

Developing Standards-Based Individualized Education Program Objectives for Students With Significant Needs

Sharon Lynch and Paula Adams

Cristina has seen many changes in her years of teaching students with significant needs. Her very first classroom was a “life skills” class in a cluster setting at an elementary school 11 years ago. She worked diligently to help her students become more independent, with the goal of placement in their neighborhood school’s general education classroom. Cristina is familiar with the academic demands of the school curriculum in the age of accountability, and she is very aware of the intense educational needs of her students. During the most recent district special education meeting, her director discussed the necessity for all individualized education program (IEP) objectives to be based on the general education curriculum. Thinking about the individual needs of her students, Cristina wonders if perhaps inclusion has gone one step too far. How is she going to teach IEP objectives in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies when some of her students are unable to speak, write, or use cause-and-effect software?

In keeping with principles established through previous legislative acts, the Individuals With Disabilities Educational Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) maintains a focus on accountability and calls for assessments of how

students with disabilities progress within the general curriculum (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005). Previously, IDEA 1997 required that all IEPs include a statement of how students’ disabilities affect their involvement and progress in the general curriculum as well as measurable goals that would enable children to be involved with and to make progress in that curriculum (Byrnes, 2004; Etscheidt, 2006). Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) later mandated that each state develop achievement standards and report outcomes for all students in math, reading, and science by 2007 (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003). Based on these curriculum and accountability requirements, it is clear that state achievement standards must constitute the curriculum framework for all students, including those with significant disabilities.

Considerable research has investigated how states measure outcomes for students with disabilities (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Browder, Flowers, et al., 2004; Browder, Spooner, et al., 2004; Flowers, Browder, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006; Thurlow, 2002). A num-



ber of states have alternative achievement standards linked to state learning standards. Typically these alternative standards reflect a narrowing of the general education standards, and learners are instructed and measured on the basis of limited access to the general curriculum (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Dezell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005). Although standards and outcome measures must be related to academic content, this does not prevent teachers from integrating functional content into instruction. Additionally, access and assessment within the general curriculum should not require teachers to restrict instruction to reading and language arts, mathematics, and science. Indeed, to do so would deny individualization, a veritable cornerstone of the federal education law for students with disabilities.

IEPs require goals and objectives that reflect individual needs as well as general curriculum standards. In the past, teachers commonly administered a commercially-published criterion-referenced measure and drafted IEP objec-

tives based on the items that were not mastered on the criterion-referenced test. One problem with this approach is that criterion-referenced measures may not correlate directly with state standards. Although most publishers provide lists of items related to state standards, the items are often vaguely tied to the standards listed and many relevant standards are not addressed at all. In such cases, the commercial tests essentially drive the development of IEP objectives, and state curriculum standards are a secondary consideration. Ideally, when developing IEP objectives, the teacher should first consider state standards which link the IEP to the curriculum.

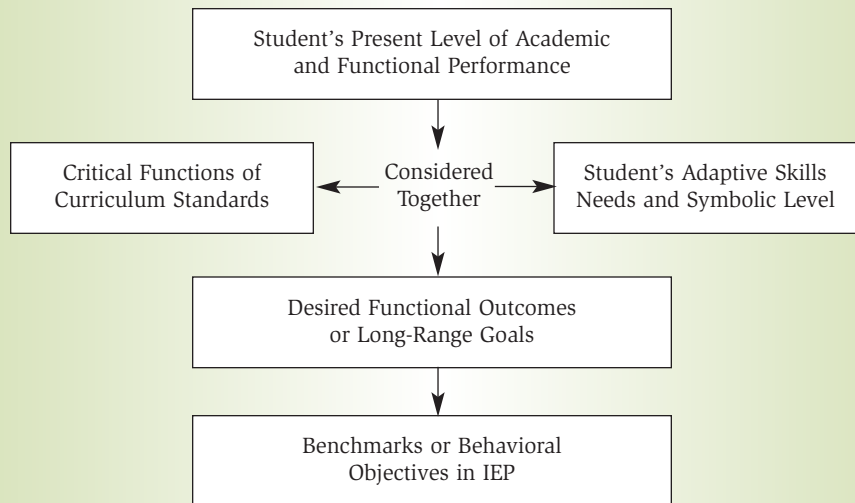
Standards-Based and Individualized Programs

