Strength-Based Teacher Report: IEP Reflection

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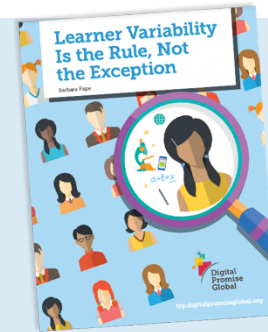# Table of Contents

Suggested Citation

Digital Promise. (2022). *Learner variability project in the field: IEP reflection.* Washington, DC: Digital Promise.

Note: Any blue link has details, sample responses, and resources.

Introduction

What is learner variability?

> *When you understand learner variability, you see a design challenge, not a student problem.*

Learner variability is the recognition that every student has a unique set of strengths and challenges across a whole child framework that are interconnected and vary according to context. A whole child strength-based approach to teaching and learning relies on a shared understanding of a student's strengths and is situated within the student's context. This allows stakeholders to work together to create coherence for support in the classroom and/or for the IEP process. Visit the Learner Variability Navigator (LVN) to find out more.

The Learner Variability Navigator Whole-Child Framework
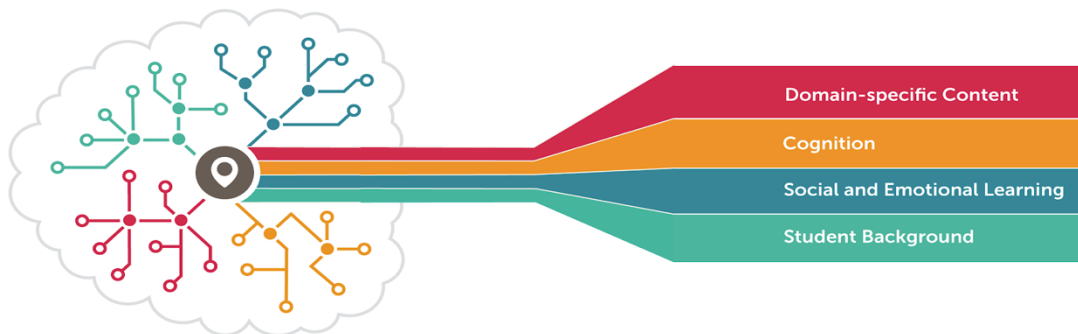
This Reflection Guide begins with a series of Essential Questions to ask yourself before setting out to write a Strength-based Teacher Report/IEP Reflection.

> IEPs are part of PreK–12 public education. IEPs include present levels of how the student is performing in behavior or social/emotional areas, yearly goals, accommodations and others supports, and services they will be provided, such as specific reading instruction or speech therapy.

How to use this guide:

Section 1

Introduction and Mindset Shift- has reflection questions a teacher should consider about the whole child, their strengths, and how to use strengths to mitigate their challenges. You can think about your responses to these questions, type, or jot down some notes as you reflect. Taking time to think about these important reflections is a critical first step in fully supporting your student's strengths and needs in the classroom.

Section 2

Strength-based Teacher Report/IEP Reflection Template- is where you capture the most important information you gathered from your reflection about your student. You will also add data, such as grades, and plan for specific ways strengths can support growth areas. It's important to involve the student with completing this section as well. The information you provide on this template will be directly used to plan for a student's support in the classroom and/or their IEP. This section is broken into three parts:

1. Key Information

2. General Academic and Cognition

3. Social/Emotional Learning & Behavior

Appendix

The last section of this guide includes sample responses for the IEP template, resources about specific strategies, and links to important research.

