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For many years, the predominant way we provided intervention and instructional support followed a straightforward formula. We used ability grouping and, during core instruction, sent the students who needed extra support to a separate classroom. There, they worked with a specialist to pursue goals that were less rigorous or different from those in the general curriculum. And it all seemed logical. These students were working below grade level, so grade-level instruction felt inappropriate. The specialist or special education teachers were the intervention experts, so it seemed to make sense that students who needed intervention should be learning with them in a separate, dedicated classroom.

We now know that this model of “pull out and replace the curriculum” isn’t effective for the students who need supplemental instruction and intervention. This model even impedes the growth of teachers and students who do not need extra support.

The effective model for delivering supports contrasts from this segregated approach. It is inclusive, and this means so much more than the location for
support. Truly inclusive supports require classroom teachers and specialists to work as a team to embed evidence-based practices in the general education classroom. This elevates the quality of instruction that all students receive. When students with a broad range of abilities and learning profiles are all taught together, the general education teacher gains new strategies, the specialists gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum, and the students receive more comprehensive support—meaning fewer of them need supplemental instruction or intervention. This approach also promotes a school culture in which students who struggle don’t “belong” to special education or specialists; instead, all students belong to all teachers. Win, win, and win!

There’s just one catch: implementing a team-based approach to designing instruction and intervention is complex, and it’s not something that most teacher education programs have prepared educators to do.

This book presents a process that the members of interdisciplinary teams can use to select meaningful goals with students that truly provide access to the general curriculum and are gateways for a successful life. You will learn how to create support strategies to be used in every classroom and how to set up and use a scale that simplifies progress monitoring and allows all team members to easily measure student progress toward goals within the context of everyday classroom routines and activities. You will learn how to use your time as a team to make decisions based on the data you collect. You will gain the tools you need to create research-based growth plans for students—plans that will foster their success and make your job easier. Whether you are a general education teacher, special education teacher, educational leader, or related service provider, this book will provide you with practical tools to use in effectively supporting every student who has individualized or personalized goals.
Overview of the Growth Plan and the Planning Process

In her video, Disability Is Natural, Kathie Snow (2014) defines disability labels as “sociopolitical passports to services.” It’s an apt description. In the United States, a student must meet disability criteria outlined in state and federal law to qualify for special education services. Too often, students without identified disabilities cannot access the intervention and support they need.

The approach to growth planning in this book reflects my belief that all students who struggle with critical skills, regardless of diagnosed learning difference, deserve to have research-based, systematic support plans and a team that is committed to their success. Although the process of developing growth plans integrates seamlessly with a school’s existing individualized education program (IEP) and response to instruction and intervention (RTI²) structures, it can—and should—be used for every student who needs support or intervention on a critical skill, not only those who qualify for special education services. Furthermore, this process supports a personalized learning approach that can benefit every student.

The Plan’s Components and Format

The kind of growth plan we’ll discuss in this book offers more detail than what is found in an IEP and more rigor of measure than is often found in personalized learning plans. It is designed to be used by teams of educators, families, and specialists working together. The plan includes five components: (1) the annual goal, (2) the settings in which intervention is delivered and progress is measured, (3) a scale for measuring performance, (4) the intervention and support strategies the team will use, and (5) a visual representation of data showing growth over time.
This book explores the components of the growth plan in detail and provides practical examples of how these plans are assembled. It’s a process that involves asking and answering a lot of questions.

This questioning is essential. A study I conducted in 2010 showed that embedding targeted prompts within a growth planning form can yield significant improvements in the quality of the plans teams develop (Jung, 2010). These results were evidence that the form really does matter, and they started me on a six-year iterative process of developing and refining a growth planning form and online platform. Each design decision about the growth plan, from where fields appear, to the colors of the data map, to the layout of the scale for measurement, was a purposeful response to iterations of feedback from educators who were using it. Figure 1.1 shows an example of my growth plan format.

The completed growth plans in this book are illustrated with screenshots from the online platform GoalWorks® (GoalWorks.org). As a web-based platform, it includes features to support easy team communication and collaboration in real time. Although this online collaborative tool and others like it certainly add value, it’s important to stress that the growth planning process in this book does not require any special technology. It reflects best practice for designing intervention and support and measuring progress.

**The Planning Steps**

No matter the tool or form that teams use, the practice of growth planning includes the following steps (see Figure 1.2):

1. Select critical skills to target.
2. Determine the settings for intervention and measurement.
3. Outline the increments of growth in a goal attainment scale.
4. Write the annual goal.
5. Develop interdisciplinary strategies.
6. Use data from implementation to inform instructional decisions.
FIGURE 1.1 GROWTH PLAN EXAMPLE

For a reproducible growth plan, visit lajung.com.
These six steps lead teams to develop meaningful plans for student growth on critical skills. We’ll delve into the details of each step in the chapters ahead.

