

IEP Short-Term Objectives and Benchmarks

Factsheet for Virginia's Parents

What Are Short-Term Objectives and Benchmarks?

Short-term objectives and benchmarks are **smaller, measurable steps** that help track your child's progress toward their annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. They break down big goals into manageable parts so parents, teachers, and students can see whether progress is being made.

- **Short-term objectives** outline the **specific skills or behaviors** a student is expected to achieve on the way to meeting the annual goal.
- **Benchmarks** are **checkpoints** that measure progress at certain times during the year.

Both terms are often used interchangeably, and they serve the same purpose: to monitor progress and adjust instruction or supports if needed.

When Are They Required?

Under the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, short-term objectives or benchmarks are required only for students who are participating in an alternate statewide assessment aligned with alternate achievement standards. In Virginia, this is called the **Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)**. Only students with significant cognitive disabilities who are not participating in the Standards of Learning (SOL) curriculum are eligible for the VAAP.

However, IEP teams can **choose to include** short-term objectives or benchmarks for **any student**, even if not required. Doing so can make it easier to track progress on complex or foundational skills, monitor growth over time, and adjust instruction or interventions more quickly.

Why Are They Important?

Short-term objectives and benchmarks:

- Help parents and teachers understand how **the student is progressing** toward a goal.
- Provide **regular checkpoints** that show whether a student is on track.
- Allow teams to **identify and respond to challenges** early.
- Offer **opportunities to celebrate small growth** build student confidence.

For students with disabilities, clear and measurable objectives **provide a roadmap for building skills** step-by-step and ensure the IEP stays focused and individualized.

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What Makes a Good Short-Term Objective

Effective short-term objectives and benchmarks should:

- **Be clearly written:** They should use simple, understandable language so that everyone on the IEP team knows what is expected.
- **Align with the student's present levels and needs:** Objectives should reflect where the student is starting from and build on skills they are ready to develop.
- **Be measurable and observable:** The objective should describe behavior or skills that can be seen or tracked, with criteria to determine whether progress has been made.
- **Connect directly to the annual goal:** Each objective should support progress toward the larger goal, breaking it into manageable steps. They shouldn't create a different type of goal.

Example:

Annual Goal: By the end of the school year, Sam will increase his reading fluency from 60 correct words per minute (cwpm) with 75% accuracy at a 2nd-grade level to 90 cwpm with 95% accuracy at a 3rd-grade level, measured using three teacher-collected reading fluency probes.

Short-Term Objective: By the end of the 2nd quarter, Sam will read a 3rd-grade-level passage at 60 cwpm with 75% accuracy in three consecutive weekly fluency checks.

Benchmark: By the end of the 3rd quarter, Sam will read a 3rd-grade-level passage aloud at 75 cwpm with 90% accuracy, documented in three consecutive weekly fluency checks.

What Can Parents Do?

- Ask if your child's IEP goals include short-term objectives or benchmarks.
- Ask if the team will add them if you feel it would help track progress more effectively.
- Ask the IEP team to explain how and when data is being collected and reviewed.
- If benchmarks are not being met, ask for an IEP team meeting to discuss what can be done.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES:

[Benchmarks or Short-Term Objectives \(Component of the IEP\) - Center for Parent Information and Resources](#)

[Understanding IEP Goals: A Guide to Short-Term Objectives in Special Education | Everyday Speech](#)

[Setting Goals in Special Education: Key Objectives](#)

[Writing Better Goals and Short Term Objectives or Benchmarks](#)

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For more information about us, please contact:

www.peatc.org | 703-923-0010 | partners@peatc.org

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