



Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards

For Students with Moderate
and Severe Disabilities

Ginevra Courtade-Little, M.Ed.
Diane M. Browder, Ph.D.

IEP
RESOURCES

Win/Mac CD

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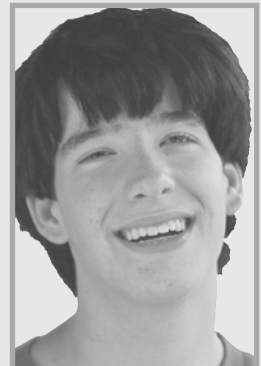
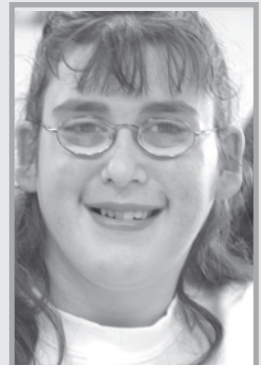
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Ginevra is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. This program and her work on the grants have given her many professional opportunities. She has presented information and findings about teaching students with significant disabilities at national, state, and local conferences. She has also had the opportunity to contribute writing to book chapters in two special education textbooks and a professional journal.

A native of Buffalo, NY, Ginevra currently lives in Charlotte with her family: her very supportive husband, Brian and her dog, Bailey.

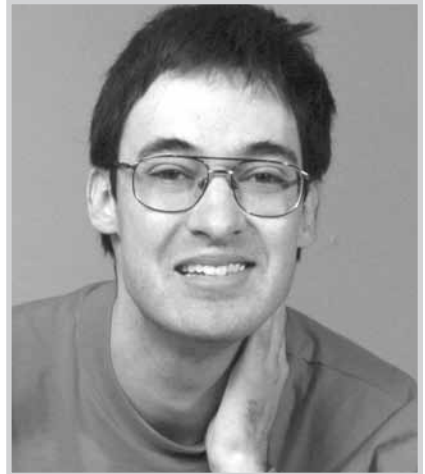
Diane M. Browder, Ph.D.

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Dr. Browder's current research focuses on access to the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities. At UNC Charlotte, she coordinates a U.S. Department of Education research grant on reading for students with moderate and severe disabilities called Project RAISE. Dr. Browder also participates in state and national policy discussion related to alternate assessment and is a partner in the National Center on Standards and Achievement.



Chapter 1 Introduction



What Does Alignment to Academic Standards Mean?

Suzanne is in 5th grade and her IEP will be different this year. While she will continue to have goals related to her expanded use of an augmentative communication system, Suzanne will now also pursue goals that focus on her acquisition of daily living skills, like putting on her coat and personal grooming. In addition she will learn to participate in her IEP meeting by helping to choose her own goals and signing her name. What also will be different is that for the first time Suzanne will have some academic goals that promote her participation in the 5th grade curriculum. While Suzanne has had academic goals before – she learned to select a dollar for a purchase she wanted to make and was able to read pictures/sight words on her schedule – now she will have academic goals that focus on her state’s standards for 5th graders. For example, her new goals will help her gain meaning from chapter books read by peers and find solutions for everyday math problems. These changes will prepare Suzanne to participate in her state’s alternate assessment and will promote skills that can provide her with a lifelong benefit (for example, sharing literature.) This year Suzanne will have the benefit of a **standards-based IEP** with goals that are **aligned** with the state’s academic content standards for her assigned grade level.

To develop a standards-based IEP you must first understand the concept of alignment.

Alignment is . . . a matching of two educational components which strengthens the purpose and goals of both . . .

. . . For example, instruction can be aligned with assessment; assessment can be aligned with state standards; IEPs can be aligned with state standards to help align instruction with the general curriculum.

Developing standards-based IEPs for students with moderate and severe disabilities is a developing educational trend. In the late 1990s, educators began to respond to the requirements of IDEA 1997 to promote access to the general curriculum and to include all students in state and district assessments. Some students with significant cognitive disabilities needed alternate assessments because they could not participate in large scale assessments with accommodations. As educators began to develop and administer alternate assessments, it soon became clear that for students to demonstrate the state standards targeted by these assessments, they needed instruction that was “aligned” to these standards. However, to develop a standards-based IEP you must first understand the concept of alignment.

Alignment is a matching of two educational components which strengthens the purpose and goals of both. For example, instruction can be aligned with assessment; assessment can be aligned with state standards; and IEPs can be aligned with state standards to help align instruction with the general curriculum. Before considering alignment in more detail, it’s helpful to consider three reasons why alignment is important.

