



Teaching Matters

The Link Between Access to the General
Education Curriculum and Performance
on State Assessments

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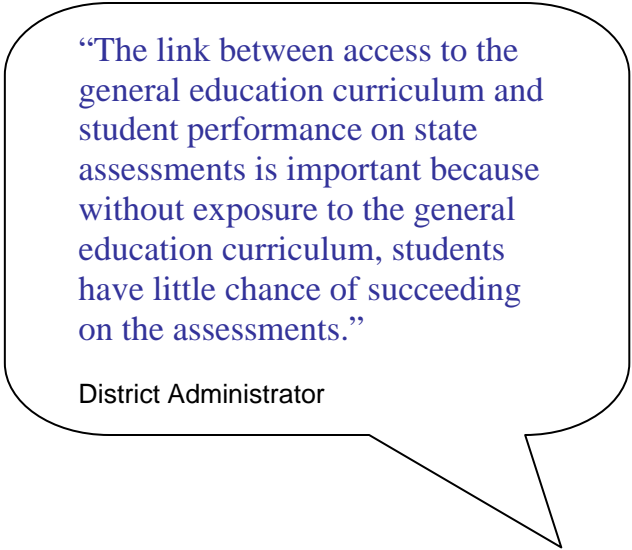
For more than two decades, the standards-based reform movement has sought to improve educational quality by setting high standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do, and by holding educators and students accountable for achieving such standards. Over the years, rhetoric often included references to *all* children; however, it was not until the 1990s that educators began to look seriously at what it meant for including students with disabilities in standards-based reform efforts (Bechard, 2000; McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (1997) and its regulations helped intensify attention on the learning of students with disabilities by calling for public accountability. At the heart of the regulations were two key concepts intended to promote improved outcomes:

- ❖ Access to the general education curriculum.
- ❖ Participation in district and statewide assessments, with accommodations as necessary.

IDEA 2004 strengthened this emphasis on participation and progress in the general education curriculum by aligning IDEA to the No Child Left Behind Act, which makes schools accountable for the learning and achievement of all students, including students with disabilities.

Today, students with disabilities are being held increasingly to the same high standards as their general education peers. The majority of students with disabilities are expected to participate and progress in the general education curriculum, and to participate in the state assessments, with accommodations as necessary. The small percentage of students who have significant cognitive disabilities also are expected to participate in the standards-based system via alternate assessments and IEP goals that reflect the state standards (Clayton, Burdge, Denham, & Kearns, 2005; Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).



“The link between access to the general education curriculum and student performance on state assessments is important because without exposure to the general education curriculum, students have little chance of succeeding on the assessments.”

District Administrator

What does this mean for classroom practice? At the heart of the issue is ensuring that *all* students—including students with disabilities—are afforded the opportunity to achieve to the high standards set by the state for what is worth knowing and being able to do. These standards form the basis for the general education curriculum and for state accountability assessments. Teachers perform an essential role in the accountability system by helping students have access to and learn the general education curriculum and by supporting student participation in accountability assessments.

The purpose of this Access Center brief is to explore the linkage between access to the general education curriculum and student performance on state accountability assessments. It offers insights into the following:

- ❖ What are the elements of a standards-based system?
- ❖ What is access to the general education curriculum?
- ❖ How does access to the general curriculum improve student performance in the classroom and on accountability assessments?