**Team Members and Their Roles**

The growth planning process is an interdisciplinary one—one that brings everyone’s great ideas to the table to co-create a meaningful and effective plan for growth. This process assumes all members of the team have a valuable perspective and a voice that is necessary to the process. Let’s explore the team members and their roles in the process of growth planning.

**General Educators**

As we shift student support from a specialist-driven model to a team-driven one, the role of general educators becomes especially important. General educators know the curriculum the best and can speak to the expectations for the grade level. Classroom teachers spend more time with students than any specialist, particularly at the elementary level, and they are likely to bring greater knowledge of a student’s strengths, interests, and nuances. Critically, these
educators are well positioned to describe the student’s performance in context. For students with IEPs, they can furnish richer and more meaningful information than any standardized instrument can provide. For example, a student struggling with language would be better served by a vocabulary list generated by her areas of interest and from her own writing or from her content-area teachers than by a generic one. The tailored list would focus the student on mastering the words that she needs to keep up with immediate learning, stay on track in various parts of the curriculum, and follow personal interests.

As a reminder, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) requires that every IEP meeting includes certain people: someone who represents the local education agency, a person who can interpret the eligibility evaluation, a special education teacher, family members, the student, anyone the family chooses to invite, and a general education teacher. Although just having a general education teacher in the room during the IEP meeting is enough to satisfy the letter of the law, IDEIA includes the requirement to ensure that eligible students will have access to the general curriculum. Input from general educators—those best equipped to guide the team’s conversation about the general curriculum—is essential to satisfy this requirement. Although there is no legally mandated growth planning process for students who don’t qualify for special education, the same principle applies, and the same approach makes sense for every student.

**Specialists**

Traditionally, the role of the specialists has been to drive the IEP meeting for students who have IEPs. Specialists have typically been expected to arrive at the IEP meeting having selected the skills to target and with draft goals in place. Understandably, the resulting IEPs have tended to emphasize “special education goals” and “speech goals” rather than the student’s goals. What these specialist-driven goals are often missing is the full context that will make them relevant to the student’s priorities and the targets of the general education curriculum.
The interdisciplinary approach to growth planning may change the specialists’ roles a bit, but it does not diminish it or discount their expertise. It relies on specialists’ knowledge to help diagnose the origin of students’ struggles and design the proper, research-informed support that all members of the team will provide.

Parents and Caregivers

The I in IEP stands for *individualized*, and giving students and parents a seat at the design table is an essential component to ensure that the IEP and growth plans are individualized. What are the student’s unique interests, personality characteristics, dislikes, motivators, and preferences? What skills will help the student achieve what matters to him or her? Parents and caregivers play an essential role in planning student support and intervention, whether or not the conversation takes place as part of a formal IEP meeting. Although educators may be expert in their individual discipline and have valuable information to contribute on learning differences and how learning differences manifest in the classroom, parents and family members are the top experts when it comes to their child. They complete the picture, and the information they have should be integrated with every piece of planning (Bailey, Raspa, & Fox, 2012). Including caregivers is a way to ensure the discussion will never be just a listing of scores and services, but a compassionate conversation about a specific student and the best ways to support that student’s success.

Although the family is a critical part of the planning team, they do not always know how to participate or even what their overall role in support is. Some parents find IEP or intervention meetings intimidating—as though they are on someone else’s turf and expected to speak someone else’s language. Consider, too, that some parents may have negative feelings and experiences associated with school and feel uncomfortable—unqualified even—to participate in discussions of school achievement. To school personnel, these parents’ reticence during IEP or intervention meetings can read as disengagement. But which is
more likely to be true: that these parents do not care about their children; or that they feel intimidated, believe they have little to contribute, or do not expect their input will be valued?

We must make it clear to parents or other custodial guardians that they are incredibly important members of the team and that we recognize them as the ultimate source of expertise on their children. And we must honor this arrangement by offering clear invitations and support for their participation, listening to their input, and putting it to use.

**Students**

Students should be involved in and driving the full growth planning process to the greatest extent that they are able.

Oftentimes, teams choose not to involve younger students because this would mean telling these students that they have a learning difference or that they need support to be on grade level. Although the intent is generally coming from a place of protecting the student, this decision is more often influenced by what will make the adults comfortable. It can be difficult to talk in child-friendly and positive terms about these topics.

