advance appropriately toward attaining the annu-

⁴ Nevertheless, even in states that do not require all children's IEPs to include short-term objectives, a tiny percent of children are eligible. Generally, these are children who are unlikely to make progress in the general education curriculum and for whom standardized testing is inappropriate. Specifically, IDEA-2004's regulations state that for "children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards," the IEP must include "a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives" (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program).

al goals; To be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program)

Let's assume the IEP Team will not develop measurable short-term objectives. What can you do? Make sure that each of the IEP's goals is measurable. To do this, create a series of short-term objectives and request that the IEP Team use your last, most ambitious objective as a goal. To illustrate, look at how we made our previous short-term objective more ambitious:

Given the 80 sight words that Alexis did not know when tested with the Dolch Word List in early September, Alexis will correctly pronounce each of these words when they are individually presented on flash cards. She will correctly pronounce each word within one second of exposure, on five consecutive school days, by the end of the fourth marking period.

Again, let's assume that the IEP Team will not agree to follow your suggestion. Use the example above, the one that increased the requirement from 20 to 80 sight words, as your criterion for the specificity needed to make a goal measurable. If the Team suggests a vague goal, such as "Alexis will improve her sight vocabulary," work with the Team to make it measurable. Do this by asking questions to make the goal concrete and specific, such as:

- How many new words will Alexis learn?
- How will we identify these words?
- How can I get a list of these words so I can work with her at home?
- How quickly will she have to say them once they're presented to her?
- How will you present the words to her? Can you show me how to do this, so I can try it at home?
- How many consecutive days must she recognize these words for the school to consider them mastered?

Suggestion 2: Make sure that your child's IEP contains an explicit plan that will adequately monitor progress. As previously mentioned, IDEA-2004 requires that each IEP describe "how the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals ... will be measured; and ... when periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward meeting the annual goals ... will be provided" (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program). IDEA-2004 also makes it clear that parents are full-fledged members of the IEP Team: "The [school] must ensure that the IEP Team for each child with a disability includes—the parents of the child" (34 C.F.R. §300.321 IEP Team). Moreover, "the IEP Team must consider ... the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child" (34 C.F.R. §300.324 Development, Review, and Revision of IEP).

Together, these statements make a clear inference: As members of the IEP Team, parents have an absolute right to help decide how and when their child's IEP goals will be measured and when they will be informed of their child's progress. But a right is only as good as its assertion. Thus, at your child's IEP meeting, you must ensure that her IEP contains an explicit, sensible, valid plan for monitoring and reporting progress.⁵ If school personnel refuse to develop such a plan, you must respectfully but firmly insist they follow the law. Why? Without the wisdom and zeal to protect your rights, they'll vanish.

One way to protect your rights is to share copies of pertinent passages from IDEA-2004. Several of the immediately important ones are found in this article. Another way is to consider Etscheidt's (2006) advice. She recommends that you identify "the individuals responsible for data collection along with the location, dates, and time of data collection." She further suggests that "members of the IEP Team who are responsible for implementing IEP goals also be responsible for monitoring progress toward those goals" (p. 59).

In general, we agree. Remember that it is best to be practical when pursuing methods of generating valuable information. As such, you need to informally assess (a) the kind of data that needs to be collected; (b) the frequency with which it needs to be collected; (c) the ability of your child's teachers and other school staff to collect it; and (d) the opportunities available for teachers and staff to collect it. If collecting particular data in particular ways at particular times by particular people is unlikely to produce the needed data with the needed frequency, you need to ask, "How can the difficulties be resolved to your satisfaction and that of school personnel while simultaneously benefiting your child?"

As part of the IEP's monitoring plan, we suggest that you request and schedule several progress monitoring or data assessment meetings. Like everything else agreed to at IEP meetings, the schedule of meetings should be written into the IEP. At these meetings, data that explicitly assess progress toward achieving each goal should be analyzed. Usually, such data suggest one of three things: the program should continue, should be modified, or should be replaced.

⁵ At the end of the IEP meeting, we suggest that you ask for a copy of the proposed IEP, even if school personnel have scribbled notes on it. At home, review it; reflect on its contents, including the specificity of its goals and its progress monitoring plan. If, after your review, you are unhappy with some particulars, ask to discuss them at a second IEP meeting. This helps you, your child, and the school district, as you're likely to be more satisfied with an IEP you've had time to carefully review and discuss than one you read haphazardly and felt rushed to sign. To everyone's benefit, this process reduces the likelihood of unnecessary, emotionally draining conflict.

