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Access to the General Education Curriculum

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Introduction and Methodology

This document contains the results of a survey of state directors of special education on the status of strategies related to improving access for students with disabilities to the general education curriculum. This activity was undertaken as part of the cooperative agreement between Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Project Forum staff designed this activity and developed the survey form in collaboration with the Access Center, a project funded by OSEP to provide technical assistance on the topic of improving access to and progress in the general education curriculum. The survey is the first step in a process that will document the programs and activities states have initiated to meet this requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Project Forum staff conducted and analyzed the survey results and compiled this summary that will be used by the Access Center to plan subsequent activities related to building state capacity to help students with disabilities succeed in the general education curriculum.

The survey, conducted from April to June 2005, requested states to report on the stage they are in, by academic area, regarding strategies to enhance access to the general education curriculum, the professional development they have provided, whether they have a written definition of access to the general education curriculum and any challenges they have encountered in supporting these activities. A total of 32 states responded and this document contains a brief analysis of the data they provided. You may find a copy of the survey as an addendum to this document.

Background on Accessing the General Education Curriculum

Access to the general education curriculum is a major requirement in the IDEA 2004. It is mentioned six times in the evaluation section alone. For example, the law requires that the content of the child's individualized education program (IEP) include "information related to

enabling the child to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum” [§614(b)(2)(A)(ii)], “how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum” [§614 (d)(1)(A)(i)(I)(aa)], and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child “to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum...” [§614 (d)(1)(A)(i) (IV)(bb)].

There is no separate definition of ‘general education curriculum’ in the IDEA, but the 1997 IDEA Regulations state that the IEP must include “How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum (*i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children*)...” [34CFR §300.347(a)(1)(i)] (emphasis added). However, there is no specific reference to exactly what would constitute *access*. Some initial discussions of the meaning of access to the general education curriculum seemed to equate it with the requirement for placement in the least restrictive environment, that is, ensuring that students with disabilities are placed in regular education classrooms to the maximum extent possible. However, while learning with general education peers can be one element, it does not encompass all that is meant by access to the general education curriculum. As discussed in the monograph produced by the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (NCAC) (Karger & Hitchcock, 2003), IDEA 1997 greatly expanded the previously understood meaning of access well beyond the concepts of mainstreaming and inclusion. The authors note that the definition of special education in the 1997 Regulations includes the requirement that one purpose of that specially designed instruction is “to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that he or she can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children” [34 C.F.R. § 300.26(b)(3)(ii)]. (Additional documents from NCAC related to this topic are available in the “Policy” listing at <http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/>.)

Surveys used in the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA)¹ included some items that address access to the general education curriculum. State directors of special education were asked whether they provided written guidelines and specific resources to districts or schools and how they would rate their progress related to increasing access to the general education curriculum and the development of IEPs to support the participation of students with IEPs in the general education curriculum. The findings from the 1999-2000 school year showed that most states and districts reported that they were making progress in this area (2003, p. 100). However, analysis of the findings revealed a mixed picture with inconsistencies and variation in services (e.g., in the types of training and supports provided to teachers and the use of instructional strategies to support students with disabilities). The SLIIDEA Focus Study IV concentrates on the progress of states’ understanding and implementation of strategies for accessing the general education curriculum and additional information will be available when the report of that study is complete.

The remainder of this document is a summary of some of the strategies states are doing to implement this component of IDEA.

¹ The SLIIDEA research study was mandated in the 1997 amendments to IDEA. Further details and copies of study materials are available at <http://www.abt.sliidea.org/>

Survey Results

A total of 32 states responded to the Forum survey. Responses were charted and analyzed and the following is a summary of the responses and additional materials sent by states.

