Ten Reasons Why We Should Use Standards in IEPS

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In case you haven't noticed, standards are everywhere. Forty-nine of the fifty states now have statewide standards. Iowa, the lone hold out, has opted for locally developed standards, but has standards none the less. In every school in every town in America, standards are, or likely will be, the basic framework for teaching and learning, the focus of educational reform, and the criteria that defines accountability.

Which, of course, begs the question: "What does this have to do with special education?" Should special education be on the front lines of the standards revolution, or is this a regular education battle? Are students with disabilities full participants or innocent bystanders? This article offers ten reasons why standards should have a prominent place in special education. Be forewarned. Although it might look like a David Letterman top ten, it's definitely not for laughs. On the contrary, the purpose of this article is to help special education administrators lead the very serious work of making sure standards provide maximum benefit for students with disabilities. That said - from the home office at California Association of Special Educators (CASE), here are the top ten reasons why we should use standards in IEPs:

1. IT'S THE LAW (SORT OF)

The 1997 Amendments to the IDEA don't specifically require that IEPs be referenced to standards. However, in the section of the amendments that articulates the purpose of special education, the following language has been added by Congress:

> *"…to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that he or she can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children" [34 CFR 300.2.6 (b)(3)(1)].*

The general curriculum thread runs throughout the amendments, touching on evaluation procedures, IEP contents, special education and related services, and the composition of IEP teams. Recall that in all fifty states, in one way or another, standards define the general curriculum. The implications of these rules should be clear. If students with disabilities are going to succeed in the general curriculum and meet the standards that apply to all students, then their IEPs must focus on those standards and provide the learning opportunities they need to meet them.

2. ONE WORD - ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability takes a variety of forms. Systems-level accountability is characterized by legislated rewards and sanctions tied to test scores, school-wide "report cards" and data-driven action-planning. Student-level accountability uses assessment results as the gateway to higher grade levels and graduation. Invariably standards are the center of accountability, the things students are supposed to know and be able to do, the stuff that assessments assess.

Clearly, special education is not immune to accountability. The IDEA amendments require that children with disabilities participate in accountability assessments [34 CFR 300.138(a)], and stipulates that states must establish performance goals and indicators that include standards [34 CFR 300.1676(a) (2)]. That being the case, doesn't it make sense to design IEPs that help students meet standards - so they can do their best on standards-based assessments, pass from grade to grade and eventually graduate, and in the process, help prove that their schools and teachers were indeed accountable?

3. THREE WORDS - LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Despite the IDEA's new emphasis on access to the general curriculum, schools must still serve students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), offering a continuum of programs and placements that meet the students' individual needs. New to the IDEA is the related requirement that the IEP team include at least one classroom teacher "if the child is or might be participating in the general curriculum" [34 CFR 300.343(a) (2)]. It's the "might be" part of this regulation that is particularly interesting. Presumably, even when a student isn't

participating in the general curriculum, the IEP team needs to address the skills and behaviors the student would need to move up the LRE continuum toward the general education environment. That's why the classroom teacher needs to be there. "Might be" suggests movement and connectedness. A common set of standards links every part of the LRE continuum to the general curriculum, and provides the team with a clear and consistent mechanism for gauging progress toward mastering the access skills identified by the classroom teacher.

4. STANDARDS CAN HELP CLARIFY WHAT WE MEAN BY REGULAR AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

It's hard to define special education without defining regular education first. Standards provide that definition. Standards can clarify both the content of the general curriculum and the student outcomes that might be expected if the educational system is working up to speed. If the purpose of special education is to provide students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum so they can meet
the standards that apply to all children, then it should be clear what special education is all about. Regular education provides an array of learning opportunities so students can meet standards. When that's not enough, special education joins in, providing supplemental and individualized learning opportunities. In some cases, special education provides what might be considered "access opportunities" - supports and services that open educational doors so students with disabilities can benefit form the learning opportunities that are available. Regular and special education are two components of the same big system, helping kids meet the same set of standards.

5. STANDARDS CAN HELP CLARIFY WHAT WE MEAN BY "STUDENT WITH A DISABILITY"

The traditional labeling system used in special education works fairly well for determining eligibility. It falls short, however, for planning individualized instruction. What do labels like LD, ED and MR really tell us about what the students knows, where we should start the learning process, or how we should proceed? A standards framework benchmarks what a student should know and be able to do at any given point in his or her career as a learner. When used in the context of special education, standards give definition to the effects of a student's disability relative to the expectations for students who don't have disabilities. Those expectations are defined along a fluid continuum.

If we add in the learning opportunities the student needs, we are able to define the student in terms that translate directly into intervention. In math, the student is working on the same standards as classmates, at the same performance levels, but needs classroom accommodations, a reader/scribe for example, to address the language content of word problems. Another student is working on the same standards as classmates, at the same performance levels, but has behavioral needs related to independent work, a manifestation of an attention deficit. A third student is working on the same standards as classmates, but at lower performance levels, and needs remedial help through special education. A fourth student needs to work on pre-requisite standards, oral expression standards for example, before progressing to the standards that are being addressed by classmates, written expression standards for example. Granted, these "labels" don't roll off the tongue like LD, ED, or MR, but what they lose in brevity, they gain in educational utility. Standards provide labels for kids that communicate what they know and what they need.