If the monitoring data show that your child is making excellent progress, continue as is. If the data show the goal has been achieved, but your child still has difficulty in the area involved (e.g., reading), agree on a new, more ambitious goal; don't waste time, don't wait for the IEP to expire.⁶ If data show that progress is inadequate, discuss changing or modifying the instructional strategies, procedures, and materials, adding new services (e.g., one-to-one tutoring), increasing current services (e.g., increasing the number of weekly speech and language sessions from two to four), or revising or replacing the goals. This last recommendation should have strong justification; it should be used with caution. After all, when writing the IEP, teachers and other school personnel believed the goals were reasonable. In other words, they believed that with a reasonable rather than a Herculean effort, you child should have achieved her goals in reasonable time.

If the monitoring data show that progress has been inadequate, that your child has been struggling, ask these questions:

- *Does she have the prerequisite skills, knowledge, and abilities to readily achieve her IEP goals?* If not, school personnel need to task analyze the goals to determine if teaching should focus on easier versions of the goals, on subcomponents, or on prerequisite skills, knowledge, and abilities (Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988).
- *Is she highly motivated to succeed on goals? If not, what strategies does the IEP Team suggest to strengthen motivation?* One key to motivation is the child's perception of the task, including the value she places on it, the likely outcome and the value she places on it, and her belief that she will succeed (see Margolis, 2005; Margolis & McCabe, 2004, 2006). Thus, it's important to systematically assess her perception of the situation, the task, and, if she makes a moderate effort, her immediate ability to succeed. Figure 1 offers a set of questions to help IEP Teams better understand the impediments to motivation, so they can suggest strategies likely to strengthen motivation.

⁶ Most IEPs are annual documents. Thus, if your child achieves her reading goal by January, there's no reason to let February, March, April, May, and June pass without starting a more ambitious reading program to accelerate her achievement.

Figure 1. Student motivation: A problem-solving questionnaire.

DIRECTIONS: Answer each question from the student’s perspective—what does the student think? Use this key.

Key (Yes) 5 4 3 2 1 (No) DK (Do Not Know)

Answers to the first section should address a particular activity or task for which the student lacks motivation (e.g., homework). The second section refers to the student’s general orientation. If you don’t know an answer, write DK for “Do not know.” This response suggests that additional information is needed.

Section 1: A Particular Activity or Task

The activity or task (e.g., homework): _____

- 1. Is the task enjoyable? Rating _____
- 2. Is the content interesting? Rating _____
- 3. Do I have the ability to succeed if I make a reasonable effort? Rating _____
- 4. Have I had success with similar activities or tasks? Rating _____
- 5. Is the subject matter important? Rating _____
- 6. Am I likely to succeed in the near future? Rating _____
- 7. Will my efforts produce desirable outcomes? Rating _____
- 8. Will I get whatever support I need to achieve success? Rating _____
- 9. Will I be positively reinforced for my efforts? Rating _____
- 10. Will I be positively reinforced for whatever success I have? Rating _____
- 11. Are the reinforcers worth my effort? Rating _____
- 12. Will reinforcement quickly follow success? Rating _____
- 13. Are there immediately available activities/tasks I find more attractive or reinforcing? Rating _____
- 14. Is success important to achieving any long- or short-range goal(s) I have? Rating _____
- 15. Will the amount of effort I invest help me achieve my long- or short-range goals? Rating _____

Section 2: The Student’s General Orientation

- 16. Are my efforts responsible for the positive things that happen to me? Rating _____
- 17. Do my peers value school success? Rating _____
- 18. Is it important that I please other people, like my teachers, parents, and peers? Rating _____
- 19. Do I have important long-range goals? Rating _____
- 20. Do I have important short-range goals? Rating _____

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When studying this list, (Figure 1), think about your child. The less she enjoys the activities associated with her IEP goals, the less important she finds them, the more she needs to frequently receive external reinforcers—reinforcers she is willing to work to get—for correctly engaging in such activities. As she begins to increase her mastery and fully participate in such activities, the frequent use of external reinforcers, especially artificial ones (e.g., tokens for buying items in a class store), should be paired with and gradually replaced by more naturally occurring ones (e.g., praise for effort, books she enjoys). Although at first your child may need to frequently receive external reinforcers, they are probably temporary—they are used to kick-start and sustain involvement so natural reinforcers (e.g., success, enjoyment) take over.