Survey Item #1 – Stage of implementation of strategies to enhance access: This item asked states to indicate the stage (planning, early implementation or advanced implementation) of their strategies to enhance access to the general education curriculum in the content areas (reading, math, science, writing and/or other language arts, or other areas). The responses were as follows:

Table 1. Stage of Implementation (N=32 states)²

Content Area	Planning Stage	Early Implementation	Advanced Implementation
Reading	6	16	13
Math	9	17	6
Science	13	5	4
Writing and/or other Language Arts	8	13	8
Other Areas	2	5	7

As Table 1 shows, implementation was most active in the content area of reading followed by math and then writing. Almost half the responding states have reached an advanced stage of implementing access initiatives in reading while only a small number have reached that level in the other content areas.

In describing their strategies/programs, states referred most often to Reading First Programs and activities supported by State Improvement Grants (SIGs). Other strategies included the development of curriculum guides based on state academic standards, partnership projects with universities, processes for accessing grade level content standards, the use of accommodations or extended standards and implementing response-to-intervention approaches. States checked “other areas” for cross-discipline initiatives and/or activities related to collaborative training of teams, the use of assessment, or strategies to address behavioral issues in students.

Survey Item #2 – Professional development regarding access provided by type and area: States were asked to indicate the type of professional development they provided by content area. Responses revealed that the types of professional development states have provided from the most common to the least are as follows:

1. Meetings/Workshops;
2. On-site technical assistance;

² Note: Some states checked more than one stage for different initiatives within a content area and some states did not indicate a stage for some content areas.

3. Development and dissemination of publications;
4. Train-the-trainer; and
5. Training via distance technology.

States indicated that reading was the area in which a variety of professional development activities were provided most often (n=98) followed by math (n=74). The next most commonly indicated area for professional development was standards-based IEPs (n=72). The two least often selected areas were writing (n=63) and science (n=41). Two states did not respond to this item. Results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Professional Development (N=32 states)

	Reading	Writing	Math	Science	Standards-Based IEPs
On-site technical assistance	23	16	15	9	16
Meetings or workshops	28	19	23	12	21
Train-the trainer Programs	19	10	12	7	11
Training via distance technology	9	6	8	5	9
Development and dissemination of publication(s)	19	12	16	8	15
TOTALS	98	63	74	41	72

States could check each type of activity under each content area that they had implemented. Some states supplied a little more specific information about an item such as where the activity occurred (e.g., at a state conference, at schools with grants through the SIG program, etc.) or the content that was covered (e.g., least restrictive environment, student assistance teams, behavior supports, etc.). One indicated that its meetings and workshops are ongoing multi-year capacity building and sustained learning at targeted sites and another provided an Internet address for transcripts of its teleconferences related to access to the general education curriculum (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/sate/satetrans.html>).

Survey Item #3 – Written definition of access to the general education curriculum: Only four of the 32 states responding indicated that they have a definition of access to the general education curriculum, although the material provided by those states contains descriptions of elements of access or a definition of the general education curriculum. Three of the states that responded in the negative commented that they use the Access Center’s definition³ and other

³ The Access Center proposes that access to the general education curriculum occurs when students with disabilities are actively engaged in learning the content and skills that define the general education curriculum. Access Center

states indicated other ways they have communicated the meaning of access to the general education curriculum (e.g., describing practices that promote genuine access, requiring the IEP team to address participation in the general curriculum, addressing least restrictive environment). The materials provided by the states that said they had definitions are as follows:

- California: incorporates a description of access to the general education curriculum within the state policy for “Algebra I Graduation Requirement.” The policy states that students with disabilities may not be able to complete the course of study in the standard length of time and may require more than one class to complete the course of study. The description also cites the sections of state code that apply to this topic, provides information about indicators from the Access Center and lists some resources on research-based best practices. (www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp/algebra1.asp?print=yes).
- Michigan: provided a copy of its statement regarding universal education, including a vision statement for the education of all students including diverse learners and principles of universal education that support desired outcomes for all students.
- New York: state policy on “Ensuring Academic Achievement for Students with Disabilities” states that “access to the general education curriculum means more than just being in a general education classroom; students must have meaningful participation and interaction with the curriculum that results in the achievement of learning standards and graduation requirements; the curriculum must be delivered with an array of supports; and barriers to access must be removed while still ensuring that the curriculum is challenging students.” The policy also lists some strategies used in the classroom to ensure access and refers to the resources available on the website for universal design for learning in the state: <http://www.trecenter.org/udl/>.
- Oregon: state regulations contain a definition of “general curriculum” as “the same curriculum as for non-disabled children.”

