

## An Interview with Dr. Margaret McLaughlin

### **\*Advocacy Brief from National Center for Learning Disabilities: Understanding the Standards-based Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

*Dr. McLaughlin is Professor in the Department of Special Education and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland. She directs the doctoral program in Special Education Policy Leadership Development. This program trains personnel to assume key leadership roles in the public and private sectors and become policy makers at the state and national level. She also directs a doctoral program in using large-scale data to conduct policy research. Dr. McLaughlin's research includes investigation of the impact of education reform on students with disabilities and special education programs.*

#### **NCLD: Why do you think we are seeing a move toward “standards-based IEPs?”**

**Dr. McLaughlin:** Attempting to develop goals and instruct in the grade level for students who have major gaps in their skills is not a new issue. In 1997, the IDEA amendments required that students access the general curriculum. We have a long tradition in special education of training our teachers to develop IEPs that are somewhat deficit based. We used assessments that were basic skills, standardized instruments, and focused our goals around remedying deficits. However, with the advent of 1997 “access” requirements, and the more recent NCLB requirements and regulations, specifically the NCLB regulation regarding alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards which requires a standards-based IEP approach, grade-level goals have become more and more important.

#### **NCLD: Many seem to think that this is both inappropriate—in conflict with the “individualized nature of special education”—and impossible to do. What is your perspective?**

**Dr. McLaughlin:** The bottom line is that “ready means never.” If you wait to get these kids mastering basic skills, then there will never be time to learn and master the critical skills and knowledge they need to progress in their grade-level curriculum. The key question is “How do we take a child who has missing skills, and provide goals and instruction in grade-level content?”

Consider this example: One of our University of Maryland students was working with five boys, 10-11 years old, who had a diagnosis of emotional-behavior disorders. Each had IEP goals consistent with state standards, and they all had math standard goals, grade level appropriate. The U of MD student's task was to work on a curriculum unit on circles, circumference, diameter, and area of a circle, in a 5-6 week unit. These students needed extra help, but all students were working on this grade level unit. She found that all of them had basic skills gaps in computation, mathematics vocabulary, etc. She knew they had two needs: there needed to be instruction on filling the gaps, but not all of those gaps would preclude the students from determining the area of a circle. They also needed to work on the circle unit, according to their IEPs. She made a decision to focus on the basic foundational skills, and after 6 weeks, these students did not gain the knowledge of circles. This decision, and the outcome, is typical; many teachers face this.

#### **NCLD: So, how do IEP teams go about addressing this challenge?**

**Dr. McLaughlin:** We need to address BOTH of these questions in the IEP: How do we deal with critical foundation skills and how will the student build skills and knowledge in the grade-level content? These are equally important things for IEP teams to address. So, here is what the IEP team needs to know before they can develop a standards-based IEP:

● **People on the IEP team collectively have to have a deep understanding of general education subject matter content, and understand not just WHAT is in it, and how the curriculum is organized, over time—K-12, and within the grade level, precursors to later skills and knowledge— they have to think about what has to occur in this year and the year after.** It cannot be looked at in a one-year frame. They also need to look at how the curriculum is “chunked,” most commonly into units, 5-6 weeks in time. Students don't have a “year” to learn all the content, but need to follow the curriculum throughout the year. It requires general education teachers as well as the special education teachers.

● **All people who are involved in the IEP development must know how to assess the student in relationship to the grade-level content demands.** It is not enough to take an “off the shelf ” test that

identifies deficits. Instead—what are the key units of instruction coming up, and what do we need to work on to ensure the student can benefit. Some gaps in learning may be essential to mastering the content coming up in the curriculum, but not all of them will be. Using the example above, computation skills aren't essential to the circle unit. Does the student have basic understanding of geometric concepts, can we work on terminology? We need to use ongoing assessments to figure out what needs to be built in order to allow the student to access the content. We need bigger assessment toolkits than we have had in the past.

We can't forget that if they could learn everything in the unit of instruction within the 5-6 weeks, then we may not have a child that has an IEP. So, now we have to think very strategically about which of the core pieces of the standard need to be mastered and learned well. We can't do it by cherry-picking out of the state standards—the student needs to build a foundation to move to the next level. There may be some things that IEP teams can determine that aren't going to be as critical—and again, they can focus the goals on those things that will contribute to this year and out years as well.

**-The team needs to think about accommodations and supports.** What will the student need to access the content? The student may have some reading deficits the team will have to consider. What are the accommodations the student will need in reading to access information and knowledge in spite of basic reading skills deficits? The IEP team should have good knowledge of the accommodations policies, and the difference between an accommodation and a modification. I have seen too often recently on IEPs just a list of the accommodations allowable on the test—but they aren't connected to content or instructional context.

● **Progress monitoring is a critical piece of this—how you determine what evidence to use to determine what the student has learned at the end of critical chunks of the curriculum, to ensure that the student did learn the critical knowledge and skills we wanted him to learn.** Assessments used for this purpose must be linked to the curriculum and academic content, and aligned with the state assessment. Tools such as end-of-unit tests, informal and systematic questioning of the student, and curriculum-based measures (CBMs) for some of the basic skills can be used. There are tools and techniques to monitor the progress of students, but we need tools that cover all of the rich and varied content, not just basic skills.

● **The IEP should show who will be responsible for teaching these goals, and where it will occur.** Some of the instruction in the example discussed earlier might occur just with special educator in a pull-out for a few hours a week or day until the student has mastered specific skills, but differentiated instruction matching challenges of content and the needs of the student is an essential piece for the IEP team to consider.

**NCLD: These seem like tall orders for IEP teams. What else needs to happen to change the way we approach instruction for students with disabilities?**

**Dr. McLaughlin:** This cannot just be “done” in the IEP meeting. It has to be done in a school wide and district wide effort, working on how to teach all children grade-level content. This is being done in a number of schools—there is no doubt that it can be done—but we have to overcome the traditions of IEP development, and our history of thinking about deficit planning for the IEP. We must think of IEP development as not only giving access, but ensuring meaningful progress toward those grade level standards—that is what is needed to achieve at grade level.

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