Welcome to Framework and Formula for Writing Meaningful IEP's. This is the first module on IEP worthy outcomes, and in particular, we're on the first of four lessons under this module of IEP Worthiness. In the first module, we're going to talk about Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance, otherwise known as a PLAAFP. It used to be a PLOP, so if you think PLAAFP is bad, PLOP wasn't much better. But, let's talk about present levels...and I'll just use that phrase, ‘present levels’, as short hand for Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance. Before you get like, "Oh, already too much lingo, too much jargon", let's just think about what we're really talking about.

For me, I'm using these four images to really depict what we mean by a present level. It's something that is really talking about coming from a place of strength. That's why we have this oak tree. You might be
thinking, "Wait, we're supposed to be identifying needs, and these are kids with disabilities. Why are we talking about strengths?" We're always going to talk from a baseline perspective, which is the other image of the graph or data, and this is the baseline. Baseline always includes what is currently going on. Part of where we build and promote growth and development is always reaching for the zone of proximal development. We can't do that, we can't reach that correct zone, we can't sort of hit the sweet spot, unless we know where kids are currently, and that includes their strengths. We're both strength-based (so we have this big strong oak tree) and we're data-based, so we have this idea of getting baseline data that tells me exactly who, what, when, where, how often, how well, how much support- all that good stuff.

We're also really specific. This might mean making our present levels longer than maybe our IEP software likes, or the form, or even some of our team members. But it really takes being specific. That means including examples, unpacking and defining all of the jargon that we use. We really want to be on target and think about being really specific about what's going on for this particular child or student.

It's also a map. It's this sort of link, or guide, or sort of to me, it's the connective tissue. Everything in the IEP centers around the present level. No matter how well you write goals; no matter how well you do
inclusive services; no matter how well you're able to provide accommodations- none of that matters if you don't have a strong roadmap. You have to have a guide of where we are, where we're going, and how long do we think it'll take to get there, and what's the best way, what's the best route, what are the barriers we're likely to run into, and how can we avoid them? We really want to have this map that is going to allow us to be guided in every subsequent decision that's made. We're strength-based, we're data-based, we're really specific, and we have the present level serving as a guide.

This means that it's comprehensive, it's thorough, it's going to be based on kids’ needs, sure. And it's super detailed. Let me give you kind of a quick glimpse at what all of those synonyms kind of look like, right? Let's say you have a child who has some social-emotional needs (and increasingly this is all of us). Once the team has decided that these needs are a result of the child's disability, or having an adverse affect, or something that would require specially-designed instruction, and is something that we can achieve this year...we start to unpack that. Well, we can't just say, "The child will improve social, emotional, health, and well-being." Sure, that's the dream, the vision. But we have to really dig deeper. As we're trying to get more targeted, as we're trying to get more specific, we're still being holistic. I know that sounds like both sides of the mouth, right? It's another one of those paradoxes that we're trying to be both comprehensive and specific at the same time.
Comprehensive meaning what part of social-emotional? Is it self-regulation, is it impulse control, is it about attention, is it about interacting with others, is it about responding to stressors and sensory needs, is it all of the above? We're really digging and peeling back what do we mean by social-emotional. Then we get specific, and we start writing about, and talking about, what the child is currently doing in terms of each of these layers of need. There's this big need of social-emotional, but each layer- self-regulation, unpack, unpack, relationships, social communication, impulse control- If we don't understand and define these words, and then begin to describe a child's performance in relation to these layers, we won't have an accurate guide in the end.

What's the formula for success? How do we write a good present level? Well actually, there's lots of good examples out and about. You can Google it, anything that Barbara Bateman writes about is really helpful. You might even just turn to your own state, or district, or agency to kind of see if they've put some models out. I'm going to give you more of a guide or a formula. We'll look at one example quickly, but really, it's so hard because writing IEP's is an art and a science, and writing present levels is also an art and a science. Some things in your formula, some things you might always want to include. In lesson one of module one, I've included a checklist that you can download and have right
beside you as you and your team members are developing present levels. Just sort of a checklist—really it's a set of guiding questions to consider.

