

standards reform • in special education

Standards allow special and general educators to speak a common language. ACSA has developed strategies to align goals and objectives to the California standards.

Moving students toward standards is not an easy task, nor has it been widely accepted by all educators. Many questions are raised by the use of standards to promote improvement. Can they be used to enhance opportunity to learn? Will they improve teaching? Will standards lead to higher performance by all students, or will they produce new inequities?

When addressing the California Content Standards, successful special educators utilize not only the *ACSA Handbook of Goals and Objectives Related to Essential State of California Content Standards*, but they integrate appropriate K-12 standards from language arts and math into their IEPs.

How can administrators help teachers implement and master standards? One strategy that has been used by ACSA and the California Department of Education Special Education Division is Star-t ©, the process to align goals and objectives/benchmarks to the California Content Standards.

The concept is clear: When special educators use the same standards as general education teachers, they offer the same

playing field. Special education students have a right to access the general education curriculum as mandated by IDEA 97.

Standards allow special and general educators to speak a common language. The consistency across classrooms, districts and the state improves when we are all aiming toward the same goal — to improve student learning by using the same “targets” or standards.

Standards tell us what to teach, but how we master each standard belongs to teachers. The “how” is why education is their chosen field.

There are many different strategies a special education program can use to assess, identify and implement a plan for student improvement. What we do with teachers is critical. If we continue to demand and expect without appropriately providing teachers with strategies, we are not only doing our teachers a disservice, but our students as well.

Once teachers know what they are teaching they know what to assess. Teach-

By Diane Youtsey

ers need administrators to break down the task of analyzing test results in conceptual terms that are easily understood and can be easily implemented.

Use test scores to improve instruction

When administered in the context of ongoing classroom-based assessments and professional development, properly selected and properly interpreted tests can do the following: provide information about children's performance levels, identify the children who need extra instructional attention, and identify the classrooms in which teachers need extra instructional support.

Standards are the best thing that has happened to special education. Once educators understand the "sequence" or hierarchy to the standards, then moving students who function below grade level standards toward those standards becomes clearer and more obtainable.

One step toward becoming fluent in the complete K-12 standards involves providing special educators with all of the standards, as well as providing them with access to the general education curriculum.

Establishing a strategy:

The Star-t © process

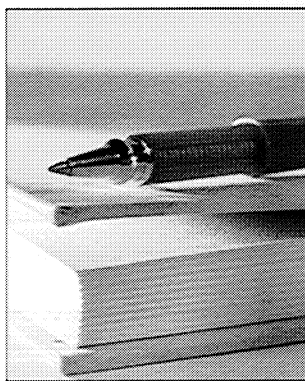
It is critical for special educators to establish clear strategies and to consistently begin to implement standards into the IEP. AB 265 in 1997 clearly required all students in California to meet standards and pass assessments. "All students" includes special education students.

During the IEP process, educators can simply refer to the Star-t © strategy. As one might determine, there is no first step. Each of the steps mentioned should be considered at any time during the development, implementation or assessment period of an IEP.

• Assess/Adjust

Assessing students to determine where a student is currently functioning is a starting point for many special educators. Usually, after each assessment general educators and special educators must make a decision to continue with their current objective/benchmark or make an adjustment for mastery teaching and learning.

The conditions ensuring the greatest benefits from testing include an under-



Three years in the making, the *ACSA Handbook on Goals and Objectives Related to Essential State of California Content Standards* was published in January 2002. ACSA's goal is to offer an updated version of the handbook each year.

Different groups and organizations are now working with ACSA on updates. ACSA has been approached by a Special Education Division English Language Development group to align our current bank of standards to the ELD standards. A small group of speech and language specialists has also approached ACSA to align standards with

speech goals. We will be working with the Special Education Division on the inclusion of Severely Handicapped standards and indicators leading up to the standard. We are working with another organization to try to make the goals available online for use with computer-generated IEPs.

To obtain the *ACSA Handbook on Goals and Objectives Related to Essential State of California Content Standards* go to www.acsa.org or call (916) 444-3216 or (800) 890-0325. For information on how your staff members can receive training on aligning IEPs to state standards, call Diane Youtsey at (530) 886-4638, or e-mail dkyconsult@starstream.net or dyoutsey@placercoe.k12.ca.us.

standing of how tests work and what they tell us. Tests, by themselves, cannot improve educational outcomes. Testing children does them no good unless it guides teachers in providing improved instruction, which in turn requires greatly enhanced professional development and support.

Although assessments are important to determine progress toward standards, Howard Gardner states, "A good assessment instrument can be a learning experience. It is extremely desirable to have the assessment occur in the context of students working on problems, projects or products that generally engage them, that hold their interest and motivate them to do well."

