



Curriculum & Instruction Fact Sheet



Curriculum and instruction can be designed to make sure that students with disabilities have meaningful opportunities to achieve the high academic standards established for all children. Instead of beginning with a separate curriculum for students with disabilities, educators can design lessons based on the general curriculum and standards.¹ "Right from the start" instruction can be planned to ensure that the general curriculum is accessible and challenging for a diverse group of students.

For the purposes of this paper, the writer uses the following:

Curriculum usually means the content or subject matter – the ideas, skills, and concepts that students are taught in a particular subject area, such as math or language arts. Curriculum describes what students learn.

Instruction generally describes the teaching methods and learning activities that a teacher uses to present the curriculum. A teacher has many different ways to teach students a given topic or unit. Instruction describes how educators teach the curriculum.

What does the law say?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides that all children with disabilities be

appropriately involved in and progress in the general curriculum, and that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities must be educated with their nondisabled peers. The law presumes that children with disabilities can learn in regular classrooms with their nondisabled peers. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) must include an explanation of the extent, if any, to which a child will not be educated with his/her nondisabled peers. Generally,

¹ The *PEER Information Brief, "Raising Standards of Learning: Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Education"* discusses content and performance standards which most states have established as part of standards-based education reform. As used in this **PEER Fact Sheet**, content standards are general descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should gain in various subject areas. Performance standards are definitions of what students have to know and be able to do to show that they are proficient in the skills and knowledge.



regardless of the educational setting, the child's curriculum and IEP goals and objectives are based on the general curriculum and standards. Research has shown that regular education

classrooms can use instructional methods that enable students with all types of disabilities to participate and excel in the general curriculum.²



Stages of curriculum and instruction design³

Over the past 30 years, the way curriculum is delivered to students with disabilities is generally thought to have evolved through four distinct stages. Schools throughout the country may be at any stage in the process of designing curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Stage 1 Students with disabilities receive specialized curriculum and instruction in a special education classroom. *E.g., Students with disabilities in a separate, self-contained classroom work on a specialized reading program or receive resource-room assistance in math.*

Stage 2 Students with disabilities receive specialized curriculum and instruction in a general education classroom. *E.g., In a chemistry lab, a student with disabilities washes test tubes in the back of the room.*

Stage 3 Students with disabilities participate in the general curriculum in regular education classrooms, with individualized accommodations, modifications, and supports. *E.g., In a fourth-grade classroom where students are writing reports on Iowa history, a student with disabilities makes a collage of historic buildings and personalities.*

Stage 4 Students with disabilities participate in the general curriculum in regular education classrooms where a range of instructional strategies are used to address the various needs of students with and without disabilities. Therefore, students with disabilities participate in the

general curriculum without individualized accommodations. *E.g., In a tenth-grade science classroom studying cell structure and function, the teacher provides a variety of materials (e.g., text books suitable for a range of reading levels, videos, computer simulation programs, plastic models, and pop-up picture books), uses a variety of teaching methods, and asks students to show their knowledge using their learning style of choice.*

Curriculum and instruction in Stage 4 schools are designed to promote equity and excellence in education. In Stage 4 schools, students with disabilities are able to master skills and content in the general curriculum subject areas. From the onset, a variety of instructional approaches are used to enable all students to meet high standards in different ways. Units and lessons are designed with student diversity in mind.

Clearly, teachers and schools at Stage 4 hold a very different set of beliefs from those held by traditional schools, and those beliefs are directly reflected in how curricula and instruction are designed. These beliefs⁴ generally include:

² McGregor, G. and Vogelsberg, R.T. (1998). *Inclusive Schooling Practices: Pedagogical and Research Foundations*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

³ These stages are part of the conceptual framework set forth by the author; they are not included in or required by IDEA.

⁴ Onosko, J. & Jorgensen, C. (1997). Unit and lesson planning in the inclusive classroom. In C. Jorgensen, *Restructuring high schools for all students: Taking inclusion to the next level* (pp. 71-105). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

1. All students have value and unique gifts to offer their school.
2. All students can think and learn.
3. Diversity is to be embraced and celebrated.
4. Effective teaching for students with disabilities is good teaching for all students.
5. Students learn best when studying interesting and challenging topics that they find personally meaningful.
6. Students learn best when they are actively and collaboratively learning with their classmates and their teacher.
7. Students differ in the ways that they most effectively learn and show what they know.