Understanding the Elements of a Standards-Based Educational System

In a standards-based educational system, students are expected to achieve to high standards. Local educational agencies (hereafter referred to as school districts) are expected to work in tandem with state accountability measures. To support student achievement in the accountability system, there must be an alignment between the system elements. Key elements include:

- ❖ **State content standards.** State standards define what students should know and be able to do as a result of formal schooling. Generally they are representative of best thinking in the subject areas, and reflect national standards and local beliefs. Content standards identify what should be emphasized in general education subject matter curriculum and instruction.
- ❖ **Indicators.** Based on the content standards, states develop indicators or benchmarks that can be used to measure student progress, typically at different milestones (e.g., grade levels). Some states (e.g., Maryland) have developed curriculum built around the indicators. There should be alignment between the indicators and the general education curriculum scope and sequence (i.e., the order or progression in which the selected knowledge and skills are taught) in each subject area.
- ❖ **General education curriculum.** State educational standards form the basis for the general education curriculum. The general education curriculum directs the what, when, why, and how of teaching. School districts either develop or adopt curriculum content and skills based on the standards. In each subject area, the general education curriculum content is organized into a scope and sequence. Courses that address content are developed. Those courses that represent the

core standards typically are required and others are deemed electives. The curriculum or course content should determine instructional focus and emphasis.

- ❖ **State accountability assessment.** States assess student achievement of the content standards. The assessments are used to hold schools and districts accountable for student performance and are linked to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requirements for determining adequate yearly progress (AYP).

As **Figure 1** (on page 5) shows, standards form the basis of the general education curriculum and the state accountability assessment. Because both the general education curriculum and state accountability assessment are based on the standards, there should be a direct link between what is taught in the classroom and what is measured on state assessments.

What Is Access to the General Education Curriculum?

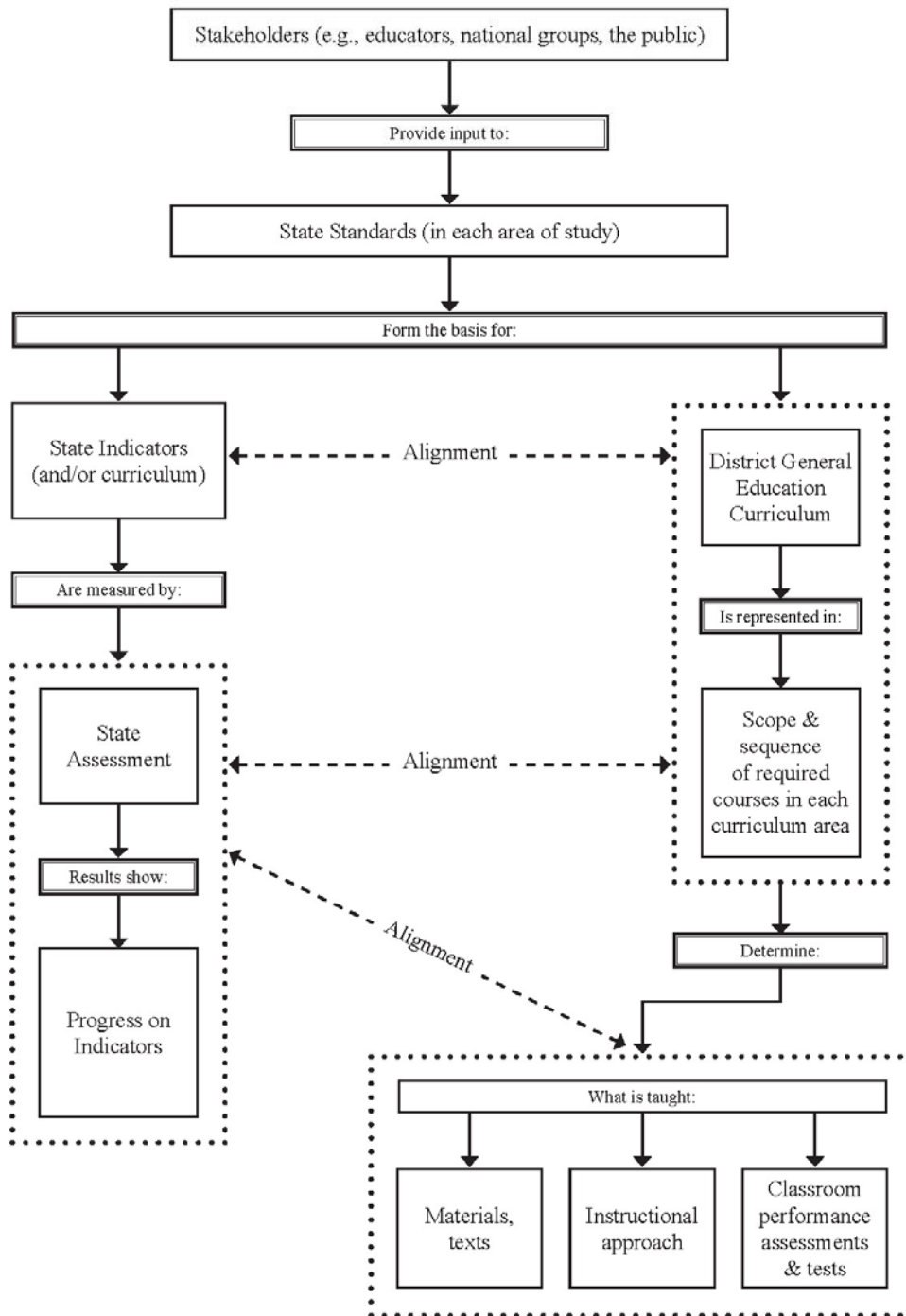
As a concept, *access to the general education curriculum* has its roots in the early 1990s with efforts to unify general and special education and include students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Pugach & Warger, 1993; 1996; 2001). The term was catapulted to the forefront with the 1997 amendments to IDEA. By law, it was no longer enough for students with disabilities to be present in general education classrooms. The question became, “Now that students are in general education classrooms, what should they be learning?” (Ysseldyke, Krentz, Elliott, Thurlow, Erickson, & Moore, 1998). Access emerged as the key to ensuring participation and progress in the same meaningful and effective curricula, aligned with the same content standards, that students without disabilities were receiving (Karger & Hitchcock, 2003).