- *What new instructional strategies will likely produce meaningful progress in relatively short time?* It is critical that the teaching strategies proposed for your child have a verifiable record of helping children make meaningful progress. Like medication, it's important that research published in well-respected, professional journals supports the teaching strategies the IEP Team proposes.

To help ensure that the proposed teaching strategies are valid or effective, ask for literature from professional journals or textbooks that support their efficacy with children like your child. Asking for such literature is consistent with IDEA-2004, which requires the IEP to contain “a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, *based on peer-reviewed research* to the extent practicable” (34 C.F.R. §300.320 Definition of Individualized Education Program). Ask how the strategies will be applied and how they differ noticeably from strategies that had been ineffective with your child.

If school personnel insist that instruction continue as is, despite poor progress, you must confront them in a firm but respectful manner. It is unlikely that strategies and program components that have failed will suddenly help.⁷ Moreover, your child is entitled to a program that offers her a reasonable chance of making meaningful progress. In reviewing the previous version of IDEA, IDEA-1997, and discussing what makes a program appropriate. Yell and Katsiyannis (2004) concluded that “appropriateness entails an education that will provide meaningful benefit for a student” (p. 30). This was made clear almost 20 years ago by the U.S. Third Circuit Court's ruling that educational

⁷ If 30 minutes daily of instruction in phonics rules has not helped your child to accurately and quickly recognize many new words, continuing such instruction will likely aggravate her problems, rather than help them. Likewise, if your child has difficulty attending in large groups, continuing to instruct her in large groups is unlikely to improve her attention and achievement, even if newly chosen reading strategies match her needs.

benefit must be more than minimal or trivial (Polk v. Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, 1988). There's no reason to think that Congress abandoned this standard. Note, for example, how IDEA-2004's statute supports student progress:

Congress finds [that] an effective educational system serving students with disabilities should—maintain high academic achievement standards and clear performance goals for children with disabilities, consistent with the standards and expectations for all students in the educational system, and provide for appropriate and effective strategies and methods *to ensure that all children with disabilities have the opportunity to achieve those standards and goals* [italics added]. (Public Law 108-446, Section 650)

Clearly, Congress continues to embrace the standard of meaningful—not trivial—progress.

- *What situational factors might be changed to improve my child's progress? What modifications or accommodations would help?* Often, minor modifications (a change in what is taught or what the child is responsible for learning) and accommodations (how information is presented to the child or how the child is asked to respond) can favorably influence achievement. Examples include the amount of reinforcement your child receives, the complexity of materials used, the length of materials, the pacing of instruction, and the students with whom your child is grouped.

Before accepting the modifications and accommodations, ask for the rationale—change for the sake of change often fails. Also, ask how the modifications and accommodations will be monitored, so everyone knows if they're working.

When discussing your child's difficulties, don't blame anyone. Instead, engage school personnel in rationally analyzing relevant information to determine which environmental or instructional factors are interfering with progress and what modifications will likely improve learning. To make these discussions successful, listen carefully and ask questions. Early on and throughout the discussion, listen to school personnel with the intent of understanding their views *and* feelings. Communicate your understanding by briefly paraphrasing what they're trying to communicate. For example, "So basically, you're frustrated because Alexis is unmotivated. Your efforts to motivate her have fallen flat. Am I right?" When asking questions, avoid trivial topics. Instead, focus on topics likely to produce important answers: "Two professors published a list of simple questions for solving motivation problems. Here's a copy [see Figure 1]. Can we take 15 minutes or so to answer their questions?"

Suggestion 3. Make sure the monitoring procedures match the goals.

Academics are very complex. Reading, for example, consists of oral language abilities, background knowledge, word recognition, fluency, comprehension, etc., etc., etc. Thus, to monitor progress, monitoring procedures must directly measure progress toward achieving the specific goal. To illustrate, let's look at reading fluency and comprehension.

Reading fluency, which involves the accuracy and speed of reading words in passages,⁸ may be monitored by teachers or teaching assistants. The process is quick and simple: Once or twice a week, the struggling reader reads aloud for one minute using materials at her instructional level (i.e., neither too easy nor too difficult). The number of words read correctly in a minute is recorded and charted. To maintain the same degree of difficulty—to compare apples to apples, not apples to oranges—the same grade-level materials should be used for several months. Although one minute of oral reading does not directly measure comprehension, increases in the number of words pronounced correctly is often associated with improvements in comprehension. If, for three successive measures or probes⁹ the number of words read correctly does not improve, the child's reading program should be analyzed to see what's blocking progress (Overton, 2006).

A similar activity you can use at home—an instructional activity that most children like—is Topping's paired reading (Topping, 1987, 1995). It works like this. Your child brings home a book she's reading in school that she likes and understands and that her teacher thinks she can accurately and expressively read aloud. Together, you and your child read the book aloud simultaneously. You stop reading aloud when your child raises her thumb, signaling you to read silently. If she makes an oral reading error or struggles with a word for approximately 5 seconds, you again read aloud with her simultaneously until she again raises her thumb, signaling you to read silently.

Afterwards, discuss the material. If you ask questions, ask open-ended, nonthreatening questions that have no right or wrong answers: "What did you like? What scared you? If you were the girl, what would you have done?" Such questions encourage discussion, and they help you gauge your child's understanding of what she read as well as the maturity of her vocabulary and oral language skills.

To directly assess your child's reading comprehension, teachers can administer weekly cloze tests that tell you, within limits, how well she can

⁸ Technically, fluency also involves the expression with which your child reads passages. But expression is difficult to measure objectively, so we'll leave it out as the critical elements for ongoing monitoring are the accuracy and speed with which children recognize words in passages.

⁹ A probe is a quick, brief measure, like a quiz.

understand the materials she's reading in school.¹⁰ Cloze is a simple, quickly administered procedure in which teachers give groups of students a new, previously unread passage of 300 to 350 words. Unlike intact passages, in cloze tests, every fifth word has been deleted and replaced by a blank line of uniform length on which your child writes the missing word. Accuracy scores between 44% and 56% suggest that with the teacher's help, your child should be able to adequately comprehend these materials; 43% and below indicate that even with the teacher's help, she will probably be frustrated; 57% and above indicate that without any help, she should readily comprehend the material (Spinelli, 2006). In addition to monitoring student progress, a cloze test has instructional benefits: It tells your child's teacher (and you) if your child is likely to comprehend the materials. If she's not, it raises questions like these: To succeed on these materials, what comprehension strategies (such as context clues) does she need to master? What vocabulary and background information does she need to learn?

Suggestion 4. Ask school personnel to send you daily or weekly information about progress. Wolery, Ault, and Doyle (1992) noted that "ideally, progress should be monitored on a daily basis ... At a minimum, frequent probes [brief measures] of a student's progress should occur, and more frequent measurement should occur for a program in which progress is in question" (p. 8). This is because the effectiveness of programs cannot be assessed until progress markers, such as probes, are implemented. "Trying to predict which interventions will work well for individual students has not been a fruitful endeavor. Therefore, we must test curricular [and programmatic] modifications empirically" (Witt, Elliott, Daly, Gresham, & Kramer, 1997, p. 51).

At best, plans represent hypotheses, or educated guesses, about what will be effective. Daily or weekly progress forms, like those in Figures 2 and 3, can prove helpful for recording, organizing, and sharing information. Moreover, school personnel can easily and quickly complete them.

Daily or weekly information about your child's progress can help you better understand what is happening in school so that you can adjust your efforts at home. Often, simple charts can give you the necessary information. For example, if your child meets her daily or weekly target for volunteering during class discussions, you might provide agreed-upon reinforcement at home as part of a home-school collaborative plan. Figure 2 provides a simple monitoring form that is quick for teachers to complete and conveys most of the information you need to determine if you should reinforce your child. Figure 3 provides a more elaborate monitoring form that can help you understand your child's progress and that can help teachers adjust their instruction.

¹⁰ Reading comprehension is difficult to measure. As Carlisle and Rice (2004) noted, all comprehension tasks have limitations; no task is best for measuring reading comprehension.

Figure 3. Reading fluency monitoring form.

