

What Is the Learning Goal—Really?

A Practical Resource Guide for Writing IEP Goals That Support Learning (Not Compliance)

WHY THIS RESOURCE EXISTS

Too many IEP goals are written around tolerating discomfort, complying with adult demands, or completing tasks that adults themselves would avoid. When this happens, the focus shifts away from learning and toward endurance.

This guide exists to help educators and administrators pause, refocus, and write IEP goals that truly support access to learning—without lowering expectations or increasing conflict.

A GROUNDING PRINCIPLE

IEPs are not designed to teach students to endure school.

They are designed to support access to learning.

If a goal can only be met through discomfort, compliance, or suppression of needs, it is not a learning goal.

HOW GOALS DRIFT AWAY FROM LEARNING

IEP goals often unintentionally shift from learning to compliance.

| GOAL SOUNDS LIKE | BUT IS REALLY ABOUT |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Completing tasks | Endurance |
| Staying on task | Adult control |
| Tolerating demands | Suppression |
| Following directions | Obedience |
| Reducing refusal | Silence |

THE “WHAT IS THE LEARNING GOAL—REALLY?” FRAMEWORK

Before finalizing any IEP goal, walk it through this four-step process.

STEP 1: NAME THE SURFACE GOAL (WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE ON PAPER)

Ask: If I read this goal quickly, what would it sound like the student is being asked to do?

This step is not about identifying the learning yet. It’s about naming the visible expectation—the thing adults are trying to control, reduce, or increase.

Surface goals usually focus on:

- what the student is expected to do
- how long they must endure
- how little support they should need
- how much they should comply

These goals often sound reasonable but are actually placeholders for something else.

Examples of surface goals:

- Completing unpreferred tasks
- Staying engaged during instruction
- Participating without refusal
- Remaining seated
- Following directions independently

At this step, you’re simply naming:

What does this goal appear to be about at first glance?

You’re identifying it—so you can examine it honestly in Steps 2–4.

STEP 2: REMOVE THE TASK

Ask: If the task changed, would the goal still make sense?

If the answer is no, the goal is about task compliance—not learning.

Ask: What skill would support this student across tasks, settings, and years?

Common underlying learning goals include:

- expressing ideas
- accessing instruction
- organizing thoughts
- problem-solving
- self-advocacy
- regulation with support
- using tools and accommodations effectively

STEP 4: REBUILD THE GOAL AROUND ACCESS

Rewrite the goal so it focuses on how the student accesses learning, not how they comply with a specific task.

GOAL EXAMPLES: BEFORE AND AFTER

Before:

Student will complete non-preferred academic tasks for 15 minutes with no more than two prompts.

After:

Student will engage in academic tasks using appropriate supports, choices, and flexible formats to increase participation and understanding.

Before:

Student will reduce refusal behaviors and complete assigned work during independent work time.

After:

Student will use self-advocacy strategies (e.g., requesting support, breaks, or alternative formats) to access and complete independent learning tasks.

Before:

Student will stay on task during whole-group instruction.

After:

Student will access instruction through multiple participation options, including movement, tools, peer collaboration, or alternative response formats.

Before:

Student will follow adult directions within 30 seconds with no more than one prompt.

After:

Student will demonstrate understanding of instructional expectations by using visual supports, clarification questions, or modeled examples to begin tasks.

RED FLAGS VS. GREEN FLAGS IN IEP LANGUAGE

| RED FLAG LANGUAGE |
|-----------------------------|
| will tolerate |
| will complete non-preferred |
| will remain on task |
| will comply with directions |

| GREEN FLAG LANGUAGE |
|----------------------------------------|
| will access |
| will engage using |
| will demonstrate understanding through |
| will use supports to participate |

THE ADULT REALITY CHECK

Before finalizing a goal, ask: If this were an adult's job, what would be changed before blaming the person?

Adults:

- redesign tasks
- use tools and technology
- add flexibility
- choose when and how work is completed
- advocate for accommodations

If a goal would be unreasonable for an adult, it is unreasonable for a student.

SUPPORT THE TASK BEFORE CHANGING THE STUDENT

Before writing a goal about behavior, consider whether learning could be supported through:

- meaningful choice
- shortened or chunked tasks
- interest-based entry points
- alternative ways to respond
- movement or sensory supports
- flexible timing
- peer collaboration
- technology tools

Support the task before changing the student.