



National Center  
on Accessing the  
General Curriculum

NCAC

## Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities: The Role of the IEP

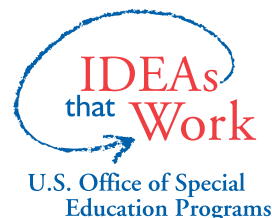
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### *A Policy Paper for Educators and Families*

Prepared by Joanne Karger for NCAC

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# Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities: The Role of the IEP

By Joanne Karger

## Introduction

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) introduced the concept of access to the general curriculum by stating that the education of students with disabilities could be made more effective by “having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible” (20 U.S.C. §1400(c)(5)(A)). IDEA '97 also specified several statements that must be included in the individualized education program (IEP) of students with disabilities to reflect their involvement and progress in the general curriculum. The overall right of students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum can, in fact, be viewed as consisting of three interrelated stages: access (i.e., accessibility), involvement and progress (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Karger & Hitchcock, 2003). The intent was to raise expectations for the educational performance of students with disabilities and to improve their educational outcomes. The provision of access to the general curriculum has taken on even greater significance in light of recent requirements under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Karger, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Because IDEA '97 requires that the IEP include specific statements concerning the involvement and progress of students with disabilities in the general curriculum, an analysis of the provision of access to the general curriculum must necessarily involve an examination of the IEP. IEPs represent the foundation of the educational program of students with disabilities and ideally should serve as a tool to help teachers provide effective instruction. Although the inclusion of legally correct and educationally sound IEP statements does not in and of itself ensure that students will have access to the general curriculum, examination of IEPs is an important first step.

This paper discusses the educational literature pertaining to IEPs in relation to access to the general curriculum and presents a framework to be used in evaluating the extent to which IEPs reflect access to the general curriculum. The literature pertaining to IEPs in general is vast, and only those articles pertaining to access to the general curriculum are included. Part One provides a literature review of relevant articles that predated the inclusion of the access to the general curriculum requirements in IDEA '97. Part Two outlines the specific requirements in IDEA '97 that pertain to IEPs and access to the general curriculum. Part Three summarizes recent articles that have appeared in the aftermath of IDEA '97. Finally, Part Four presents a framework to analyze the extent to which the IEPs of students with disabilities reflect access to the general curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Current House and Senate reauthorization bills maintain the IDEA '97 provisions concerning access to the general curriculum.

## I. Part One: Review of Relevant IEP Literature Predating IDEA '97

The legal concept of the IEP was written into the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), the precursor to IDEA, with much optimism. The IEP, as both a document and a process, has been viewed as the primary means by which to implement the statute's goal of providing students with disabilities with an appropriate education (Smith, 1990b). McLaughlin and Warren (1995) have referred to the IEP as a document defining special education and related services for students with disabilities and as a process offering "the opportunity for teachers and other service providers, parents, and students to provide input into the development of a plan tailored to the student's individual educational strengths and requirements" (p. 1). Although it was anticipated that the IEP would lead to improved educational programs for students with disabilities, during the 20 years between the passage of the EAHCA in 1975 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, much was written about the ineffectiveness of the IEP as both a document and a process. Four major summaries of the literature were conducted in the early to mid-1990s: Smith (1990b); Rodger (1995); McLaughlin and Warren (1995) and the U.S. Department of Education (1995).

Smith (1990b) divided the literature pertaining to IEPs into three evolutionary phases: (1) a "normative phase," in which standards for compliance with the law were prescribed (late 1970s–early 1980s); (2) an "analytic phase," in which themes such as the content and quality of IEPs as well as the involvement and perceptions of teachers in the IEP process were discussed (1980s); and (3) a "technology reaction phase," in which the effectiveness of computerized IEPs was analyzed (mid–late 1980s). Rodger (1995) extended Smith's classification by adding a fourth phase, which she called a "quality and implementation phase," in which a number of themes discussed during Smith's analytic phase were revisited (early 1990s-1995).

McLaughlin and Warren (1995) discussed the history of the IEP as well as concerns associated with IEP development – for example, lack of participation on the part of general education teachers and lack of implementation of IEPs in the classroom. As part of this work, the authors interviewed three local special education administrators to ascertain their perspectives concerning the IEP and recommendations that would lead to its improvement. Also included in this work was a summary of the key literature in the area of IEPs to date, much of which had been discussed by Smith and Rodger.

The fourth summary of the IEP literature was written by the U.S. Department of Education (1995) under the Clinton administration as part of the 1995 IDEA reauthorization process, culminating in the passage of IDEA '97, with the administration providing a brief synopsis of the key IEP studies. Also as part of its report, the U.S. Department of Education made recommendations for improvements in the IEP that were subsequently incorporated into the final version of the law and regulations.

The general consensus from the above four summaries of the literature was that there were shortcomings associated with the IEP that needed to be corrected. For example, (1) there were inadequacies pertaining to the content and quality of IEPs (a lack of congruence between various IEP components, differences in IEP content across settings/delivery models, and a lack of connection between IEPs and the general curriculum); (2) general education teachers played a

minimal role in the process; and (3) special education teachers had negative perceptions of the IEP. Several of the concerns that were highlighted led to the inclusion in IDEA '97 of the requirements pertaining to access to the general curriculum.

