

# UNDERSTANDING ACCESS TO THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM



**National Center  
on Deaf-Blindness**

# CONTENTS

Providing Meaningful,  
Equal Access .....2

What the Laws Say .....2

Standards and  
Assessments .....3

Standards-Based  
Individualized  
Education Programs .....4

Additional Goals Beyond  
the Academic Content .....5

The Role of State  
Deaf-Blind Projects.....6

The Challenges of  
Providing Access.....6

Key Terminology .....7

References .....9

# OVERVIEW

This article provides information and resources to help state deaf-blind project personnel increase their knowledge of access to the general education curriculum (GEC) for students with disabilities. It specifically focuses on academic content standards and academic achievement standards, and how they inform instructional planning.

The terms used for these standards in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are “academic content standards” and “academic achievement standards,” but individual states may use different terminology.

**National Center on Deaf-Blindness, January 2022**  
**[nationaldb.org](http://nationaldb.org)**

*The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T180026. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Susan Weigert.*



**National Center  
on Deaf-Blindness**



Office of Special Education Programs  
U.S. Department of Education

## Providing Meaningful, Equal Access

From decades of research and experience, there is little doubt that children learn more effectively when educators hold high expectations for them. Congress recognized this concept in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), noting that high expectations are needed for students with disabilities to “meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children.”<sup>1</sup> With IDEA, Congress also affirmed its commitment that all children with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability, have an equal opportunity to fully participate in free appropriate public education (FAPE).<sup>2</sup>

In clarifying the scope of FAPE, the Supreme Court, in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1* (137 S. Ct. 988), stated that schools must provide an education program that enables a child with disabilities to make appropriate progress, and that “every child should have the chance to meet challenging objectives.”<sup>3</sup> So, rather than adopting a mindset that students with disabilities are destined to be low achievers, educators should establish high expectations that are meaningful, ambitious, and achievable.<sup>3</sup>

The philosophy behind this approach is sometimes referred to as the “least-dangerous assumption.” This means that it is best to assume that students with significant disabilities “are competent and able to learn, because to do otherwise would result in harm such as fewer educational opportunities, inferior literacy instruction, a segregated education, and fewer choices as an adult.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, far less harm can result if we assume students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to meet challenging objectives than if we were to assume the opposite.

This altered perspective is truly a paradigm shift from how we once approached education for students with significant disabilities. In the past, their annual learning goals focused solely on functional skills related to communication, daily living, and socialization as well as therapeutic goals. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 clarified that school systems and educators must provide students with disabilities, even those with significant support needs, a free, appropriate, and equal opportunity to access academic content and the chance to meet challenging expectations.

## What the Laws Say

IDEA requires that all children with disabilities be provided with access to the GEC.<sup>5</sup> According to ESSA, all students, including those with disabilities, must also be included in state assessments based on a state’s academic content and achievement standards.<sup>6</sup> These laws apply to all public schools and public school students.

The GEC is defined as the curriculum used by all students enrolled in the same grade, including students with disabilities, and is based on a state’s academic content standards.<sup>7</sup> Access to the GEC and academic content standards are closely linked because curricula, implemented by local education agencies, include the steps and methods teachers use to support students in mastering their state’s standards.<sup>8</sup> From a practical standpoint, access to the GEC is achieved by providing access to a state’s academic content standards for the grade in which a child is enrolled.

## Standards and Assessments

### Standards-Based Education

The concept of standards-based education is nothing new. Since the 1980s, academic content standards, what students should know or be able to do, have been linked to academic achievement standards, which describe the levels of performance students may attain by the end of the school year (e.g., “basic,” “proficient,” or “advanced”). Standards-based education (sometimes called “standards-based reform”) was initially an effort to respond to public outcry for educational reform in light of growing concerns about global competitiveness, declining SAT scores, and decreasing graduation rates.<sup>11</sup>

Standards-based education has been sustained under reauthorizations of ESEA, and today, all academic instruction for students, regardless of ability or disability, is centered around a state’s academic content standards. Each state formally adopts academic content standards for

math, reading or language arts, and science as well as other subjects determined by the state (e.g., history, social studies). States also adopt academic achievement standards aligned to those content standards, which specify “how much” of those content standards a student must know to be considered proficient or advanced.<sup>6</sup>

Under ESSA—the most recent reauthorization of ESEA—all students must have access to their state’s grade-level content standards, and their progress on state assessments must be measured by the state’s adopted achievement standards (either regular or alternate, as described below).