Section One

_____

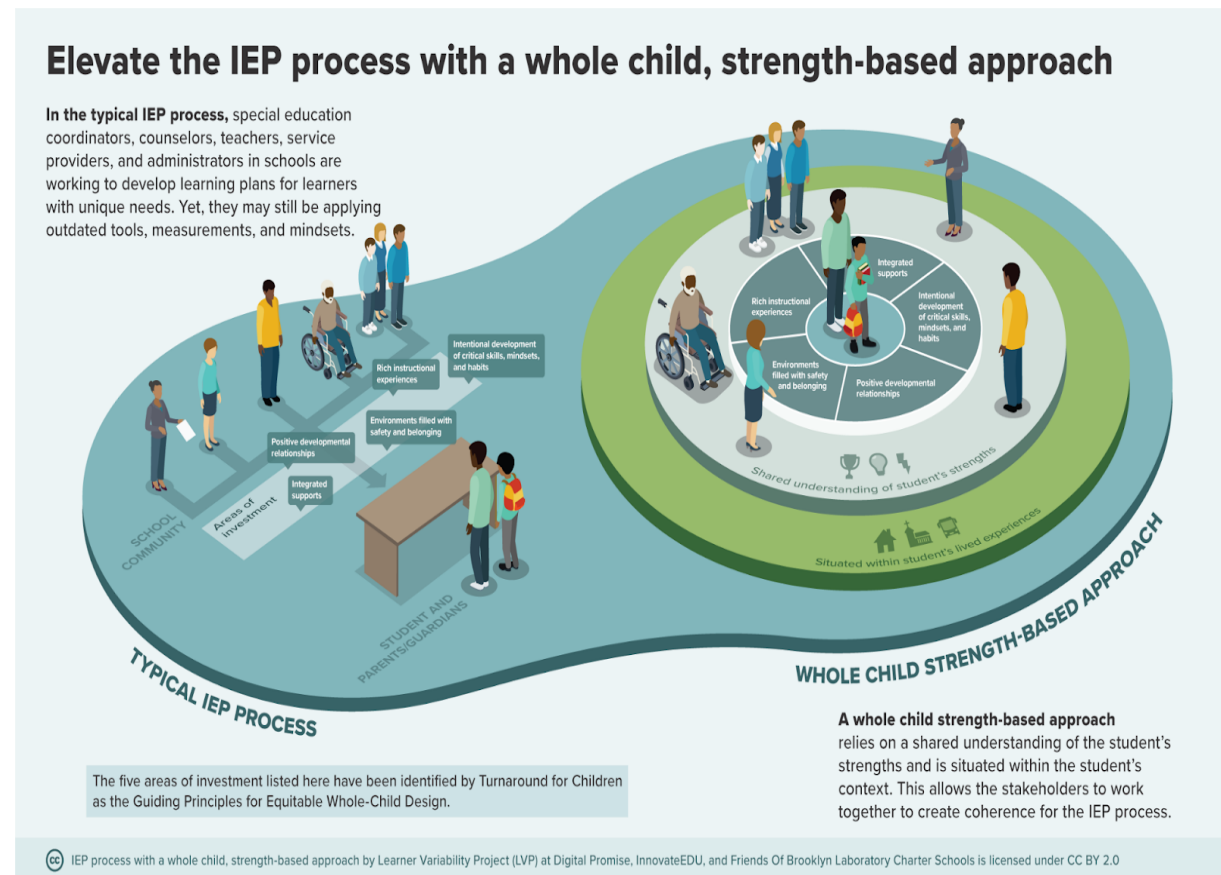# Mindset Shift: Essential Questions Before Starting Teacher Report / IEP

Strength-based teacher reports and IEPs begin with the teacher considering the whole child, an integrative look at academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and student background, and student interests. Take a moment to reflect on the following key tenets of strength-based teacher reports. This is just a starting point. For some, it is a new way of thinking—a mindset shift—to ensure that each student's learner variability is considered so they can thrive in school and beyond.

Start with empathy:

Begin with understanding the role of empathy as you develop the teacher report. (Amanda Morin states the qualities of empathy include practicing perspective taking and letting go of judgment). (A Learner Variability Project/Digital Promise webinar for CE certificate: Creating IEPS: Understanding Learner Variability and the Role of Empathy)

Put the student at the center:

Make sure the student's perspective is considered. Talk one-on-one with the student about their strengths, interests, and growth areas. You can do this formally, like with a student interview, or informally, where you ask the student questions about what's going well, their strengths, and what they think could help.

Elevate the IEP process with a whole child, strength-based approach

In the typical IEP process, special education coordinators, counselors, teachers, service providers, and administrators in schools are working to develop learning plans for learners with unique needs. Yet, they may still be applying outdated tools, measurements, and mindsets.