### **A. Content and Quality of the IEP as a Document**

*(1) Examination of IEP Components.* A number of articles examined the IEP in terms of its various components such as present levels and annual goals. For example, Schenck and Levy (1979) analyzed the IEPs of 300 students with a variety of disabilities, including emotional disabilities, learning disabilities and mental retardation. They found that 64% of the IEPs did not provide information concerning current levels of performance and that 20% did not contain annual goals and/or objectives. Other studies analyzed the interrelationships between IEP components. For example, in a large-scale national survey of more than 2500 IEPs of students again with a variety of disabilities, Pyecha et al. (1980) reported that many of the IEPs lacked internal consistency with respect to a connection between annual goals, short term objectives and indicated needs (see also Schenck, 1980; Smith and Simpson, 1989). Similarly, Fiedler and Knight (1986) found little congruence between assessment data and IEP goals for students with behavioral disabilities.

*(2) Differences Across Settings/Delivery Models.* Other articles examined the quality of IEPs across different settings. For example, Smith and Simpson (1989) analyzed the IEPs of 214 students with behavioral disorders and found differences in the number of goals and short-term objectives for different delivery models – for example, resource room, self-contained classroom, residential setting. Similarly, Smith (1990a) compared the IEPs of students with behavioral disorders and learning disabilities and found differences in the substantive components of the IEPs for the two groups. Students with behavioral disorders had approximately the same number of goals regardless of the educational setting, while students with learning disabilities who were placed in self-contained, segregated classrooms consistently had a greater number of academic, behavior and other goals than students in resource classrooms. Hunt, Goetz, and Anderson (1986) analyzed the IEPs of 36 students with significant disabilities and found that, holding teacher expertise and professional development constant, the IEP objectives for students educated in integrated settings received higher rating scores than those for students participating in segregated programs.

*(3) Lack of a Relationship to the General Curriculum.* In the years leading up to the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, articles began to highlight the fact that IEPs often had no relationship to the general curriculum. This shortcoming in the IEP was a serious concern because it meant that students with disabilities were not working towards the same outcomes as their peers. Moreover, the lack of connection between IEPs and the general curriculum proved to be a barrier to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes. Pugach and Warger (1993) pointed out that students with disabilities often had a separate curriculum from that of other students in the school and that this curriculum was synonymous with the IEP. The authors noted that because special education personnel often lacked knowledge of the general curriculum, “the selection of curriculum by special educators represented in the development and implementation of IEPs [was] idiosyncratic at best and [lacked] continuity either with the general curriculum or with subsequent experiences within special education.” Moreover, Brauen, O’Reilly, and Moore (1994) concluded that it was difficult to evaluate the educational

performance of students with disabilities because IEPs often did not reflect the general curriculum.

In an analysis of the IEPs of 46 students with multiple disabilities receiving services in general education classes, Giangreco, Dennis, Edelman, and Cloninger (1994) found that the IEPs were too broadly focused, too long, incoherent and not linked to the general education curriculum. The authors reported that the IEP goals often consisted of broad-sweeping statements that lacked individualization. Moreover, the IEPs were not consistent with what was actually happening in the classroom – i.e., they were not being implemented. Giangreco et al. stated:

IEPs...were not incorporated into daily instruction in general education settings. Rather than the IEP providing a useful road map for curriculum and instruction within the general education class, the IEP was filed away; general class teachers frequently were not familiar with the content of the child's IEP.

One factor was the length of the IEP, often 20-30 pages. In addition, IEP goals were written in a manner that focused on staff rather than on the students. Finally, the authors also found that because the IEPs were “discipline-referenced” rather than connected to classroom instruction, there was a lack of internal consistency among IEP parts and excessive use of jargon. Pugach and Warger; Brauen, O'Reilly, and Moore; and Giangreco et al. were three of the key sources cited by the U.S. Department of Education in its 1995 legislative proposal, which ultimately led to the passage of IDEA '97 and the inclusion of the IEP requirements pertaining to access to the general curriculum.

### ***B. Limited Role of the General Education Teacher in the IEP Process***

In addition to articles analyzing the content and quality of IEPs, many studies from 1975 to 1997 documented the limited participation of general education teachers in the IEP process. For example, Gilliam and Coleman (1981) found that IEP team members gave a higher ranking to the perceived importance of general education teachers prior to the IEP meeting than the team members gave to the general education teachers' actual participation at the meeting. Similarly, Pugach (1982) sent questionnaires to 33 general education teachers and found that the majority of the teachers were not involved in the development of the IEPs for students in their classes. Nevin, Semmel, and McCann (1983) surveyed 59 general education teachers and found that they were not very involved in the IEP development process and that although they implemented various modifications in the classroom, the majority of these modifications were not found in the IEP (see also Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Allen, 1982).

