



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Family FACTS on Special Education

A publication of the Parent Training and Information Center

Access to the General Curriculum

What is access to the general curriculum?



General curriculum is a term used to describe what children are taught in school. It includes academic subjects such as reading, writing, spelling, math, science, and history as well as skills such as social skills, organization, study habits, and independence. The general curriculum also includes what is referred to as the “life of the school.” This includes activities such as school assemblies, recess, lunch, clubs, field trips, school plays, school sponsored after-school activities, and even the prom. In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has identified what students at each grade level must learn in the Curriculum Frameworks. Special educators help students with disabilities to access the general curriculum by changing the content, using different ways of teaching, and/or using different ways of testing what students have learned, all according to the students’ unique needs.

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

When Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, they found 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 curriculum to the maximum extent possible, in order to meet the developmental goals and ... the challenging expectations that have been established for all children and ... be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives ...” 20 U.S.C. 1400(c)

Why is access to the general curriculum important?

Historically, students with special needs only had limited if any access to the general curriculum. They were taught an alternative curriculum. Thus, these students were not able to make effective progress in school. Now there is one core curriculum for every student.

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

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;
- Meets the standards of the Massachusetts Department of Education, that is, addresses the state curriculum frameworks;
- Includes students from 3 until 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. Address skill deficits with IEP measurable goals;
2. Make effective progress in the general curriculum and meet MCAS standards;
3. Participate in academic and extracurricular activities with non-disabled children to the maximum extent appropriate; and
4. Make meaningful educational progress and demonstrate significant learning in all areas affected by the child's disability.

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

IDEA states that your child's IEP must be based on "the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance" 20 U.S.C. 1414 (d) (1) (A)(i). The IEP must include "a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals, designed to meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum ...". In other words, your child can make progress in the general curriculum through special education supports. The IEP may modify the curriculum frameworks, if necessary, but it does not design a new curriculum. The IEP designs the supports and services for students to learn missing skills needed to make progress in the general curriculum.

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

MCAS evaluates what is taught according to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. 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 ensure that my child accesses and makes progress in the general curriculum?

As part of the IEP Team, you can ensure access to the general curriculum by being knowledgeable about:

- the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and your school district's curriculum;
- your child's disability and needs; and
- the goals, services, and accommodations in your child's IEP.

If your child has a regular education teacher, make sure he or she attends the Team meeting. The regular education teacher understands the general curriculum and can discuss how your child can be included. Be sure the IEP team has copies of all evaluations, including any independent evaluations. Make sure the Team discusses and address all of your child's needs. There should be IEP goals and services for all significant disabilities, including social/emotional and behavior deficits. Articulate your vision for child's future. Actively participate in discussing what accommodations, modifications, and/or services can make that vision a reality.

Resources on Access to Curriculum

To get a copy of Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, go to the DESE website:
www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html.

It should also be available as reference material at your child's school.