In addition, the author characterizes Stage 4 schools as believing that schools should be held accountable for *all* children achieving to high standards. Based on these beliefs, curricula, instruction, and standards in Stage 4 schools differ dramatically from those in schools whose personnel do not share these beliefs. The table at right displays characteristics of curricula developed to challenge and value all students.



How can parents advocate to restructure curriculum and instruction for their child?

1. To Learn about the general curriculum and standards, request copies of the curriculum and standards for your child's grade. Begin with the general curriculum offered to all students as the basis for writing your child's IEP goals and objectives.
2. Ask the school to arrange for a complete evaluation. You may ask that the evaluation include an assessment of your child's learning strengths and weaknesses, including a description of the kinds of learning activities and teaching styles that will

Characteristics of Curriculum and Instruction Developed to Challenge and Include All Students

Standards

- A common core of learning standards has been set that applies to all students.
- Performance criteria are personalized for each student.
- Learning standards are expressed in terms that promote the highest levels of expectation and achievement for each student.
- Learning standards promote each student's entry into post-secondary education, typical jobs, active citizenship, and community membership.

Thematic Curriculum

- Provocative "real world" subject matter is chosen that appeals to the interests of all students.
- Major units of study are framed with "essential questions," problem statements, or compelling issues that apply to all students.

Learning Opportunities and Instructional Design

- Students are given choices in the learning resources they use, project topics, and group membership.
- A variety of learning materials are available in different formats and at different reading levels that match students' interests and learning styles.
- Small groups and cooperative learning structures are frequently used.

Learning Opportunities and Instructional Design (continued)

- The primary work of learning is accomplished by students actively thinking, speculating, researching, debating, discussing, and responding rather than by teachers lecturing.
- Modifications and adaptations — particularly learning and communication technology — are available for any student who needs them.

Demonstration of Learning

- Options are given for how students demonstrate what they know and can do. Students are encouraged to progress from using comfortable styles of demonstration to those that are personally challenging.

Evaluation and Grading

- Evaluation consists primarily of conversations with (and among) students about the quality of their work relative to common standards and individualized student progress.
- Students with disabilities are included in statewide and districtwide assessments with whatever accommodations are necessary for them to demonstrate what they know and are able to do.

promote success. Request a reading assessment from a qualified teacher.

3. Ensure that specific learning conditions, such as participation in cooperative learning groups, are incorporated into the short-term objectives of the IEP.

4. Choose teachers whose teaching styles best match your child's needs. You might also request to interview or observe teachers to identify an appropriate match, or enlist the help of an administrator to assign your child to a teacher whose teaching style is suited to your child. Remember that one regular education teacher, under certain circumstances, must be a member of the Team.

5. Make sure that the IEP team includes in the IEP the modifications and supports your child needs to be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum, as required by IDEA. Examples of modifications are:

personalizing the way students show what they know (e.g., multiple choice instead of essay); providing assistive technology, such as an augmentative communication system; individualizing the amount of work required; or assigning a written report instead of an oral presentation. The IEP should also specify the supports and services school personnel will need to teach your child effectively, and the learning environment your child needs to progress in the general curriculum.

6. Make sure your child's IEP addresses how s/he will participate in statewide or districtwide assessments and lists necessary accommodations, as required by IDEA.



How can parents advocate for systemwide curriculum and instruction reform?

1. Learn about curriculum design, ability grouping, tracking, and effective instruction.

2. Request information about the design of curriculum and instruction from state or local groups (e.g., Parent Training and Information (PTI)⁵ centers, Protection and Advocacy (P&A) organizations, legal services, universities, or state departments of education). Request assistance in working with your school community.

3. Join local committees or task forces addressing school reform issues in your community.

4. Contact your state department of education and request participation in development of the State Improvement Grants, if your state is applying for this grant.

5. Participate in your school's site-based council or run for a position on your local school board.

6. Participate in your school's PTA and join professional groups (e.g., Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, TASH, the national PTA). Encourage curriculum and instruction reform to address the needs of all students. Talk about these issues with the parents of your child's classmates.

7. Monitor state and districtwide assessment results to ensure that students with disabilities fully and fairly participate and that test results are used to improve curriculum and instruction.

Information in this **Fact Sheet** is based on the *PEER Information Brief*, "Curriculum and Instruction: Key Strategies to Promote Equity and Excellence" by Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Ph.D.

⁵ Each state has at least one PTI funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education. PTIs provide parents of children with disabilities information about their rights under federal and state special education laws and other aspects of raising a child with a disability. For your state's PTI, call National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) at 800-695-0285.

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