Survey Item #4 – Challenges faced by states in supporting access: A variety of challenges were mentioned by respondents including:

- attitudes (e.g., entrenched positions, low expectations, lack of teacher buy-in, teacher/parent/administrator beliefs about where students with disabilities should receive services, need for a paradigm shift);
- need for information, preservice and inservice training;
- perceived lack of resources;
- shortage of special education teachers;
- integrating assistive technology into the regular classroom;

staff developed a framework for thinking about access to the general education curriculum. At its core, access is a multi-dimensional and dynamic process that involves a combination of instructional practices and supports. For further information, see the Center’s website at www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/FrameworkFinal.asp.

- concern about denial of need for functional skills training; and
- lack of effective consultation and collaboration.

Additional Information: A few states commented about other activities or other challenges related to achieving access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities including the following:

- imposition of legal settlements from hearings or court cases to provide access to students;
- collaborating with the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to implement universal design for learning (<http://www.cast.org/>);
- revising curriculum guides to include prerequisite skills for achieving state standards;
- many efforts to provide access are not initiated by special education, but are part of department-wide initiatives under Reading First and other projects;
- helping stakeholders to understand the relevant research and data to support changes for better access;
- use of universal screening in early grades followed by immediate intervention especially in reading;
- focused monitoring to include appropriate access; and
- continuation of work with the Access Center.

Finally, a total of 24 states indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview with the Access Center to provide additional information, although a few mentioned that participation would depend on the time commitment required for such participation. The Access Center will plan and carryout follow-up interviews to explore these issues further.

Conclusions

It is obvious from the background material and state responses to Project Forum's survey that access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities is a complex and evolving concept. It is difficult to assess progress toward this goal because of a number of complications, including lack of an accepted consistent definition and an incomplete understanding of the concept. Emphasis on eliminating the separation between general and special education has brought about an emphasis on placement of students with disabilities in the general education setting and work is continuing to support increased and more effective access to the regular curriculum.

Results of the survey indicate that there is little consensus on the meaning of access to the general education curriculum. The states reported progress is being made, but much work remains to be done in the alignment of the general curriculum with the specially designed instruction that students with disabilities need to succeed in that curriculum. Changes will have to be made in the IEP process and document and the understanding of parents and school staff to implement the letter and spirit of the access requirements in IDEA 2004.

References

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**Survey of State Directors of Special Education
Project Forum at NASDSE**

Name & title of person completing survey: _____

Phone number: _____

Email: _____

1. Across content areas, please indicate with an **X** the implementation stage your state is in regarding strategies to enhance access to the general education curriculum. If appropriate, please feel free to provide specific descriptions of the initiatives.

Content Area	Planning Stage	Early Implementation	Advanced Implementation	Description of Strategy / Program
Reading				
Math				
Science				
Writing and/or other Language Arts				
Other Areas				

2. If your state has provided professional development regarding access to the general education curriculum in the areas of reading, writing, math, science, or standards-based IEPs, mark an X in the appropriate box to indicate the type of training provided:

	Reading	Writing	Math	Science	Standards-Based IEPs
On-site technical assistance					
Meetings or Workshops					
Train-the trainer					
Training via distance technology					
Development and dissemination of publication(s)					

3. Does your state have a written definition of "access to the general education curriculum"?

_____ **Yes (If so, please provide a copy of it)**

_____ **No**

4. Please describe any challenges the SEA has encountered in supporting access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities

Please provide any additional information about your state's activities:

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the Access Center to provide additional information?

Yes

No

Please email (Eileen.ahearn@nasdse.org) or fax (703-519-3808) your completed survey to Eileen Ahearn by April 15th 2005.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey.