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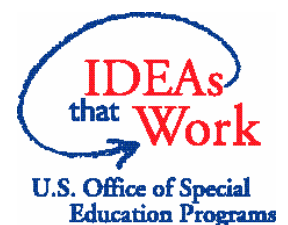
Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities

A Brief for Parents and Teachers

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Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities: A Brief for Parents and Teachers

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Introduction

In 1997, Congress made a number of important changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One of the most significant changes is the requirement that students with disabilities receive *access to the general curriculum*. Under the new law, students with disabilities must (1) *have access to* the general curriculum; (2) *be involved in* the general curriculum; and (3) *progress in* the general curriculum.

The purpose of this brief is to explain the meanings of the terms access, involvement, and progress in relation to the general curriculum. These new requirements have the potential to lead to improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Who qualifies as a “student with a disability”?

In order to qualify for special education services under IDEA '97, a student must satisfy two requirements: (1) the student must have one of the disabilities specified in the law; and (2) the disability results in the need for special education and related services. IDEA '97 lists the disability categories that may entitle a child to receive special education and related services:

- Mental retardation
- Hearing impairments, including deafness
- Speech or language impairments
- Visual impairments, including blindness
- Emotional disturbance
- Orthopedic impairments
- Autism
- Traumatic brain injury
- Other health impairments
- Specific learning disabilities

In addition, a child aged three through nine who is experiencing developmental delays, as defined by the State, may be eligible for services under IDEA at the discretion of the State and local educational agency.

What is the “general curriculum”?

The regulations implementing IDEA '97 describe the *general curriculum* as the same curriculum as that established for students without disabilities. The general curriculum can be thought of as “the overall plan for instruction adopted by a school or school system. Its purpose is to guide instructional activities and provide consistency of expectations, content, methods, and outcomes” (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, and Jackson, 2002). In recent years, the general curriculum has come to be influenced more and more by the adoption of standards by many states, and local school districts (Nolet and McLaughlin, 2000).

What does “access” mean?

(1) Access before IDEA '97

Congress passed the first national special education law in 1975. At the time, Congress estimated that one million children with disabilities were being excluded from public schools. The purpose of the 1975 law was to give children with disabilities the right to a public education, individually tailored to address disability-specific needs. This initial law focused on providing students with disabilities with *access to special education services* and *physical access* to school buildings. The 1975 law did not require schools to provide a specific level of education to children with disabilities. During these early years, the concepts of mainstreaming and inclusion also evolved, but tended to center on the placement of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom without attention to necessary supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, and supports.

By the early 1990s, many improvements had been made in the education of children with disabilities (*see* Table 1, page 4). Increased numbers of students with disabilities were graduating from high school and obtaining post-school jobs (U.S. Department of Education, 1995; Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, Hebbeler, and Newman, 1993). In addition, the number of children living in separate institutions had decreased dramatically. Children with the most significant disabilities were attending public schools and had the opportunity to interact on a social basis with their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

In spite of these positive changes, however, students with disabilities still faced many difficulties. For example, research showed that students with disabilities tended to fail classes and drop out of school at a higher rate than students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). In passing IDEA '97,

Congress explained, “Despite the progress, the promise of the law has not been fulfilled” (H.R. Rep. No. 105-95, at 85 (1997)).

Table 1. Education of children with disabilities prior to 1975 and in 1993-94

Prior to 1975	1993-94
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,000,000 children with disabilities were excluded from public schools • Families often had to find education for their children in settings not part of the public schools, far from their homes and at their own expense • More than 50% of children with disabilities did not receive appropriate educational services • Many children who attended public schools had undetected disabilities that inhibited their educational progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12% of elementary and secondary students attending public schools received special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) • More than 95% of children with disabilities were educated in “regular school buildings” as opposed to separate facilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) • 43.4% of students with disabilities (aged 6-21) were educated in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) • 16% of students with disabilities completed four years of college or more (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, Table 3.1, citing Louis Harris and Associates, 1994)

Note. All of the information in column 1 is from 20 U.S.C. §1400(c)(2).

(2) Access according to IDEA ‘97

The meaning of access in IDEA ‘97 far exceeds the earlier definition of access and goes beyond the concepts of mainstreaming and inclusion. Under IDEA ‘97, students with disabilities have a right to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum. IDEA ‘97 has therefore raised expectations for the performance of students with disabilities. Providing students with disabilities with access to the general curriculum, however, is only the first step. **Involvement in** and **progress in** the general curriculum can be viewed as giving the specific details about how access is to be achieved.

What does “involvement in” the general curriculum mean?

IDEA ‘97 states that students with disabilities must **be involved in** the general curriculum, and the law includes several requirements that help explain this involvement: (1) ensuring that the student’s IEP goals address how the student will be involved in and progress in the general curriculum; (2) specifying in the student’s IEP appropriate supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, or supports that will help the student be involved in and progress in the general curriculum; and (3) explaining in the

student's IEP why he or she will not participate with children without disabilities in the regular classroom.

(1) Ensuring that the student's IEP goals address the student's involvement in and progress in the general curriculum

A student's individualized education program (IEP) plays a major role in helping the student be involved in the general curriculum. Under IDEA '97, a student's IEP must state how the student's disability affects his or her involvement in and progress in the general curriculum and must contain measurable annual goals (including benchmarks or short-term objectives) that address how the student will be involved in and progress in the general curriculum. This is a marked change from the past when IEP goals, although based on the specific needs of the individual student, did not necessarily relate to the general curriculum. In order to help align IEP goals with the general curriculum, IDEA '97 also requires that the student's regular education teacher (if the student is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment), as well as a representative from the district who is knowledgeable about the general curriculum, be members of the IEP team.