Student's Name _____ Marking Period 1 2 3 4
 Reading Teacher _____
 Home Room Teacher _____

2007: Week of	Passage #	Number of words read correctly	Fluency level achieved with end-of-second grade narrative materials			Instructional approaches emphasized during the week				
Oct 1			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 1			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 8			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 8			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 15			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 15			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 22			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 22			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 29			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Oct 29			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 5			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 5			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 12			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 12			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 19			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
Nov 19			A	B	C	1	2	3	4	5
		Average number of words read correctly = _____ words	Average level achieved:							
			A	B	C					

Fluency Levels: Based on the student's baseline fluency level with end of 2nd grade narrative materials.

A: 60-75 words correctly read in a minute

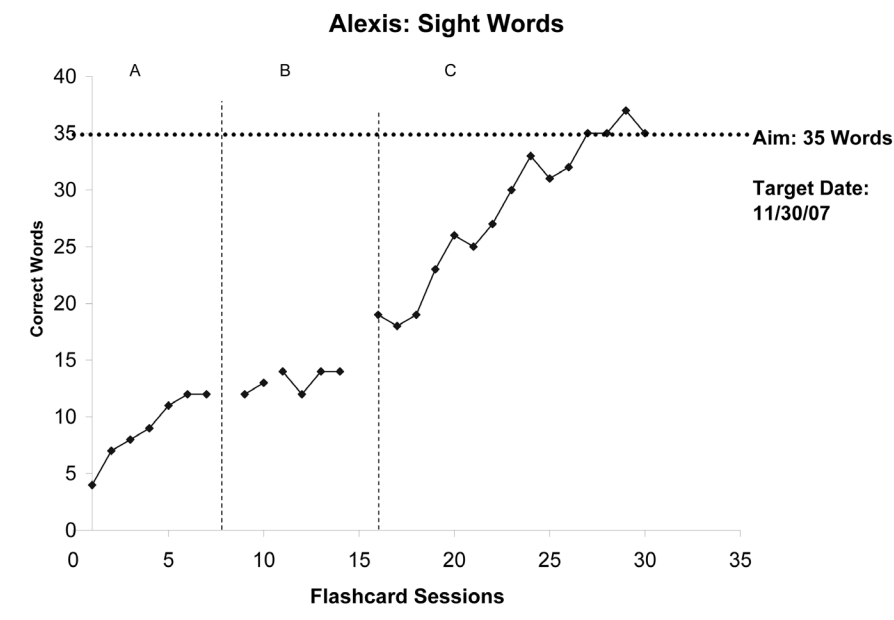
B: 76-110 words correctly read in a minute

C: 111 or more words correctly read in a minute

Instructional Approaches: 1 = Repeated Reading; 2 = Partner Reading;
 3 = Echo Reading; 4 = Paired Reading; 5 = Neurological Impress Method

Adapted from Y.A.L.E. School, Inc., Cherry Hill, NJ. Used with permission.

Figure 4. Example of aim line.



Look at what an aim line tells you and your child's teacher: Exactly what your child has accomplished each day. It gives you and your child's teacher an accurate idea about her progress. It gives you the information needed to say to your child's teacher, "Things aren't going well. Let's see how we can improve things." Or even better, "Things are going great. What's your secret?"

Although relatively simple to construct and quick to complete, aim lines cannot compensate for poor decision making. They cannot compensate for measuring relatively unimportant behaviors (placing a pencil in the upper right hand corner of the desk), poorly defined behaviors (e.g., caring), or infrequently occurring behaviors (e.g., whistling aloud during silent reading). They are best used with important, discrete, easily identified, readily produced behaviors (e.g., the number of words pronounced correctly, the number of arithmetic computations completed correctly). Even when used for such behaviors, aim lines can backfire if teachers must maintain many of them.

Two keys to ensuring that the reporting system works over time are simplicity and importance. By keeping the system—whatever system is used—simple and reporting only important information that can influence the effectiveness or nature of instruction, teachers are much more likely to use the system consistently.

Figures 2 and 3 present simple ways for collecting and reporting data; they're not magic, and they are not the only ways. We recommend that you understand our suggestions, but then accept what the IEP Team recommends, if ... There's that big word—if ... if their system reports valid data in readily understandable ways. If not, ask for changes. If none satisfy you, and if our suggestions are appropriate, ask the Team to examine them and adapt them to their needs.

Suggestion 5. Ask for weekly samples of your child's work, with annotations or scoring guides (rubrics). Although the number of words allocated to this suggestion is far fewer than allocated to others, it is just as important and informative.