### ***C. Negative Perceptions of the IEP Process by Special Education Teachers***

Finally, a number of articles prior to IDEA '97 reported that the perceptions of special education teachers concerning the IEP process were often negative. For example, Gerardi, Grohe, Benedict, and Coolidge (1984) concluded that the administrative responsibilities associated with the development of the IEP placed excessive time demands on special education teachers, in particular those responsibilities that required a large amount of paperwork. Based on a survey of special education teachers, Morgan and Rhode (1983) reported that these teachers felt that much of their time had to be spent on the IEP process and that they did not receive adequate support from other personnel. Moreover, the teachers felt that there was no direct link between the IEP

as written and what actually took place in the classroom. The teachers viewed the IEP as an administrative rather than an instructional tool and felt that they could teach as easily without the IEP. Similarly, Dudley-Marling (1985) found that special education teachers did not consider the IEP to be particularly useful or accessible and that they often did not refer to the IEP in planning instruction.

#### **D. Summary of Pre-IDEA '97 Literature**

In summary, the IEP literature prior to IDEA '97 focused heavily on the inadequacies of the IEP as both a document and a process. As a document, the IEP was found to lack both essential components and connectedness between components, to vary across different settings, and to have no relationship to the general curriculum. Inadequacies of the IEP as a process focused on the limited participation by general education teachers, the excessive paperwork and time demands placed on special education teachers, and the perception of the IEP as having little value to guide instruction. The 1997 IDEA reauthorization attempted to address these concerns

## **II. Part Two: IDEA '97 Requirements Pertaining to IEP's**

In response to the inadequacies associated with the IEP that were highlighted in the educational literature, Congress introduced a number of changes in the IEP in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. Specifically, IDEA '97 included five new IEP requirements pertaining to the involvement and progress of students with disabilities in the general curriculum:

- 1) The IEP must state the child's *present levels of educational performance*, including how the child's disability impacts his or her involvement and progress in the general curriculum (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(I); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(1)).
- 2) The IEP must contain *annual goals*, including benchmarks or short-term objectives to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(ii); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347 (a)(2)).
- 3) The IEP must include the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, as well as *program modifications or supports* for school personnel that will enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(iii); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(3)).
- 4) The IEP must explain the extent, if any, to which the child will *not participate in the general education class* (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(iv); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(4)).
- 5) The IEP must state the necessary modifications in administration to enable the student to take part in *state and district-wide assessments*; if the student will not participate, the IEP must explain why such assessments are not appropriate and how the student will be assessed (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(v); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(5)).

These five statements, which, according to IDEA '97 must be included in the IEP, together present a comprehensive picture of the student's prospective plan for access, involvement and progress in the general curriculum (see Karger, 2004; Karger & Hitchcock, 2003).

### III. Part Three: Review of Relevant IEP Literature Post IDEA '97

Post IDEA '97, there has been limited research in the area of IEPs and access to the general curriculum, despite the potential of the new requirements to lead to increased expectations and improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities. This section discusses a small number of survey-based studies, didactic materials and empirical studies that have appeared in the aftermath of IDEA '97.

#### **A. Survey-Based Studies**<sup>[2]</sup>

(1) The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) (1999) analyzed survey data from 33 state and non-state jurisdictions concerning the implementation of the requirement that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum. The responses of the states indicated that linking IEPs to the general curriculum provided the benefit of increased opportunities for general and special educators to collaborate and for schools to implement inclusive educational practices.

At the same time, respondents also reported several challenges, including the following: (a) While IEPs have tended to address the general curriculum in the areas of reading and math, consideration should be given to linking IEPs with all areas of the general curriculum. (b) State standards may be too broad for IEP goals and may need to be sub-divided into smaller IEP objectives. (c) "Specially designed instruction" may need to be defined differently as general and special education begin to come together to a greater extent. (d) Additional training is needed for parents and teachers to understand how state standards apply to all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities. (e) On-going professional development is needed for both general and special education personnel as well as specific training for IEP teams regarding the linking of IEP goals with state standards, state and district-wide assessments and the general curriculum. (f) Curriculum-based assessments and criterion-referenced diagnostic instruments need to be developed in addition to commercially-available tests in order to assess how well students are progressing in the general curriculum. The NASDSE survey also found that states were taking steps to address some of these concerns. For example, the Colorado and Maine State Education Agencies (SEAs) had developed processes to help IEP teams connect IEPs to state standards.

(2) Menlove, Hudson, and Suter (2001) surveyed 1005 IEP team members in Utah about their levels of satisfaction with the IEP process. General education teachers indicated lower levels of satisfaction with the process than special education teachers, with secondary teachers reporting the lowest levels. The authors found that general education teachers reported low levels of satisfaction with respect to the following areas: (a) feeling connected to the IEP team; (b) time required for paperwork and meetings; (c) lack of information provided prior to the IEP meeting; (d) lack of formal training concerning the IEP process; and (e) lack of connection between IEP

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<sup>2</sup> The three surveys discussed in the present section are also mentioned in a literature review of IEPs by Sopko, 2003.

content and what actually took place in the classroom. It is interesting that following IDEA '97, general education teachers are expressing some of same dissatisfactions with the IEP process as was reported by general and special education teachers in the years preceding the 1997 reauthorization (see, e.g., Morgan & Rhode, 1983).