The truth is, we are not tricking students by avoiding direct discussion of their struggles or differences. Most students know when they are behind grade level, and excluding them from discussions of what they need to work on can bring shame to their performance. Students should never feel shame about their performance! And all students should be fully aware of their strengths, the areas they need to target, and the steps being taken to support them.

Consider, too, that students have insight and opinions that can be valuable to teams working to select target skills for growth. They often know what supports or circumstances work well for them, what does not work, and what they would like to accomplish. We just have to ask them! By listening to students with sincerity, we show them the respect they deserve and identify them as the
most important member of the team. They are the ultimate consumers of the services we provide.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

As teams prepare to implement this growth planning process with students, they may have questions about how it will operate within existing intervention processes. I’d like to take some time to discuss the questions I hear the most.

**If a student qualifies for special education services, do we need to devise a growth plan in addition to the IEP?**

There are distinct advantages to doing so.

Any student can achieve below grade level and need additional support, but the students many of us think of first when we hear “intervention” are those who qualify for special education services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004). Roughly 13 percent of students in the United States receives one or more special education services (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). The embrace of inclusion means these students are spending a decreasing proportion of their school time in segregated classrooms (Data Accountability Center, 2010). Because nearly every general education classroom today includes students who qualify for special education, it makes sense for the responsibility of planning instruction and intervention for students with learning or behavior differences to reside with an interdisciplinary team of specialists and general educators working together.

All students who receive special education services under IDEIA must have an individualized education program, or IEP. The IEP documents the student’s eligibility for special education; his or her annual goals; the accommodations, modifications, and special strategies the student requires; and the support services the student will receive. Although the IEP includes a list of these supports, it seldom includes sufficient detail for everyone on the team to be able
to implement the associated strategies on a day-to-day basis. Yes, the IEP team does need to outline the specific strategies to promote consistency of the program’s implementation, but the IEP is probably not the best place for this level of detail.

IEPs are contracts that provide the broad framework for intervention. Because each is a legal document, changing it in any significant way requires a meeting and signatures from all team members. Contrast this formal process with the practical reality of the classroom, where teachers and specialists need the flexibility to choose a set of strategies, try them, and then make additional changes based on emerging student data. A supplemental growth plan that lives outside the IEP is a sensible way for team members to gain specificity on its implementation while retaining the fluidity necessary to ensure the support remains effective. In other words, the growth plan complements the IEP but serves a different purpose. Similarly, the IEP provides the broad legal framework for intervention that complements the development of a detailed and practical growth plan. In fact, the IEP process of writing goals should begin with the growth plan structure, not the other way around. One of the reasons teams struggle to implement IEP strategies and measure students’ progress is that the IEP goals are often written in isolation by specialists and then brought to the IEP meeting for approval. This leads to a very different goal from one that is developed by an interdisciplinary team following the six steps I’ve described.

For clarification, consider the two goals in Figure 1.3. Which one makes the most sense to you? Which one seems like a goal that can be measured easily in everyday classroom settings and as part of everyday classroom assignments? And which one seems like a goal that you might typically find on an IEP?

Goal A is a pretty typical IEP goal. It includes a percentage, which makes the goal seem measurable. (That percentage is 80 percent, which many think of as “mastery.” We will get to the concept of percentages later in the book.) But is it clear what exactly is being measured in this goal, and how it would be measured?
Would all of Martin’s teachers—specialists and classroom teachers—measure his progress toward Goal A in the same way? Is it even clear that this goal should be measured in general classroom settings? Would general education teachers even know how to measure it?

In contrast, Goal B provides enough clarity and specificity to support both effective planning and, critically, effective progress measurement and monitoring across disciplines and educators. Historically, states’ area of lowest compliance with IDEIA is progress monitoring (Etscheidt, 2006). Getting our goals and measurements right is essential, and Goal B’s interdisciplinary approach supports these efforts.

Should we go through this process for students who need extra support but don’t have IEPs?

As noted, students who have diagnosed learning differences are not the only students who may struggle with certain skills and benefit from support and close monitoring. Most classroom populations include great variation in knowledge
and proficiencies. Some students may be above grade level on a particular skill, and others significantly behind. Not just many but most of the students who are struggling with a critical skill do not qualify for special education services and have IEPs. Some of them may narrowly miss the criteria for eligibility; others may be experiencing temporary lags in performance. Still others may struggle as a result of interrupted formal education or inadequate instruction in previous years.

Even though some of these students may be many grade levels behind on one or more skills, their learning differences have an environmental basis, not a neurological one. Under IDEIA, adequate instruction is a necessary exclusionary criterion for classification as having a learning disability (the most common disability category) (Fletcher, 2006). In other words, the cause of the student’s underachievement must be neurological in nature and not a result of the student’s being an “instructional casualty.”