Although IDEA 2004 references access to the general education curriculum, it stops short of defining the term. As practitioners, policymakers, and families grapple with its implementation, access continues to evolve as a complex, multifaceted concept. The Access Center (n.d. a) describes access to the general education curriculum as occurring when students with disabilities are actively engaged in learning the content and skills that define the general education curriculum. This is most likely occurring when the following indicators are present:

- ❖ The general education curriculum includes appropriate, standards-based instructional and learning goals for individual students with disabilities, as well as reflects an appropriate scope and sequence.
- ❖ Materials and media being used are appropriate, research-based, and documented as being effective in helping students with disabilities learn general education content and skills.
- ❖ Appropriate, research-based instructional methods and practices that have a track record for helping students with disabilities learn general education content and skills are being used.
- ❖ Research-based supports and accommodations that have a track record of helping students with disabilities learn general education content and skills are being used.

Standards-Based Educational System

Links Between Standards and Practice



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- ❖ Appropriate tools and procedures for assessing and documenting whether students with disabilities are meeting high standards and achieving their instructional goals are being used.

Viewed this way, access is a major tool with which students participate and progress in the general education curriculum. Effective teaching practices (i.e., instructional approaches that are marked by flexibility in planning instructional routines, selecting media and materials, and designing learning activities that are considerate of individual learner needs) support access to the general education curriculum for diverse groups of learners (Jackson, Harper, & Jackson, 2002).

The individualized education program (IEP) is another important tool for enhancing student access to the general education curriculum (Karger, n.d.; Sopko, 2003). IEPs provide a structure for setting high standards and measuring student outcomes by defining and documenting how students with disabilities will participate and progress in the general education curriculum, as well as how they will participate in statewide assessments (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005; Shriner & Destefano, 2003; Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001). IEP team members address the concept of curriculum access when they determine:

- ❖ The student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the student's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum.
- ❖ Annual goals that address the student's involvement in and progress in the general education curriculum, including how the student's progress toward meeting annual goals will be measured, and how and when parents will be informed about their child's progress.
- ❖ Appropriate supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, or supports that enable the student to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum.
- ❖ An explanation of the extent, if any, to which the student will not participate with nondisabled students in the general education classroom.
- ❖ A statement of appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the student on state and district-wide assessments.