(3) Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Esler (2001) examined the IEP forms of 41 states in order to determine the extent to which these forms reflected state and district standards, the general curriculum, and state and district-wide assessments. They found that the forms from only five states actually addressed state and district standards. For example, the Alaska IEP form gave the following instruction: "Goals should reflect Alaska State Standards, when possible." In addition, 13 states had IEP forms that reflected the IDEA '97 requirements that both the present levels of educational performance and the annual goals address the general curriculum, while 19 states had IEP forms that reflected only one of these requirements. Moreover, the authors found that the IEP forms of four states made no mention of standards or the general curriculum. They also found that 31 states had IEP forms in which at least three options for participation in state and district-wide assessments were included – i.e., standard participation, accommodated participation or alternate assessment participation.

In summary, the above three surveys discussed various concerns associated with implementation of the new IEP requirements pertaining to access to the general curriculum: challenges related to the linking of IEPs to the general curriculum, frustrations on the part of general education teachers with the IEP process, and inconsistencies in the degree to which IEP forms reflect standards, the general curriculum, and state and district-wide assessments.

### ***B. Didactic Materials***

In addition to the survey-based studies discussed above, there have been a number of didactic materials providing guidance and direction to educators in how to connect IEPs to the general curriculum.

(1) Walsh (2001) described a professional development program initiated by a school district in Maryland that was designed to help general and special education teachers align IEP goals with the general curriculum and with instruction.<sup>3</sup> The program provided teachers with a variety of materials, including a copy of the Maryland Content Standards with columns that were to be filled in to show how a student would meet these standards. Teachers also received a copy of student outcomes for Maryland's Alternate Assessment as well as examples demonstrating how to align IEP goals with the general curriculum. According to this program, the alignment process represented:

a means of comparing a student's current level of performance to the expectations for peers without disabilities of the same age group, identifying the skills needed for successful involvement in the general education curriculum, and ensuring that teachers teach the content that is measured on standard-based assessments (p. 20).

(2) Matlock, Fielder, and Walsh (2001) provided guidance for IEP teams in aligning IEP goals and objectives with state and district standards. The authors proposed a three-part model,

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<sup>3</sup> This article is also mentioned by Sopko, 2003.

according to which short-term objectives could be connected to state and district standards. During the first phase, "Assessment," the IEP team should (a) determine present levels of performance by examining samples of work, curriculum-based assessments, classroom assignments and performance on tests; and (b) consider the standards that the student has already mastered. During the second phase, "Selection of Short-Term Objectives/Benchmarks," the IEP team should formulate short-term objectives based on a particular learning standard, taking into account the broadness of the standard and the fact that in some instances prerequisite skills are needed to help the student master the standard. Finally, during the third phase, "Develop the Measurable Annual Goal," the information obtained in phase two should be used to create annual long-term goals. The authors caution that aligning the objectives and goals with standards is only the first step and that schools and districts need to follow-up this step by devising ways to record and evaluate progress toward meeting the goals.

(3) Weishaar (2001) provided advice for general education teachers who, following IDEA '97, are required to participate in IEP meetings and who are often the ones responsible for implementation of IEPs in the general education classroom. As noted above, Menlove et al. (2001) found that many general education teachers are not satisfied with their participation in the IEP process. Weishaar suggested four best practice norms to encourage general education teachers to take on a more proactive role in the education of the students with disabilities in their classes: (a) Because general education teachers are the ones who are most knowledgeable about the curriculum they use in their classrooms, they should participate actively in IEP meetings and not be afraid to express their opinions. (b) General education teachers should review the IEPs of the students in their classes at the beginning of the school year and become familiar with accommodations, supports and services that are required. (c) There must be on-going communication between general and special education personnel. (d) If the general education teacher feels that the IEP is not working effectively, he or she should request an additional meeting to voice concerns.

(4) Massanari (2002) developed a flow chart to help IEP teams connect IEP components to the general curriculum. The flow chart consisted of a series of questions for IEP team participants to think about prior to the IEP meeting and to help shape the discussion at the IEP meeting. For example, she suggested that the team begin by asking what the desired outcome would be for the student, what skills and knowledge would be needed to meet this outcome, and how these skills and knowledge compare to the content and learning expectations of the general curriculum for the student's grade level. The team would then consider the student's present levels, goals, assessment participation and specialized instruction and supports or services, all in relation to the general curriculum. The questions provided by Massanari could be helpful in shaping the conversations and thought processes of the IEP team participants. Part Four of the present study describes a framework for analyzing the extent to which IEPs reflect access to the general curriculum that is similar in some respects to the flow chart developed by Massanari but, at the same time, has a different focus.

In summary, a number of didactic materials have attempted to provide guidance in how to connect IEPs to the general curriculum. These articles can help general and special education teachers better understand the IEP process in general and the provision of access to the general curriculum in particular.

### **C. Empirical Studies**

Finally, this section discusses two empirical studies that indirectly relate to IEPs and access to the general curriculum. The present study was unable to find any empirical studies directly addressing all of the IEP statements pertaining to access to the general curriculum.

(1) Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Bielinski, House, Moddy, and Haigh (2001) examined the relationship between instructional and assessment accommodations in the IEPs of 280 students with disabilities in Maryland. The authors found that although, for the most part, the instructional accommodations matched those for assessment, some students received testing accommodations that they did not receive for instruction. The matching of assessment accommodations with instructional accommodations is one of the indicators of access to the general curriculum included in the framework described in Part Four of this paper.

(2) Shriner and Destefano (2003) examined the IEPs of students with disabilities in three Illinois school districts in order to analyze the relationship between IEP statements and participation of students in state-wide assessments. The study was conducted over a two-year period, with a training session preceding the second year. Specifically, the study addressed the following three research questions: (a) What kinds of assessment participation and accommodation statements are included in IEPs? (b) To what extent do the statements in IEPs regarding assessment participation and accommodations reflect actual participation in state assessments and accommodations received during testing? (c) What is the effect of training on the writing of assessment and accommodation statements in IEPs? The study found that the degree to which IEPs reflected actual practice varied considerably from district to district. Similarly, alignment of IEPs with actual practice depended on the time of development and person developing the IEP – i.e., whether during the same year and by the same person. The study also found that following training, the assessment participation and accommodation documentation in IEPs was more complete.

As part of their analysis of assessment participation and accommodation statements in IEPs, Shriner and Destefano also considered whether IEP goals reflected the general education curriculum or a special education curriculum. For example, the authors found that in one of the districts, during the first year, 21% of the students had general education curriculum goals, while 8% of the students had modified general curriculum goals and 45% had student-specific, special education goals.<sup>4</sup> During the second year after training, 34% of the students in this district had general education curriculum goals, while 2% had modified general curriculum goals and 56% had student-specific, special education goals.<sup>5</sup> The results regarding IEPs and access to the general curriculum, however, were ancillary to the authors' main research questions pertaining to assessments (see above), and these results were not discussed in detail in the article. The authors also do not explain how they determined whether a goal reflected the general or modified curriculum or was student-specific.

### **D. Summary of Post-IDEA '97 IEP Literature**

The limited post-IDEA '97 literature reveals that, as pointed out by the NASDSE survey (1999), as SEAs have begun to implement the new IEP requirements pertaining to access to the general

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<sup>4</sup> The remainder of the students during the first year (26%) had missing data with respect to goals.

<sup>5</sup> The remainder of the students during the second year (8%) had missing data with respect to goals.

curriculum, challenges have been encountered – for example, sub-dividing broad standards into smaller IEP objectives, redefining “specially designed instruction” as general and special education begin to come together to a greater extent, and understanding how to apply standards to all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities. It is also apparent that the degree of implementation of the IEP requirements varies, in part as a result of factors such as differences in the structure of IEP forms and state standards (Thompson et al., 2001). General education teachers, in particular, who, following IDEA '97, must participate as members of the IEP team and increasingly find themselves responsible for the implementation of IEPs in the general education classroom, are struggling with the new IEP requirements (Weishaar, 2001). A number of didactic articles have provided direction to educators in conceptualizing the linkage of IEPs with the general curriculum. At the same time, there have been only a small number of empirical studies, none of which have directly examined the issues associated with the implementation of all of the IEP requirements pertaining to access to the general curriculum.

## IV. Part Four: Framework for Analysis of IEP's

### **A. Introduction**

The present section discusses a framework to analyze the extent to which the IEPs of students with disabilities reflect access to the general curriculum. The framework is designed for use in professional development training in order to promote the writing of legally correct and educationally sound IEP statements by educators as well as for the examination of the implementation of the IEP requirements in subsequent empirical studies.<sup>6</sup> The framework, based on the requirements in IDEA '97 and the educational literature, is comprised of five parts corresponding to the five IEP statements described in Part Two. Each of the five parts consists of a series of guidelines that can be viewed as indicators of access to the general curriculum. The framework is presented in Figure 1. A detailed discussion of each part follows, with reference being made to the Massachusetts IEP form.

### **B. Discussion of Framework**

- 1) *Statement of present levels of educational performance and how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum*
  - a) Present levels reflect the student's strengths and needs as indicated by the evaluation results. Present levels are written in a manner useful to the general education teacher (specific, direct and clear)
  - b) Present levels are connected to the annual goals and short-term objectives and/or benchmarks
  - c) Explanation of how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum indicates curriculum areas and grade level expectations
  - d) Explanation of how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum is connected to accommodations and/or modifications