Every student who is underachieving requires systematic instruction and support, regardless of the origin of the learning difference. Each of these students can benefit from a growth plan designed by a team of educators, regardless of whether he or she qualifies for special education services. Furthermore, the process of growth planning is one that is beneficial to any student who has individualized or personalized goals. And doesn’t every student deserve personalized goals?

**Our school is already using a specific intervention program for certain skills. Is using growth plans an additional intervention program?**

The growth plans described in this book are not an intervention, per se. Nor does the growth planning process require the use of a particular curriculum or program. Instead, the growth plan is a framework that guides the development and individualization of intervention and support strategies, collection of data, and communication of progress made in response to instruction and intervention. For students with IEPs, this process bridges the gap between the IEP meeting and what happens day to day in the classroom. For students who do not have
IEPs, the growth planning process offers a systematic approach to instruction and support and is compatible with any evidence-based program or curricula.

**How many goals and growth plans should a student have?**

When teams convene to plan support for a student who is behind grade level, it can be tempting to set goals for every skill for which the student is behind. The growth planning process, however, is a deep dive into each goal. It would be difficult to design more than a few growth plans with each student. In this process, we prioritize our efforts, choose the most meaningful skills, and do an excellent job of designing and implementing support rather than try to cover every skill where the student might benefit from support and be unable to address them adequately or consistently.

So what is the right number of goals and growth plans? The answer depends on the student and on the context. For some, the answer is only one plan. Most will need two or three. Some may need five, but if you go much beyond this number, things will become difficult to manage. In the case of growth plans, more is not better; **better** is better.

**Will using this growth planning process help us minimize the challenges we currently experience when writing IEPs?**

The process described in this book is designed to help teams arrive at meaningful goals, plans for growth, and ways to measure progress. As such, it’s set up to minimize the many challenges that busy teams face when they commit to helping all students achieve and differentiating instruction within their broader planning and teaching responsibilities. Having said that, this is complex work, and it’s inevitable that challenges will arise. For each step in the growth planning process, I highlight a common challenge teams face and provide tips to prevent or respond to it.

Although it would be easy to write scenarios with fairytale endings, we all know that the real world is messy. There is a theme, though, to the prevention and successful response to each of the challenges I highlight: **an interdisciplinary focus.**
It is natural for general education teachers to think that the special education teachers have most of the intervention answers. And it is logical for the special education teachers to assume that the general education teachers know the curriculum and students the best, and, thus, that they should have most of the answers. We would all do well to remember that the parents have many answers, as do the students themselves. The best course of action is for us all to work as a team and incorporate each person’s unique and valuable knowledge into the problem-solving process. This perspective is a large part of what distinguishes the growth planning process in this book from a more traditional “specialist as expert” approach.

An additional distinction of the process described in this book is the order in which we approach IEP development. It’s an order that does, in fact, minimize some of the challenges teams normally encounter. The traditional way is to develop an IEP and then work to design specific interventions and measures. Unfortunately, this approach too often leads to goals that are not measurable and a plan that feels “owned” by the special educators and other specialists on the team, rather than owned by all. The approach in this book begins with the end in mind, as many in the field of education recommend. Team members work together to identify how to measure and how to support the student before finalizing each of the IEP’s goals.

**Student Stories**

Carmen  
Carter  
Maggie  
Danielle
In the pages ahead, I will introduce four students and use their stories to clarify the growth planning process for a variety of support and student profiles. These students and their experiences are amalgams of real students and their families, real profiles, and real challenges their support teams faced. Although these students are different in many ways, all are behind grade level on one or more critical skills and need targeted support. We’ll follow the growth planning process for each, from the initial team meeting conducted to select the critical skills to target (which, for some, will feature annual IEP goals), to the means of measuring progress and using the data collected to inform instructional decisions.

Carmen’s story will feature the most prominently. Threaded throughout the chapters, it will illustrate how to carry out each step of the growth planning process. I highlight her story because Carmen has a specific learning disability (a neurological learning difference), and specific learning disability is the most common category for which students qualify for special education services. Although the growth planning process applies widely to all students, the process for Carmen is one that almost all teachers can relate to and might embark on right away.