### Alternate Academic Achievement Standards and Assessments

States must provide alternate academic achievement standards—and alternate assessments based on those standards—for any student who is unable to participate in the state’s regular assessment for the grade in which he or she is enrolled.<sup>6</sup>

Alternate academic achievement standards reflect a reduction in the breadth, depth,

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TWO ACTS

### Act 1: IDEA

In what would become known as landmark civil rights legislation, President Ford, in 1975, signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>9</sup> Over the years, IDEA has been reauthorized, amended, and clarified, yet its underlying principle remains constant: As “disability is a natural part of the human experience . . . improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, [and] full participation.”<sup>10</sup>

### Act 2: ESSA

In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized an earlier important piece of legislation: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA further strengthened the nation’s commitment to equal educational opportunity for all students by upholding protections for high-need students. For example, it required that all students be taught to high academic standards in preparation for college or a career. ESSA also emphasized accountability, requiring that information from annual statewide achievement tests be compiled and shared with educators, families, and communities.<sup>6</sup>

or complexity of the regular academic achievement standards.<sup>12</sup> Use of these standards allows students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, including many with deaf-blindness, to be exposed to the same general grade-level content as their non-disabled peers, and to be assessed against achievement standards that best measure their performance and rate of progress.

Under ESSA, only “students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” may take their state’s alternate assessment. Because the term “students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” does not represent any particular disability category under IDEA, it is the responsibility of individual states to define assessment participation criteria for such students. Based on a review of state education agency websites, the TIES Center found that students eligible to take an alternate assessment were most commonly those who

- Had significantly affected cognitive and adaptive functioning
- Required extensive individualized instruction or support
- Benefitted from modifications to assignments and learning materials<sup>13, 14</sup>

The most common disability categories of students eligible for alternate assessments, as identified in the TIES Center review, were intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

Some students with deaf-blindness, especially those who are fluent in a language and accomplished in using assistive technologies, take their state’s regular assessments, often with test accommodations.<sup>15</sup> However, because approximately 70% of children with deaf-blindness have cognitive impairments and 87% have one or more additional disabilities, many are likely to be considered

students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and eligible for their state’s alternate assessment.<sup>16</sup>

## Standards-Based Individualized Education Programs

To help ensure the equity of access to academic content that FAPE demands, IDEA requires that educational supports be tailored to meet each child’s unique needs.<sup>7</sup> A student with the most significant cognitive disabilities who takes a state’s alternate assessment must have IEP goals that reflect high expectations and are based on academic content standards for the student’s enrolled grade.<sup>7, 12</sup> Moreover, specially designed instruction must be provided that enables the student to meet those goals.<sup>17</sup>

In the past, IEPs often functioned as the total curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities, but this misinterpreted the purpose of the IEP, which is to provide the supports necessary for each child with a disability to access the GEC.<sup>18</sup> Changes in attitudes and laws that emphasize high expectations and the right to access the GEC, as described earlier, have led to standards-based IEPs that promote access to the GEC rather than serve as the curriculum for a student.

The following is a brief summary of steps IEP teams can take to develop standards-based IEPs.

### **Identify the student’s preferences and current level of academic achievement.**

Use data from the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance to identify their strengths and weaknesses in each academic area as well as assess other areas of performance (e.g., social skills, functional life skills, communicative competence).<sup>18</sup>

**Develop annual goals in each content area.** When well written, “An IEP goal will be applicable to multiple standards and evolve from deep review of the grade-level content.”<sup>18</sup> Develop annual goals based on a review of the state’s academic content standards for the student’s grade level. Given the large number of state standards within a content area, it is not reasonable to cover them all when developing an IEP. The challenge is to identify high-priority goals and objectives that address areas in which the student needs the most intensive academic interventions. Content standards that best support those goals and objectives should be prioritized in the IEP. This involves identifying overarching academic content or strands that the student must master to access the full scope of the GEC. In turn, specially designed instruction should address this content in a manner that conforms to the student’s access needs, preferences, and present level of performance.<sup>18</sup> A few prioritized standards per content area is reasonable for a standards-based IEP.

