



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Frequently Asked Questions About Access to the General Curriculum

What is “access to the general curriculum”?

Curriculum means what children are being taught throughout the school day. The general curriculum means what general education students are being taught. In Massachusetts, we have curriculum frameworks. Curriculum frameworks are written standards or descriptions of what will be taught in various subjects at various grade levels. When students with disabilities have the opportunity to learn the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers, be involved in and make progress in that curriculum, then we can say that they have access to the general curriculum. Special educators in Massachusetts can help determine how a student with a disability can access the general curriculum. Students will need some changes to content, different ways of learning and/or different ways of showing what they have learned.

Does the law require schools to provide access to the general curriculum to students with disabilities?

Yes, the law requires access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. “Congress finds...almost 30 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 to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible, in order to meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible.” IDEA 2004

Why is access to the general curriculum important?

Historically, children with special needs only had limited if any access to the general curriculum. Students with disabilities were taught an alternative curriculum. Thus, these individuals were not able to progress to their full potential. Now there is one core curriculum for every student.

Is access to the general curriculum part of a free and appropriate public education?

Yes, it is. Under both federal and state law, all eligible students with disabilities must be provided a free and appropriate public education or FAPE. This includes special education and related services:

- ◆ Provided at no cost to parents
- ◆ Meeting the standards of the Massachusetts Department of Education, that is,
- ◆ Addressing the state curriculum frameworks
- ◆ Including students from 3 to 22
- ◆ Provided in compliance with the students’ IEP

Under FAPE, the IEP must specify all special education programs and services needed to support the child to:

1. Advance appropriately towards IEP goals
2. Make effective progress in the general curriculum and meet MCAS standards
3. Develop his/her individual educational potential
4. Participate with non-disabled children to the maximum extent appropriate
5. Participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities
6. Make meaningful educational progress and demonstrate significant learning in all areas affected by the child's disability.

How will my child be able to make progress in the general curriculum?

Massachusetts' special education regulations 603 CMR 28.01(3) state that the purpose of these regulations is "to ensure that eligible Massachusetts students receive special education services designed to develop the student's individual educational potential in the least restrictive environment." In other words, your child can make progress in the general curriculum through special education supports.

How will my child do well on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System or MCAS?

MCAS tests what is taught according to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Students demonstrate what they know and what they can do. In order to do well on MCAS, every child must have had the chance to learn the same information. In other words, your child needs access to the general curriculum in order to do well on MCAS.

How can I get a copy of the Massachusetts' Curriculum Frameworks?

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks can be downloaded from the MA Department of Education Website at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html>. They should also be available as reference materials at your child's school.

How will the IEP help my child access the general curriculum?

The federal law IDEA 2004 states that students with disabilities should work on learning the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. An IEP can be written which ensures access to the general curriculum by considering the present level of educational performance and by allowing as much time in the general education classroom as possible or in the least restrictive environment for your child. The IEP does not design a curriculum, but rather, the IEP designs the services that students need to make progress in the general curriculum, and to help them to reach their potential. To enable students with disabilities to access the information in the general curriculum, IEP Teams may find it necessary to identify accommodations, modifications or services to meet specific learning needs.

What can I do to as part of the IEP team to ensure that my child accesses and makes progress in the general curriculum?

In summary, as a parent, you can ensure access by being knowledgeable about the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, your school's curriculum, your child's needs and your child's IEP. Request that an educator be invited to the team meeting. The regular educator understands the general curriculum and can discuss how your child can be included. Be sure that the IEP team has updated evaluations in any areas necessary, and that the information is incorporated into the IEP. You should be an active participant in articulating your vision including how your child can access the general curriculum in and out of the regular education classroom. You should also be an active participant in discussing what supports: accommodations, modifications and/or specific services can make that vision a reality.