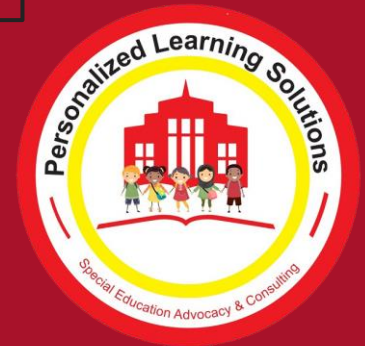


How to Create Strength-Based IEPs

Presented By: Shemica S. Allen



Shemica S. Allen



- Shemica S. Allen is the founder of Personalized Learning Solutions, LLC.
- Former educator with 15 years of teaching and administration experience working with students/individuals with disabilities and their parents/guardians.
- Received a Bachelor of Science in Education from the University of Arkansas in 1999 and a Master of Science in Kinesiology with a specialization in Adapted Physical Activity in 2005 from Texas Christian University.
- Has extensive training in facilitating Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD)/IEP committee meetings.
- Named to the Special Education Continuing Advisory Committee (SECAC) for Texas in December 2017 to help make decisions to improve Special Education in the state.
- Special Education Advocate Training (SEAT) Instructor/Teaching Assistant for SEAT 1.0 & 2.0 Class for Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA)
- National Allies for Parents in Special Education (NAPSE) Advocate Committee Co-Chair.

Presentation Objectives:

- Participants will learn the basics of the strength-based IEP approach.
- Participants will learn techniques for incorporating strength-based planning into the IEP process.
- Participants will learn how to apply the strength-based and person-centered planning approaches to writing a present levels.
- Participants will learn the basics of SMART goals and how to use information from the present levels to write IEP goals & objectives.



We believe that adopting strength-based IEP writing practices is vital to reconstructing students with disabilities as capable contributors to their inclusive classrooms (Weishaar, 2010).



Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The IEP serves as a blueprint for the child's special education needs and any related services. The IEP team consists of the parent(s), the student (if appropriate), at least one of the child's regular classroom education teachers, at least one of the child's special education teachers, and a qualified representative of the public agency (United States Department of Education, 2017, p. 1).



Development of
high-quality
educational
programming for
students with
disabilities

MORE



Implementation of
high-quality
educational
programming for
students with
disabilities