In a standards-based system, IEPs are aligned to content standards (Access Center, 2004). The process of aligning IEPs to content standards involves comparing a student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance to the expectations for peers without disabilities of the same age group, identifying the skills needed for successful involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, and ensuring that teachers teach the content that is measured on standards-based assessments (Walsh, 2001). Such alignment ensures that students with disabilities are included in standards-based systems, with resulting benefits such as increased exposure to challenging curriculum, higher expectations for learning, and improved performance in state accountability systems

(McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, & Henderson, 1999; Quenemoen, Lehr, Thurlow, & Massanari, 2001; Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001).

How Does Access to the General Education Curriculum Improve Performance in Classroom and State Accountability Assessments?

What teachers do in classrooms matters. In an aligned standards-based system, student engagement in rigorous academic content can improve classroom performance and, ultimately, performance on large-scale assessments. At a basic level, access to the general education curriculum increases the potential for success on state assessments because it provides students with an opportunity to learn the content and skills being assessed. In fact, some argue that access to the general education curriculum should be used as the determining factor when deciding whether or not a student participates in an assessment of that curricular area (Destefano, Shriner, & Lloyd, 2001).

“As a classroom educator, the link between classroom practice and assessment is important because assessment outcomes inform my teaching. The outcomes provide me with vital information that guides what and how I teach. If students are doing well on assessments, then I know I am teaching my students in a way that is meaningful for them.”

Special Education Teacher

As teachers are being held increasingly accountable for student progress in the general education curriculum and for student performance on district and/or statewide assessments, it is important to understand the link between access to the general education curriculum and student performance on state assessments. Student test results can focus attention on the needs of struggling students, prompting teachers and administrators to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction (Yeh, 2005).

Linking Access to Improved Assessments: Six Areas to Consider

Following are six areas to consider in understanding the connections between access to curriculum and state accountability assessments. Improving student access to the general education curriculum can result in improved student performance in state accountability assessments by focusing attention on:

1) Heightened expectations for student performance. IDEA 2004 continues the tradition (first proposed in the 1997 IDEA statute) of holding high expectations for students with disabilities. As stated in the IDEA regulations (1999), one purpose of specially designed instruction is to ensure access by the student to the general education curriculum so that he or she can meet educational standards that apply to all students within the jurisdiction of the school district.

Standards are based on high expectations. Higher expectations and effective instruction lead to improved achievement (Heubert, 2002). When students are held to low expectations based on stereotypes and biases, they are likely to be educated in segregated settings, with access only to alternative curricular options whose quality and appropriateness vary greatly (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003).

2) Access to academic content and grade-level standards. Content standards define the knowledge base in subject matter curricula. General education curriculum includes learner outcomes and an articulation of content across grade levels. A decision to not teach a specific set of skills, concepts, or standards at a particular grade level has implications for all future grades (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005).

Further, in some cases, assessments are used to evaluate student learning over a long period of time (e.g., a fourth-grade assessment reflects what students have learned in first, second, third, and fourth grades) (McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, & Henderson, 1999). For example, complex problem solving requires multiple opportunities for practice across multiple environments, and with the use of multiple prerequisite or enabling skills. In these cases teachers must learn to view daily and weekly lesson planning as an ongoing process of deciding which is the most critical content or skills on which to focus instruction (McLaughlin, 1999).

In a perfect world, curriculum content is appropriate for all students at each particular grade level. However, as classrooms become more diverse, it may take longer to teach the same content each year (Lenz, n.d.). Some students may not have mastered certain prerequisites for present curricular goals. In some cases, the complexity and pace that the curriculum dictates may pose barriers.