Often, by simply looking at a child's work, it is hard to figure out if she is making progress. To solve this problem, ask for work samples with short, concrete annotations that assess progress. The following is an annotation comparing two writing assignments: "On last week's, writing assignment, Kierstin earned only a 2 of 5 because her paragraphs were not unified: Individual paragraphs dealt with several different topics. This week, Kierstin's writing assignment earned a 4 of 5 because her paragraphs were unified: All sentences in each paragraph were cohesive and related to the topic sentence. The sentences within her paragraphs were logically arranged and connected by transition words or by one or two words from previous sentences."

Instead of annotations, some teachers prefer scoring guides with performance standards, called rubrics. Rubrics have many advantages: They are quicker to complete, convey explicit information about the criteria for success, and are available in many areas, such as oral reading, oral presentations, group work, social skills, story presentations, science projects, narrative writing, and expository writing. Figure 5 illustrates one of the dozens of reading comprehension rubrics available on the Internet. If teachers prefer rubrics, agree with them. The reasons are simple: First, rubrics are as effective as annotations.¹¹ Second, people are more apt to do what they are comfortable doing.

When asking for samples, ask that they be organized by goal. If your child's IEP has four goals, and samples can help to monitor three, ask that each of the three have a separate folder—with samples and annotations or rubrics.

¹¹ Spinelli (2006) provides a clear definition of a rubric and lists several advantages: "A rubric is an established guideline or planned set of criteria that describes levels of performance or of understanding for what is expected so that an assignment or a performance can be judged. Points or grades are awarded for specific levels of performance. The criteria are expressed numerically and are accompanied by specific descriptors of performance for each number. Rubrics provide a common understanding of teacher expectations for students outcomes and validate teachers' judgment. They promote consistency and reliability of assessment.... [Rubrics provide students] with expectations about what will be assessed and standards that need to be met. Scoring with a rubric provides benchmarks that encourage students to self-evaluate during the task completion process" (Spinelli, 2006, p. 99).

Separate folders can help you to focus on one goal at a time, making progress easier to discern.

Suggestion 6. Have an impartial expert observe your child in her program. If your child's progress is poor, you should probably request an IEP meeting. In line with this, IDEA-2004 requires that the IEP be reviewed "periodically, but not less than annually, to determine whether the annual goals for the child are being achieved; and [revise] the IEP, as appropriate, to address ... any lack of expected progress toward the [IEP's] annual goals ... and in the general education curriculum, if appropriate" (34 C.F.R. §300.324 Development, Review, and Revision of IEP). Thus, if progress is poor, and you request a new IEP meeting, you're on firm ground.

But meetings without the valid information necessary to solve the problem often waste time and opportunity. To make an IEP meeting effective, you and the IEP Team need valid information—information obtained before the meeting. At a minimum, the information should help to answer these questions:

- To succeed, what concepts and skills does my child need to learn?
- What is preventing her from learning?
- What are her instructional and independent levels?
- To accelerate her learning, what type and level materials should be used when she works with the teacher and when she works alone?
- To accelerate her learning, what instructional strategies should be used?
- To accelerate her learning, what environmental conditions need to be in place?

Figure 5. Sample holistic rubric for grading answers to reading and social studies questions.

Score	Description
3	Answers address most aspects of the questions, use sound reasons, cite and explain appropriate examples; when appropriate, answers demonstrate ability to evaluate, synthesize, and analyze.
2	Answers deal with most aspects of the questions and make correct inferences, although minor errors may exist; when appropriate, comprehension is inferential; when appropriate, answers demonstrate ability to synthesize and analyze.
1	Answers deal with material on a concrete, literal level and are usually accurate.
0	Answers are unresponsive, unrelated, or inappropriate.

Because learning and behavioral difficulties are often caused by or aggravated by instructional factors (e.g., the reading methods and materials; the frequency of reinforcement) and by environmental factors (e.g., who sits near your child; the availability of interesting, independent level and instructional level books), there's no substitute for periodically having an impartial expert observe your child in two kinds of situations: those in which she succeeds and those in which she struggles or fails. Such comparisons can identify the factors responsible. Clearly, IDEA-2004 supports such observations:

[The school] must ensure that the child is observed in the child's learning environment (including the regular classroom setting) to document the child's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty. (34 C.F.R. §300.310 Observation)

If the school does not have the right kind of expert, or you don't trust the school's,¹² you may have to hire one. If so, your expert should (a) have sophisticated knowledge of your child's disability; (b) know precisely how to analyze instructional situations; (c) understand the operation and culture of schools; and (d) have a problem-solving rather than adversarial orientation.