(2) Specifying in the student's IEP appropriate supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, or supports

The child's IEP must specify the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will enable the student to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum. In the past, students with disabilities were sometimes placed in the regular education classroom for the sake of inclusion without any help or support. IDEA '97 addressed this problem by requiring that supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, and supports play a more important role in a student's education.

Supplementary aids and services are aids, services and other supports that enable the student to be educated together with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. In the field of special education, there is an important distinction between the terms accommodation and modification. Generally, an *accommodation* is a curricular, environmental, or testing adaptation that does not fundamentally alter the general curriculum, lower standards, or change the construct being measured on a test. The purpose of an accommodation is to level the playing field. By contrast, generally, a *modification* is a "substantial" adaptation that results in a fundamental alteration (Freedman, 2000). If the student requires only modifications or accommodations in order to progress in a specific area of the general

curriculum, the IEP does not need to include a goal in this area. The IEP, however, does need to specify these modifications or accommodations. The IEP must also specify *supports* for school personnel.

Decisions as to which supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications or supports are appropriate for a particular student are to be made on an individualized basis by the IEP team. It is important that these decisions do not substantially lower curriculum standards and thus deny the student access to the general curriculum.

The approach should be to create from the beginning a curriculum with built-in supports for diverse learners, rather than to fit supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, or supports after the fact (Hitchcock *et al.*, 2002). This kind of approach, called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), reflects an understanding that each learner is unique and acknowledges the need to create learning experiences that help each individual maximize his or her potential to be involved in the general curriculum (Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), 2002).

(3) Explaining in the student’s IEP why he or she will not participate in the regular class

IDEA '97 does not require that all students with disabilities participate with children without disabilities in the regular class. If it is not possible for a student to participate in the regular class, the student’s IEP must explain why this is the case. In addition, a student cannot be removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because the student needs modifications in the general curriculum. Even if a student is not in the regular classroom, the student’s IEP goals must address the general curriculum. Decisions about the appropriate educational placement of students with disabilities are to be made on an individualized basis by a group of persons, including the parents, and others knowledgeable about the student, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options.

What does “progress in” the general curriculum mean?

It is not enough for students with disabilities to participate in the general curriculum. The law also requires that the IEP address *progress in* the general curriculum. Progress in the general curriculum can be thought of as involving three parts: (1) measuring the student’s progress in reaching IEP goals; (2) including students with disabilities in State and district-wide assessments, with appropriate accommodations, where necessary; and (3) developing State performance goals and indicators and providing reports on progress toward meeting these goals and indicators.

(1) Measuring the student’s progress in reaching IEP goals

Under IDEA '97, schools have to make a good faith effort to help a student reach his or her IEP goals. In order to ensure that the student is making progress, the IEP goals must be “measurable.” In addition, IEPs must state:

- How the student’s progress toward the annual IEP goals will be measured; and
- How parents will be regularly informed about their child’s progress toward the IEP goals.

IEPs are to be reviewed annually and revised, as appropriate, to address lack of progress toward IEP goals and lack of progress in the general curriculum. Similarly, as part of the process of reevaluation that occurs at least every three years, a child’s progress toward IEP goals and participation in the general curriculum must be examined.

(2) Including students with disabilities in State and district-wide assessments, with appropriate accommodations, where necessary

IDEA '97 requires that students with disabilities take part in State and district-wide assessments with appropriate accommodations or modifications in administration. The student’s IEP must state:

- The necessary *accommodations or modifications* the student will need in order to take part in State and district-wide assessments; or
- Why that assessment is not appropriate for the student and how the student will be assessed.

An accommodation in testing is an adaptation that does not fundamentally change the nature of what is being measured by the test. States sometimes call these adaptations “reasonable accommodations.” In contrast, a testing modification is a substantial adaptation that results in a fundamental alteration (Freedman, 2000). The accommodations or modifications that a student receives in testing should match those that he or she receives in the classroom. When students are unable to take part in the general assessment with accommodations or modifications, they are to receive an *alternate assessment*, which is a completely different measure of a child’s learning progress – for example, a portfolio of the child’s work may be evaluated. The purpose of an alternate assessment is the same as that of the general assessment – to measure the student’s progress.

(3) Developing State performance goals and indicators and providing reports on progress toward meeting these goals and indicators

IDEA '97 requires that State education agencies:

- Develop *performance goals* for students with disabilities that are as similar to the goals for students without disabilities as much as possible;
- Develop *performance indicators* to measure the progress of students with disabilities toward the achievement of these goals that, at a minimum, address graduation rates, drop-out rates, and performance on assessments; and
- Provide *reports* every two years to the Secretary and the public that include information about the progress of students with disabilities in the State toward meeting the established performance goals and indicators. The reports must include data on the performance of students with disabilities on assessments together with all other children, as well as data regarding the performance of students with disabilities alone.

In addition, States will need to consider the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which focuses on accountability for the performance of all students. NCLB also requires that State assessments provide for the participation of all students, including students with disabilities, and provide for appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. ❖

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