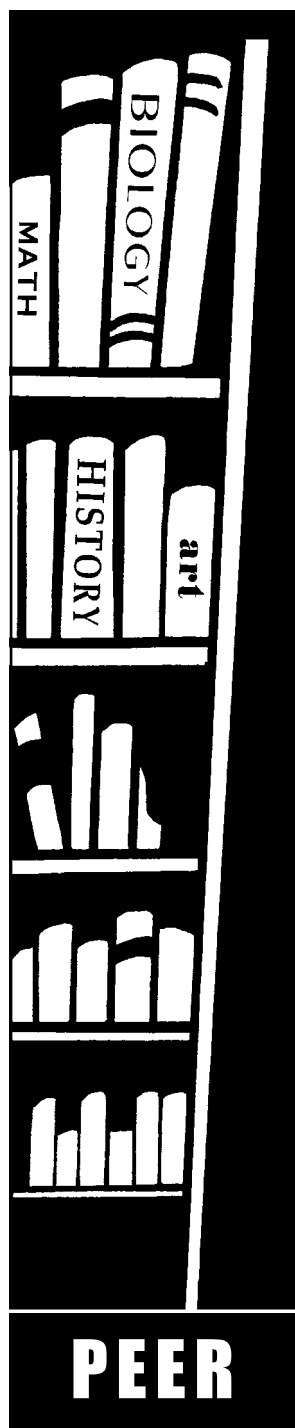


Raising Standards of Learning Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Education

prepared by Janet R. Vohs, Julia K. Landau, J.D., & Carolyn A. Romano, J.D.



This *PEER Information Brief* is about standards-based education reform and students with disabilities. Its purpose is to give parents of children with disabilities an introduction to some of the key ideas behind standards-based education reform efforts. It describes the role of standards in improving education and how participation in state standards and the general education curriculum can increase educational opportunities for children with disabilities.

It may seem at first that general education reform efforts have little to do with students with disabilities. After all, parents and their organizations have pushed for and won tremendous advances in education for children with disabilities over the past 25 years. Most parents of children with disabilities have come to rely on state and federal special education laws for guarantees that their children with disabilities will receive an appropriate education. For years, these laws have detailed the steps that must be taken to develop a child's Individualized Education Program, including rules for parent participation and the requirement that, to the maximum extent appropriate, a child with a disability be educated along with his or her nondisabled peers in the regular classroom, with appropriate supplementary aids and services. Yet, with national attention focused on reforming education for all students, it is critical now that issues for students with disabilities be included in the reform agenda. Therefore, this *PEER Information Brief* provides ideas and tools that parents can use to continue to build upon their efforts to improve education for children individually and in program and policy development.

Peer Information Briefs are written primarily for parents of students with disabilities, although others who have a concern for quality education for students with disabilities may also find them useful.

Understanding Standards

To begin to make sense of standards, assessment, and other aspects of education reform, parents must first

believe, absolutely and without apology, that their children with disabilities have a right to a *quality* education.





Remember, it was not until the passage of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (now known as IDEA) was enacted in 1975¹ that students with disabilities had a comprehensive statutory right to an education. Before that important victory, access to formal education for many students with disabilities depended upon charity or upon the whims of local or state legislative initiatives. For students with disabilities, education was the privilege of a fortunate few, not a right. While compulsory attendance laws required all other children to attend school, the schoolhouse door could legally be closed to children with disabilities.

Since 1975, there has been great progress in the education of students with disabilities. Today, the right of children with even the most significant disabilities to an education has been upheld by the courts. But *access* to the schools and classrooms, even to specific therapies and treatments, is not always the same as access to a *quality* education. And today, parents of children with disabilities are beginning to shift their attention from issues of access to issues of quality.

In 1983, the entire nation turned its attention to the quality of education when *A Nation at Risk* was published. The country was shocked to learn that education in general was not preparing students to meet the demands of modern society. Special education, although less than 10

years old, was not immune from criticism either. Yes, the wholesale institutionalization and discrimination of the 1970s had ceased, but many students with disabilities were — and continue to be — excluded from regular education's offerings altogether or given a watered-down curriculum. Consequently, students with disabilities continue to be far less likely than their nondisabled peers to graduate from high school, to participate in post-secondary education, or to be employed after their school years.² Clearly, further reform in special education was urgently needed as well.

