

Research Highlights

Topic: Access to the General Curriculum

Wehmeyer, M. L., Lattin, D., & Agran, M. (2001). Achieving access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation: A curriculum decision-making model. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 36(4), 327-342.

BOTTOM LINE

Access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities should be a part of educational standards-based reform and accountability systems for the purpose of raising expectations for these students and ensuring access to a challenging curriculum. This article addresses issues associated with access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation. A decision-making model enabling IEP teams to achieve such access is proposed.

TIPS

- Address all aspects of the educational experience, including formal and informal curriculum (what), instruction (how), and placement (where), through the IEP process.
- Begin the IEP process with the general curriculum, taking into account the individual student needs.
- Adapt the curriculum by modifying: (a) the curriculum representation (e.g., changing font size of text), (b) curriculum presentation (e.g., using film or video sources rather than written formats), or (c) student engagement with the curriculum (e.g., artwork, drama, music rather than written responses).
- Augment the curriculum using various strategies such as cognitive or learning strategies, active learner strategies, and student-directed learning strategies.

- Use the principle of universal design in curriculum planning to ensure that students with a wide range of capacities can access, advance, and succeed in the general curriculum.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) of students with disabilities include information about students' engagement in and access to the general curriculum.
- *What is the general curriculum?* The general curriculum is the formal curriculum adopted by state and local education agencies; a curriculum usually designed under the auspices of standards-based reform efforts.
 - ◆ The purpose of accessing the general curriculum language for students with disabilities is to ensure the inclusion of these students in standards-based reform and accountability systems.
 - ◆ The purpose of standards-based reform is the establishment of content standards that define the curriculum and performance standards that define what students should learn.
- *What is meant by access?* Access to the general curriculum does not mean that the educational program of a student with a disability is to be determined only by the general curriculum. IDEA's intent is that the child will have access to and participate in the general curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate.
 - ◆ Federal regulations and statutory language anticipate progress or advancement in the general curriculum, and decisions about a student's involvement in the general curriculum should be within the context of ensuring success and progress.
- *Is access to the general curriculum important for students with mental retardation?* Yes, access to the general curriculum is important because we are accountable for ensuring that (1) all students receive an education that challenges them and (2) teachers and others hold high expectations for student achievement. Issues related to the importance of gaining access to the general curriculum include:
 - ◆ Expectations are low for students with mental retardation.
 - ◆ Individualization does not guarantee quality.
 - ◆ Accountability for process and accountability for progress are not the same thing.
- The proposed curriculum decision-making model promotes access to and progress in the general curriculum, focusing not on the IEP as a legal, written document, nor on the IEP process as conforming with procedural requirements, but instead on the IEP process as a decision-making process to determine an effective, challenging, educational program for all students. It focuses specifically

KEY FINDINGS

cont.

on the “what” of the educational experience, the curriculum, rather than the “how” or the “where.”

- ◆ This model assumes presence of a ‘general curriculum’ that describes the formal content for all students.
 - ◆ The model does not require a general curriculum that uses principles of ‘universal design.’
 - ◆ The model focuses on enabling IEP teams to make decisions about the formal content of the educational program.
 - ◆ The model begins with the general curriculum, taking into account individual student needs and working through three levels of modifications: curriculum adaptation, curriculum augmentation, and curriculum alteration.
 - ◆ The model incorporates the IDEA 1997 mandate that assistive technology (AT) be considered for all students with disabilities.
- Implementing the model:
 - ◆ The IEP team first determines if the general curriculum is adequate to meet the student’s instructional needs.
 - ◆ The next decision relates to consideration of the use of assistive technology to mitigate aspects of the student’s disability that impact their interaction with the general curriculum.
 - ◆ The IEP team then considers how the general curriculum might be adapted to make it appropriate.
 - Curricular adaptations are designed to overcome barriers inherent in the curriculum for students with disabilities. They are efforts to modify the representation (the way information is depicted) or presentation (the way information is conveyed) of the curriculum or to modify the student’s engagement with the curriculum (the ways the student responds to the curriculum).
 - ◆ The next step in the model is curriculum augmentation.
 - Curriculum augmentation involves enhancing the standard curriculum with executive processing strategies for acquiring and generalizing information. Methods for augmenting the curriculum include cognitive or learning strategies, student-directed learning strategies, and enhancement of student self-determination.
 - ◆ The final step in the decision process is curriculum alteration.
 - Curriculum alteration involves the IEP team’s consideration of the need to add content to the student’s formal curriculum that is not found in the general curriculum.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Agran, M., Alper, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (2002). Access to the general curriculum for students with significant disabilities: What it means to teachers. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 37, 123-133.

RELATED
PUBLICATIONS
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Wehmeyer, M. L., Lance, G. D., & Bashinski, S. (2002). Promoting access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation: A multi-level model. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 37*, 223-234.

Agran, M., Blanchard, C. Hughes, C., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2002). Increasing the problem-solving skills of students with severe disabilities participating in general education. *Remedial and Special Education, 23*(5), 279-288.

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