

# 1

# Access to the General Education Curriculum

## *Why It Is More Important Than Ever Before*

**T**he purpose of this book is to help teachers and school administrators begin to translate policy into practice as we explore the meaning and implications of “access to the general education curriculum” and of ensuring that every student has an opportunity to access that curriculum. In this chapter, we are going to discuss the context for what it means to “access the general education curriculum.” We are going to discuss the current legal and policy foundations and provide the important links between what teachers need to know and do in classrooms and the broader policy background. We will begin with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and then discuss the requirements of the new accountability reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

### **IDEA AND ACCESS TO THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM**

IDEA has, in recent years, contained a number of new provisions that represent major advancements in ensuring that each student with a disability receives a high quality and individually designed education. The provisions build on the original purposes of law: Each student must be ensured a free appropriate public education; each child’s education must be determined on an individualized basis and designed to meet his or her particular needs in the least restrictive environment; and the rights of children and their families must be ensured and protected through procedural safeguards. But, several changes have been made to better ensure that students with disabilities have access to a challenging curriculum and that their educational programs are based on high expectations. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

(IDEA) increased the focus of special education from simply ensuring access to education to improving the educational performance of students with disabilities and aligning special education services with the larger national school improvement efforts that include standards, assessments, and accountability.

***New Individualized Education Program (IEP) Provisions.*** The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the cornerstone of special education for any child and is critical to the success of a child's educational program. In 1997, and again in 2004, changes were made to the IEP provisions in IDEA that require specific attention to providing an individual student with a disability access to the general education curriculum. This requirement exists regardless of the setting in which the student will receive special education and related services.

Following is a synopsis of what an IEP must include:

- A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. (For preschool children, a statement of how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities.) For children who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives.
- Measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum; at the same time, they must meet all of the child's other unique educational needs.
- A statement of how the child's progress toward meeting the IEP annual goals will be measured and when periodic reports of the progress will be provided.
- A statement of the special education and related services, supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent possible, that are to be provided to the child. Also, a description of any modifications or supports for school personnel that are necessary for the child to advance toward attaining the annual goals, be involved and progress in the general education curriculum, participate in extracurricular or other nonacademic activities, and be educated and participate in activities with other children with and without disabilities.
- An explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with the children without disabilities in general education classes and activities.
- A statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state or district assessments. If the IEP team determines that the child shall take an alternate assessment, the IEP must include a statement that tells why the child cannot participate in the regular assessments and must indicate the alternate assessment that is selected.
- Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals beginning at age 16 or after.

## **4** ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM

***IDEA and Participation in Assessments.*** IDEA requires that all children with disabilities be included in all state and district assessment programs with appropriate accommodations and alternate assessments where necessary as indicated in their IEPs. Specifically, states and local districts are required to include students with disabilities in the assessments required under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (The No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB). Both IDEA and Title I of NCLB provide specific requirements for how students with disabilities are to participate in assessments as well as how their scores are to be reported. Furthermore, IDEA and NCLB define alternate assessments as aligned with the state academic content standards and student achievement standards.

States and districts are required to report the performance of students with disabilities on state and district assessments, including alternate assessments, in the same detail that they use to report the performance of nondisabled students. Reporting and accountability requirements of NCLB apply equally to the subgroup of students with disabilities. IDEA clearly communicates that state and local assessments are to be regarded as educational benefits that contribute to a student's opportunity to learn challenging academic content. Moreover, IDEA supports NCLB in ensuring that schools are accountable for the achievement of students in special education and clearly signals the intent of federal policymakers to raise expectations for students with disabilities and improve their educational outcomes.

### **THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT**

The federal NCLB is the 2001 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was first passed in 1965. Title I of this law has always been concerned with creating educational equity for low-income children, and as the largest federal program in U.S. schools, it has had a major influence on the policies in K–12 education. In the early 1990s, a number of changes were made to Title I in an effort to promote greater equity between students in high poverty schools and other students. The changes were based on a vision of education referred to as standards-driven reform, which has been the dominant model for reform for almost two decades. In 2001, NCLB reinforced the vision of standards-driven reform and created even greater demands for states to create challenging standards and to require more accountability on the part of schools and school systems. To understand the requirements under NCLB, you will need to understand the components of standards-driven reform.

#### **The Components of Standards-Driven Reform**

Standards-driven reform has three critical components: (a) challenging content and achievement standards, (b) assessments aimed at measuring how schools are helping students meet the standards, and (c) accountability for achieving higher levels of student performance.

**Standards.** The defining element of standards-driven reform is the content and achievement standards. Standards are general statements of what students should know or be able to do as a result of their public school education. Content standards refer to what gets taught, the subject matter, the skills and knowledge, and the applications. They reflect the professional judgment of educators and the community at large about what really matters in education. Achievement standards set the targets or levels of performance that students must achieve in the content. Achievement standards set the targets for teaching. They specify that “by the time students reach a particular grade, we expect them to be able to do [these specific things] and demonstrate that they can [use this specific information or knowledge].”