Most recently, Congress responded to the need for reform in special education with the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA)*. Congress amended the law to explicitly require states to establish goals for the performance of children with disabilities that are consistent with other goals and standards set for children by the states. In its introductory comments to one section of the new law, Congress emphasized that the changes to IDEA were based on decades of sound research and experience:

Research, demonstration, and practice over the past 20 years in special education and related disciplines have . . . demonstrated that an effective educational system now and in the future must . . .

(A) maintain high academic standards and clear performance goals for children with disabilities, consistent with the standards and expectations for all students in the educational system, and provide for appropriate and effective strategies and

¹ The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)*, also referred to as P.L. 94-142, is both a civil rights law (barring exclusion of children with disabilities from school) and an education law. Today this law is called the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*.

² Senate Report to accompany S.717, *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997*, Sec. V, p. 5.

PEER

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methods to ensure that students who are children with disabilities have maximum opportunities to achieve those standards and goals;

(B) create a system that fully addresses the needs of all students, including children with disabilities by *addressing the needs of children with disabilities in carrying out educational reform activities.*³
[Emphasis added.]

In addition, IDEA now requires schools to ensure that all students with disabilities be involved in and progress in the general curriculum. Congress stressed the importance of this requirement by emphasizing it on the first page of the introduction

(called “Findings”) to the new law:

Over 20 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by . . . having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible.⁴

Together, the IDEA amendments and education reform efforts provide strategies and tools for improving the quality of education and increasing academic expectations and achievement for all children, with and without disabilities.

A Key Strategy for Reform

Start with Standards

Standards have received much attention in education reform discussions. In fact, the efforts across the nation to improve education by first setting standards is called “standards-based education reform.” The report of the Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities describes the purpose of the standards movement as follows:

This movement seeks to improve educational quality by setting high content standards that define the knowledge and skills that teachers should teach and students should learn, and by holding educators and students accountable for ambitious performance standards that set the expectation for proficiency.⁵

³ 20 U.S.C. §1451(a)(5) - 6)(A-B) (“Findings and purpose” to Part D (National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities) of IDEA.)

Standards, therefore, are seen as a way to come to a common understanding of what students should be learning and teachers should be teaching in school. The move toward using standards as the beginning point for education is based on several important beliefs. First is the belief that *all* students can achieve to higher levels *if* expectations are set high, *if* standards are clearly defined, and *if* teaching is designed to support the achievement of students. While standards differ greatly from state to state, they share a common purpose: They lay out the essential core of knowledge of what students should be

⁴ 20 U.S.C. §1401(c)(5)(A).

⁵ Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities. (1997). McDonnell, L.M., McLaughlin, M.J., & Morison, P. (Eds.) *Educating One & All: Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Reform*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, p. 1.





taught. They also share two other ideas: standards should be high, and they should apply to all students.

The intended result of standards-based education is that all students, including students with disabilities, will learn more.

The Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities stressed that while most standards-based reforms strive to apply the same high standards to all students, with and without disabilities, “for many

students with disabilities, this represents a striking change.”⁶

One important change that comes with setting standards is the shift of attention toward the actual *results* of education. In special education, tremendous energy has been devoted to developing IEPs and to securing kinds and amounts of special services or special placements. Little has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of

⁶ Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities. (1997). p. 2.

FOUR ESSENTIAL STEPS TO STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION REFORM

- 1 Set the standards.** Standards-based education reform initiatives begin with the setting of standards. With standards, states decide first what every child should learn. Standards are simply statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling. Most states have already set standards or are in the process of doing so.
- 2 Develop the curriculum.** States or local districts develop specific curriculum based on the standards. The curriculum defines what learning should be accomplished in what grades. The curriculum is a further elaboration of the standards. In some states, standards and curriculum are virtually the same.
- 3 Design individual courses and instructional strategies.** School districts, schools, or individual teachers may be responsible for deciding the day-to-day content of courses and instruction, including the materials and methods best suited for their students.
- 4 Assess the performance of schools and students.** Assessments based on content and performance standards are an important step toward being able to measure the actual results of education and hold schools accountable for the actual results of schooling.

the education that is provided. Focusing on standards can help to expand the focus to educational results, rather than only on the inputs and process of education. In general education terms, this focus could mean that, rather than judging the success of schools based only on the number of computers, class size, and type of services, schools would be judged based on the actual achievement of students. Of course, simply setting high standards is in itself insufficient. Ensuring that students have the proper support to reach high standards requires high levels of teaching and quality schools. Both high standards *and* high quality schools and teaching are necessary to significantly reform education.

