

IEP Goals: What the Law Actually Requires

A Reference for Parents

This resource summarizes key legal principles that govern how IEP goals must be written. It is intended to help parents understand their rights and keep IEP discussions focused on **instructional appropriateness, feasibility, and meaningful progress**.

1. IEP Goals Must Be Based on Present Levels

Federal law requires that IEP goals be based on the child's **present levels of academic achievement and functional performance**.

This means:

- Goals must start from what the child can do **right now**
- They cannot be based solely on age, grade level, or peer expectations
- They must reflect the child's individual learning profile

Legal reference:

IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(I)

34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)(1)–(2)

2. IEP Goals Are One-Year Commitments

An IEP is designed to cover a **one-year period**. Goals are not long-term aspirations or predictions of eventual potential.

Legally, annual goals must be:

- measurable
- specific
- reasonably attainable within one year

A goal that cannot realistically be achieved within a year, based on the child's current skills and documented rate of progress, does not meet the purpose of an IEP.

Legal reference:

IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(II)

34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)(2)

3. Goals Must Be Reasonably Calculated to Enable Progress

The U.S. Supreme Court has clarified that IEPs must be **reasonably calculated** to enable a child to make progress that is appropriate in light of the child's circumstances.

This requires teams to consider:

- the child's abilities
- the child's learning challenges
- the pace at which the child has historically made progress

Goals that skip foundational skills or rely on unrealistic leaps are not "reasonably calculated."

Legal reference:

Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)

4. Ability to Perform Steps Is Not the Same as Educational Benefit

Special education law focuses on **meaningful educational benefit**, not mere task completion.

A goal that teaches a child to follow steps without understanding:

- may not transfer to real-world use
- may not increase independence
- may not represent meaningful progress

Parents may reasonably question whether a goal builds understanding and functional skill, not just rote performance.

Legal reference:

Board of Education v. Rowley (1982)

Endrew F. (2017)

5. Grade-Level Standards Do Not Override Individualization

While access to grade-level standards is important, special education law requires that IEPs be **individualized**.

Alignment to grade-level standards:

- does not automatically make a goal appropriate
- does not override present levels or rate of progress
- does not justify skipping prerequisite skills

Placement and goals must be determined **individually**, not ideologically.

Legal reference:

IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d)(1)(A)

34 C.F.R. § 300.39(b)(3)

6. Parents Have the Right to Ask for Explanation and Revision

Parents are full members of the IEP team and have the right to:

- ask how a goal will be taught
- request clarification of instructional steps
- ask whether prerequisite skills are in place
- request revision of goals that are not appropriate

Parents are **not required** to agree to goals in the meeting.

Legal reference:

IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(B)

Key Takeaway for Meetings

IEP goals must be based on present levels, reasonably attainable within one year, and supported by a clear instructional pathway.

Presuming competence does not eliminate the legal requirement for appropriate instruction, realistic pacing, and individualized goals.

How Parents Use This Resource

Parents often use this document by:

- bringing it to IEP meetings as a reference
- reviewing it before meetings to feel grounded
- using it to frame questions calmly
- keeping discussions focused on law and instruction

This resource is intended to support informed, collaborative conversations.