Under Title I of NCLB, all states are required to have one set of content and achievement standards in reading, math, and science. Most states have established content standards in other subject matter areas, such as social studies, history, physical health, or technology. Not every content standard has a corresponding achievement expectation, however.

Some standards are broad statements of learner goals (e.g., “becoming self-sufficient learners”) while others are very specific about what students should be able to know and do in a particular subject matter area (e.g., “students will read grade-level text with both high accuracy and appropriate pacing, intonation, and expression”).

Standards are important for several reasons. They are intended to create equity across schools and classrooms in that they define what all teachers should teach, in all schools across a state. Standards also define the content that will be assessed and for which schools will be held accountable. Finally, since teachers are expected to teach to the standards, curricular frameworks, goals, and materials (e.g., textbooks) are to be directly aligned with a state’s standards.

**Assessment.** Under NCLB, states are required to have one set of assessments that measure student performance on their content standards. States must assess at least 95% of all students in three content areas: reading/language arts, math, and science. They must assess students each year in each of the subject areas in Grades 3–8 and once during Grades 9–12. States must also establish three levels of achievement: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced.

Since the grade-level assessments would not be appropriate for some students with disabilities, especially those with significant cognitive disabilities, both IDEA and NCLB allow states to create alternate assessments and alternate achievement standards. However, only a limited number of students (i.e., not more than 1%) made be held to these alternate standards. Alternate achievement standards define student performance that differs from a grade-level achievement standard in terms of complexity, but these achievement standards must be aligned with a state’s regular academic content standards, promote access to the general education curriculum, and reflect high or challenging standards.

**Accountability.** New demands for educational accountability under NCLB have changed the consequences for schools and individual students. School- and

## 6 ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM

system-level accountability has dramatically increased and is based almost entirely on student assessment results. There are two primary ways that schools are held accountable: through public reporting such as school report cards and through a complicated process referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

States must publicly report assessment results at the school, district, and state levels for each grade, subject, and level and must report scores separately by gender, race/ethnicity, and for students identified as low income, special education, and limited English proficiency. In addition, schools and districts must report on a number of other indicators, such as the numbers of teachers who are fully certified, student attendance, suspensions and expulsions, drop-out rates, and graduation. The purpose of these reports is to make the educational performance of schools as transparent as possible.

In addition to the public reports, states must set annual performance targets for students in each of the three subject areas for each grade level and subgroup. The annual targets represent the percentage of students in a grade and subgroup who must reach the Proficient and Advanced levels of achievement on the state assessment. The annual targets are reported as AYP and designed to keep all subgroups on track to reaching Proficient or Advanced by the 2013–2014 school year. Specific consequences are applied to any school that fails to meet its annual AYP target for any subgroup.

While NCLB only addresses school- and system-level accountability, at the student level, accountability may mean that test scores are linked to promotion from grade to grade or to high school graduation. For example, in 2003–2004, states had high school graduation exams, and most of these exams require high levels of knowledge.

Standards-driven reform has an overriding goal of achieving higher levels of student achievement in subject matter content among all students. Thus, students with disabilities more than ever before need to have access to the demanding standards-based curriculum and instruction.

### **THE LINK BETWEEN STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM**

As general and special education teachers approach the challenge of helping all students achieve at higher levels, they need to have a thorough understanding of how to provide access to the standards as well as the link between content and achievement standards, curriculum, and what they teach day-to-day. Furthermore, teachers, parents, and other practitioners need to deeply understand how the standards and the general education curriculum relate to an individual student's IEP.

#### **Dissecting the Standards**

Keep in mind that the primary purpose of content and achievement standards is to focus classroom instruction. Thus, it is important for teachers to be able to thoroughly understand what knowledge, information, and processes are implied or embedded in content and achievement standards. One finding from

research that we have conducted in schools across the country that have been implementing standards-driven curriculum is that special education teachers have tended to “add on” new content rather than refocus what they teach (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim, 1997; McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, & Henderson, 1999). In other words, teachers often want to keep their favorite lessons, curriculum, and materials, as well as continue to use their “tried and true” instructional strategies. For instance, they continue teaching specific functional skills (e.g., teaching time or money, etc.) while they attempt to also teach new standards-based skills, such as using estimation in math or engaging in writing activities. Teachers often feel torn by competing priorities and frustrated by lack of time to “cover it all.” As a result, their teaching is focused on a collection of splinter schools or loosely collected knowledge.

The first thing that teachers need to know is that individual content and achievement standards do not stand alone but are connected across grade levels. Knowing what standards come before and which come after is very important to understanding what to teach and when to teach it. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 provide examples of specific state preK–3 reading/language arts standards and Grades 6–8 math standards.

In the sample of state standards, there are obvious “strands” or specific knowledge that appears across grade levels. For example, phonics is taught at the preK–2 level but with different levels of knowledge requirements. The math standards provide another example wherein the specific knowledge requirements do not change across the grade levels, but the expectations for how students are to demonstrate that knowledge become more demanding and complex.

What should be clear is that the knowledge required at each grade builds on what comes before and influences what comes after. Decisions made to not teach a specific set of skills, concepts, or standards at a particular grade have implications for all future grades as teachers simply cannot pick and choose among the content standards.

