



STRENGTH-BASED IEP

A strengths-based IEP is...

- ✓ An approach that leverages a student's abilities to help work on weaknesses.
- ✓ A way to combine standards-based IEPs with a growth mindset that helps students believe they can improve their abilities.
- ✓ A process that can lead to more self-awareness and self-advocacy.

A strengths-based IEP is not...

- ❖ A superficial look at strengths. Abilities are thoughtfully woven into IEP goals.
- ❖ An adults-only process. Students are encouraged to help identify strengths and actively participate in IEP meetings.
- ❖ Just about strengths and weaknesses. It also focuses on interests and preferences.

This new kind of IEP reframes how IEP teams talk about—and use—strengths

Too often, IEP teams discuss a student's strengths by saying things like "What I like about this student is...." These comments can be hard to connect to the rest of the IEP in actionable ways. But IEP teams can reframe the strengths discussion so it focuses on abilities: "What does the student do well?"

For example, for students who struggle in math, what do they do well in that subject? Are they good at using a calculator? Do they prefer to work independently or in groups? Strengths-based IEPs aim to start with a strength for each of the skill sets described in the student's present level of performance.

Let's Take a Look

The overarching focus of the first statement, is on the label and resulting limitations, while the second provides a more holistic and strength-based portrait of Franklin.

1. Franklin is a second-grade student who has labels of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and an intellectual disability. Franklin often has difficulty staying on task and focused. He also has a hard time comprehending and recalling material. Currently, Franklin is on grade level for math, but is well below grade level in reading. Specifically, Franklin has a hard time comprehending and recalling information read from a text. Because of these difficulties, Franklin is often unable to recall information from both independent reading books and books read aloud.

2. Franklin is a friendly young boy who enjoys trains and tall buildings. Franklin is timid in new situations but warms up to people quickly. He is a hard-working second grade student who enjoys attending school, working with his teachers, and developing relationships with peers. He enjoys

and excels in math. During math instruction, he likes to use manipulatives when working to solve a given problem. Currently, Franklin is working at mastering double-digit addition problems. When given 10 double-digit addition problems, Franklin gets an average of six correct. However, when given assistance, such as the teacher drawing a line between the two-digit number, Franklin is able to solve them correctly most of the time, as long as there are no carryovers. Franklin has labels of intellectual disability and ADHD that affect him academically because it is more difficult for him to comprehend and remember material, and his label of ADHD makes it harder for him to stay on task and focus for the duration of a lesson. These challenges are often evident during reading instruction. Specifically, he often has difficulty recalling information from both independent reading books at the first-grade level. For example, when prompted by saying, "Did _____ happen in the story?" Franklin often guesses, it is unclear if he comprehended what occurred in the story. However, when Franklin is given a graphic organizer to write down key aspects of the story and a peer buddy, he is able to more easily recall and pull out relevant textual information. Further, when these supports are paired with a text of his choice, he is able to pull out key events and details of the text with little adult assistance and he is able to recall information from the text more consistently.

Adapted from <https://www.understood.org> & Elder, B. C., Rood, C.E., & Damiani, M.L. (TBD). Writing strength-based IEPs for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 14(1), 116-153.