Under the pressures of competing priorities and time demands, each teacher must decide how much of the content is critical for students to achieve the standards. This requires first and foremost an understanding of how state standards underlie both the general education curriculum at different grade levels and state assessments. Armed with this knowledge, teachers can then enhance access by:

South Dakota: One State's Process

In developing and aligning the SD Alternate Content Standards to the general content standards, the workgroup considered the "essence" of each standard. To determine the essence, the group considered the intent of each standard. For example: "Display data using bar and line graphs and draw conclusions from data displayed in a graph." The group determined that the essential component at that grade level was not the representation of the data, but rather being able to understand what the graph represents. Therefore, the alternate standard that was written was **"Interpret the data using bar and line graphs and answer questions from data displayed in a graph."** Once the essence of each standard at each grade level was determined, the group did a cross grade level alignment to ensure that the standards continued to build upon each other and increase in complexity, while retaining the intent of the general standards. The workgroups continued this process as they added the descriptors at each level of complexity for the standards. The final step in the process was to add target skills, which would provide some instructional examples for teachers to use when teaching to the standard. The workgroup was composed of general content specialists and special education teachers to ensure both the intent of the general content was maintained, while taking into consideration the unique needs of special education students.

- ❖ Making sure that their emphasis is consistent with standards and performance indicators, taking care to include content that is crucial to student success on state assessments.
- ❖ Unlocking standards—a term used to describe how teachers dissect standards to obtain a clear picture of their many parts and decide which of these parts the students need (California Department of Education, 2005).
- ❖ Assessing student performance on the grade level standards and determining an appropriate instructional level.

3) Effective instruction. Access to the general education curriculum is enhanced by effective teaching (Access Center, n.d. b). It requires using instructional practices, assessment techniques, and materials that are appropriate for the curriculum standards and goals that are reflective of current research on best practices and that are sufficient to accommodate diverse and multifaceted student needs. [Note: For more information, see the Access Center (2005) brief, [Strategies to Improve Access to the General Education Curriculum](#).] For students with disabilities, teachers also can improve access through the implementation of appropriate accommodations.

In addition to defining the knowledge base in subject matter areas, content standards can encourage certain instructional approaches (McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, & Henderson, 1999). Teachers can enhance student learning and ultimately their performance on assessments by using a variety of teaching strategies linked to the standards. For example, experts recommend teaching higher-order thinking and problem solving—skills found in many content standards—through the use of group projects, student collaboration, project-based learning activities, and experiments.

4) Standards-based IEPs. The process for determining the content of a student's IEP should be tied directly to providing the student with access to the same challenging state standards that peers without disabilities are receiving (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997; McLaughlin, 1999; Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001). There is an alignment between the IEP goals and general education curriculum outcomes. Specialized instruction—including accommodations related to a student's disability—helps students participate and progress in the general education curriculum.

To promote access to the general education curriculum, IEPs include a statement of the student's present levels of academic achievement and annual goals that address the student's needs. IEP goals may focus on:

- ❖ **Basic skills and/or prerequisite skills that underlie standards and grade level curriculum content.** For some students, goals might focus on improving the underlying access skills (e.g., communication skills, problem-solving skills, mobility management, etc.) needed to learn specific components of the content standards. Grade-level content knowledge and skills generally assume that the student has mastered certain prerequisite skills. IEP teams may decide to provide the student with remedial assistance (e.g., an intensive reading program, small-group tutorial assistance in basic math facts, keyboarding skills).

- ❖ **Instructional access skills.** A teacher's choice of instructional methodology assumes certain prerequisite skills. For example, a student who has difficulty comprehending and learning information from text will have difficulty in classrooms that emphasize this approach. At times, the student may require supportive training related to his or her disability (e.g., how to use an assistive technology device). Similarly, students who have difficulties with social skills may struggle to participate in classrooms in which teachers rely heavily on heterogeneous groupings (e.g., cooperative learning groups, group projects). Annual goals may emphasize skills that a student needs to access instruction (e.g., summarization strategy for a student who has difficulty obtaining information from texts).