MORE



Ensure access to
FAPE and improve
outcomes for
students with
disabilities

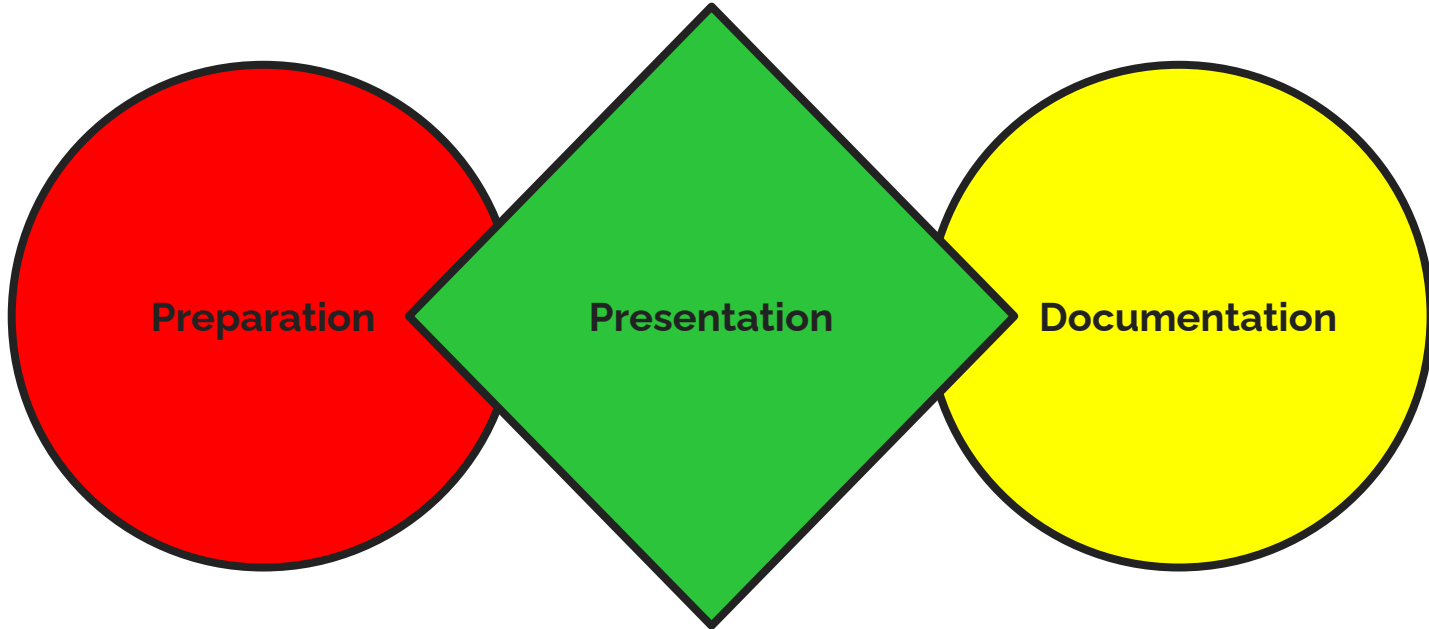
Basics of Strength-Based IEPs

- An approach & mindset that uses a student's abilities to help work on weaknesses as well as utilizing a student's strengths.
- Includes strengths, weaknesses, interests & preferences.
- Is not a superficial look at strengths. Strengths & abilities are thoughtfully integrated into IEP goals & objectives.
- Is ***not an adults-only process***. Students are encouraged to help identify strengths & actively participate in IEP meetings.
- A process that can lead to more self-awareness & self-advocacy for students.



Processes that promote and ensure meaningful collaboration between professionals and families are a key aspect of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Department of Education, 2004). Using information gathered from a variety of stakeholders, including families, to write IEPs offers a more holistic portrait of who the child is because it provides opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop between schools and families, as well as natural and salient opportunities for knowledge sharing (Elder, 2018).

Ways to Incorporate Strength-Based Planning into the IEP Process



The process helps build a trusting relationship between the school & parents.

Ways to Incorporate Strength-based Planning into the IEP Process

- **Preparation** involves preparing all IEP committee participants, especially parents for the meeting.
 - Bring information about your child's strengths, preferences, likes & dislikes to the meeting. This can be done in the form of a Vision Statement shared with the committee and included as part of the present levels.
 - Before the meeting relay any concerns that you would like the committee & school representative to be prepared to discuss at the IEP meeting. This assures that the committee is prepared to discuss your concerns rather than be placed in the position to react without preparation.
 - Ask for copies of all reports that will be presented at the meeting.

Ways to Incorporate Strength-based Planning into the IEP Process

- ◎ ***Presentation*** involves focusing on the student's strengths and using strength-based terminology & language at the meeting.
 - Be prepared to make a statement about your child's strengths & abilities.
 - Give your input when discussing goals & priorities for your child now and in the future.
 - Discuss what your child ***can*** do and what you want your child to ***be able*** to do.
 - Ask if there are other skills that may be a priority when determining goals.
 - Be respectful and professional in how you address all meeting participants.

Ways to Incorporate Strength-based Planning into the IEP Process



PERSONALIZED LEARNING SOLUTIONS

What Is A Vision Statement?

DEVELOP A VISION STATEMENT
TO PRESENT AT IEP MEETINGS

Is a prepared statement that highlights
what you hope your child will be
doing in the next 1 to 5 years.

- Think about short-term goals (current school year)
- Keep long-term goals in mind (school & career)
- Include strengths, interests, and concerns
- Focuses your child's IEP on results
- IEP should always keep future, long-term goals in mind



Ways to Incorporate Strength-based Planning into the IEP Process

Vision Statement

- Be concise, be thorough
 - Stay child focused
- Don't point out staff faults, only what affects your child
 - Ideas of what to include:
 - areas of need that the school identified that you agree with
 - areas of need not identified, that you wish to include or ask for an evaluation
 - strategies that are working & not working
 - behavior concerns
 - food/medical concerns
- what you want to ask for & what data you have (summarize) to support these asks

Ways to Incorporate Strength-based Planning into the IEP Process

- ◎ **Documentation** involves using a strength-based or ability-based perspective in writing the IEP.
 - Documentation should be observable, measurable statements of what your child can do now, what you want your child to be able to do in the future, and how progress will be measured.
 - Reframe what your child **cannot** do into what your child **can** do.
 - Incorporate strength-based language to describe your child and his/her abilities.
 - Remember IEP team decisions can have a profound impact on your child & family. It is important not to rush decisions. Do not let the committee rush the meeting because of time constraints.