The standards developed by most states focus mainly on academic content in language arts, mathematics, science, and other core academic subjects. They are lists of what the state has decided is most important for students to be taught in each subject area. Many states have also written standards for other life areas such as citizenship, work readiness, and health.

Content and Performance Standards

In discussions of standards-based reform, two kinds of standards are usually referred to: content standards and performance standards. These standards are defined in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* enacted by Congress in 1994:

- **Content standards** are “broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a

Even within typical subject areas such as reading and math, standards can vary tremendously. Some states have developed broad standards which establish general learning goals. Other states have developed narrow standards which are more specific. The decision about the specificity of standards ultimately reflects the educational philosophy of the decisionmakers. Many groups believe standards should be broad to encourage local creativity and flexibility in meeting the standards. Other groups believe standards should be narrow to the point that teachers know exactly what to teach. It has been suggested that when standards are broad, it is easier to incorporate all learners, including students with disabilities. However, *students with disabilities can be incorporated into any type of standard, broad or narrow.*

particular subject area.”⁷ Sometimes content standards are called “curriculum standards,” “curriculum frameworks,” or “essential learning.” They provide guidelines for what schools should teach; they define the overall goals of student learning.

⁷ *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. P.L.103-227, §3(4).

An example of a narrow standard in science is: “Students describe the basic processes of photosynthesis and respiration and their importance to life.”

An example of a broad standard in science is: “Students . . . will acquire a solid foundation which includes knowledge of . . . characteristics and interactions of living organisms.”



- **Performance standards** are “concrete examples and explicit definitions of what students have to know and be able to do to demonstrate that [they] are proficient in the skills and knowledge framed by the content standards.”⁸ Performance standards describe how well a student must

perform to demonstrate achievement of the content standards. Usually, they indicate how well the student must read, write, calculate, and so on. Performance standards are the link between the content standards and assessment.

⁸ *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. P.L.103-227, §3(9).

Content and Performance Standards for Communication Standards in Writing

from Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities

| Content Standard | Performance Standard |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1.6 Students' independent writing demonstrates command of appropriate English conventions, including grammar, usage, and mechanics.</p> | <p>This is evident when students</p> <p>PreK-Grade 4 a. Use clear sentences, correct syntax, and grade-appropriate mechanics so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p> <p>Grades 5-8 aa. Use correct grammar; employ a variety of sentence structures; follow conventional spelling; use correct mechanics; display few errors or patterns of errors, relative to length and complexity; make only intentional, effective departure from conventions.</p> <p>Grades 9-12 [aa. from above applies.]</p> |
| <p>1.7 In written responses to literature, students show understanding of reading; connect what has been read to the broader world of ideas, concepts, and issues; and make judgments about the text.</p> | <p>This is evident when students</p> <p>PreK-Grade 4 a. Connect plot/ideas/concepts to experience, including other literature; b. go beyond retelling of plot by reflecting on what is read and making connections to broader ideas, concepts, and issue; and c. Support judgments about what has been read by drawing from experience, other literature, and evidence from the text, including direct quotations.</p> <p>Grades 5-8 [a. through c. above applies, plus] d. Clearly articulate a point of view, or state a firm judgment about the piece to be discussed; e. Engage the reader effectively and provide closure; and f. Maintain a sense of audience by addressing the reader's possible questions.</p> <p>Grades 9-12 [a. through f. above applies, plus] g. Establish interpretive claims and support them.</p> |

High Standards and Students with Disabilities

Perhaps our future health and well being of our society and future generations depends on developing every mind that we have. Imagine, for example, what would happen if we viewed every mind as a source of genius. Imagine what our schools might be like if we resolved to offer all students the intellectual and social tools that they need to take on the great issues of our time. Imagine what our classrooms might be like if we began to ensure that every one of our students was equipped to play a role in discovering a cure for AIDS or Alzheimer's disease, negotiating a lasting peace in the Middle East, redesigning our urban and rural communities for environmental safety and economic prosperity, eradicating homelessness in America and starvation in the Sahara, or writing the great symphonies, dramas, or poetry of the twenty-first century.⁹

Standards-based education represents a change in expectations. Instead of expecting students to achieve *minimum* competencies, the standards movement is about setting *high expectations for all students*. Yet, for the most part, students with disabilities have not been considered in the development of high, challenging, world-class standards. Because special education has developed as a separate system, removed from general education, many of the groups that are setting standards consider students with disabilities to be a "special interest group" with little relevance to mainstream education. Often standards-setting groups have not even

consulted with people with disabilities, educators, students, or others with relevant expertise.