Involving a private expert may prove highly beneficial by (a) providing fresh insight into the causes of your child's difficulties; (b) generating ideas that foster progress; and (c) spurring the school to do far more than planned. Minimally, it informs school officials that your child is important to you and that you will be actively involved. Nevertheless, experts are expensive. At \$150 to \$250 dollars an hour for travel, observations, research, record reviews, reports, meetings, and phone calls, bills can easily exceed \$7,500, an amount most families cannot afford.

If this is your reality, you might ask the IEP Team to have the school's expert observe your child using a structured instructional-observation system like TIES-II (The Instructional Environment System II: A System to Identify a Student's Instructional Needs; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 1993).¹³ Then share the expert's report with professionals you trust. Often, local child advocacy groups can link you to experts who are willing to volunteer a few hours of service. If you cannot get an expert to volunteer, you might black out all identifying information on the expert's report and ask a college professor to have his or her graduate class critique it and offer suggestions. Another option is to formally request an independent evaluation, including an observation, paid for by the district. Later, we will discuss this in detail.

¹² A common question is, "Should I trust experts who work for school districts?" The senior author's experience is that *most* experts who work for school districts offer honest opinions. However, even honest opinions can be wrong. Certainly, the senior author has made his share of mistakes.

¹³ By focusing on specific instructional factors like clarity of directions, classroom management strategies, informed feedback, frequency of reinforcement, and relevant practice, the likelihood increases that the observation will produce information that is relevant, useful, and verifiable.

A Perspective for Understanding Our Suggestions

Only our first two suggestions are legal requirements.

Suggestion 1: Insist that the IEP's goals are measurable.

Suggestion 2: Make sure that your child's IEP contains an explicit plan that will adequately monitor progress.

Our other suggestions emphasize implementation—how to ensure the effectiveness of monitoring. For some goals and some situations, all of our suggestions for ensuring effectiveness of monitoring might make sense; in other situations, perhaps three, perhaps one.

Suggestion 3. Make sure the monitoring procedures match the goals.

Suggestion 4. Ask school personnel to send you daily or weekly information about progress.

Suggestion 5. Ask for weekly samples of your child's work, with accompanying annotations or rubrics.

Suggestion 6. Have an impartial expert observe your child in her program.

Our suggestions are not exhaustive; teachers can use other ways to monitor progress. You and the IEP Team, including your child's teachers, may have different ideas for ensuring the effectiveness of monitoring.¹⁴ That's fine, as long as (a) everything is written into the IEP; (b) you get the information by the times specified in the IEP; (c) the information is valid: it is sufficient for you and your child's teachers to adequately understand your child's progress; (d) the times are frequent enough for you and your child's teachers to quickly accelerate flagging progress. Anything less weakens your ability to quickly and effectively solve problems and accelerate meaningful progress.¹⁵

¹⁴ Frequently, the teachers who attend IEP meeting and help write the IEP are different from those who implement it. Following is a typical scenario: In the *spring*, a fifth grader's general education and special education teachers participate in his IEP meeting; the following fall, he is a sixth grader with a different set of teachers. Thus, you should discuss with the new teachers how they will monitor your child's progress. You should also assess their willingness and ability to monitor your child's progress.

¹⁵ Progress monitoring information can also identify successful programs and provide ideas for maintaining success, or expanding and enhancing programs so they offer additional benefits. Maintaining success might include systematically and gradually reducing the frequency of artificial reinforcement (e.g., awarding stickers). Expanding and enhancing programs might include accelerating progress (e.g., increasing the number of words presented per lesson), teaching additional concepts (e.g., adding 3 new animals to the curriculum), or adding new activities (e.g., conducting experiments to help students learn inductive reasoning and to make science more interesting).

