

CASE GUIDELINES FOR USING BENCHMARKS IN THE IEP PROCESS

PURPOSE

The concept of benchmarks was introduced to special education through the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997)** legislation. Prior to this time the term benchmarks has been used in general education in implementing local and state standards. The intent of this document is to clarify definitions and provide examples of benchmarks in general education and in special education and the relationship between the two.

INTRODUCTION: BENCHMARKS IN EDUCATION

Benchmarks in education are statements of points along the path toward learning a new skill or set of skills. They can provide a basis for tracking progress and marking achievement of identified standards or goals. Benchmarks serve as content and/or performance markers for all students relative to a particular standard or goal. Not all students, however, are expected to meet all benchmarks at the same time or in the same way.

GENERAL EDUCATION BENCHMARKS

Benchmarks in general education are broad, sometimes span more than one year, and are tied directly to the content of a subject area. They are checkpoints that may be tied to designated grade levels at which students' progress toward mastery of a standard is measured. While many school districts are states use a variety of formats, one school district's example is provided.

CURRICULUM AREA: COMMUNICATION

STANDARD: The student reads to acquire and use information for a purpose.

BENCHMARKS:

PRIMARY LEVEL

* Reads to acquire and use information to create meaning by applying appropriate strategies

UPPER ELEMENTARY

* Reads to organize and integrate information for a purpose

MIDDLE SCHOOL

* Reads to summarize and interpret information for a purpose

HIGH SCHOOL

* Reads to select, analyze, and evaluate information to meet a purpose(s)

SPECIAL EDUCATION BENCHMARKS

As specified in the IDEA 1997, "the IEP must include a statement of measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives related to meeting the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general

education curriculum, and meeting each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability...".

In special education, either benchmarks or short-term objectives may now be used to measure a student's progress toward achieving IEP annual goals. These benchmarks are generally more specific than benchmarks used in general education in state and school district standards which, in many cases, have multi-year parameters.

Language in the Appendix to the March 12, 1999 IDEA Final Regulations clarifies the definition and purpose of benchmarks in special education and differentiates benchmarks and short-term objectives. It states that "once the IEP team has developed measurable annual goals for a student, the team must develop either measurable intermediate steps (short-term objectives) or major milestones (benchmarks) that will enable parents, students and educators to monitor progress during the year". Short-term objectives are described as discrete components of the annual goal, and benchmarks describe the amount of progress the student is expected to make within specified segments of the year. An IEP team may use either short term objectives or benchmarks or a combination of the two depending on the nature of the annual goal and the needs of the child.

Key considerations in the use of benchmarks in the IEP process are:

- * Benchmarks establish expected performance levels at different points during the IEP year.
- * Benchmarks allow for regular checks of progress that coincide with the reporting periods for informing parents of their child's progress toward achieving annual goals.
- * Benchmarks reflect the direction of student progress toward meeting IEP goals.

The advantages of using benchmarks in the IEP process are:

- * help link IEPs to the general education curriculum.
- * facilitate increased communication with general educators through the use of a common language.
- * promote collaboration among all educators.
- * provide for adjustment during the year without reconvening the IEP team.
- * correlate with the IEP reporting periods for the purpose of sharing progress.
- * establish a more user friendly process for team members and parents than the short term objectives IEP teams have historically used.

The following are examples of the application of the use of benchmarks in special education:

CURRICULUM AREA: MATH

PRESENT LEVEL: The student mastered fractions operations on the fourth grade level in the math curriculum with 90% accuracy.

GOAL: The student will complete fifth grade math curriculum expectations in fractions as measured by a grade of 70 or above final mastery exam.

BENCHMARKS:

- * Adds fractions and mixed numbers with like and unlike denominators using vertical and horizontal presentations (1st progress report)
- * Subtracts fractions and mixed numbers with like and unlike denominators using vertical and horizontal presentations (2nd progress report)
- * Multiplies fractions and mixed numbers with like and unlike denominators using vertical and horizontal presentations (3rd progress report)
- * Adds, subtracts, and multiplies fractions and mixed numbers with like and unlike denominators using vertical and horizontal presentations (4th progress report)

CURRICULUM AREA: BEHAVIORAL

PRESENT LEVEL: The student expresses anger by swearing and hitting those near him. Frequency of behavior averages three to four times a day.

ANNUAL GOAL: The student will reduce his inappropriate responses to situations which make him angry. Measured over a 10-week period, it is expected that the student will average fewer than two inappropriate episodes per week.

BENCHMARKS:

- * The student will reduce the frequency of inappropriate responses to an average of two or fewer episodes per day. (1st quarter)
- * The student will reduce the frequency of inappropriate responses to an average of one or none per day. (2nd quarter)
- * The student will reduce the frequency of inappropriate responses to one or none per day. (3rd quarter)

CURRICULUM AREA: COMMUNITY-BASED TRAINING

PRESENT LEVEL: The student, age 15, has a job placement in the community but has never used the public transportation system to get to and from the work site.

ANNUAL GOAL: The student will use the public transportation system to get to and from his job placement, as measured by independently arriving at work, on time, for five consecutive days.

BENCHMARKS:

- * The student will get from school to work using public bus transportation accompanied by an adult. (1st quarter)
- * The student will ride public transportation independently but will be escorted to and picked up at the bus stop by an adult. (2nd quarter)
- * The student will independently go from school, to the bus stop, ride alone, and be met at the bus stop by an adult. (3rd quarter)
- * The student will independently get from school to the job site, using public transportation. (4th quarter)

CONCLUSION:

The option to use benchmarks in the IEP provides special educators with a mechanism to link IEP goals to the general education accountability system. The use of benchmarks facilitates communication and collaboration between general and special educators as we strive for the achievement of high standards by all students.