Parents of students with disabilities are eager to have their children achieve high standards. Yet, because so many students with disabilities have been denied access to the general curriculum and excluded from assessments, parents have questions and concerns about how their children can be included in school reform efforts.

IDEA now provides important direction for schools and parents. The law requires IEP teams to develop concrete strategies for linking IEPs to the general curriculum, which should reflect relevant state standards. Therefore, parents, as members of IEP teams, must be involved in making decisions about their child, the general curriculum, and standards. A child's IEP goals and objectives should be directly related to state standards because these standards are directly linked to the curriculum being used in the child's school.

Standards provide a mechanism to hold schools accountable for the educational progress of students with disabilities. When IEP goals and objectives embody the high standards and results established by education reform, parents can then use the IEP to ensure that the school system provides the special education and related services necessary to achieve those goals and objectives. Improved results for



⁹ Wheelock, A. (1992). *Crossing the Tracks*. New York: The New Press, p. 284.



children with disabilities will, in part, be demonstrated by progress made towards IEP goals which incorporate state standards that are reflected in the general curriculum.

Similarly, the requirement in IDEA that students with disabilities be included in state and districtwide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations where necessary, provides another tool to encourage access to the same standards set for other students. Developed at the state and district level,

these assessments are usually aligned with the state standards. Because schools (and districts) are held accountable for the quality of results for all students' performance on the assessments, schools typically develop their curriculum and invest their resources in ways that will help students improve their scores. Now that students with disabilities must be included in these assessments, with appropriate accommodations where necessary, they, too, should benefit from the investment of resources.

The Process for Including Students with Disabilities in State Standards

The *IDEA Amendments of 1997* set forth procedures for IEP teams to ensure that children with disabilities are included in the general curriculum which should reflect state standards, and that they participate in state and districtwide assessments of student achievement.

✓ *First, the IEP must specify how the child's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general curriculum.*

This crucial first step enables all IEP team members to address the specific ways a child's disability impacts his or her ability to learn the specific content standards as set forth in the curriculum for the different subject areas.

✓ *Next, the IEP team must state what the measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or*

short-term objectives, are that will meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability and enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum.

The IEP team must develop goals and benchmarks or short-term objectives that are directly tied to the general curriculum. Therefore, IEP teams should develop individualized goals and benchmarks or short-term objectives that appropriately reflect the general curriculum and the goals articulated in the state standards.

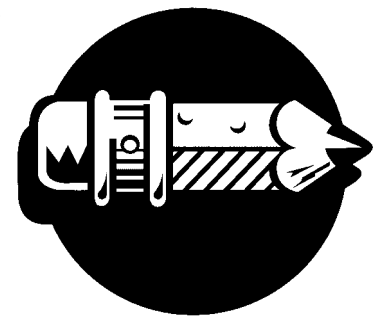
The IEPs of students with all types and levels of significance of disabilities should reflect general education standards. IEP teams should develop individualized performance standards as necessary and appropriate for an individual child. Of course, many students will require

additional goals (such as independent living or vocational goals) not necessarily referenced to the academic standards. Yet, even work on these goals can usually be accomplished within the context of the general curriculum. No student should be denied the opportunity to participate in the academic life of the school community.⁹

✓ *The IEP must describe the specific special education and related services, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, or supports for school personnel necessary for the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum.*

IEP teams must consider the full range of services, supports, accommodations, and modifications necessary for children with disabilities to progress in meeting a state's education reform standards. The services provided must be directly linked to achievement of the results described in the general curriculum.