A checklist seems like you have to have it or it's wrong. Again, that art and science isn't quite that easy. It's really up to the team to make the case, including the child's name, their age or their grade, and starting off. Remember, we're talking about strengths. What are they able to do, what do they enjoy, what does it look like in a daily routine as it's related to this identified need? You can also talk about what the child currently doesn't do, or has difficulty doing. It could be a list of things, but it's really describing how their day, how their interaction, how their participation in an event or routine looks. You're going to tell a story, you're going to talk about what's not going well.

You can also talk about something about what they can do, or what they do engage in with supports, or with needs, or in a certain way. If it's hard for you to list what they don't do, or what they have difficulty with, and you're still kind of wanting to be strength-based, here's where you can describe what they can do, what they can complete, what they can engage in. But the types of supports and the types of needs that they require, again, you're starting to build your case for what you're going to write as IEP goals, what kind of supports and
services you're going to offer, and what kind of accommodations and modifications may be needed.

You can also describe what's kind of getting in the way. Even though we talk about what the child or the student can't do, this is so important. We've got to say, "So what? Why is that important? So they don't know how to name letters, what's getting in their way of accessing, participating, and making progress?" You also want to be able to describe, again, that baseline. What's happening currently. This is where you can use words, you can use numbers, so it can be quantitative or qualitative.

Measurable just means I need to be able to observe it, and I can see change, or a difference over time. When is this happening, where, how often, in what way, or under what conditions? With what types of supports, for how long, with how many errors? It could go on and on. In another lesson, we'll talk more about how to really think about measurable criteria. It gets started not with just more writing IEP goals, but back in the present level. That when we're writing that baseline, we have to have measurable criteria here as well.

It can also describe how all of this is affecting the student's access, participation, and progress in the general curriculum, and as appropriate, activities for preschoolers. Again, I'm just asking you to go
back, even after you've listed the things, and kind of alluded to how this is sort of a disruption, or an issue, or a concern, or a need. But have you built the case? I'm saying it to you again. So what, why, what is the impact, how does this affect access, participation, and progress? Then, often times, the last part of the formula is to sort of couch this in what we would expect from typically developing peers, or at a particular age, or at a particular grade. We expect a child to be able to do X, Y, and Z. You're just kind of couching it in terms of known human development.

Be careful here because there may be expectations set forth by a district, or an agency, or even a state that aren't developmentally appropriate. Just because a state may require a child to do X, Y, or Z, if you know that is not developmentally appropriate, or in the case of this child, it's not really something we should expect yet, then it doesn't automatically make it IEP worthy.

Here's an example: you're going to want to pause the video and just sort of take a second and read this statement. Is it everything that we just talked about in terms of the formula? Well, pieces and parts. Not bad. You'll see that we've really been strength-based, you've got a clear description of what the child's currently doing in terms of letter identification, but there's something really important that's missing. Pause the recording, read the paragraph, and then come back and see
if you can say out loud to your friends- if you're doing this with other colleagues- what is missing.

What's also interesting, so did you find it? Let's see, right? I'm not going to tell you the secret, I'm going to ask you to do your activity at the end of this lesson to get a little bit more practice, but it should be clear now that there's something important missing. One of the things you might have hypothesized is what I just finished talking about in terms of what's developmentally appropriate. Some of you might have said, "Hey, should kids know 20 uppercase, and 20 lowercase?" That's not quite it. That is an issue, but it's not what's important that's actually missing from this present level. You might need to pause it again, go back through the formula for success. Download the handout with the guiding questions for lesson one, and see if you can find it.

As a side note, this 20 uppercase and 20 lowercase, depending on whose state standards you're looking at, which agency standards, how old the child is in terms of did they just turn five, have they had any previous preschool experience? All of these things matter. There's very little research to show how many upper and lowercase letters are really predictive of later success in reading. There was an article by Piasta and Colleagues in 2012\textsuperscript{2} that showed that there should be 18 uppercase, and 15 lowercase. Already you could suggest that if this child were five and just entering kindergarten, that they may or may not, should be able to
do 20 and 20. That's just a little side note. Again, make sure you've paused long enough to read this statement and compare it with the formula for success, as well as lesson one of module one's guiding questions to see if you can figure out what's missing.

