

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Access to the General Curriculum

Wehmeyer, M. L. (2003). Defining mental retardation and ensuring access to the general curriculum. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 38(3), 271-282.

BOTTOM LINE

The 10th edition (2002) of the AAMR mental retardation definition and classification manual contains some modifications from the 9th edition (1992). The more dramatic change is contextual in nature and has occurred as special education attempts to join standards-based reform efforts so that students with disabilities are not left behind. This attempt is reflected in general curriculum mandates. Both the 9th and 10th editions have changed the way mental retardation is conceptualized to shift from students' deficits to types and intensities of supports necessary for students to succeed in a variety of contexts. This shift is essential to increase access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation.

Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



TIPS

- Do students with mental retardation get services according to the AAMR support levels? Look at the new definition and see where this matches up with existing services and other needed supports for your child or someone whom you teach.
- Is a student with a label of mental retardation participating in formal and informal aspects of the general curriculum at school. If not, why not? On the IEP, there should be a statement that details a student's level of participation in the general education curriculum.
- Take a look at the revised definition for mental retardation. Think about how you characterize and perceive people with mental retardation. Do you use the terms and ideas mentioned in the 2002 definition?
- Describe the activities of people with mental retardation from a STRENGTH orientation, rather than by mentioning deficits.

On the IEP, there should be a statement that details a student's level of participation in the general education curriculum.

KEY FINDINGS

- In 1992, the 9th edition of AAMR's terminology and classification manual the basis of mental retardation shifted from levels of deficits to intensity of support needs.
- Rather than a personal characteristic, mental retardation is now conceptualized as a state of functioning resulting from the interaction between a person's functional limitations and the social or environmental context in which the person exists or functions.
- Four levels of mental retardation (mild, moderate, severe, and profound) were changed to four levels of support (intermittent, limited, extensive, and pervasive) in the 9th edition.
- Previously, the focus in the field of mental retardation was to provide programs to people and now that has changed to designing and delivering individualized supports.
- The 10th edition (2002) is an opportunity to further the shift in the field from labels and categories to concepts of support and providing greater access to the general curriculum.

- Now we need to transform the definitional changes to accomplish practical improvements in the education of students with mental retardation so that they have access to the general curriculum to support academic success. A constellation of supports that might be used include family and friends, nonpaid supports, generic services, and specialized services.

METHODS

- This article overviews the 9th (1992) and 10th (2002) editions of the AAMR's terminology and classification manual. It is opinion-based only.
- Next, the uses of definitions in education are discussed.
- Finally, the article describes how the new definition system allows students with mental retardation to access the general curriculum.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Greenspan, S. (1997). Dead manual walking: Why the 1992 AAMR definition needs redoing. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 32, 179-190.

Jacobson, J. W., & Mulick, J. A. (1992). A new definition of mentally retarded or a new definition of practice. *Psychology in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 18(2), 9-14.

Luckasson, R., Borthwick-Duffy, S., Buntinx, W. H. E., Coulter, D. L., Craig, E. M., Reeve, A., Schalock, R. L., Snell, M. E., Spitalnick, D. M., Spreat, S., & Tasse, M. J; (2002). *Mental Retardation: Definition, classification, and systems of supports* (10th Ed.). Washington DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.

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