

Aligning the IEP and Academic Content Standards to Improve Academic Achievement

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If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), it's essential that you understand how your state's "academic content standards" can be used to ensure strong academic achievement.

Although you may never have heard academic content standards mentioned in an IEP meeting, there are some important reasons you should be familiar with them:

- First, as a student receiving special education services, your child is required by federal law to be provided the opportunity to access and progress in the general education curriculum, which is aligned with your state's academic content standards.
- Second, your child is also required by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to participate in all large-scale assessments administered by your school district and state. By definition these tests are designed to test proficiency in knowledge and skills that are determined by the state's academic standards.
- Third, an increasing number of students are required to pass a "high-stakes" exam in order to graduate from high school with a standard diploma. These exams also focus on a student's proficiency in relation to state standards.
- Finally, the increased focus on school accountability — how schools are performing in educating all students — brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act, provides an opportunity to create new linkages between IEP components and state academic content standards.

Given the strong linkage to state standards — both in terms of school accountability and student stakes — it seems only logical that there should be an equally strong relationship between the content of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the academic content standards for a student's enrolled grade level.

Some states have begun to use this "standards-based" approach and have developed guidance for IEP teams. Many more have yet to begin to require a clear and meaningful alignment between IEPs and state content standards. Regardless of whether your state is promoting a standards-based approach to IEPs, you can begin to insist on a strong connection between IEP components and your state's academic content standards to improve your child's progress.

What are State Academic Content Standards?

State academic content standards specify what students are expected to know and be able to do. NCLB requires that state standards be coherent and rigorous, encouraging the teaching of advanced skills. Every state must have strong content standards for each of the following subjects and grades or grade clusters:

Reading: Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10-12

Math: Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10-12

Science: Elementary, middle school, and high school

Each state determines its own content standards. The content standards must be the same for all students — including students with disabilities. All students should have access to and be assessed on their enrolled-grade-level content standards. In a standards-based IEP process, IEP team members need to thoroughly understand and use state content standards to ensure that IEP components are aligned.

What is a Standards-based IEP?

Historically IEPs have focused on a student's acquisition of basic academic or functional skills and have had little if any relationship to a specific academic area or grade-level expectations. In contrast, the process used to develop a standards-based IEP is directly tied to the state's content standards. Both the student's present level of performance (often referred to as "PLOP") and the annual IEP goals are aligned with the state's grade-level standards, creating a plan that is aimed at getting the student to a proficient level on all state standards.

While there might be a gap — sometimes significant — between the student's present level of performance and the skills and knowledge required to meet the grade-level standards — the IEP should address what needs to happen in order for the student to meet the standards. Once the IEP team has analyzed the student's current performance and determined what the student needs to learn, the specially designed instruction (i.e., special education) and related services and supports can be developed.

Standards-based Present Level of Performance (PLOP)

The development of every IEP begins with a statement describing the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLOP). However, this statement frequently has no connection to the grade-level expectations for all students. In a standards-based IEP process, the PLOP clearly indicates how the student is performing related to the standards for the student's enrolled grade. The PLOP information should include the student's most recent performance on all state and district-wide assessments. This information is then used to determine what state standards the student has achieved and what standards remain to be accomplished. Determining the gaps between the student's current level of academic achievement and the expectations for grade-level performance provides a clear picture of what needs to be accomplished in the coming year.

Standards-based Annual Goals

Using the PLOP statement as a roadmap, the IEP team develops annual goals that are individualized for the student and designed to move the student toward proficiency on grade-level standards. Goals should be prioritized, clearly indicating the skills and knowledge most important to long-term academic success. In many cases, the goal will require the student to make more than one year's progress in an academic school year in order to close the gap. Goals should also include the development of "access" skills — skills that will allow the student to access grade-level materials, sometimes in different ways. Lastly, as explained in one state's guidance on standards-based IEPs, "A student's goals ... on an IEP should not be a re-statement of a standard or a curriculum goal, but rather a statement that reflects the necessary learning that will lead to attaining the standard."

Standards-based Special Education and Related Services and Supports

Using state academic content standards to guide the development of IEPs for students with disabilities is an approach that will require substantial changes to the traditional IEP process.

Some might feel that standards-based IEPs contradict the concept of individualization that is central to IEP development. However, it is the strong connection between the individualized instruction and the goals expected of all students that will provide optimum results. The benefits that students will receive from this standards-driven approach include:

- Closer collaboration between general education and special education teachers
- Improved understanding of academic content standards by special education teachers
- Increased involvement in and ownership of the performance of students with disabilities by general education teachers
- Increased exposure to general education curriculum for students
- Special education related services and supports focused on bridging the achievement gap
- Higher expectations for student achievement
- Instructional modifications and accommodations that support the student's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum
- Better connection between what the student is taught and what the student is tested on
- Better understanding by parents of where their child is functioning as it relates to grade level

Regardless of whether your state is promoting a standards-based approach to IEPs, parents should begin to insist on a strong connection between IEP components and their state's academic content standards to improve student progress. And, while a standards-based IEP will provide several benefits over the traditional approach, parents must still closely monitor the progress of their child. Reports of progress toward annual IEP goals must be provided to parents on a regular basis—such as at the same time reports cards are issued for all students. Be sure to use these reports to gauge whether your child is making adequate progress toward reaching the annual goals established in the IEP.

