Special Educators Look to Tie IEPs to Common Core
Standards Adoptions Buoy Long-running Efforts to Tie IEPs to Academic Benchmarks
By Christina A. Samuels – January 12, 2011

The widespread adoption of common-core academic standards is expected to accelerate a growing movement among educators to link individualized education programs for students with disabilities directly to grade-level standards.

“Standards-based” IEPs allow individualized instruction in pursuit of a common goal: helping students with disabilities move toward meeting the same grade-level academic standards that general education students are supposed to meet.

Though such IEPs have been required for more than 10 years in federal law, “it’s still a learning process,” said Meredith Cathcart, a special education consultant for the California Department of Education’s special education division. “It’s a hard thing to make a shift for people.”

California is among the 43 states that have adopted common-core academic standards for math and English/language arts, along with the District of Columbia. Developed last year through an initiative led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the standards are intended to replace the patchwork of state-based standards that have led to uneven academic expectations nationwide.

“I think the common core is a good thing for our nation, and it’ll help us bring up the conversation again” about tying IEPs to academics, Ms. Cathcart said.

The common-core initiative does not address the specifics of writing IEPs, but the standards writers have said that students with disabilities “must be challenged to excel within the general curriculum and be prepared for success in their post-school lives, including college and/or careers.” A federally funded consortium is also spending $67 million to develop common-core assessments for students with severe disabilities.

Common vs. ‘Special’
The question now is how to meld special education’s promise of individualized instruction with the goal of common standards that all students should strive to meet. One common objection to standards-based IEPs has been that students wouldn’t need special education if they were able to meet general academic standards. Another concern is that the IEPs crowd out some of the functional training that students with disabilities may need.

“People say, aren’t you taking the ‘special’ out of special education? No. This is still centered on the child,” said Eileen A. Ahearn, a senior policy analyst for the Alexandria, Va.-based National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Ms. Ahearn has written two reports surveying state efforts to develop standards-based IEPs. “Everything is couched in academic mastery.”

Ginevra Courtade-Little and Diane M. Browder, two special education trainers, attempt to address those issues in their 2005 book *Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards for Students With Moderate and Severe Disabilities*. They give a hypothetical example of a 3rd grade mathematics standard to learn multiplication. If the only math goal on an IEP targeted to a particular 3rd grade student with a disability is to learn to tell time, that student isn’t learning any grade-level academics, they say.

A teacher might also teach that student how to sort items into equal-size sets, and then count how many items the student has in all. Additional instruction for that student may focus on the meaning of the symbol for multiplication and the “equals” sign—each skill a step on the way to mastering basic multiplication.

Standards-based IEPs are not intended to define every educational goal for a student, and they are also not meant to eliminate any functional training students require, the authors say.

“You pick the most powerful standard that is going to help that student,” said Sharen Bertrando, a special education resource development specialist with California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, which provides assistance to the state to improve student achievement.

“We know some standards are more important than others. And there’s more than one way you can show mastery,” she added.

**Fusing Skills and Standards**

The California Department of Education has developed steps to aid teachers in writing grade-level, standards-based goals for individualized education programs. Excerpts from a hypothetical IEP written for a 4th grade student who has trouble with reading comprehension and written language skills show how the steps can be applied.

1. **USE PRESENT LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE**
   Tests show that concentrating on reading comprehension and writing strategies, with an emphasis on organization and focus, would do the most to accelerate this hypothetical student to grade level. The regular curriculum will address all other areas of weakness.

2. **CHOOSE THE STANDARD**
   The teacher identified this grade-level standard: “Identify structural patterns found in informational text (e.g. compare and contrast, cause and effect, sequential or chronological order, proposition and support) to strengthen comprehension.”

3. **“UNPACK” THE STANDARD**
   The teacher breaks the standard into its component parts. For example, some parts of this standard include: identify compare-and-contrast patterns, identify cause-and-effect patterns, identify the author’s proposition.

4. **ANALYZE THE SUBSKILLS**
   One subskill the teacher has chosen to focus on is “list the statements that support the author’s proposition.”

5. **DEVELOP THE GOAL**
   By the end of the school year, when given grade-level passages, the student will support the author’s proposition with a minimum of six correct statements from each text passage on regularly scheduled, curriculum-based reading-comprehension tests.

6. **WRITE THE SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES AND BENCHMARKS**
   By the middle of the school year, the student will identify the author’s proposition from the text correctly in four out of five attempts, as measured by classroom discussion, daily reading journal entries, and work samples.

7. **MONITOR THE GOAL**
   At regular reporting periods, monitor and report progress on goals and short-term objectives and benchmarks.

Such access was not always the case. Not only were students with disabilities not included in the general curriculum, but also many educators didn’t believe that they should be. In 1975, when the law that would become the IDEA first passed, educators focused merely on getting children with disabilities into public schools. Those students were often learning on a parallel track that had no connection to a general education program.

According to a report from the National Center on Educational Outcomes written four years after the adoption of the 1997 IDEA, researchers found that student goals might have general statements such as “Peter will improve communication skills,” or the education programs would include goals for staff instead of students, such as “the student’s medication will be administered on a daily basis.”

**Goals and Strategies**

The lack of curriculum alignment was particularly common for students with intellectual disabilities. A survey conducted in 1995, two years before the 1997 IDEA made general education access a mandate, noted that more than half of the 341 elementary and secondary special education teachers polled at the time believed that each student with disabilities should have his or her own special curriculum, as opposed to the general education curriculum being the primary source of academic content.

Over time, however, educators moved toward social and then academic inclusion. But writing education plans based on general academic goals requires a deep knowledge of the goals at each grade level, a clear idea of what the student knows now, and a concrete plan for how to move the student toward that academic goal.

“You have to really know the goal you’re working toward. And in order for the child to access A, B, or C, here’s a particular strategy,” said Gwendolyn J. Mason, the director of special education services for the 142,000-student Montgomery County, Md., district.

Ms. Bertrando, with the California Comprehensive Center, said that she “loves” the common-core standards because they are broad, and offer several methods for students to potentially demonstrate mastery.

“I think it’s really exciting,” she said. “This shows that we don’t need a separate curriculum” for students with disabilities.