Present Levels

“There should be a direct relationship between the present levels of performance and the other components of the IEP. . . .”



Present Levels

Four Essential Elements of a High-Quality Present Levels

1. Student Needs
2. Baseline Information
3. Effect on Progress in the General Education Curriculum
4. Connection to accommodations, goals/objectives, services, etc.

Present Levels

Student Needs	Baseline Information	Effect on Progress in General Education	Connection to Goals & Services
Main Areas of Concern	Data in the present levels is used to determine whether the student is making progress	Involvement in general education	Enough information in the present levels to develop challenging, ambitious & measurable annual goals
Parent Concerns	Present levels is. . . Specific Objective Measurable Able to be collected frequently	Access to the general education curriculum	Enough information in the present levels to determine what special education, related services, accommodations & program modifications are needed
Evaluation Results	Data related to . . . Identified areas of concern State content standards	Progress in the general education curriculum	
Student's Strengths & Instructional Preferences			

Present Levels

- The IEP committee must determine a student's present levels before it can determine appropriate goals, accommodations, modifications, and placement for the student.
- The present levels tells the story of the student through description of current evaluations and performance, discussion of student's strengths and needs, explanation of curricular and non-curricular issues that describe the student's strengths and needs, and utilization of a **variety of sources of data** in telling the student's story.
- The present levels identifies and prioritizes the strengths and needs of the student learning, behavioral, functional, & social strengths and needs as well as data on the student's attendance, performance on district and state assessments, discipline data, and other related areas.
- The present levels establishes the student's current baseline for developing an appropriate program. **Also explains how the disability and the student's needs currently affect his/her participation and progress in the general education curriculum** and provides direction for moving the student toward greater access and greater success.

Present Levels

- The present levels provides a description of current skill sets and expectations for future learning. Should contain specific and measurable baseline data as well as establish the connection between where the student is currently functioning and the enrolled grade level standards.
- 34 CFR §300.320-Defines the requirements for an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
 - States the IEP must include: A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including... (I) How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e. the same curriculum as for nondisabled children); or (II) For preschool children, as appropriate, how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities. §300.320 (a) (1) (I) and (II)

Strength-Based Present Levels

Example #1

Nathan is a fourth-grade student who has labels of specific learning disability, speech impairment, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Nathan often has difficulty staying on task and focused for periods of time. Currently, he can remain on task for 5-7 minutes with prompts. He also has a hard time comprehending and recalling material. Currently, Nathan is on grade level for math but is well below grade level in reading.

Specifically, Nathan has a hard time comprehending and recalling information read from a text as well as sequencing information. Because of these difficulties, Nathan is often unable to recall information from both books or stories read aloud and read independently.

Strength-Based Present Levels

Example #2

Nathan is a hard-working fourth grade student who enjoys attending school, working with his teachers, and developing relationships with peers. He is a friendly, young boy who enjoys trains and basketball. Nathan is timid in new situations but warms up to people quickly. He enjoys and excels in math.

During math instruction, he likes to use manipulatives when working to solve problems. Currently, Nathan is working at mastering adding and subtracting fractions. When given 10 addition or 10 subtraction fraction problems, Nathan gets an average of seven problems correct. However, when given assistance, such as the teacher helping him to correctly set up the problems Nathan is able to solve them all correctly most of the time. In addition, Nathan can solve addition and subtraction fraction problems when the problems are mixed together answering six problems correct on average.