TYPICAL IEP PROCESS

The five areas of investment listed here have been identified by Turnaround for Children as the Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design.

WHOLE CHILD STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH

A whole child strength-based approach relies on a shared understanding of the student's strengths and is situated within the student's context. This allows the stakeholders to work together to create coherence for the IEP process.

IEP process with a whole child, strength-based approach by Learner Variability Project (LVP) at Digital Promise, InnovateEDU, and Friends Of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Identify specific strengths:

What does this student do well? To think through specific strengths, use the factors outlined in the
Learner Variability Navigator, which includes factors of learning for grades preK-12 in literacy and math,
plus an adult learner model.

> *Student strengths are not only in the areas of content and cognition, but*
> *in social emotional skills and in student background.*

SEL strengths can include positive skills with:

Emotion
Motivation
Self-regulation
Sense of belonging
Social awareness and relationship skills

Student with Cognitive strengths can include skills with:

Attention
Cognitive flexibility
Inhibition
Long-term memory
Sensory integration
Short-term memory
Speed of processing
Visual processing
Working memory

Students with academic strengths can include skills with:

Specific skills based on grade level such as skills with numeracy, order of operations, and place value.
Specific literacy skills based on grade level such as genre knowledge, fluency, syntax, and vocabulary.

Consider interests:

- What do they enjoy doing? What are their hobbies? What are their specific interests?
- How can I leverage what students do well and enjoy doing to address the challenges they face to improve opportunities for learning?

Brainstorm how strengths can support growth areas:

- Now that I have identified specific strengths, what are the student's specific areas of growth? Reflect on the areas mentioned above. Watch this video for an example of how an IEP team used a student's strengths and interests to support growth areas.

- How can the strengths I identified above help support the growth areas for my student?

What did you discover about your student's strength and growth areas? What did you learn about your own mindset? Capture your thoughts below.

Section Two

Strengths-Based Teacher Report / IEP Reflection Template

The Learner Variability Navigator (LVN) is a free and open source web app that features Learner Models for grades Pre-K to 12 in math and literacy and an adult learning model. It is based on a whole learner framework. Visit our home page to find out more about LVN and how to use the tool.

Key Information			
Student's name		Date of Report	
Teacher's name		Course/Grade	
Summary of student background information *Consider:* Adverse experiences, hearing, physical well being, safety, sleep, social supports, socioeconomic status, vision, etc.			

General Academic and Cognition

Present Levels of Academic Performance

Current Grade & %		
Most Recent Assessment Scores	1	
	2	
	3	
	4	
	5	
Assessment information: Are there types of assessments where the student experiences more success? What supports enable the student to better demonstrate their knowledge?		
Academic strengths & growth areas: What are the student's 2–3 greatest strengths in your class? What 2–3 areas does this student struggle the most in your class? How can these strengths be leveraged to mitigate student challenges?		

Goal Planning

Specific academic areas for improvement:

What specific academic area would you like to see the student improve in your class?

What data currently supports this as an area of need? (grades/percent mastery, etc.)

Accommodations and Classroom Strategies

Accommodations:

What accommodations, modifications or strategies best support the student to access the content and demonstrate learning?

What supports have you tried that have not met with success? Why?

Student Input

Student input/interview:

What does the student consider to be their academic strengths?

What does the student consider to be their academic growth areas?

Now that you have drafted possible accommodations and goals, does the student feel these will be beneficial for their learning?

Social and Emotional Learning and Behavior

Present Levels of SEL Performance

Quantitative data: If applicable, include quantitative data about student behavior or SEL. This can include grades (SEL, behavior), number of incident reports, behavior tracker data, etc.	1.		
	2.		
	3.		
	4.		
SEL strengths and growth areas: What are the student's 2-3 greatest strengths in your class? What 2-3 areas of growth? What behaviors are impeding their learning?			
Strengths to support growth areas: How can these strengths be leveraged to mitigate student challenges?			

Goal Planning

What specific SEL area would you like to see the student improve in your class? What data currently supports this as an area of need? (grades/percent mastery, etc.)	