Although they must be individualized and not focused on a large number of standards, IEP goals should serve as a pathway to the full scope of a state’s academic content standards for any student with a disability. The purpose of the IEP is to support the student, through specially designed instruction and auxiliary aids and services, to access the same content that other students in the grade are being taught (i.e., the GEC). Special education is a supplement to the GEC provided to students with IEPs. It does not replace or stand in for access to the GEC, which every child with a disability is legally entitled to under IDEA.

**Identify adaptations and specialized instruction needs.** Decisions about accommodations and modifications of assignments and materials must be tailored to the needs of individual students.<sup>12</sup> Accommodations are curricular access

features—changes that allow a student with disabilities to learn the same material as other students without significantly altering the content (e.g., a change in format or timing).<sup>19, 20</sup> Modifications to instruction (e.g., materials, assignments) change the content and rigor of what is to be learned.<sup>19, 20</sup>

## Additional Goals Beyond the Academic Content

In addition to making progress related to academic content, the IEP for students with significant cognitive disabilities almost always includes specially designed instruction in communication, life skills (functional), social skills, or foundational academic skills that do not align with grade-level content standards but serve as prerequisites to grade-level academic skills.<sup>18</sup> In a brief by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC), Browder (2015) writes, “The IEP team should identify goals related to these additional needs. . . . At one time these specialized needs comprised the entire IEP for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Now these additional goals may continue to be a portion of the plan.”<sup>18</sup>

For students with visual impairments, many important functional skills have been identified as components of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). These components, such as social interaction, assistive technology, career education, and independent living, are foundational to all learning and prerequisites for living independently.<sup>21</sup> Just like the IEP goals Browder describes, the ECC components of the IEP do not necessarily align with academic content standards but nevertheless represent essential skills for students with visual impairments, including those who are deaf-blind.



## The Role of State Deaf-Blind Projects

Technical assistance (TA) provided by state deaf-blind projects should be designed to help IEP teams learn what it means to provide access to the GEC and their state's content standards, and the distinction between regular and alternate achievement standards. This TA may include consultation and training on how to

- Individualize adaptations and accommodations for grade-level materials and provide instructional strategies appropriate for a student's sensory abilities and preferences. In addition, adaptations and accommodations should be appropriate for each student's level of conceptual development.
- Identify the strengths and skills a student has (or can develop) to access their state's content standards and other activities for the grade in which they are enrolled. Students with disabilities often require a focus on literacy and numeracy skills as part of specially designed instruction.
- Provide examples of intensive interventions designed to teach prerequisite skills (e.g., literacy, numeracy, or expressive communication skills) in the context of teaching specific content standards included in the GEC.
- Provide examples of specialized practices developed for students with deaf-blindness to promote communicative competence and teach concepts that help them more actively participate in meaningful social interactions and in academic learning.

## The Challenges of Providing Access to the GEC

Providing access to the GEC for students with deaf-blindness can be challenging for several reasons. First, because deaf-blindness profoundly limits one's ability to quickly acquire information from the world and benefit from modeling by others, students with deaf-blindness take more time to learn concepts and develop communicative competence than do those with typical hearing and vision.

Second, there is a shortage of qualified personnel with expertise in deaf-blindness able to appropriately assess such students and to design and implement high-quality IEPs. Students with significant disabilities have unique needs that require intensive, individualized interventions specifically designed to address persistent learning or behavior difficulties affecting learning.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the interventions and services children with deaf-blindness need require the presence of specially trained personnel.

Third, although there are widely accepted practices designed to improve the assessment of students with deaf-blindness, there is a shortage of up-to-date tools to provide a full and comprehensive assessment for many of these children.<sup>23</sup> For example, many students require assessment across a broad range of learning domains, including sensory learning channels, cognitive ability, and level of communication.