The appendixes provide additional examples of how teams carry out the individualized growth planning process for students at varying grade levels who need targeted support for a variety of reasons. You’ll find the stories of growth planning for Carter, a 6th grader who has cerebral palsy and a cognitive difference; for Maggie, a 9th grader who has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder; and for Danielle, a 3rd grader who struggles with decoding and reading fluency. Again, although the examples in the book focus on students who are behind grade level on a skill, the process is useful for any individualized or personalized goal. Students do not need to be behind grade level to benefit from a growth plan.
Summary

Because the growth plan provides structure for designing individualized, interdisciplinary support and measuring progress in the context of everyday classroom activities, it is a great fit for today’s inclusive schools. Creating and using a growth plan ensures every student who needs support in critical skill areas—both those who qualify for special education services and those who do not—gets that support and makes progress toward meaningful goals. An IEP and growth plans can work together as separate but complementary documents.

**Key Reminders:**

- An IEP provides the broad-brush view of goals, services, and supports.
  Growth plans bridge the gap between an IEP and what teams of educators will do on a daily basis to support the student’s development of identified critical skills.
- If a student has an IEP, growth plans should be created at the beginning of the IEP process by all members of the team, including the student’s family, so that the finalized IEP is a solid, meaningful document.
- The growth plan is designed to support all students, and for many students, it will be the impetus to prevent school failure and the need for ongoing, intensive intervention.
- Although students who need intervention and support are the feature of this book, *any* student can benefit from having a growth plan that addresses their own interest-driven goals.

In the next chapter, we will explore the first step of the growth planning process—working together as an interdisciplinary team to identify critical skills that will become the foundation of the plan.
The skills and behaviors a team selects to target form the foundation for the entire growth planning process. If we fail to focus on the goals that are the most important for the student’s long-term success, the quality of the strategies and design of the plan are of little consequence. In this chapter, we will take on the important first step of the growth planning process: seeking team consensus on the most meaningful skills for the student to master during the year.

Context Matters

In an older paradigm of student support, it was the specialists who drove the determination of priority goals. Oftentimes, these priorities reflected the results of the standardized developmental or achievement measures. These were also the measures used to determine eligibility for special education services, and they were administered by school psychologists or specialists.

At first blush, this specialist-led process of identifying critical skills makes sense. After all, each of these specialists is the expert in his or her discipline
and is the person best qualified to identify what the student needs to be able to do. And standardized instruments seem to be a sensible way to identify a student's greatest needs. However, as logical as this approach to selecting priorities seems, it misses so many factors that make each student an individual: his or her preferences, interests, motivators, classroom activities, routines, and performance relative to general curriculum standards.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) remarked that “much of contemporary developmental psychology is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time” (p. 513). He was absolutely right. The items from standardized diagnostic instruments, administered in a vacuum to students who are unique individuals, should not be the primary means of determining goals that will drive growth plans or shape IEPs. Instead, teams must take a more comprehensive look at the student—the whole child—and consider far more than test scores. The goal is to target the skills that affect that particular student’s ability to access the general curriculum and succeed in school and beyond. These are the critical skills that reach across the curriculum and across time.

Understanding the Student’s Perspective

Before identifying these critical skills and discussing support needs, it is important that the team devotes time to celebrating the student’s strengths and gaining deeper understanding of the student’s interests, dreams, and priorities. That means getting the student’s input—a 180-degree difference from setting goals based on test scores alone.

Students who are comfortable driving the IEP meeting should be invited to do so. Speaking in front of a team of adults may feel intimidating for other students, so teams will need to make decisions ahead of time about the best way to invite the student to share his or her experience. But all students must be part
of rich conversations about their experience ahead of the meeting, and we must summarize and revisit their priorities during the meeting. No growth plan or IEP is meaningful if it does not honor the strengths, voice, and priorities of the student. This process of selecting skills should always feel like something that is being done with students, not to them.

The following six questions can help guide our discussions with students:

1. How do you enjoy spending time? What do you love to do?
2. In school, what is your favorite activity or time of day?
3. What do you feel are your strengths?
4. When do you feel successful and proud of yourself?
5. What would you like to be able to do better or more easily in school?
6. What kind of help do you think has worked for you? What kind of help doesn’t work for you?

These questions are meant to provide general guidance, not a script to use with students. The questions should feel like natural, everyday conversational language, rather than an interview or protocol. Older students can also be asked about their dreams for the future and their plans after graduation. This part of the growth planning process is crucial if the plan is to truly be personalized with students and make a difference in their lives.

**Guiding Questions for Identifying the Priority Skills**

The person charged with facilitating the teaming process has the task of guiding the team to identify priorities for the growth plans. Again, the goal is not to identify every skill where a student needs support; it’s about identifying priorities.

The following three questions should shape the team’s discussion:

1. With which standards or skills expected at this grade level does the student need additional support or intervention?
2. What other critical skills or behaviors does the student need to better access the curriculum or participate more meaningfully in classroom activities and school routines?