Nathan's specific learning disability, speech impairment, and ADHD affect him academically because it is more difficult for him to comprehend and remember material and his disability of ADHD makes it harder for him to stay on task and focus for the duration of a lesson. Currently, he can focus 5-7 minutes with teacher prompting. 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?" Nathan often guesses and it is unclear if he comprehended what occurred in the story. However, when Nathan is given a graphic organizer to write down key aspects of the story, he is able to more easily recall and pull out relevant textual information. Further, when supports are paired with a text of his choice, he is able to pull out key events and details of the text with little teacher assistance and he is able to recall information from the text more consistently.

Strength-Based Present Levels

Questions To Think About

- What significant differences in language, attitude & student support do you notice in each example?
- What influences do you think the two approaches have on the lives of students and their families?
- Which scenario best represents what you experience at your child's IEP meetings?

Writing a student's IEP from a strength-based approach is one potential way to ensure that a student's IEP is designed to meet the rigorous demands of the law and to best serve the educational rights of a student.

Strength-Based Present Levels

● **Example #1**

- A more limited and generalized portrayal of Nathan & his overall performance compared to grade level expectations in reading and math.
- The focus of the first sentence is on the label and Nathan's limitations.

● **Example #2**

- A more holistic, detail-oriented & strength-based portrayal of Nathan.
 - Includes data points & accommodations that have been used & proven to be successful.
- Describing Nathan in either manner can have a tremendous impact on the resulting goals that are designed for him & which services and supports are made available to him.

Strength-Based Present Levels

- The language used to describe your child can translate to different educational opportunities offered based on the expectations expressed for your child.
- When present levels statements are written in a more deficit-oriented manner IEP committees miss opportunities to see beyond the limitations and challenges that your child may face, and instead, overly focus on the shortcomings of your child.
- By adopting a strength-based approach IEP committees could instead focus their attention on remediating these deficits by paying attention to your child as an individual holistically and through the use of their many strengths, abilities, and capabilities.



If students with disabilities are acknowledged as competent individuals by IEP teams from the outset of the planning process, the likelihood of them being successful in the general education classroom increases (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010).

Person-Centered Plans

What is Person-Centered Planning (PCP)?

- Person-Centered Planning (PCP) is a process in which people work together to develop a positive description of an individual and to plan for a future consistent with the person's goals and dreams. The individual for whom the planning is done, or the focus person, is at the center of the planning.
- PCP typically consists of the following:
 - A vision of the future;
 - A personal profile identifying the focus person's strengths, interests, gifts, preferences, and learning style;
 - Identification of goals and short-term steps/objectives that can be taken in pursuing those goals

Person-Centered Plans

- One way an IEP team can obtain in-depth knowledge about your child is by initiating Person-Centered Planning (PCP) as soon as possible.
- Using the information gathered from PCP meetings, the IEP team should create a comprehensive & strength-based student portrayal for writing present levels statements.
- Since the premise of writing strength-based IEPs focuses on the student's strengths as a key aspect in both describing their abilities and talents, the present levels statements should begin with describing the student's strengths, capabilities, talents, and interests.

Person-Centered Plans

- In the present levels statements, the IEP team must then identify & document what is already taking place within the classroom & school that has proven to be effective & supportive of the student's learning & growth.
- Strength-based IEP writing does not ignore or avoid the effect of the disability or other difficulties the student experiences in school. Instead, within the present levels statements teachers practicing strength-based IEP writing should describe the disability along with specific challenges & support needs associated with a student's disability in mind.
 - This includes providing and documenting detailed examples that illustrate under which conditions and demands the student experiences these challenges and needs (e.g., times of the day, specific subject/content areas, grouping strategies, etc.).
 - By focusing on problem solving instead of being reactive, as well as providing specific information about when & how the challenge or need arises, educators can plan for & develop strategies & supports that are already built into their practices & learning environments from the beginning. For example, in the case of Nathan, this includes naming specific strategies that support his challenges and needs in math and reading.

Person-Centered Plans

- Writing strength-based present levels statements influences the entire IEP.
 - Vital that the statements provide a strength-based view of the student that the IEP team can utilize to develop appropriate goals & identify appropriate services for the student.
 - By positioning the student in this holistic manner, the IEP team has a solid foundation to drive the development of the remainder of the document.
- After developing the present levels statements, the IEP team can then utilize that information to develop student goals & objectives that integrate the specific strengths & needs of the student.
- The IEP team should use the needs & challenges that were described within the present levels statements to determine appropriate annual goals & objectives, supports, and services that further the development of the student.

Andrew F. vs Douglas County

- The Endrew decision syllabus (2017) states that: ***(a) child's educational program must be appropriately ambitious in light of his circumstances***, just as advancement from grade to grade is appropriately ambitious for most children in the regular classroom. The goals may differ, but every child should have the chance to meet ***challenging objectives***. This standard is more demanding than the 'merely more than de minimis' test applied by the Tenth Circuit. (p.3)
- The Endrew decision reinforces that the essential function of the IEP is to set out a program for students to make appropriate educational progress. One way IEP teams could meet this responsibility is by understanding each students' abilities and using their strengths as a basis for addressing their needs and developing their IEPs.

Andrew F. vs Douglas County

- The main purpose of the *Andrew* case was a determination about the degree of opportunity schools must provide to meet their substantive obligation under IDEA to support students in making appropriate progress in the general education curriculum.
- Strengthens the legal imperative for providing ***a comprehensive and high quality***, “free and appropriate public education, or FAPE, by means of a uniquely tailored individualized education program, or IEP” (*Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, 2017).
- In determining what it means to “meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, the provisions of the IDEA governing the IEP development process provide guidance” (*Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District Syllabus*, 2017, p. 3).

SMART Goals

◎ SMART Goals

- **S**pecific (simple, sensible, significant).
- **M**easurable (meaningful, motivating).
- **A**chievable (agreed, attainable).
- **R**elevant (reasonable, realistic and resourced, results-based).
- **T**ime bound (time-based, time limited, time/cost limited, timely, time-sensitive).

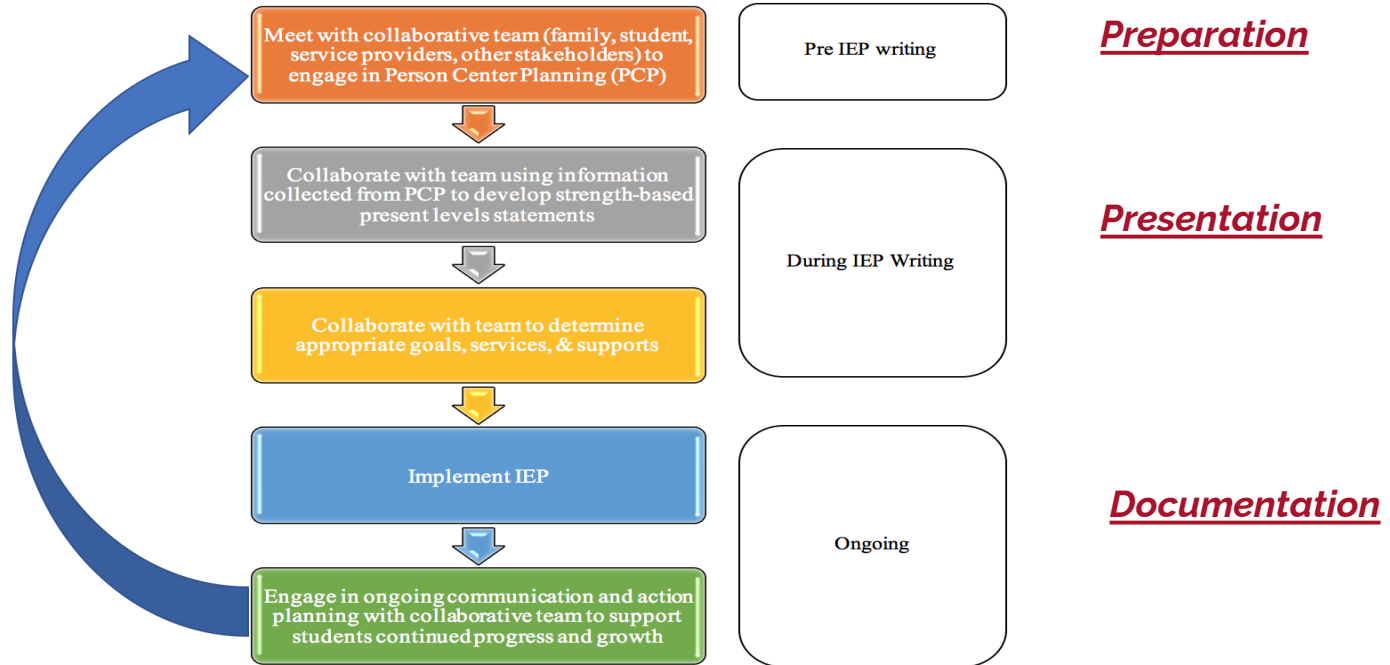
◎ IEP goals that employ the SMART strategy can utilize information provided within present levels statements to develop specific and strength-based goals. The IEP team should think about how they can use the student's strengths, talents, abilities & understand what is already working to further students' continued growth & progress on annual goals.