5) Opportunities to participate in classroom tests that are aligned with content standards. Tests should measure essential information that is aligned with the general education curriculum. Understanding the design of standards-based state assessments provides an entry point for using standards to guide and improve instruction. Tienken and Wilson (2001) offer the following process as an example of how teachers might align classroom tests with large-scale assessments:

- ❖ Perform a content analysis of the state standards and choose a unit of study.
- ❖ Examine and compare classroom resources, local curriculum, activities, and skills, level of difficulty, format, and classroom tests to the standards, indicators, and state assessment to ensure congruity.
- ❖ Design lessons and activities, gather resources, and create classroom tests that are congruous with the skills and level of difficulty for the standards, state assessment, and curriculum.
- ❖ Use these calibrated activities, classroom tests, resources, and lessons as part of instruction.

IDEA 2004 provides that IEPs must include a statement of any appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the student. Students should never use an accommodation for the first time on an assessment. Best practice literature suggests that teachers should incorporate any assessment accommodations into daily classroom activities.

6) Reporting student progress. Assessing and reporting student progress during the year enables teachers and parents to track how students are progressing in the curriculum. This allows them to be able to take steps to identify and solve problems as they arise.

States are required to publicly report the performance of students with disabilities in large-scale assessment reports with the same frequency and detail as students without disabilities. Large-scale assessment can improve instruction by showing where students are not achieving the standards. It may be that standards require a different content focus or different instructional methodology (Boundy, n.d.). Such reporting can lead to a more widespread and better understanding of student needs and abilities as they relate to participating and progressing in the general education curriculum.

Connecting for Success

The standards-based education movement emphasizes higher levels of student achievement as demonstrated through large-scale assessments. As testing becomes more regulated, general education curriculum must be accessible to all students (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). Federal law—particularly the 1997 and 2004 amendments to the IDEA—has helped states promote connections between students’ instructional experiences, the content of the general education curriculum, and assessments of student performance.

Teaching matters. What goes on in classrooms has a direct effect on student performance on state accountability assessments. Strong linkages between classroom learning and large-scale assessments can enhance student performance.

“Effective instructional practices can help students engage in general education content and improve their academic performance. Providing access to the general education curriculum helps to ensure that students with disabilities achieve the same standards as their peers without disabilities.”

State Department of Education
Consultant

Next Steps... To find out more about the concepts discussed in this brief, consider the following K-8 Access Center activities and resources [all available at www.k8accesscenter.org]:

- ❖ **Review information briefs and documents.** Two titles to get you started include [*Aligning IEPs with State Standards and Accountability Systems*](#) and [*Strategies to Improve Access to the General Education Curriculum*](#).
- ❖ **Check out expert presentations.** [*Strategies to Enhance Access to the General Education Curriculum for Students with Disabilities*](#) and [*Using Research-Based Strategies to Improve Access to the General Education Environment*](#) both offer current thinking and ideas regarding curriculum access.
- ❖ **Participate in a webinar.** New titles are added periodically so check the K-8 Access Center schedule. Past webinars (archived on the web site) of interest include [*Making Abstract Core Curriculum Accessible to Students with Severe and Multiple Disabilities*](#) and [*The Strategic Instruction Model: How Learning Strategies and Content Enhancement Routines Help Educators Respond to NCLB*](#).
- ❖ **Join an expert chat or discussion room.** Learn from experts and colleagues, and share your ideas, in these web-based discussions. You can read the transcripts, read a summary of the chat, and/or join the discussion. Topics include *Aligning IEPs with Standards, Accountability Assessment and Students with Disabilities*, and *Universal Design for Learning*.
- ❖ **Sign up for the K-8 Access Center e-newsletter.** Keep abreast of new activities and resources—including professional development opportunities—offered by the Access Center.

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For additional information on this or other topics, please contact The Access Center at accesscenter@air.org.

The Access Center: Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8

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