When standards are used for the purpose of keeping track of how well schools are educating students, it is important that students with disabilities are included. Standards usually provide a common reference point that can help paint a true picture of how all students perform. Students with disabilities would be expected to demonstrate a range of performance, similar to the range demonstrated by nondisabled students.¹⁰



Making an Impact — Step by Step

Being part of shaping decisions about standards can help ensure that students with disabilities participate in education reform. Parents can provide valuable contributions and shape discussions and policies around standards and students with disabilities in many ways. Local decisions about standards should be made by a group of stakeholders which include parents, educators, and individuals with disabilities.

Listed below are two strategies parents

may use to ensure full participation of children with disabilities in standards.

The first strategy focuses on your child's individualized education program (IEP) while the second focuses on making an impact at the state policy level.

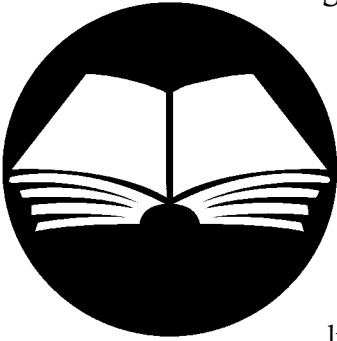
Your Child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Step 1

Obtain copies of your state or district standards.

⁹ As a field, special education has often paid little attention to the content of the general curriculum. The expectation has been that students with disabilities need a wholly individualized, largely functional, curriculum. The new IDEA requirements now open the door to high academic achievement for many students denied this opportunity in the past.

¹⁰ The *PEER Information Brief: "Assessment — A Key Component of Education Reform"* is available from the PEER Project, Federation for Children with Special Needs, 1135 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02120; 617-236-7210.



Step 2

Obtain copies of your school's curriculum which will detail how your school plans to meet the standards.

Step 3

Review the standards and curriculum for your child's age group.

Step 4

Review your child's current IEP goals and objectives.

Step 5

Think about any changes in IEP goals, objectives, or benchmarks that are necessary to ensure that your child is involved in and progresses in the general curriculum.

Step 6

Make sure that the IEP team develops new goals and objectives which reflect participation in the general curriculum.

Step 7

Make sure that the IEP specifies any services and supports that are necessary for your child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum.

State Policy

One

Determine whether your State Department of Education has developed state standards (which may be called curriculum standards, curriculum frameworks, etc.)

Two

Review your state standards to determine

whether children with disabilities are specifically included, excluded, or not mentioned.

Three

Make sure that your state includes children with disabilities within the standards developed for general education. Make sure that your state does not try to develop separate standards for groups of children with disabilities.

Four

Find out whether any educators with special education or inclusion expertise, parents of children with disabilities, or individuals with disabilities helped to develop the standards.

Five

Work with your state's Parent Training and Information (PTI) center,¹¹ Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Organization, Developmental Disabilities (DD) Council, and/or State Advisory Council (SAC) to propose any changes necessary to ensure that your state standards reflect the learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities.

Six

Work with your State Department of Education or local school district to ensure that IEP goals and objectives fully reflect state standards. Consider whether changes to the IEP form developed by the state or district would help IEP teams fully incorporate the state standards.

¹¹ To locate the parent training and information center in your state, call National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) at 800-695-0285, or visit the Federation's web site www.fcsn.org.

Some Final Words

At first blush, “state standards” may seem unrelated to what is going on in your local school. Education reform may not seem important for your child's education.

Yet, as the nation moves further along the path of standards-based education reform, essential questions of quality of educational opportunity are being discussed. It is vital that parents know that state and federal education reform statutes call for high standards for all. Therefore, once states decide on standards-based reform, they must include students with disabilities in

the reform agenda. This means that students with disabilities must be given opportunities to participate successfully in standards-based education and to obtain the benefits of standards-based education reform. Parents have a critical role to play in individual, school district, and state decision-making. Decisions about standards — what students need to know and be able to do — are at the core of a wide range of educational decisions and reforms that have a direct impact on all students.

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The PEER Project is grateful to Martha Thurlow from the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) for her comments and contributions to this *Information Brief*.

* The NCEO was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

NCEO offers a variety of materials and services for state personnel, educators, parents, and others concerned with the education outcomes of students with disabilities. To receive a copy of the NCEO publications list, please contact NCEO at:

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This publication has been reviewed and approved by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). Funding for this publication was provided by the Office of Special Education Programs, OSERS, U.S. Department of Education, through grant #H029K50208.