How do we help teachers adjust for mastery teaching and learning? Powerful interventions based on data work! Successful intervention programs set up strategies with a common strand based on the standards identified. In our special education classes, we can place students in small groups and begin to instruct depending on similar strands of essential standards identified in the ACSA Handbook mentioned above. This is also a time where general education and special education can provide a "seamless" program by grouping all

students with similar needs into groups intended to address the standard(s) in need.

Special educators depend on analyzing data to drive instruction. What we need to teach special and general education teachers is how to analyze the trends in data results. What do their kids know or need to know? What trends do we see in strengths and weaknesses? Have we done a good job in showing teachers how to use the data to determine which standards to teach? We know what the standards are, but do we really know which standards to teach?

• Identify the standard(s) in need.

Once we have assessed, we can identify the standards needed to ensure success toward the grade level standard. Standards describe what students should know and be able to do in the core academic subjects at each grade level. They describe what level of performance is good enough for students to be categorized as advanced, proficient, below basic, or by some other performance level. Standards are used as a framework for teaching and provide a point of focus and to guide instructional planning.

In deciding where to start, it is our premise that you cannot put a roof on a

shaky foundation. In order to create student success we must build rock-solid foundations. If we only use grade level standards and never see the beauty of the research placed in the developmental sequence to the standards, we will be placing roofs before we build foundations.

IDEA 97 states that when developing goals and objectives/benchmarks, include the child's "present level of performance."

By developing goals deemed by the present levels of performance, one must always consider that obtaining mastery at grade level standards is the ultimate goal, and sometimes to achieve this we must begin at a lower grade level. This concept does not suggest we lower the expectation; it merely alludes to building a strong academic base for students to excel.

Education leaders are identifying stan-

dards to specify what students should know and be able to do in key subject areas. The ACSA Handbook has identified "essential standards," chosen with the learning disabled population in mind. An essential standard identifies specific content critical to the special education student's program through the curriculum. Essential standards at each grade level provide a "road map" through the content standards maze.

The next question is, why use essential standards when developing an IEP? Standards tie the IEP to what is going on in the general education classroom. Special education students have a right to access the general curriculum as mandated by IDEA 97. Standards allow special and general educators to speak a common language. Using the same standards improves consistency across classrooms, districts and the state.

• **Develop the goal and write objectives/benchmarks**

Annual goals are statements that describe what the student can reasonably accomplish within a 12-month period. IDEA 97 changed how goals are written; they must be measurable, observable and relate to present levels of performance. One should develop goals that are specific and avoid language that is too broad or too vague ("Sam will improve reading skills").

In writing goals and objectives/benchmarks, it is important to use verbs that require an overt, observable action, such as to write, to solve, to demonstrate, to synthesize. An objective/benchmark is a small step or measuring point toward attaining the annual goal. The components needed for every goal and objective/benchmark must include:

1. **Who:** The student
2. **Does what:** Observable behavior
3. **When:** By reporting period
4. **Given what:** Conditions
5. **How much:** Mastery, criteria
6. **How it will be measured:** Performance data

• **Access core curriculum**

Special education is not a place. It is specialized instruction and supplementary aids and services. Federal law assures students with disabilities have access to a free and

appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. It is imperative that we provide all students with access to the same materials.

As our team travels throughout the state we are finding that some of our special educators still do not have access to the same curriculum as general education. IDEA 97 was clear that special education students would have access to the core curriculum.

• **Choosing grade level standards for special education students**

An effective strategy to move any student toward grade level standards is what the author has defined as Trellis™.

A trellis is a frame used especially as a support for climbing vines. We use the metaphor in conjunction with the teaching of standards. The Trellis™ is a frame used to support children functioning below grade level state or district standards. As the learner gradually masters one grade level

standard, climbing on to the next grade level standard is possible.

“Trellising” a standard cannot be accomplished without assessment and appropriate goals and objectives/benchmarks. Here are the steps:

1. Review assessment results:

- Eligibility criteria assessments for special education students.

- Interim assessments aligned to standards.

2. Consider the students’ current grade level standard first.

3. If that standard is too low, then Trellis™ up to the next grade level. On the other hand, if the standard is too high, Trellis™ down one grade level.

4. In some cases you might need to Trellis™ down more than one grade level.

5. After carefully reviewing the standard in need, decide if the standard needs “unpacking.”

6. Unpacking a standard:

- Each standard is loaded with goal potential.

- Decide whether the student can master the entire standard within a year, or only part of a standard within a year.

Bridging the gap

The IEP is the plan for bridging the gap between where the student is and where the student needs to be in relation to the state grade level standards.

As Michael Fullan has stated, “Student improvement boils down to two things: What will students achieve by the end of the year? How will you know how students are doing throughout the year?” ■

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