Finally, the field would benefit from additional resources to support educators both in tracking student progress in the GEC and progress in specially designed instruction, including prerequisite academic content and communication skills. For example, educators would benefit from

- A thorough understanding of regular and alternate achievement standards and how to design special instruction to support student progress toward meeting these standards

- Examples of standards-based IEPs specifically for students who are deaf-blind
- Guidance on how best to develop and implement intensive interventions for students who are deaf-blind to address communication, prerequisite skills, and other important IEP goals

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

**Terminology related to access to general education curriculum (GEC) concepts can be confusing. Here’s a quick overview of a few key terms.**

### **Academic Content Standards**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all states to adopt challenging academic content standards for math, reading or language arts, and science as well as other subjects as determined by each individual state. These standards

- Represent what students are expected to learn by the end of the enrolled grade
- Apply to all public schools and public school students (including those with disabilities) in the state<sup>6</sup>

A number of other terms may be used to refer to academic content standards including “content standards” and “college- and career-ready standards.”

All states have websites that list their standards, and all educators need training on the standards for the grade levels they

teach.<sup>18</sup> Federal law does not mandate a specific set of standards, but most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards ([corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)) or close variations of these standards.<sup>8</sup>

### **Academic Achievement Standards**

ESSA requires that states adopt academic achievement standards that are aligned with their academic content standards and represent the level of performance students are expected to attain by the end of the school year. These achievement standards apply to all public school students in the state, with the exception of a small percentage of students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities.”<sup>6</sup>

For students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, states may adopt alternate academic achievement standards and provide alternate assessments. (The



total number of students using the alternate assessment for a subject may not exceed 1% of the number of all students in the state who are assessed in the subject.) Alternate achievement standards must

- Be aligned with the state’s academic content standards for each grade level
- Promote access to the GEC as required by IDEA
- Reflect professional judgment as to the highest possible standards achievable by these students
- Be designated in a student’s IEP as the standards that will be used for the student
- Be aligned to ensure that a student who meets the alternate academic achievement standards is on track to pursue postsecondary education<sup>6</sup>

Many states use Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) Essential Elements, ([dynamiclearningmaps.org](http://dynamiclearningmaps.org)) developed by the Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems (ATLAS) at the University of Kansas, for their alternate academic achievement standards. An examination of DLM Essential Elements displayed side-by-side with grade-level content standards reveals how an alternate achievement standard is connected to and aligned with the same grade-level content to which all students with disabilities must be provided access.

## Curriculum

Although state content standards define what is to be learned by the end of a school year, curriculum is the detailed plan for day-to-day teaching. Along with lesson plans, curricula are the steps and methods teachers use to support their students in mastering standards. Federal policies encourage states to adopt high standards but do not address curriculum, which is a state and local matter.<sup>8</sup>

## Inclusion vs Access to the GEC

Inclusion and access to the GEC have similar purposes, but they are not the same. Inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities in general education classrooms serves the purpose of ensuring that they have access to the GEC and to the same educational opportunities to learn as their non-disabled peers. Access to the GEC means providing access to the same academic content standards used by all students enrolled in the same grade. Inclusion is a much broader term for which there is no universally agreed upon definition; however, most definitions include education in the regular classroom as one component.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike “access to the general education curriculum,” neither “inclusion” nor “inclusive education” is defined in IDEA or other federal education legislation. IDEA does require that, to the maximum extent possible, students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment, but a child’s educational placement must not restrict access to the GEC, which is required for all students no matter the setting. Furthermore, a child cannot be removed from education in regular classrooms solely due to accommodations and modifications needed to access the GEC.<sup>25</sup>