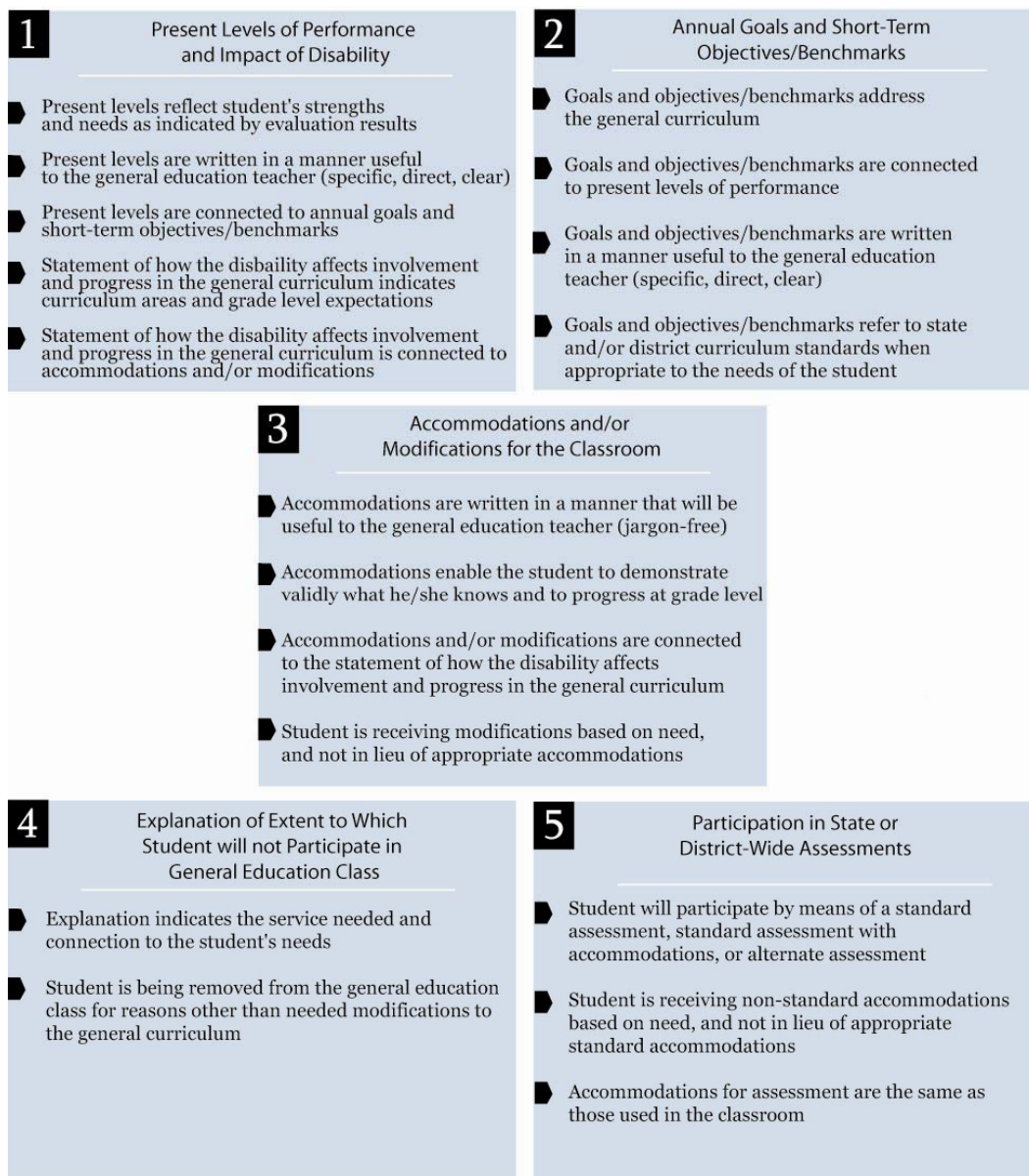
The first part of the framework corresponds to the statement concerning the student's present levels of educational performance and how the disability impacts involvement and progress in the general curriculum. (a) The student's present levels should include consideration of both the

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the flow chart developed by Massanari, described earlier, consists of questions intended to guide the conversations and thought processes of the IEP team in addressing the needs of the specific child.

strengths and needs of the student, as indicated in the student’s evaluation results. (b) Attention should be paid to the kind of wording and language used to describe the student’s present levels – i.e., the language should be specific, direct and clear rather than general and vague. Because special education personnel tend to be more familiar than general education teachers with the evaluation results on which the present levels are based, it is important that present levels be written in a manner that will be easily understood by the general education teacher. (c) Moreover, in light of the fact that statements of present levels lay the foundation for annual goals, there should be a connection between these two IEP components.<sup>7</sup> As noted in Part One of this paper, pre-IDEA ’97 research highlighted the lack of relationship between evaluation results and annual goals (see, e.g., Pyecha et al., 1980; Schenck, 1980).

**Figure 1. Framework for Analysis of IEPs in Relation to Access to the General Curriculum**



<sup>7</sup> To emphasize this connection, the Massachusetts IEP form requires a statement of present levels before each goal.

(d) The requirement that the IEP state how the student’s disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum directs educators to focus on the nature of the general curriculum.<sup>8</sup> IDEA ‘97 defines the term “general curriculum” as the same curriculum as that established for students without disabilities (34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(1)(i)). 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 et al., 2002). Therefore, in describing how the student’s disability affects his or her participation in the general curriculum, educators must consider all aspects of the curriculum – i.e., content, methods, materials, and outcomes as well as grade level expectations. Such consideration is a critical first step in the design of an appropriate educational program for the student. (e) Finally, this statement should be connected to and help educators make subsequent determinations about the necessary accommodations and/or modifications that the student requires in order to participate fully in the general curriculum.