Our suggestions are more likely to prove effective if you treat teachers and other school personnel with respect, and if you are actively involved in your child's education.¹⁶ Active involvement can take many forms, including attending meetings, volunteering for school activities, joining a school advisory board, periodically observing your child's classes, volunteering to tutor in the school, and volunteering as an aide. In addition to learning a great deal about the school, including its realities and how it works, research reports that parents' involvement improves the academic achievement, motivation, and behavior of their children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001) while helping them to generalize and maintain skills (Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991). It improves the consistency of treatment (Bailey & Wolery, 1989) and increases parent satisfaction (Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984). Parents' involvement in their children's education is the single best predictor of school success (Henderson & Berla, 1994). So, to give your child the best chance of success, involve yourself. But to effectively involve yourself in making insightful suggestions and informed decisions, you need accurate information about your child's progress. This requires ongoing monitoring.

Inadequate Progress

Although measurable goals and short-term objectives, explicit monitoring plans, a system of daily or weekly communication, samples with explanations, and the involvement of impartial experts can increase the odds of progress, they cannot guarantee it. If, with all of these, progress is inadequate, what should you do? We suggest that you ask for an independent educational evaluation and a new IEP.

Suggestion 7: Ask for an independent educational evaluation.

IDEA-2004 provides for independent educational evaluations paid for by the school. In many ways, this sounds better than it is, so be careful. Be careful because requesting an independent educational evaluation(s) means you are asserting that the school's is inadequate. As such, the school might challenge you by initiating a formal due process hearing, meaning they are taking you to court.

Here are some of IDEA-2004's relevant regulations:

- [An] independent educational evaluation means an evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the [school].
- A parent has the right to an independent educational evaluation at public expense if the parent *disagrees* [italics added] with an evaluation obtained by the [school].

¹⁶ For a free article on respect and how to secure cooperation, go to www.ldworldwide.org and download "Securing cooperation: An essential component of the IEP" by Howard Margolis, Gary G. Brannigan, and Daniel Keating.

- [An independent evaluation] must be considered by the [school], if it meets [the school's] criteria.
- A parent is entitled to only one independent educational evaluation at public expense each time the [school] conducts an evaluation with which the parent disagrees.
- If a parent requests an independent educational evaluation at public expense, the [school] must, without unnecessary delay, either ... *file a due process complaint* [italics added] to request a hearing to show that its evaluation is appropriate; or ... ensure that an independent educational evaluation is provided at public expense, unless the [school] demonstrates in a hearing ... that the evaluation obtained by the parent did not meet [the school's] criteria (34 C.F.R. §300.502 Independent Educational Evaluation)

Suggestion 8: Request a new IEP. A primary reason for requesting reevaluations from school personnel or independent evaluators is to identify how your child's learning can be accelerated, so progress is meaningful. This purpose is clearly stated in IDEA-2004's regulations:

One of the purposes of a reevaluation is to determine the educational needs of the child, including whether any additions or modifications to the special education and related services are needed to enable the child to meet the child's IEP goals and to participate in the general education curriculum. (34 C.F.R. Parts §300 and §301, Discussion)

This information will not benefit your child, unless it is used to develop an IEP that, if implemented and monitored in knowledgeable, skilled, and conscientious ways, will likely promote meaningful progress. Thus, once you've reviewed the reevaluation reports and discussed them with the evaluators, you need to meet with the IEP Team to develop an IEP that addresses the findings and your concerns. IDEA-2004 supports this:

[School districts] must ... determine whether the annual goals for the child are being achieved; and ... revise the IEP, as appropriate, to address ... any lack of expected progress ... the results of any reevaluation. ... [The IEP Team] must consider ... the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child [and] the results of the initial or most recent evaluation of the child; and ... the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child. (34 C.F.R. §300.324 Development, Review, and Revision of IEP)

To put it another way, if the school knows your child is having difficulty meeting her IEP goals, but does not allow for a meaningful IEP meeting(s) sufficient to improve the situation, it would—by continuing a program unlikely to meet her needs—be violating a primary purpose of IDEA-2004:

To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education ... designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. (Public Law 108-446)

CONCLUSION

Your involvement in ensuring that your child's progress is frequently monitored, using valid procedures, and having the monitoring information reported to you with the frequency needed to quickly solve problems is crucial for making sure that your child makes meaningful progress. By making the effort, by making the requests, by formally letting the IEP Team know that you want ongoing updates, you can have a positive impact on your child's education. By leaving monitoring to the schools—no matter how well intentioned their teachers and staff—you are gambling, like playing the slots in Atlantic City. It's a gamble your child can't afford.

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