# REFERENCES

1. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400(C)(5)(A)(i). Findings. (2004). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-i/1400>
2. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 300.101. Free appropriate public education (FAPE). (2004). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.101>
3. U.S. Department of Education. (Dec. 7, 2017). *Questions and answers (Q&A) on U.S. Supreme Court case decision Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1*. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/qa-endrewcase-12-07-2017.pdf>
4. Jorgensen, C. (2005). The least dangerous assumption: A challenge to create a new paradigm. *Disability Solutions: A Resource for Families & Others Interested in Down Syndrome & Developmental Disabilities*, 6(3), 1-9. <https://www.dsadelaware.org/wp-content/uploads/Least-Dangerous-Assumption-by-C-Jorgensen.pdf>
5. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).
6. Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015).
7. Yudin, M. K., & Musgrove, M. (Nov. 16, 2015). *OSERS policy guidance on free appropriate public education (FAPE)* [policy letter]. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/idea/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/guidance-on-fape-11-17-2015.pdf>
8. U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *College-and career-ready standards*. <https://www.ed.gov/k-12reforms/standards>
9. Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (1975).
10. U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *About IDEA*. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose>
11. Kenna, J. L., & Russell, W. B. (2018). The culture and history of standards-based educational reform and social studies in America. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 1(1), 26-49.
12. Sabia, R., Bowman, J., Thurlow, M. L., & Lazarus, S. S. (2020). *Providing meaningful general education curriculum access to students with significant cognitive disabilities*. TIES Center. <https://ici-s.umn.edu/files/Ay4cXYTgh7/ties-brief-4-providing-meaningful-general-education-curriculum-access-to-students-with-significant-cognitive-disabilities>
13. Lazarus, S., & Thurlow, M. (2020, October 21). *Academic standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities* [Webinar]. National Center on Deaf-Blindness. <https://www.nationaldb.org/updates/academic-standards-students-significant-disabilities/>
14. Thurlow, M. L., Lazarus, S. S., Albus, D. A., Larson, E. D., & Liu, K. K. (2019). *2018-19 participation guidelines and definitions for alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards* (NCEO Report 415). University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOReport415.pdf>
15. Peterson, D., Blaha, R., & O'Donnell, N. (2020). *Meeting the needs of proficient communicators* [factsheet]. National Center on Deaf-Blindness. [https://www.nationaldb.org/media/doc/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Meeting\\_the\\_Needs\\_of\\_Proficient\\_Communicators\\_1.pdf](https://www.nationaldb.org/media/doc/Fact_Sheet_Meeting_the_Needs_of_Proficient_Communicators_1.pdf)
16. National Center on Deaf-Blindness. (2020). *2019 national deaf-blind child count report*. <https://www.nationaldb.org/products/national-child-count/report-2019>
17. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 300.39(b)(3). Special education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.39>
18. Browder, D. (2015). *Standards-based individualized education programs (IEPs) for students who participate in AA-AAS (NCSC Brief #5)*. National Center and State Collaborative. [https://files.tiescenter.org/files/PpEiA\\_Nqni/ncsc\\_brief\\_5](https://files.tiescenter.org/files/PpEiA_Nqni/ncsc_brief_5)
19. Springer, L. (2019). *Accommodations and modifications: Keys to successful inclusion*. PEAK Parent Center. <https://peakparent.org/blog/accommodations-modifications-keys-successful-inclusion>
20. Understood Team. (n.d.). *The difference between accommodations and modifications*. <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/the-difference-between-accommodations-and-modifications>
21. Perkins School for the Blind. (n.d.). *Understanding the Expanded Core Curriculum*. <https://www.perkins.org/understanding-the-expanded-core-curriculum/>
22. Ryder, R. E. (April 18, 2017). *Letter to Ruthie-Marie Beckwith*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. [https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/OSEP\\_Letter\\_to\\_Beckwith\\_4-18-17.pdf](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/OSEP_Letter_to_Beckwith_4-18-17.pdf)
23. National Center on Deaf-Blindness. (2020). *Appropriate assessment strategies: NCDB practice guide*. [https://documents.nationaldb.org/AppropriateAssessmentStrategies\\_a.pdf](https://documents.nationaldb.org/AppropriateAssessmentStrategies_a.pdf)
24. Francisco, M. P. B., Hartman, M., & Wang, Y. (2020). Inclusion and special education. *Education Sciences*, 10(9), 238.
25. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 300.116(e). Placements. (2004). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.116>