Considering Student Needs and State Standards

An important consideration when developing IEP objectives for students with significant disabilities is the need for intense instructional support. Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002) found that teachers of students with severe disabilities did not believe that access to the general curriculum was appropriate for their students, given their specific and intense educational needs. These teachers ranked social skills and communication skills as the most important skills for access to the general curriculum. However, Browder, Flowers, et al. (2004) point out that functional skills and academic skills should not be competing priorities. They recommend a “threaded” curriculum approach based on academic tasks which specify functional materials and environments. When state standards and individual needs serve as the basis for the IEP, both functional and academic skills can be addressed.

Some students with significant needs perform at the nonsymbolic level of communication (Downing, 1999), and most commercially developed IEP programs are not tailored to meet individual needs (Burns, 2006). Also, it is often difficult for teachers to understand how the education of these students can be linked to state academic standards (Agran et al., 2002; Flowers et al.,

Figure 1. Development of Standards-Based IEPs



2005). However, objectives can be written that correlate to the state standards, yet meet the educational needs of students who work at the *presymbolic*, *early symbolic*, or *expanded symbolic* levels (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade-Little, & Snell, 2006). This method enables teachers to examine state standards and write IEP objectives that are individualized to the learner’s needs and directly related to the general curriculum.

Considering the Student’s Symbolic Level

When developing standards-based IEP objectives, consideration of students’ cognitive and symbolic levels of functioning is an important first step (Browder et al., 2006). Students who work at the presymbolic level have not yet acquired the skills to understand conventional symbols such as words, written sight words, pictures, or signs. Their primary means of communication may include body movements, vocalizations, facial expressions, and touching. Rather than relate to pictures or symbols, these students relate to concrete objects. At the early symbolic level, students begin to move beyond the object level and can relate to words, beginning oral language, photographs, pictures, line drawings, clip art, or pictured symbols. At this level, students may also have learned a few numbers and familiar sight words. Finally, students working

at the expanded symbolic level demonstrate basic academic skills such as number and letter recognition and may have learned some functional sight words and the use of money.

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Using standards-based IEPs assists each child to progress in the curriculum with functional and academic skills, appropriately reflecting the child’s level of symbolic use. An additional benefit is that as teachers become aware of various symbolic levels of their students, they can better assist students’ progress in communication and use of symbols (Downing, 1999).

Developing the Standards-Based IEP

The flow chart in Figure 1 illustrates the process of standards-based IEP development. Teachers and IEP teams begin with consideration of the student’s present levels of academic and functional performance. Educators determine and consider critical functions (White, 1980)