3. Which of these skills and behaviors will have the greatest impact on the student’s success and happiness, now and in the future?

Each person on the team has a role in answering these questions.

**Academic Standards and Skills**

Inquiry into the first question can begin with inviting the perspective of general education teachers, who brief the team on what students are expected to know and be able to do for the upcoming academic year. These teachers can also clarify what mastery of grade-level expectations looks like for the student’s grade level. The discussion of standards and skills may involve review of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a, 2010b) or other standards used by the school, such as the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) or the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) (Achieve, 2013).

Specialists on the team can contribute by reviewing the student’s progress data and leading a conversation about the student’s performance on the grade-level expectations. For students who receive special education services, these data may be from the previous year’s IEP goals, or the data may be a review of the student’s recent performance in the classroom.

After the team has reviewed the student’s skills relative to academic expectations for his or her grade level, it’s time to ask which of these are critical skills. Again, the team should focus on the most important procedural knowledge for the student to master rather than on content knowledge that is isolated to a particular subject area at that grade level. For example, although the 6th grade social studies curriculum may include the topic of westward expansion, and a
6th grade student may need support to demonstrate competency with this topic, this is not something we would choose as a priority for a growth plan. As noted previously, critical skills are those that have an impact that reaches across subject areas and across grade levels. In this example, the critical skills team members might identify would be the ability to study events of the past and analyze problems; to apply knowledge to novel problems; or to take a position on a topic, develop a logical argument and rationale, and support the case with evidence.

When everyone on the team is involved in the conversation, complex patterns of skills and behaviors begin to emerge. Students may experience “motivation” or “engagement” differently with different people or in different contexts. Consequently, a student’s behavior or skill expression can look different to different people, at different times of the day, or in different settings. The student’s family, for example, might contribute insight into conditions or times of day during which the student finds it easier or more difficult to concentrate. Understanding a student’s present level of performance as well as how the skill or behavior looks within general curriculum and home contexts is necessary to select goals that are meaningful.

**Other Skills and Behaviors**

Not every skill that students need can be found within the general curriculum standards. There are many skills and behaviors that students need to participate meaningfully in school routines, gain access to the general curriculum and learn, and have successful, happy lives. For example, students must be able to remain engaged with the curriculum and activities; communicate and collaborate with other students and adults; and organize their space, time, and materials throughout the day.

Skills in these areas can greatly affect a student’s success, but frequently, even though parents or teachers may notice the student’s struggle, these skills and
behaviors do not make it onto a growth plan or IEP. Sometimes this is because the difficulty the student has is viewed as an inherent and unchangeable quality rather than a challenge that can be addressed through evidence-based support. Most of us have heard comments like “She is a student who has difficulty managing her time” or “He is a student who is always late with assignments.”

But prerequisite skills and behaviors can, of course, be taught, and they are often as important to a student’s success as mastery of any academic standard. Sometimes they are more important. As such, teaching these skills is a school’s responsibility, and targeting them for growth is both sensible and correct.

### The Number of Goals

There is no correct number of goals for growth planning or IEPs, but it is generally understood that adding more goals does not equal better outcomes for students. Instead, teams should select a reasonable number of goals that they agree are the most fundamental to the student’s success across time. As schools begin the process of implementation, they may decide to begin with the achievable step of creating just one growth plan with each student.

### A Common Challenge: Team Members Calling for Too Many Goals

Sometimes you’ll find that team members want to continue adding goals to the IEP in order to be comprehensive. When parents advocate for additional goals, often it is because the IEP does not include goals for all of the student’s needs. Although it may seem the right choice to try to create a comprehensive list of goals, the longer the list of goals, the more difficulty the team will have managing the implementation of strategies and coordination of data collection. Remember, this process is about intentional selection of skills to target. The student will still participate in the full curriculum.

*continued*
To Prevent or Respond to the Challenge:

• Remind the team ahead of time that the objective is to create interdisciplinary goals, not a set of discipline-specific goals to bring to the IEP meeting and then combine into an IEP. The interdisciplinary goals reflect the skills needed in general education settings.

• Reassure the family that the student will be supported in every curricular area. It may be that the parent has a specific priority in mind; families have the ability to see the “full picture” of their child, and their input must be valued. Often, though, the best response is to have the general education teacher explain how special skills that the parent is concerned about are taught and detail what plans are in place to provide all students with the appropriate differentiated instruction and support.

