Access to the General Curriculum
By Cathy Healy

Imagine being present at a social gathering of people you have never met. Everyone is talking about the latest widget. Discussions abound about the pros and cons of using the widget, its multiple uses, and the designer colors it’s available in. You have never heard of a widget, have no idea what people are talking about and no one is taking the time to involve you in the discussion. Just when you realize it doesn’t matter that you don’t know anything about a widget because you can leave the party at anytime, your name is called. You are informed that you have won a door prize, an all expense paid vacation to a tropical island. In order to claim it, all you must do is articulate your views on the widget to the room full of people. Now you’ve been at this gathering for at least 90 minutes, and even though you’ve been paying attention and listening hard, you still don’t have enough understanding of the widget to actually say anything intelligent about it. Sadly, you must forfeit the dream vacation.

This scenario, though a little far fetched, actually may be a reality for many of our children with disabilities. In schools all across the nation, information is being disseminated to students, and as hard as they try, some students with disabilities will never grasp the information. They will be exposed to discussions about widgets but not given much help in understanding them. With the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, much attention was given to the concept of the general curriculum: the need for our children not only to have access to it but also to participate in it and demonstrate progress in it.

General curriculum is defined in the Virginia Regulations as “the same curriculum used with children without disabilities adopted by a local educational agency, schools within the local educational agency or, where applicable, the Virginia Department of Education for all children from preschool through secondary school. The term relates to content of the curriculum and not to the setting in which it is taught.”

What’s So Good about the General Education Curriculum?
Congress, in its desire to raise the academic standards of all children, included in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, the language “access to, participation and progress in the general curriculum.” Why all the fuss about the general education curriculum and what does access to it mean? Why must we also emphasize participation and progress in the general education curriculum? What’s so good about the general education curriculum?

Students who expect to receive a regular or
advanced high school diploma need it; statewide assessments are based on it; and in order to go on to a higher level of education, whether academic or vocational, you will need to demonstrate that you have participated in it. Even future employers want to know how much a student has learned in the general education curriculum.

But for many, trying to grasp the general education curriculum is similar to holding a handful of jello. You can see it, taste it, smell it, but it may easily slip through your fingers as you try to hang on to it.

The other significant thing about the general education curriculum is that access to it can also mean access to students without disabilities. Children with disabilities may not spend much of their day in classrooms with typically developing peers. Individualized education plans may call for explicit instructional strategies that are unique to the special education classroom. For many students with disabilities, interaction with typical peers may happen infrequently or in less academic parts of the day. Having access to the general education curriculum may strengthen the likelihood of more opportunities for peer interaction. A few IEP teams may decide that a student who will be participating in alternate assessments may not need to meet the goals as set forth in the general education curriculum. If this is the case, the IEP must still address how and when children with disabilities will have meaningful interaction with their non-disabled peers and why the student will not be accessing the general education curriculum. But for the majority of students with IEP’s, the question remains how will the child have access to, be meaningfully involved in and demonstrate progress in the general education curriculum?

Special, Individualized Instruction Is the Key
The IEP must address how the child will be involved in the general education curriculum and there must be measurable annual goals that demonstrate that the child has progressed in it. Statewide assessment reporting must also include students with disabilities whether they have taken the alternative assessments or the general statewide assessments. Individualized instruction is key to helping students access the general education curriculum. There has been little question about how students with physical impairments such as hearing and vision loss access the general curriculum. Sign interpreters and Braille devices are used to help these students gain access to information. Curriculum adaptations developed by vision and hearing specialists help students master the information. Conceptually, adapting curriculum to meet the learning styles of all students with disabilities will ensure that they will have meaningful access, participation and progress.
in the general education curriculum. Visual learners may need pictures to understand abstract concepts. Auditory learners may need to listen to teacher-directed lectures or books on tape. Students with cognitive delays may need broad concepts broken down into smaller components. School communities must figure out ways for all students to achieve high standards based on the general curriculum. For students with disabilities who have traditionally had less involvement in the general curriculum, it is less clear how this will be accomplished but vital that it happens.

Letting the IEP Work for the Student and the Teacher
Will children with cognitive delays now suffer through classes with work that is beyond their scope and ability? Will children with moderate to severe disabilities now lose their functional life-skills curriculum? How will local educational agencies implement the law? Will teachers be adequately trained and have the necessary resources to support this learning?

The IEP team plays an even greater role than previously. The IEP team decides the goals and objectives for each student. With the parent as an equal member, and when appropriate the student himself, the IEP team will determine the student’s access to the general curriculum and the strategies and modifications necessary for success in the curriculum. The team can also help support the teacher and related personnel by including teacher training in strategies and techniques that will help the student progress.

What Can Parents Do?

- Establish partnerships with educators.
- Think through hopes and dreams for your children and articulate that “vision” to professional teammates.
- Work with the IEP team to develop the best plan for your children that will create a meaningful, realistic curriculum that is rich with content from the general education curriculum.
- Become as familiar with the general education curriculum and teachers as you are with your child’s special education needs and staff, thereby reinforcing the importance of education in educating your child.
- Look at the statewide assessments and goals and determine which ones (with adaptations and modifications) are attainable for your children.
- Look to professionals for expertise and guidance in foundational skill building and explicit instruction; be aware of the most appropriate environment to achieve specific goals.
- Work closely with and support teachers so they are equipped with the necessary skills and materials to include your child in the general education classroom.
- Encourage teachers to re-think the basic conceptual tenets of education from “what can the teacher teach” to “what can the student learn.”
- Continue to hold high standards and high expectations for all of your children.

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