SMART Goals

- In the example with Nathan the IEP team may develop an annual goal that provides specific faded supports (i.e. strategies, supports & scaffolds that are incrementally removed or adjusted) that are based on the knowledge described in the present levels statements.
 - For example, for Nathan a goal that employs the SMART strategy and strength-based approach could state: Within 36 instructional weeks, when given a text at the second-grade level and a graphic organizer, Nathan will be able to verbally recall four out of five comprehension level questions about the text as measured by a teacher-created checklist at 80% accuracy on 3 out 5 trials.
 - Since the strength-based present levels statement for Nathan provides specific information about his needs, accommodations & what works, the IEP team has readily available supports & strategies that can be used to support Nathan's continued growth and progress.
 - With the example goal above, once Nathan has shown progress on the goal with supports (e.g., graphic organizer), the supports can be removed or his level of need can be re-evaluated.
- IEP teams can choose to include specific information about strengths, abilities & talents from present levels statements in developing goals & objectives. By using the present levels statements as a foundation for employing the SMART strategy, annual IEP goals can be written in a manner that honors the student & their capabilities.

Strength-Based IEP Process

Strength-Based IEP Process





Research also shows that students with disabilities who spend more time in inclusive settings with their peers without disabilities: perform significantly better on academic achievement tests than students with similar disabilities who spend more time in segregated classrooms (Hehir, Grindal, & Eidelman, 2012; Waldron, Cole, & Majd, 2001), do not negatively impact peers without disabilities in their classrooms (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998), and provide students with disabilities with better predictive life outcomes (e.g., build meaningful social relationships, achieve positive behavioral outcomes, and graduate from high school, college and beyond (SWIFT, 2018; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006)).

Let's Review Some Key Concepts



Strength-based IEPs use an approach & mindset that uses a student's abilities to help work on weaknesses as well as utilizing a student's strengths. Strengths & abilities are thoughtfully integrated into IEP goals & objectives.



Incorporate the strength-based process through preparation, presentation, and documentation stages of the IEP process. The process helps build a trusting relationship between the school & parents.



Writing a student's IEP from a strength-based approach is one potential way to ensure that a student's IEP is designed to meet the rigorous demands of the law and to best serve the educational rights of a student.



By adopting a strength-based approach IEP committees could instead focus their attention on remediating these deficits by paying attention to your child as an individual & through the use of their many strengths, abilities & capabilities.



Writing strength-based present levels statements influences the entire IEP, so it is vital that the statements provide a strength-based view of your child that the IEP team can utilize to develop appropriate goals & identify appropriate services for your child.



IEP goals that employ the SMART strategy can utilize information provided within present levels statements to develop specific and strength-based goals.

Thanks!

ANY QUESTIONS?



You can find me at:

www.personalizedlearningforall.com

Facebook-<https://www.facebook.com/personalizedlearningsolutions/>

Facebook Group-Special Education IEP & 504 Plan Support Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/iepand504plansupportgroup>

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Resources

- Elder, B. C., Rood, C.E., & Damiani, M.L. (2018). Writing strength-based IEPs for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 14(1), 116-153.
- Phillip M. Weishaar (2010) Twelve Ways to Incorporate Strengths-Based Planning into the IEP Process, *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 83:6, 207-210, DOI: [10.1080/00098650903505381](https://doi.org/10.1080/00098650903505381)
- Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1, 137 S. Ct. 988