CARMEN’S STORY

Carmen is a 10th grade student in a suburban school district who qualifies for special education under the category of specific learning disability. Carmen also has been identified as gifted. She was first referred for special education services in 2nd grade, when her family and teacher became concerned about her reading fluency and comprehension.

Although Carmen’s rate of reading continues to be a bit slower than her peers, she is now reading text at and above grade level with high-level comprehension skills. When presenting her thoughts verbally, she performs at or above grade level in all subject areas, but writing remains an area of need. Although Carmen’s writing expresses thoughts with maturity, and the individual sentences she writes are frequently clear, she has difficulty organizing her thoughts into paragraphs and producing whole papers that are clear and cohesive. She is
also working to improve her skills in the conventions of writing; spelling, punctuation, and grammar are all a struggle for her. Carmen receives intervention targeting her writing within the general education classroom and in a learning support classroom for one hour each week.

The Team Meeting

Because Carmen has a diagnosis that makes her eligible for special education, her planning meeting was a formal IEP meeting. Both of her parents, her general education language arts teacher, her special education teacher, a special education facilitator, and Carmen were at the meeting.

In the meeting, Carmen’s facilitator guided the planning conversation from a discussion of Carmen’s current strengths and areas where she needed support to the selection priorities for her success in the general curriculum. All team members were a critical part of the conversation. The general and special education teachers presented data and work samples of Carmen’s current writing skills. And Carmen’s parents shared their observations, joys, and concerns. This collaborative conversation generated a set of critical skills that have real meaning to Carmen and will play a real role in both her immediate and future success.

After welcoming everyone, the special education facilitator, Kay, kicked off the conversation by asking Carmen’s parents how they thought everything was going this year. Carmen’s mom, Claire, explained that she was thrilled with Carmen’s reading progress. “It’s been such a delight to watch Carmen finally take off with reading,” she said. “Carmen, tell everyone about some of your favorite books.”

Carmen, who had developed an interest in nonfiction texts about historical female leaders, told the team, “I just finished a book about Rosa Parks that was so inspiring. I love reading about strong women in history and the impact they’ve
had on our world.” Everyone smiled at Carmen’s enthusiasm. She’d really come into her own this year, exhibiting strong opinions and a new level of maturity.

Kay asked Carmen’s special education teacher, Liz, to discuss Carmen’s progress in literacy skills. Liz showed graphs of data and work samples, saying, “You can see how Carmen exceeded her goal from last year. She is now on grade level in reading comprehension!” Everyone agreed that the progress had been remarkable, and Carmen’s parents were delighted to hear that she was finally on grade level in this area.

Her teachers, Liz and Masha, went on to describe Carmen’s improved reading fluency, explaining that her pace had improved so much that Carmen was now comfortable reading for pleasure. Carmen beamed at the description of her effort and accomplishment. Kay turned to Carmen and asked, “You really enjoy reading now, don’t you?” “Yes,” Carmen replied with a smile.

Kay then asked the team to discuss the grade-level standards for 10th grade for which Carmen would require support. They focused on Carmen’s writing skills. Her language arts teacher, Masha, began the discussion by sharing two pieces of Carmen’s writing. She showed the group the graded papers’ feedback and pointed out how, in both lengthy texts, the number of errors Carmen made in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling increased dramatically after the first few paragraphs. Carmen’s dad, Jeremy, nodded and said, “I’m usually the one to help with that homework if she needs it, and I’ve noticed the same problem with errors in her social studies work.” Special education teacher Liz added, “This seems to be what happens on all work that requires multiple paragraphs. For students like Carmen, who both have a learning difference and are gifted, it can be difficult to do the heavy thinking necessary to really engage in the task of expressing complex concepts and at the same time remember punctuation and spelling.”

Here, Carmen interjected, “I know it should be easy to remember commas and periods, but for me, it’s way harder to remember that stuff than it is to write
a good paper. Grammar rules and spelling and stuff like that are so boring, too,”
she admitted, with a half-smile. Everyone laughed and agreed with her that it
wasn’t the most interesting skill to learn, but it was necessary to communicate
her thoughts in a way that makes them easy for others to understand.

Next, Masha turned to the language arts skill of organization and clarity of
writing: “I think we are ready to target skills that will help Carmen organize her
writing. I’d really like to see her use a clear topic sentence, include lots of rich
supporting detail for each paragraph, and organize it all clearly into a paper
with headings.” Again, sharing examples of Carmen's writing, Liz pointed out
Carmen's pattern of moving abruptly from topic to topic without fully devel-
oping any of the details. To Carmen, she said, “When I give you the chance
to talk aloud about your topic, you knock it out of the park! You express well-
developed thoughts that are organized and supported by many rich details.”
The challenge, Liz added, was to transfer this skill into the realm of writing. She
explained that she had ideas for teaching this skill and could work together with
the language arts teacher and other general education teachers to support Car-
men in this area.

