



The General Education Curriculum—Not an Alternate Curriculum!



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Students with significant cognitive disabilities are to be provided access to and make progress in the grade-level general education curriculum. It should not be an alternate curriculum. Determining whether this is happening can be difficult.

The purpose of this Brief is to help parents determine whether their child with significant cognitive disabilities is provided meaningful access to the general education curriculum. It addresses the myth that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who take the state's alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) need an alternate curriculum. This myth is often the basis for

inappropriately educating these students in separate settings. See [Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting! \(TIES Center Brief #2\)](#).

This Brief highlights information that you need to know as you participate in discussions about instruction for your child with significant cognitive disabilities. During Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings, parents should make sure that instruction for their child is based on the general education curriculum, not an alternate curriculum. They should also make sure that IEP goals support *access to and progress in* the general education curriculum. IEP goals are not the

curriculum. These goals should focus on the skills and knowledge needed to work on grade-level content, including subjects that may not be in the IEP goals such as social studies.

For more detailed information on this topic, read [Providing General Education Curriculum Access to Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities \(TIES Center Brief #4\)](#). It includes multiple instructional examples and details on the provisions of federal policy related to curriculum requirements.

How Does an Alternate Curriculum Differ from the General Education Curriculum?

Some ways to tell whether your child with significant cognitive disabilities is provided the general education curriculum or an alternate curriculum are shown in Table 1.

Key Features of Participation in the General Education Curriculum for Students Who Take the State AA-AAAS

First, it is important to remember that curriculum content is different from the performance expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The curriculum is to be based on grade-level

academic **content standards** defined by the state.

Expectations for student performance on state assessments, in contrast, are defined by the state's **achievement standards**. The state alternate achievement standards are used for the AA-AAAS taken by students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and cover less academic content than the state's general assessment. Achievement standards should not limit instruction because students may be capable of learning more than is covered by the assessment. The achievement standards can be useful to prioritize which content should be addressed first before moving on to other content.

Three key features to remember about what the general education curriculum looks like for students with significant cognitive disabilities are provided here. Instruction using the grade level curriculum supports the inclusion of students who participate in the AA-AAAS in the general education classroom.

The same content standards are used for all students.

All instruction starts from the same content standards, regardless of the student's disabilities. However, the expectations for how much a student will master of the grade-level general education curriculum can be modified. Assignments and materials may be adapted based on the needs of the individual student. There can be less depth (e.g., learning

Table 1. Characteristics of Alternate Curriculum and General Education Curriculum

Alternate Curriculum	General Education Curriculum
Often based on content from a lower grade level	Based on content from the grade-level in which the student is enrolled
Identified as the "curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities," even if based on grade-level content	Identified as the curriculum for all students in the class, but individualized so that the student can learn as much as possible of the grade-level content
Uses the same materials for every student taking the AA-AAAS	Provides accommodations, adapted materials, and technology based on the needs of the individual student and how much the student can master of the full general education curriculum
Taught by special educators who are trained with separate resources from those of other educators	All educators are trained on the state's content standards, which describe the academic objectives for each subject and grade level
Has a different teacher's manual than the one used for students without disabilities	The same teacher's manual is used for all students regardless of disabilities
Addresses only some of the content areas in the general education curriculum (for example, reading and math but not science)	Addresses all of the content areas in the general education curriculum

the general concepts of poetry, but not all the details), less breadth (e.g., learning about the most important causes of the Civil War, but not all of them) and less complexity (e.g., counting squares on graph paper to calculate area of a rectangle, instead of using an equation).

Accommodations such as more time to work on an assignment or using a text-to-speech program or a calculator also may be provided without changing the content of the curriculum. For example, when the peers of a second-grade student with significant cognitive disabilities are working on a worksheet on fractions using cut-out pictures of pizza slices, the student with significant cognitive disabilities in the same classroom may solve similar problems by using wooden slices of pizza. This accommodation can also be used by other students who need a more hands-on strategy to understand fractions.

All content provided to the peers of a student who participates in the AA-AAAS also should be provided to the student with significant cognitive disabilities.