- 2) *Statement of annual goals and short-term objectives and/or benchmarks to enable involvement and progress in the general curriculum*
  - a) Goals and objectives and/or benchmarks address the general curriculum
  - b) Goals and objectives and/or benchmarks are connected to present levels of performance
  - c) Goals and objectives and/or benchmarks are written in a manner useful to the general education teacher (specific, direct and clear)
  - d) Goals and objectives and/or benchmarks refer to state and/or district curriculum standards when appropriate to the needs of the student

The second part of the framework corresponds to the statement that annual goals and short-term objectives and/or benchmarks<sup>9</sup> must enable the student to be involved and progress in the general curriculum. As noted in Part One of this paper, prior to IDEA ‘97, IEP goals had to be based on the specific needs of the individual student, but the goals did not necessarily have to relate to the general curriculum (see, e.g., Giangreco et al., 1994). Also as noted, earlier research showed that IEPs were often synonymous with a separate curriculum for students with disabilities (Pugach and Warger, 1993). Moreover, the fact that IEP goals were not connected to the general curriculum made it difficult to evaluate the performance of these students (Brauen, O’Reilly, & Moore, 1994).

(a) Because IEP goals create a roadmap for a student’s educational program, in order for the student to be involved and progress in the general curriculum, IEP goals must address the general curriculum. The task of linking IEP goals with the general curriculum is complex because as with present levels, an awareness of the general curriculum is necessary as well as an understanding of the student’s needs. Such linking is most difficult with respect to students with significant cognitive disabilities (see, e.g., NASDSE, 1999). The extent to which IEP goals address the general curriculum will depend on the individualized needs of the student. IEP goals

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<sup>8</sup> The Massachusetts IEP form has a separate section in which IEP teams are to check the curriculum areas that are affected.

<sup>9</sup> Short-term objectives and benchmarks allow teachers to gauge periodically throughout the year how well the student is progressing toward the annual goal. The current House and Senate IDEA reauthorization bills propose elimination of the requirement that IEPs contain short-term objectives and/or benchmarks but maintain the requirement that the goals enable involvement and progress in the general curriculum.

do not need to address all areas of the general curriculum, only those that are affected by the student's disability. (b) As noted above, because statements of present levels lay the foundation for IEP goals, the goals should relate back to the present levels. (c) Moreover, the statements of annual goals, as those of present levels, should be written in clear and direct language in a manner that general the education teacher will find helpful. The inclusion of the general education teacher on the IEP team following IDEA '97 means that general education teachers now have to view students with disabilities as part of their responsibility. Because the general education teacher is the individual who is most familiar with the general curriculum, the input of this teacher, in conjunction with his or her collaboration with special education personnel, can help to ensure that the student participates in the general curriculum in a meaningful way.

(d) IEP goals should also reflect state or district standards, when appropriate according to the needs of the student. Following the passage of the NCLB Act of 2001, states are required to establish challenging content and performance standards (20 U.S.C. §§ 6311(b)(1)(A)-(C)). Although standards are not the same as the general curriculum, standards help to define and influence the general curriculum. Moreover, goals should reflect state standards because standards form the basis for state-wide assessments, and students with disabilities must be provided with the opportunity to learn the material covered by the assessments. As noted in Part Three, some states have begun to develop processes to help IEP teams connect IEP goals with state standards (NASDSE, 1999). Moreover, some didactic materials have made suggestions regarding the linkage of IEP goals with the general curriculum. For example, Walsh (2001) described a professional development program that provided teachers with a copy of the Maryland Content Standards to use in conjunction with the writing of IEPs.

- 3) *Statement of accommodations and/or modifications to enable involvement and progress in the general curriculum*
  - a) Accommodations are written in a manner that will be useful to the general education teacher (jargon-free)
  - b) Accommodations enable the student to demonstrate validly what he or she knows and to progress at grade level
  - c) Accommodations and/or modifications relate back to the statement of how the disability affects involvement and progress in general curriculum
  - d) Student is receiving modifications based on need, and not in lieu of appropriate accommodations

The third area of the framework corresponds to the listing of accommodations and/or modifications necessary to help the student be involved and progress in the general curriculum. An accommodation is generally thought of as an alteration that does not change the content of the curriculum or lower standards. In contrast, a modification is considered a change that creates a substantial alteration in the content of the curriculum or lowers standards (for example, teaching less content or different content) (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

(a) Accommodations should not be written in a complicated manner that will be difficult for general education teachers to implement. Giangreco et al. (1994) found that the IEPs they examined were often discipline-referenced and that the language contained a considerable amount of jargon. In order for general education teachers to be able to implement

accommodations in the classroom, the accommodations need to be written in a straightforward manner. (b) Accommodations are intended to level the playing field and should allow the student to demonstrate validly what he or she knows. (c) Accommodations should also relate back to the statement of how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum.

(d) Furthermore, a student should be receiving an instructional modification based on need, and not in lieu of an appropriate accommodation. For some students, modifications to the curriculum are appropriate. For other students, however, their IEP may inappropriately specify the use of modifications rather than accommodations.<sup>10</sup> If a student is receiving a modified curriculum, while his or her strengths and needs suggest that he or she could be participating effectively in the general curriculum with the help of accommodations, then the student may not, in fact, be receiving access to the general curriculum. Ultimately, the goal should be to create curricular goals, methods, materials, and measures of assessment from the outset that have built-in supports for diverse learners, rather than to retrofit accommodations or modifications after the fact (Hitchcock et al., 2002).

