

## **Common Core Standards: What Special Educators Need to Know**

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) released in June 2010 the Common Core State Standards (CCS) for instruction, providing states for the first time with common standards for all students in English/language arts and mathematics.

The English/language arts and mathematics standards for grades K-12 were developed in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, including content experts, states, teachers, school administrators, and parents, establishing clear and consistent goals for learning that will prepare America's children for success in college and work.

The CCS are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, providing a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them.

### **CCS impact on special education**

Students with disabilities continue to demonstrate the capacity to succeed in the general curriculum with appropriate specialized instruction, supports, and accommodations. Reports from the National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO) reveal that students with a variety of learning profiles are continuing to demonstrate greater capacity to acquire and express all levels of knowledge than was previously anticipated. Transitioning administrators, teachers, and related service personnel to this expectation of higher achievement based on demonstrated outcomes is part of the challenge for our field.

The CCS are laden with literacy, numeracy, and cross-disciplinary skills, e.g., communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and use of technology. Embedded throughout, as well, is clear evidence that the CCS should be read as allowing for the widest possible range of students to participate fully from the outset, along with the appropriate accommodations to ensure maximum participation of students with special education needs.

The standards note, for example, that instruction in reading for students with disabilities should allow for Braille, screen-reader technology, or other assistive devices. Meanwhile, writing instruction should include the use of a scribe, computer, or speech-to-text technology.

In a similar vein, the CCS provide that speaking and listening should be interpreted broadly to include sign language. The student with special education needs is thought of as a general education student first—one who, with supports and accommodations, can be expected to proceed in the general curriculum with mastery of grade-level standards as the goal.

This degree of attention to the individualized learning needs of students with disabilities was insufficient in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Its greater presence within the CCS speaks to the

hard work of stakeholder associations, states, and others as the standards were created and revised. This attention highlights and strengthens the value of the special educator in bringing to general curriculum instruction expertise in individualization and the research-based teaching that is the hallmark of our field.

There are many issues to be resolved:

- Will the CCS change what special educators need to know?
- Will the CCS lend themselves to modifications for learning profiles without minimizing expectations?
- How will important access and transition skills be integrated into the teaching schedule?

The CCS and its learning progressions should provide clarity in charting the course of instruction from where a student is performing to the expectations for the grade level.

CEC is optimistic about the impact of the CCS on the achievement of students with disabilities. Students can be active learners in 21st century learning environments when they have instructional supports that invite their engagement, instructional accommodations that change materials and procedures but not the standards, and assistive technology that ensures access to the standards and curriculum.

#### **Implications for assessment processes and results**

From an SEA perspective, there is a need to review a state's current alternate standards with an eye toward whether they need to be revised to link to the new Common Core Standards as a first step. If the alternate standards do need to be revised, then a new alternate assessment needs to be created. That is a long, expensive process that doesn't end until all the professional development related to the new assessment is complete.

On the national level, special educators are fortunate to have been represented by Dr. Martha Thurlow of NCEO on the Validation Committee for the college and career readiness standards developed prior to the K-12 standards.

Among others on the Validation Committee was Dr. Norm Webb, Senior Research Scientist Emeritus from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin, who has assisted many states with their alignment studies of summative and alternate assessments. Their vigilance in ensuring that assessment of the standards was considered as they were developed bodes well for resolution of the many assessment questions that are emerging.

Dr. Jan Sheinker, an affiliate of NCEO and consultant to Edvantia Inc., presented at the CCSSO's Large Scale Assessment Conference in June 2010 on the considerations for impact on students with disabilities as various assessments of achievement on the CCS are created.

She chose to pose the opportunities and consequences of a comprehensive assessment system that includes formative assessment, interim assessment, through-course assessment, and summative assessments that are cumulative. Throughout her presentation she noted the need to use as a yardstick for assessment design, especially given the variance in learning profiles of students with disabilities, whether the items or tasks will:

1. Increase or decrease access.
2. Take into account that a child's disability may cause a variance in the learning progression.

3. Reflect assumptions that are not true for all students, e.g., all students are taught in the same scope and sequence.
4. Yield results that are immediately available for instruction.
5. Reflect unfamiliarity with technology, for instance, as states move to technology enhanced assessments.
6. Signal the need for accommodations not currently used or available.

Dr. Sheinker's remarks are a reminder that the next big step in implementing the CCS is the discussion about how and in what form mastery of these standards will be assessed and that many test design questions and psychometric discussions remain for states to discuss.

### **Significant challenges in implementing CCS for students with disabilities**

CEC views the CCS as providing the opportunity to continue the trend of greater access to the general curriculum while enhancing successful transition opportunities and improving results for all students with disabilities. That positive outlook, however, does not camouflage the very real challenges inherent in teaching to these more rigorous standards or the accountability of schools and, now, teachers in moving students to mastery of them.

The most significant challenge will be in preparing and further developing the knowledge and skills of not only special educators, but all teachers who are sharing the instructional responsibilities for students with disabilities.

If teachers do not approach IEP development, i.e., the present level and the goals/objectives, with a sure knowledge of the grade-level standards for the student and the skill to scaffold instruction low enough to create access and high enough to reach the standard, the potential for mastery is never known or demonstrated. If teachers are not familiar with efficient and frequent means of assessing progress, they won't know how instruction needs to be adjusted to increase the possibility of mastery. If teachers are not deeply knowledgeable of the strategies for teaching reading and math that have been shown to produce results, the likelihood that any student with a disability will be able to navigate these standards in reading/language arts and math is slim.

The special educator's purpose is to be as knowledgeable as she or he can be about what social and academic skills a student needs to access, or perform successfully in, the general curriculum. The challenge for the field is to do everything possible to make sure every special educator feels confident that she or he can achieve that purpose.