Table 1. Sample IEP Objectives

Content Area	Standard	Critical Function	Objective
Sample IEP Objectives in Writing			
Language Arts/ Writing, Grade 6	Viewing/ Representing/ Production: The student produces visual images, messages, and meanings that communicate with others.	Communication with others through visual representation.	Presymbolic Level: The student uses a computer switch to print a greeting card to give to a peer. After printing the greeting card, the student uses eye gaze to choose the peer to receive the greeting card. Early Symbolic Level: After orally dictating a message that is typed on the computer, the student uses a switch to print the message. Expanded Symbolic Level: After orally dictating a letter, the student copies the letter, addresses an envelope, and mails it to the person of her choice.
Sample IEP Objectives in Reading			
Language Arts/ Reading Grade 6	Reading a variety of texts: The student reads widely for different purposes in varied sources.	Use of receptive communication (reading, listening, photographs, and drawings) for different purposes.	Presymbolic Level: The student activates a switch to listen to books on tape to read a book of her choice for pleasure, read a recipe that is used for a class project, read directions for walking to a different part of the school, and read the next step in her personal daily schedule. Early Symbolic Level: The student orally reads pictured symbols to make a choice for her daily leisure activity, follow the next step in her daily schedule, follow pictured classroom rules, follow instructions for classroom arts and crafts activities, and use a communication board to interact with peers. Expanded Symbolic Level: The student reads basic instructions within multiple contexts to follow directions to microwave a dinner of her choice, prepare a cake mix, follow instructions from in-building signs (e.g., BOYS, TEACHERS ONLY, EXIT, ENTER), obtain items on a grocery list, and find items in a catalogue.
Sample IEP Objectives in Mathematics			
Mathematics, Grade 6	Measurement: The student solves application problems involving estimation and measurement of length, area, time, temperature, capacity, weight, and angles.	Application or quantitative and temporal concepts.	Presymbolic Level: The student demonstrates time concepts by following a daily object schedule and going independently to the activity from the schedule. The student selects clothing appropriate to the daily temperature. Early Symbolic Level: The student demonstrates knowledge of following concepts by discriminating objects which represent the descriptors such as big, little, large, small, long, short, near, far, hot, cold, heavy, and light. Expanded Symbolic Level: The student measures objects to the nearest ½"; tells time to the nearest hour; selects a container of the appropriate size for storing leftovers; reads the daily temperature and classifies it as hot, warm, cool, or cold; and differentiates two familiar objects stating which object weighs more.
Sample IEP Objectives in Science			
Science, Grade 6	Science concepts: The student knows that the responses of organisms are caused by internal or external stimuli.	Recognition of harmful and helpful things for plants, animals, and/or people.	Presymbolic Level: The student assumes a classroom job on a weekly basis using an object schedule including watering classroom plants, feeding fish, and providing food and water for pets. Early Symbolic Level: The student communicates with symbols to express personal states or needs such as hunger, thirst, hot, cold, dark, and light. Expanded Symbolic Level: The student tells the needs of various organisms required for life such as plants (heat, light, water, soil, and plant food); animals (food, water, and shelter); and people (food, clothing, shelter, and other people).

of particular state curriculum standards related to the student's adaptive skills needs and levels of cognitive and symbolic functioning. This analysis guides the selection of appropriate functional goals or desired learning outcomes for the student. Identifying long-range goals

helps determine and identify individualized measurable objectives.

When teachers target IEP objectives at the student's symbolic level, they are able to develop objectives that are appropriate to the child's level of performance, yet ambitious enough to

show progress on the general curriculum standards. Ultimately, the valid assessment methods and strategies included in the standards-based education plans of students with significant disabilities should inform the evaluation of their progress in the general curricu-

lum and support their inclusion in state accountability measures.

Standards-Based IEP Objectives

Table 1 provide examples of how curriculum standards can be addressed at the presymbolic, early symbolic, and expanded symbolic levels. The objectives are based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, Grade 6.

Summary and Conclusion

Like Cristina, many special education professionals perceive a dilemma created by what seems to be conflicting mandates of IDEA 2004 and NCLB 2002. Teachers and IEP teams serving students with significant disabilities are confronted with the challenge of designing programs that assure access to the general curriculum while at the same time provide instruction that is responsive to highly individualized and varied needs. In addition, IEPs must use appropriate and valid assessment strategies for evaluating differentiated goals while accounting for student progress within prescribed and undifferentiated statewide accountability systems under NCLB. The development of standards-based objectives can provide a means for reconciling all of these requirements and is the first step in delivering access to the general curriculum, a principle that should be supported by the IEP.

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In order to achieve appropriately individualized education plans, standards-based IEP development must be driven by consideration of students' present levels of academic and functional performance. An examination of critical functions of general curriculum standards and students' adaptive skills and symbolic levels will guide and inform the selection of appropriate goals and objectives. As teachers establish

clear links between state standards and specific needs of students, goals and objectives selected for IEPs become extensions of the scope and sequence found within the general education curriculum. In this manner, the process goes beyond merely identifying the broad relevance of state standards to IEP goals and clearly sets the general education curriculum as a basis for the selection of desired functional outcomes and objectives. Once IEP objectives have well established foundations in state standards, implementation and instruction in least restrictive settings and evaluations for state accountability purposes are additional elements needed to assure access to the general education curriculum for all students.

As educators grapple with the often frustrating issues surrounding compliance with state and federal legislative mandates, the development of standards-based IEPs provides a practical framework for meeting the complex legal and ethical requirements of teaching. It is the first step in a process that can bridge the divide between the call for uniform curriculum and assessment standards and the preservation of appropriately individualized instruction and evaluation practices for students with a significant disability.

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