6. STANDARDS CAN PROVIDE A USEFUL STRUCTURE FOR IEP DEVELOPMENT.

A typical standards framework reads like an educational road map, providing milestones for every grade level, future destinations, and points of interest along the way. Wisconsin's Fourth Grade Model Academic Standards for English Language Arts, for example, begin with the following performance standard:

> "*By the end of grade four, students will use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading."*

That standard is followed by a list of eight benchmarks that cover word recognition strategies, use of context clues, phonemic awareness, comprehension, organization, reading with a purpose, and much more. That is only one of many standards in Wisconsin's English Language Arts framework, at only one of three grade levels. English Language Arts is

only one part of Wisconsin's Model Standards, which also include math, science, social studies, agriculture, family and consumer skills, and many other content areas - nineteen in all.

Not every state has a standards framework as extensive as Wisconsin's. In some states, South Carolina for example, the standards have less breadth but greater depth. All of Vermont's standards fit in one booklet. Massachusetts has seven. The fifty standards frameworks are as different as the states that produced them, but they all have one thing in common. They are a gift for special educators. The frameworks provide an exceptional tool for planning IEPs. It's safe to say that the English Language Arts standard listed above would be at home in at least 90% of IEPs. Those Wisconsin benchmarks are perfect for setting up a pedagogically sound sequence of short-term objectives. Overall, a standards framework can streamline the special educator's work, succeeding where IEP tools such as objective banks have failed.

7. STANDARDS CAN PROMOTE CONSISTENCY THROUGH COMMON LANGUAGE

Initially, some special educators might feel like the "language of standards" is the revenge of regular education for all the jargon that special education has produced over the years. Standards-based school reform certainly has brought its fair share of new terminology into the educational vernacular-content standards, performance standards, alignment, benchmarks, rubrics, etc. New terminology aside, standards can provide a common language for special educators, regular educators, specialists, parents and other team members. When everyone speaks the same language, the chance of confusion is reduced and, in turn, the chance that various team members will work at cross purposes on conflicting or incompatible goals is virtually eliminated. Consistency is the end result of common language. If we apply that consistency across an entire state, IEP's could have something they've often lacked in the past - portability from teacher to teacher, program to program, school to school, and district to district.

8. STANDARDS CAN PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON NOT SO POSITIVE BEHAVIORS

For kids with behavior problems, standards can help IEP teams write goals that focus on what they want the student to DO, not NOT DO. Rhode Island, for example, has standards that address integrity, honesty and courage, as well as "showing courtesy towards others" and "respecting the rights of all people." Illinois has standards that cover positive communication for "resolving differences and preventing conflicts." In Massachusetts, all students in grades 5-8 are expected to "describe the personal benefits of making positive health decisions," and in grades 9-10 to "demonstrate helpful ways to discuss sexuality, violence, and substance abuse." Standards such as these have the dual advantage of promoting programs that give students power over their own lives, and also helps make it clear that the student is only being asked to do what is expected for all students. Finally, by addressing behavioral issues in the context of workplace standards such as dependability, honesty, productivity, leadership and initiative, students can begin to see the long-term personal implications of those issues.

9. STANDARDS CAN IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The positive effects that standards have had on teaching and learning in regular education are too numerous to mention in the context of this short article. Many of those innovations in curriculum design, instruction and assessment translate well to the needs of special education students. Not the least of those effects is that standards force classroom teachers to view each student as an individual, and to plan accordingly. That has to be a tremendous benefit for students with special needs, a benefit that is enhanced by using standards in the student's IEP.

Standards have also promoted innovations in classroom measurement strategies. Authentic portfolio-based assessments, which use analytic rubrics to quantify student performance, have direct application to IEPs. Picture this: at the IEP meeting parents are appraised of their child's progress with a portfolio of work samples, collected over time, that are scored against common language criteria that reference typical classroom performance. They get it.

On a broader scale, standards can tie special education into the action-planning processes that are a big part of accountability in many

schools and districts. Standards provide a mechanism for aggregating the performance of all the students who access specific programs or services, making it possible to winnow out programs and strategies that don't work, or validate the ones that do.

10. STICKY NOTES

Many of the special educators who are pioneering the use of standards-referenced IEPs started with a copy of their state's standards framework, some professional development time, and a packet of those little yellow sticky notes. Seriously. Given the time to review standards in the context of IEP development, teachers begin to see how specific standards link to individual students and typical IEP goals. They find the reading, math, and writing standards that provide an explicit scope and sequence for teaching basic skills. They see the health standard that can provide a positively directed goal for a student with a substance abuse problem. They identify social studies and workplace standards that can give a real world relevance to behavior plans. For future reference, key pages of the standards framework are tabbed and labeled with the sticky notes.

It can be that easy. The end result is an IEP that is anchored in the general curriculum, promotes the use of common language and common goals, and drives innovation in teaching and learning. When the test scores come out, the administrator has the confidence of knowing that at the very least the results reflect the efforts. That makes eleven reasons why we should use standards in IEPs.