The other activity that is contained in lesson one of module one is an opportunity to read kind of shorter, present level statements. You're going to decide are they good, are they bad, are they both? I'm using sort of this red, green card analogy. If you were a referee you would hold up a green card, or you would hold up a red card. This might just be something that you do on your own to practice, and/or it might be something that you do with colleagues, or if you're offering professional development, an activity you might do with participants. Just to see if you can get agreement on what's a good present level statement, what's not so good, and where is this sort of grayness where some people are like, "Eh, it's sort of ... It's not bad." You might be surprised about the art and science kind of rearing its head as you work your way through that activity.

How do we get there? Meaning, how do we get to the gold standard? How do we get to the good quality present level? Well, in a nutshell, we sit beside and get to know children. The heart of a good present level stems from engaging in authentic assessment, where we have familiar people, in familiar settings, with familiar objects, doing familiar things.
with a child. If you have not engaged in authentic assessment, if you have not sat beside to get to know a child, it's going to be really hard to write a good present level, and then we know our present level is our guide. Without ... Trace it backwards, right? Without the guide, we're not going to be able to write IEP goals, determine supports and services, and we only get to a good guide through authentic assessment.

We also have this little thing that we call, "Data-driven decision-making." Some people are able to do authentic assessment in terms of observing, and good interviews, and they document it, and they do a play-based arena assessment, and they summarize it, and they're very strength-based, and it's all holistic. But then we jump straight to, "Okay, what should be your IEP goals?" We don't land at this step four and say, "Oh, what are the patterns and trends I'm seeing?" I've got to examine or analyze the data before I can interpret, and make sense of the data. To begin to write a present level as my interpretation. How do I really analyze my data?

You're looking for patterns. Patterns are these reoccurring things. We're going to offer up six different patterns. Patterns of strength, patterns of unexpected performance, patterns of quality of actions, patterns of need for assistance, interfering behaviors, and time to action. If you want to learn more about these, you might be wanting to take one of
my deep dive courses on writing IEP's where we're going to go deeper into this data-driven decision-making model, deeper into analyzing, and then deeper into these six patterns or trends.

For now, a place you can begin. This is called the, "Can-Do Planning strategy." It's one of our handouts for module one, lesson one³. It's just very quickly, it's a way that a team can begin the conversation, to begin to analyze their data without having to go to too much effort, and much time. You can set a time limit, and each quadrant is a certain amount of time. You say, "What is the child currently doing? Hey, that sounds like something we just talked about in terms of their baseline." Yep, this is sort of a verbal way to start fleshing out the present level.

What does the team want to see the child doing? Great, this starts getting at what are expectations. Are they developmentally appropriate? Have we peeled back social-emotional well enough? People can't just say, "I want them to be regulated." What does that mean? What does it look like for a five-year-old to be regulated? What are the possible solutions? This is a fabulous place to go, "Hey, maybe we should adjust our expectations." Or, "Maybe we should do some class-wide interventions before we think about whether this is really something that is worthy of an IEP." Then really what are our priorities? Do we understand what is the common trajectory? Do we understand when we look at all of the child's needs, where should we put our
energy? There might be a lot of stuff going on, so where should we begin to prioritize?

This Can-Do-Planning strategy is just one way that a team can begin to get to that gold standard of a present level, not worry about the formula for success, not worry about if they've got everything in the right grammatically correct flow, but really have a conversation that allows them to take their authentic assessment information, and walk through a data-driven decision-making process where they actually analyze the data. So they're taking all that rich information, and answering what is the child doing, what does the team want to see the child doing, what are possible solutions, and what are our priorities?

That is lesson one of module one. The next one, that will be lesson two of module one, is all about what we call, "four filters." How do we start to really determine what becomes an IEP goal? What's worthy of, from this present level, moving into writing an IEP goal.

References
1. To review publication titles from Dr. Barbara Bateman, see: http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n88622603/
3. Can Do Planning Printable. Available at: https://prekteachandplay.com/shop/can-do-planning-printable/

Transcript: Module 1 Lesson 1
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