Accommodations and Classroom Strategies	
Accommodations What accommodations, modifications or strategies best support the student to access the content and demonstrate learning? What supports have you tried that have/have not met with success? Why?	
Student Input	
Student input/interview: What does the student consider to be their SEL or behavioral strengths? What does the student consider to be their SEL or behavioral growth areas? Now that you have drafted possible accommodations and goals, does the student feel these will be beneficial for their learning?	

Teacher Signature: By typing my name below, I am affirming that all information on this form is accurate and up to date.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Section Three
Appendix

Part 1: Sample Response Bank	
Academics & Cognition	Antonio struggles to read with fluency and accuracy. Yet, his comprehension of material when read to him, even above grade level, is strong. He also has an extensive vocabulary in Spanish, his home language, and English. A successful overall strategy is to put reading stories for pleasure and information and learning how to decode with more accuracy and fluency on two tracks. Text-to-speech assistive technology is used to help keep him motivated to read, while teaching decoding skills and phonics to help him improve fluency and accuracy.
SEL & Behavior	Taniesha is eager to work on and complete math assignments and is successful working independently or with a partner. She benefits from having roles defined for small group work, so she understands exactly what her responsibilities are. During reading and writing activities, Taniesha's independence increases with the availability of scaffolds: checklists, chunking reading and comprehension questions (rather than reading all of the text and then answering the questions). She prefers to work independently in reading and writing.
SEL & Behavior (continued)	Mary is eager to participate in class and often is disappointed if she is not called on to provide a response/share information. The teacher has met with Mary 1:1 to talk with her about taking turns with participation and makes a point to check in with her on a regular basis which is helping. Mary may benefit from having a journal where she can write her own responses and share with a classmate or teacher later so she continues to know that her participation is valued.
	Leo is developing their organizational skills with support from. home and school. They have tried one large binder but had some difficulties with using the dividers, hole punching papers, and maintaining the organization. They have just started using separate color-coded folders for each subject and this is helping as it reduces the step of hole punching. Leo is color blind, so they need to be included in their color coding to ensure they can see the color accurately (avoid red). While Leo does not yet use folders in their Google Drive independently, they will create them following teacher

direction. They need reminders to label their Google files so they can later search for their materials.

Ignacio always comes prepared with all of his materials, which are always organized in a way that helps him quickly find and retrieve them. However, he struggles to maintain deadlines and often forgets to complete assignments and misses deadlines. This is particularly true for homework and longer term projects. This could be due to his struggles in time management or due to the fact that he often is responsible for taking care of his grandmother when he is home, making it harder for him to complete assignments.

Lionel is respectful of adults and is improving his self-advocacy skills, when he comes to advocating for personal needs. He continues to either rely on peer questions in class (he will quietly listen to the teacher's response) or wait for an adult to prompt for questions. He needs to have a trusting relationship with an adult before he feels safe communicating. Adults can do this by continuing to engage Lionel in conversations, questions about his interests, connecting assignments to his interests, and being patient. In virtual class, after 4 months he began opening up to his teacher during their weekly call.

Gia is learning how to use a communication device and is able to independently select "Hi" and "I love dancing!". With a verbal prompt and two choices, Gia is successful with asking a question from her priority list. Her favorites to ask are: "Do you want to hang out at lunch?" or "What did you do yesterday". Gia participates in lunchtime clubs: Dance, Anime, and Best Buddies. She is more likely to engage peers independently in clubs using gestures and facial expressions.

Christian is motivated by public praise and highly demotivated by public corrections. Christian will appreciate any correction or negative feedback to be private. He has a hard time trusting authority figures in his life and will react poorly if he perceives that a teacher is out to embarrass him or singles him out. He is highly motivated by relationships: he will go to war for teachers that he likes, respects and more importantly trusts. Christian enjoys especially close relationships with his Math Teacher and Basketball Coach. Leveraging those relationships can help motivate and drive him. He is also highly motivated by challenges and proving people wrong. Having challenges with a small prize at the end can help drive him.