After confirming with the team, including Carmen, that there were no other
academic skill areas where she needed support, Kay asked them to consider
other skills Carmen might need to support her success in the areas they’d iden-
tified. Carmen’s dad, Jeremy, shared, “I’m worried that Carmen always has a lot
of late or missing assignments.” Carmen’s mom, Claire, agreed, saying, “I know
she wants to remember her homework, but she forgets to use the agenda and
can’t seem to get her work done on time.” Carmen agreed, too. “Sometimes I do
the homework but forget to take it back to school. Sometimes I even get it to
school but forget to turn it in! I don’t know why I can’t remember,” she added. “I
think it’s because I get totally involved in what I’m doing and forget about things
that aren’t related to that.”
Masha said, “I usually tell the class as a group at the beginning of the class to turn in any homework assignments, but Carmen sometimes doesn’t turn one in. I wasn’t sure if you hadn’t completed the assignment, Carmen, or if you had but still weren’t looking for it. This helps me understand so much better. Let’s figure out a way to help you remember.”

Claire and Jeremy provided context and filled in some details. Carmen had a hard time remembering lots of things at home and a hard time keeping up with her things. Jeremy said, “I don’t know if you all know this, but Carmen carries all of her textbooks in a backpack at school because she doesn’t want to use the locker. She is afraid she’ll forget something or forget the combination.” Carmen looked embarrassed and didn’t say anything. Her mother asked, “Is the forgetfulness related to her learning difference, or is this just something that happens with some teenagers?” Liz explained that many students with neurologically based learning differences have difficulty remembering to do things and keeping up with their materials—it is related to executive function, which many teenagers are still developing. “I can give you more information on executive function,” Liz said to Carmen and her family, who agreed that they would like to learn more.

The team concluded this part of the IEP meeting—and growth planning process—by drafting the critical skills outlined in Figure 2.1.

**FIGURE 2.1 CRITICAL SKILLS IDENTIFIED FOR CARMEN**

1. Using correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling throughout a multiple-paragraph paper.
2. Presenting a topic clearly in writing, using multiple supporting paragraphs, each with a topic sentence, supporting details, descriptive language, and headings.
3. Timely completion and submission of homework assignments.
Summary

This chapter outlined the process for identifying critical skills as a team—the first step of the planning process and the step that guides its overall direction. The collaborative dialogue at the center of this step is necessary to ensure that growth plans improve students’ outcomes.

Key Reminders:

- The planning process should begin with a discussion with the student about his or her strengths, dreams, priorities, and needs. The student’s voice should be clear and present throughout the process.
- In the planning process, teams should target skills that will impact a student’s success in multiple areas of the curriculum and in the future. These are the critical skills.
- General education teachers must play a leading role in determining the critical skills teams select.
- Parents and families are the experts on their children. They have much of the information that is needed to truly individualize a student’s plans.
- If a student is missing skills or behaviors that are needed for school success, even if these are not a part of the academic standards for the grade, the team must consider them critical skills that are as or more important than the academic standards.
- By prioritizing, the team can concentrate instruction and intervention efforts and measurement of progress on the skills that are most fundamental to the student’s success.
In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the critical skills identified and consider the settings in which the team will deliver intervention and measure progress, focusing on connecting skills to the general curriculum and providing the appropriate support across contexts.
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Related Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses):

**PD Online® Courses**
Inclusion: The Basics, 2nd Edition (#PD11OC121M)
Inclusion: Implementing Strategies, 2nd Edition (#PD11OC122M)

**Print Products**
*A Teacher’s Guide to Special Education* by David Bateman and Jenifer L. Cline (#116019)
*Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs: How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom* by Toby Karten (#117023)
*Causes & Cures in the Classroom: Getting to the Root of Academic and Behavior Problems* by Margaret Searle (#113019)
*Enhancing RTI: How to Ensure Success with Effective Classroom Instruction and Intervention* by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (#111037)
*Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most* by Jeffrey Benson (#114013)
*Inclusion Dos, Don’ts, and Do Betters* (Quick Reference Guide) by Toby J. Karten (#QRG116082)
*Leading an Inclusive School: Access and Success for ALL Students* by Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand (#116022)
*Success with IEPs: Solving Five Common Implementation Challenges in the Classroom* (ASCD Arias) by Vicki Caruana (#SF117047)
*Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom* by Joan Blednik and Gloria Lodata Wilson (#110029)

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