- 4) *Explanation of the extent to which the student will not participate in the general education class*
- a) Explanation indicates the service needed and connection to the student's needs
  - b) Student is being removed from the general education class for reasons other than needed modifications to the general curriculum

The fourth part of the framework corresponds to the requirement that the IEP provide an explanation if the student will not participate in the general education class. This provision expands upon IDEA's mandate that students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate (20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(5)(A)).

(a) The statement explaining the extent to which the student will not participate in the general education class should include: the specific service that cannot be provided to the student in the general education class and a connection back to the student's needs. Merely stating that the student must be removed from the general education class to receive general specialized services is not sufficient. (b) The implementing regulations of the Department of Education explain that a child cannot be removed from education in age-appropriate general education classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum (34 C.F.R. § 300.552(e)). Therefore, the explanation of removal from the general education class should include reasons other than needed modifications to the general curriculum.

- 5) *Participation in state or district-wide assessments*
- a) Student will participate by means of a standard assessment, standard assessment with accommodations, or alternate assessment

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<sup>10</sup> The Massachusetts IEP form includes separate sections for accommodations and instructional modifications. Under the program modifications section, three categories are listed – content, method/delivery of instruction, and performance criteria.

- b) Student is receiving non-standard accommodations based on need, and not in lieu of appropriate standard accommodations
- c) Accommodations for assessment are the same as those used in the classroom

Finally, the fifth part of the framework corresponds to the IEP statement regarding the participation of the student in state or district-wide assessments. IDEA '97 requires the IEP to include a statement of the modifications in administration that will enable the student to take part in state and district-wide assessments; if the student will not participate in the regular assessment, the IEP must explain how the student will be assessed. In its 1995 legislative proposal, the U.S. Department of Education explained the importance of including students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments:

When schools are required to assess students with disabilities and report on the results, schools are more likely to focus on improving results for students with disabilities, and students are more likely to have meaningful access to the general curriculum (p. 12).

(a) The manner in which the student will participate in state and district-wide assessments must be stated – whether by means of a standard assessment, standard assessment with accommodations, or an alternate assessment. The Massachusetts Department of Education defines what is meant by the terms “standard accommodations” and “non-standard accommodations” and includes a list of such accommodations in their 2004 MCAS handbook. Standard accommodations are defined as “changes in the routine conditions under which students take MCAS tests, and involve changes in timing or scheduling of the test; test setting; test presentation; how the student responds to test questions” (p. 8). Non-standard accommodations are defined as “modifications in the way the test is presented or in the way a student responds to test questions that may alter what the test measures” (p. 8). (b) A student should receive a non-standard accommodation based on need, not in lieu of an appropriate standard accommodation.

(c) Moreover, educators should make sure that the accommodations listed in the IEP for assessment match those listed for instruction. As noted, Ysseldyke et al. (2001) examined the relationship between instructional and assessment accommodations in the IEPs of 280 students with disabilities in Maryland and found that the accommodations for the classroom generally matched those for assessment; however, a number of the students received assessment accommodations that they did not receive in the classroom. A student should not be receiving a new accommodation for assessment that he or she has not received for instruction.

## V. Conclusion

In the years following the passage of the EAHCA in 1975, much was written about the inadequacies associated with the IEP both as a document and as a process. Some of the major criticisms involved concerns with: (1) the content and quality of IEPs (e.g., lack of connection between IEP components, differences in the content of IEPs across various delivery models, and lack of a relationship between IEPs and the general curriculum); (2) the limited role played by general education teachers in the IEP process; and (3) the negative views of the IEP process by special education teachers.

The shortcomings identified in the literature led to improvements in the IEP that were instituted as part of the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. Specifically, IDEA '97 introduced the requirement that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum, and this requirement was expressed in five specific IEP statements: (1) present levels of performance and how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general curriculum; (2) annual goals/short term objectives and benchmarks to enable involvement and progress in the general curriculum; (3) accommodations and/or modifications to enable involvement and progress in the general curriculum; (4) explanation of the extent to which the student will not participate in the general education class; and (5) participation in state or district-wide assessments.

Despite the optimism associated with the introduction of the IEP requirements pertaining to access to the general curriculum, very little has been written about the requirements following IDEA '97. Although there have been a small number of survey-based studies, didactic materials, and indirectly related empirical studies, there have been no empirical studies directly addressing all of the IEP statements pertaining to access to the general curriculum.

This paper has developed a framework to analyze the extent to which IEPs reflect access to the general curriculum. The framework can be used as part of professional development training for educators or as the basis for a subsequent empirical study examining all of the IEP statements pertaining to access to the general curriculum. The framework, which is grounded in the legal requirements of IDEA '97 and the educational literature, provides an effective mechanism by which to obtain a detailed picture of IEPs in relation to access to the general curriculum. Moreover, this framework directs attention to new ways of conceptualizing and can lead educators to think comprehensively by considering interrelationships and/or factors that might otherwise be overlooked. The use of legally correct and educationally sound IEP statements does not automatically ensure that students are in fact receiving access to the general curriculum; however, because the IEP represents a prospective plan or map of a student's educational experience, examination of these statements represents a critical first step in the analysis of access to the general curriculum.

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