Accommodations	Mason has experienced a lot of success using teacher created checklists during independent work time. He frequently references visual schedules, timers, and calculators. Mason has self-reported not wanting to use his multiplication chart and that he prefers to use a calculator to support his fluency needs. This may be due to difficulties with organization (he doesn't always know where his chart is) or it may be visually overwhelming. Marta has benefitted the most from completing tests in sections. They will complete a few problems before school, during class, and after school until the test is done. This has been very helpful. The student also seems to enjoy sitting on the left side of the board. This is not currently in the IEP, but may be worth noting." Diego has been very reluctant to test in the resource room. His IEP gives him the option, but he says he feels singled out. It may be worth exploring another time for him to take the test such as before or after school when he may feel less apprehensive. I have also tried using a peer helper in class to help with notes and that has not been successful.
Student Interests	Jose likes baseball. His favorite team is the Marlins. He knows specific stats about his favorite players. Melanie loves Pokémon and likes to organize her cards every day at recess. Lionel enjoys stacking blocks and building small houses and tracks with Legos.

Part 2: Strategy Bank			
Assessment			
Resources on Strategy	Foster Growth Mindset	Error Analysis	Goal setting and monitoring
	Sound-blocking Devices	Equitable Grading	Checks for Understanding

Academic Strengths & Growth Areas			
Resources on Strategies	Literacy Pk-3	Literacy 4-6	Literacy 7-12
	Math Pk-2	Math 3-6	Math 7-9

Social Emotional Learning & Behavior			
Independence Level, Participation & Focus			
Resources on Strategies	Positive Self-Talk	Building trusting relationships in the classroom	Brief Instruction Steps
	Checklists and Rubrics	Self regulation	Individual spaces
	Individual Deliberate Practice	Self-monitoring	Sound Level
	Individual Spaces	Student Choice	Sleep

	Growth Mindset Feedback	Positive Self-Talk	Adverse experiences
	Error Analysis	Individual Spaces	Math Mindset

Organization			
Resources on Strategies	Brief Instruction Steps	Advanced graphic organizers	Self monitoring
	Individual Spaces	Uncluttered Environment	Mindfulness Breaks

Communication			
Resources on Strategies	Building Trusting Relationship	Social Awareness and Relationship Skills	Encourage Self Advocacy
	Building Empathy	Student-led Conferences	Incorporate Students' Cultural Practices

Motivation			
Resources on Strategies	Building trusting relationships	Incorporate students' cultural practices	Growth mindset feedback
	Daily Review	Goal setting and monitoring Multimodal instruction	Authentic Audiences and Purpose

	Incorporate student cultural practices	Student Choice	Real world problems
	Authentic Audiences and Purpose	Student generated problems	Expressive writing

Part 3: Research and Resources for Strengths-based IEPs

Books

Inclusive Education in a Strengths-based Era ; Michael L. Wehmeyer and Jennifer A. Kurth.

The End of Average, Todd Rose

Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence and Chronic Stress; Debbie Zacarian, Lordes Alavarez-Ortiz, Judie Haynes

Research Papers

Learner Variability Is the Rule, Not the Exception; Barbara Pape

Shifting Mindsets: Designing Lessons for Learner Variability; Medha Tare, Alison Shell, Jessica Jackson

Acorns to Oaks: Nurturing Growth through Strengths-Based Practices; NCTM

Inclusion of students with learning, emotional, and behavioral disabilities Through strength-based approaches

Confronting ableism; Thomas Hehir

LVN Workspaces and Topic Pages

Topic Page: Learning Disabilities: ADHD, Dyscalculia, and Dyslexia

Megan Gross' Workspace on ADHD

Megan Gross' Workspace on Dyslexia

Workspace: Sense of Belonging

Blogs
How to Recognize and Avoid Stereotype Threat In Your Class This School Year
Webinars (for CE credit)
Teaching and Learning for Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD: FromResearch to Classroom Experience Creating IEPs: Understanding Learner Variability and the Role of Empathy Reading and Dyslexia in a Digital World: The Perspective of a Reading Warrior Culturally Responsive Practice: So All Learners Can Be Seen and Understood   Creating a Sense of Belonging: A Critical Need for Student Engagement and Success