If a subject area such as social studies or literature is important to teach to a student without disabilities, it is also important to teach to students with disabilities, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. For example, a unit on Shakespeare in an eighth grade English class might be adapted for the student with significant disabilities by providing a simplified modern English version of the text and providing a movie version for the student to watch at home. These materials can also be used in addition to the regular text for other students in the class to help with comprehension.

Decisions about modifications and accommodations of assignments and materials are tailored to the individual student.

All decisions about needed modifications of instructional materials and accommodations should be based on the individual characteristics and needs of the student with significant cognitive disabilities. This means that decisions should not be based on what is easiest to do or easily available. **Federal policy is clear that the need for modifications cannot be used as the reason for removing a student with disabilities from the age appropriate general education classroom.**

What Does the Law Say?

Federal education laws are clear that ALL students are to be taught using the grade-level general education curriculum. No student, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, is to be taught an alternate curriculum.

For students with significant cognitive disabilities, the U.S. Department of Education¹ recommends that:

- Annual IEP goals should reflect high expectations and be based on the state's content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled.
- For students performing significantly below the grade level in which they are enrolled, IEP teams should determine annual goals that are ambitious but achievable. This means that the annual goals need not necessarily result in the child reaching grade level within the year covered by the IEP, but the goals should be sufficiently ambitious to help close the gap.
- The IEP must identify the specially designed instruction needed to address the unique needs of the student to ensure access to the general education curriculum, so that the student can meet the academic content standards that apply to all students in the state.

For example, a student who reads below grade level can receive modifications for all grade-level reading assignments. The student's reading assignments could be based on the grade-level content, but could be shortened, or the text adapted with simplified language (or picture symbols, if necessary).

This information is very important in the discussion of a student's educational setting. Often the myth that these students need an alternate curriculum is used incorrectly as an argument against educating the student in the general education classroom. See [*Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting!* \(TIES Center Brief #2\)](#).

Look Fors

Table 2 lists some quick ways for you to determine whether your child with the most significant cognitive disabilities is being provided meaningful

¹Guidance from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), U.S. Department of Education (<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcitrs/guidance-on-fape-11-17-2015.pdf>)

Table 2. Look Fors

You Should See	You Should NOT See
Instruction for the student with significant cognitive disabilities that is based on the same grade-level standards as for all other students in that grade. The instruction should use a Universal Design for Learning ¹ approach to make lessons accessible and effective for the whole class. If the IEP contains some basic math or reading goals or functional goals, they should be worked on in the context of a grade-level lesson and other inclusive school activities.	Instruction, including assignments and resources, is based on content standards from a lower grade.
Instruction for the student with significant cognitive disabilities in all subject areas provided to students who do not participate in the AA-AAAS.	Subject areas taught are limited to the content tested by the AA-AAAS, or to that content plus a few other areas (for example, art) but not all areas provided to other students.
Instruction and instructional materials that are tailored to the individual student with significant cognitive disabilities, using adapted materials as appropriate, accommodations, and modifications when needed.	A separate curriculum designed to be used in the same way for all students who participate in the AA-AAAS, without individualized decisions about adapted materials, accommodations, and modifications.

access to the general education curriculum.

If unclear about whether the *Look Fors* are present, ask to see the curriculum for your child’s grade and compare the content to what is being used for your son or daughter with the most significant cognitive disabilities who participates in the AA-AAAS.

Summary

Access to the general education curriculum is critical to a meaningful education for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Federal law says

that students who take the AA-AAAS are supposed to be prepared to pursue postsecondary education and competitive integrated employment. Determining that the student who participates in the state’s AA-AAAS has access to, and makes progress in, the grade-level general education curriculum requires that parents become familiar with the instruction that is being provided. They must also ensure that their student is given the opportunity to master as much of the grade-level general education curriculum as possible, with the help of any needed modifications, accommodations, or adapted materials.

¹Universal Design for Learning is a framework for instruction that provides multiple means of representation, expression (or action), and engagement. For more information see www.cast.org.

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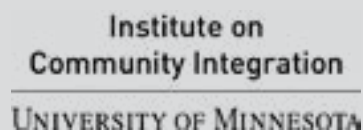
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