1. IEPs aligned with state standards can prepare students for state assessments.

Many students with moderate and severe disabilities participate in alternate assessments because they are not able to participate in large scale assessments with accommodations. No Child Left Behind requires reporting adequate yearly progress for all students in reading, math, and science. Some students who participate in alternate assessments can be reported as achieving adequate yearly progress if they meet a state’s alternate achievement standards. The application of alternate achievement standards is only appropriate for students with significant cognitive disabilities and must be limited to no more than 1% of the student population.¹ Alternate achievement standards specify performance levels that are aligned with grade level content standards but set different performance levels. To meet these

¹For more information on the use of alternate achievement standards for reporting adequate yearly progress, see the Federal Register December 9, 2003.

alternate achievement standards, students need instruction that is aligned with the academic content standards for their grade. The IEP is not meant to restate all of these content standards, but should specify skills for the student to acquire that will promote access to this curriculum and help the student meet the alternate achievement standards.

2. For students to show progress in academic content, they need academic instruction.

Sometimes educators have taught functional curriculum as a replacement for the general curriculum. Functional skills are important for increased independence and transition to adult living, but students also need the opportunity to participate in the general curriculum for their grade level. Young students especially need the opportunity to gain skills in literacy and math. Sometimes in the past students with moderate and severe disabilities received little or no academic instruction. Because students with moderate and severe disabilities need direct and systematic instruction, they are not likely to learn academic skills unless they receive this instruction. The IEP is not intended to define all of this instruction nor does it function as the student's curriculum. Instead, it points the way for you to set priorities for what the student will master and how he will access the broader content.

Functional skills are important for increased independence and transition to adult living, but students also need the opportunity to participate in the general curriculum for their grade level.

Young students especially need the opportunity to gain skills in literacy and math.

3. Well aligned IEPs can promote meaningful academic instruction.

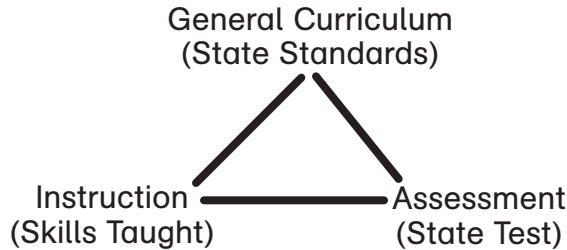
Deciding what academic skills to teach students with moderate and severe disabilities can be difficult. Sometimes the goal that is chosen does not appear to be “really reading” or “really math” when presented to general educators. Sometimes it is clearly academic, but with little real life use or meaning for the student. Sometimes it is academic, but not relevant to the student's current grade level content. Knowing how to align an IEP to state standards can help planning teams select academic goals that are meaningful for the student and promote access to the general curriculum.

Notice that the instruction addresses content to be covered by the state test and links to the state standards.

Further Understanding Alignment

Alignment occurs when there is a match between the written, taught and tested curriculum. The alignment of these educational components can be illustrated as follows:

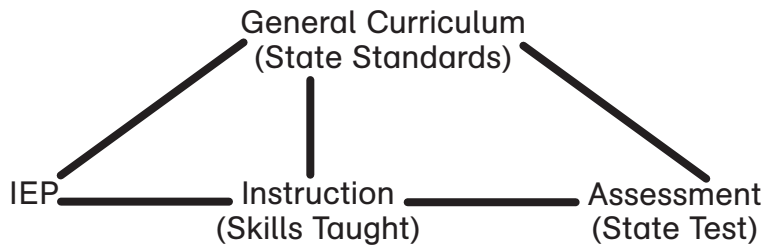
When Educational Components Align



The IEP can help define priorities for student mastery within this curriculum and skills students can use to access grade level content. When a student has an IEP, well aligned educational components can be illustrated in this way:

Note that the IEP helps focus the instruction.

When IEPs Promote Alignment

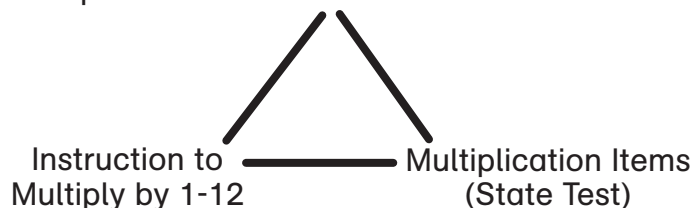


Chapter 1 ♦ What Does Alignment to Academic Standards Mean?

To consider what the pattern looks like when IEPs don't align, consider a hypothetical general education context in which educational components are aligned. For example, Ms. Jones is teaching her third grade class to multiply using numbers 1-12. Her state's 3rd grade mathematics standards include beginning multiplication. The state's 3rd grade math assessment will measure how well her students multiply. In this example, the taught curriculum aligns well with both the written curriculum (state standards) and tested curriculum (state test). The alignment can be diagrammed like this:

Alignment for 3rd Grade Math Standard

Multiplication is a 3rd Grade State Standard



Ms. Smith is the special educator for 3rd grade students with significant cognitive disabilities. Her students participate in the state's alternate assessment. One portion of the assessment determines if students can group items and count the sets (concrete form of multiplication). The only math skill Ms. Smith has targeted for student IEPs is telling time. In the following example, students do not have instruction aligned to states standards:

Instruction Not Aligned to State Standards

