

*During the past year the Critical Issues Committee of the Division on Developmental Disabilities worked with Ms. Magi D. Shepley (member) and a group of professionals to structure an Issues Brief focused upon Secondary School Students with Significant Developmental Disabilities. The following Issues Brief reflects the work of Ms. Shepley and seeks to clarify this issue for educators of young persons with developmental disabilities as they seek to access general education curriculum content at the high school level. I would like to thank Magi and others who worked on this Issue Brief, as well as all those persons who provided input over the past year. If you have questions or would like to comment on the Issue Brief, please address yourself to Magi at [magid@concentric.net](mailto:magid@concentric.net) or [stodden@hawaii.edu](mailto:stodden@hawaii.edu) - thanks, Robert A. Stodden, Chairperson, Critical Issues Committee, Division on Development Disabilities, Council for Exceptional Children.*

## Supporting Students with Significant Developmental Disabilities to Access the General Education Curriculum

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the focus in special education is in two areas: 1) college preparatory curriculum, and 2) general education standards. NCLB mandates that all programs for students with special needs include the same courses as that for students without special needs. However, this requirement makes it ever more difficult for individualized education to happen as IDEA 2004 mandates, particularly as it relates to the needs of youth with significant developmental disabilities (SDD) to also learn functional skills.

Students with significant developmental disabilities require extensive accommodations and modifications in order to learn the curricula required under the NCLB mandates. At times, the accommodations allow the student to access the curriculum, but do not allow the student a realistic opportunity for long-term learning.

Most often, accommodations can be divided into two types:

- Evaluation and Testing (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 1995).
  - Grading based only on the work turned in, not all required work
  - Extended time for tests, projects, and quizzes

- Dictation to a scribe
- Reading the test or work to the student
- Access to a calculator
- Setting (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 1995).
  - Small group
  - Individual administration (one-on-one)
  - Special location such as home or hospital administration
  - Structured Breaks
  - Testing at the best time of day for the student

However, these accommodations do not address the curriculum being taught to students with SDD. In many cases, the curriculum is modified in order to allow better access. As with accommodations, the modifications can be described by type (Ellis, 2006):

- Textbooks with lower reading levels: These books cover only the basic information important to a topic; concepts may be left out, and easier concepts added
- Modified work load: i.e. the student is not expected to complete all of the math problems or vocabulary given
- Altered classes: Students may be enrolled in “English 12”, but be working on skills many grade levels below that
- Note taking: The student is provided prepared notes or a writing frame in which some or all information is copied from a teacher’s notes
- Altered projects: Students are asked to meet different standards. For example, to do a project instead of a research paper.

While these modifications are well intended and often necessary to address the students' challenges, they substantially change what they are expected to do when compared to a student with out special needs enrolled in a similar class.

Accommodations and modifications may make it possible for students with SDD to access the core curriculum, but valuable time is taken away from the learning of the independent living skills necessary for adult success. Students are being prepared for college with a curriculum that will often not assist them with daily functional living skills.

There are few states where the required educational standards address functional skills. Witness the new Virginia Alternative Assessment which requires teachers to choose from among the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL) as the basis for a portfolio of student work which is then used to determine whether or not the student is meeting state requirements. The ASOL are nearly identical to the current state Standards of Learning (SOL). Although a few of the SOL do address functional applications which would form the basis of the most appropriate curriculum for students with SDD, the special education teacher must adapt the aligned standards to address functional goals.

As with the standards, few curricula for students with special needs address the required information and skills in a way that enables student success on a statewide curriculum. The functional curricula which exist do not provide teachers with ready-made materials for teaching, such as worksheets. Teachers are often left with a difficult choice, either offer greater access to the statewide general education academic material, or to teach functional skills and access less of the age appropriate general curriculum. Without support from textbook publishers in integrating state standards with the functional textbooks offered, and without support from the states to include practical academics, the teacher will often choose to use the standard curriculum with

accommodations. This results in the teaching of too much grade level material to students who are frequently many grade levels behind. Students who have not mastered counting money are being taught Algebra, while students who have not mastered writing sentences are being taught how to write college essays (Pinzur, 2005).

The Developmental Disabilities Division of the Council for Exceptional Children believes student's with special needs benefit from, and should be given the opportunity to be taught, functional academics which meet state academic content standards. School districts could address this by forming ad-hoc groups to look at current special education curricula and adapt them to state standards. Many children who receive special education services would certainly benefit from the integration and teaching of state academic standards in a functional manner. Studies indicate students who know how they will use the material being taught in their lives are more responsive to the teaching, whether they are in general or special education classes (Cavanagh, 2005).

Currently, many publishers detail how the standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) are met in their special education materials. While these standards are somewhat vague, they can be a good starting point. For example, a standard may require: "Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world." (Virginia Department of Education, 2005) In this instance, the functional goal and benchmarks for a student in a job preparation program could then include this eighth grade statewide English standard: "The student will read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of informational sources." (Virginia Department of Education, 2003). The teacher could then create individualized objectives to meet the needs of the students, such as:

- Read published advertisements for functional purposes
  - Identify vocabulary for shopping in grocery, department, and drug stores
  - Use vocabulary dealing with grocery stores in order to determine prices of items and assist in making grocery lists
- Read recipes
  - Determine the ingredients for a specific recipe
  - Make simple recipes such as instant gelatin, soup, or cold sandwiches
- Read schedules
  - Read their class schedule
  - Read a television schedule to pick a favorite TV show

Through integration of state standards, functional curriculum, and access to appropriate accommodations, we may find that many students that were previously thought unable to handle grade level curriculum are now able to access some age appropriate material.

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