Another important consideration regarding standards is the interaction between specific knowledge and processes. Most state standards emphasize applied problem solving and authentic knowledge. Teaching to these standards requires more active roles for students and less teacher-directed instruction. There is less rote skill development and more emphasis on students’ understanding topics and actually being able to do something with the content. Furthermore, many of the standards cross subject areas, such as requiring students to apply math concepts and skills in science or being able to communicate in writing how they solved a problem. Teachers need to adjust their instructional strategies to the intended outcome of the standard. As an example, “describe how a change in one variable in a linear function affects the other variable in a table of values.” What are students intended to know and be able to do after receiving instruction directed at this standard?

### **Differentiating Between Content and Achievement Standards**

We have been talking about developing a deeper understanding of the content standards and how they define the intended knowledge, skills, and

**Figure 1.1** General Reading Processes: Phonics

Students will apply their knowledge of letter-sound relationships and word structure to decode unfamiliar words.

<b>Prekindergarten</b>	<b>Kindergarten</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>	<b>Grade 3</b>
<i>Phonics</i>	<i>Phonics</i>	<i>Phonics</i>	<i>Phonics</i>	<i>Phonics</i>
Decode words in grade-level texts	Decode words in grade-level texts	Decode words in grade-level texts	Decode words in grade-level texts	Decode words in grade-level texts
Identify and name some upper- and lowercase letters in words, especially those in the student's own name	Identify similarities and differences in letters and words	Recognize and apply short vowels, long vowels, and y as a vowel	Use phonics to decode words	Sound out common word parts
	Blend letter sounds in one-syllable words (CVC)	Decode words with letter combinations, such as consonant digraphs, blends, and special vowel patterns	Break compound words, contractions, and inflectional endings into known parts	Break words into familiar parts
	Use onset and rime (word families) to decode one-syllable words	Read one-syllable words fluently (CVC, CVCE)	Identify and apply vowel patterns to read words, such as CVC, CVCE, CVVC	Use word meanings and order in sentences to confirm decoding efforts
		Use known word/part to decode unknown words, such as car → card	Read blends fluently, such as <i>spl</i> , <i>str</i>	

**Figure 1.2** Standard 1.0: Knowledge of Algebra, Patterns, or Functions

Students will algebraically represent, model, analyze, or solve mathematical or real-world problems involving patterns or functional relationships.

<i>Grade 6</i>	<i>Grade 7</i>	<i>Grade 8</i>
A. Patterns and Functions	A. Patterns and Functions	A. Patterns and Functions
1. Identify, describe, extend, and create numeric patterns and functions (a) Identify and describe sequences represented by a physical model or in a function table (b) Interpret and write a rule for a one-operation (+, −, ×, ÷) function table (c) Complete a function table with a two-operation rule	1. Identify, describe, extend, and create linear patterns and functions (a) Identify and extend an arithmetic sequence represented as a function table (b) Identify and extend a geometric sequence (c) Describe how a change in one variable in a linear function affects the other variable in a table of values	1. Identify, describe, extend, and create patterns, functions, and sequences (a) Determine the recursive relationship of arithmetic sequences represented in words, in a table, or in a graph (b) Determine the recursive relationship of geometric sequences represented in words, in a table, or in a graph (c) Determine whether functions are linear or nonlinear when represented in words, in a table, symbolically, or in a graph (d) Determine whether functions are linear or nonlinear when represented symbolically

processes. In contrast, achievement standards define how well or how proficiently students must demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and processes. Achievement standards are typically defined by the assessments, which should be clearly aligned with the standards. However, assessments cannot measure every aspect of every standard, so assessments are designed to sample student performance.

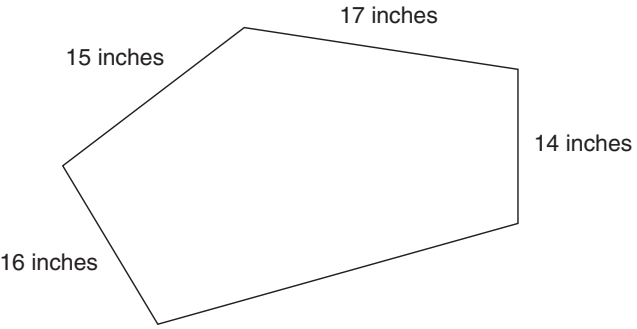
State assessments, often referred to as “large-scale” assessments can give teachers important information about the general grade level at which a student is performing. Also, unlike older forms of multiple-choice assessments, the newer assessments are designed to illustrate the processes and applications that are intended by the content standards.

As you can see from the sample items in Figures 1.3 and 1.4, today’s assessments include both traditional multiple choice test items as well as constructed response items, which require that students explain answers or processes or expand on specific items. Conventional essay questions are also included. The items model the types of instruction that is expected and the skills and processes in the standards. Teachers are supposed to teach to these tests! However, large-scale assessments are not designed to provide the breadth or depth of information about a student’s level of understanding in a standard area and cannot be the sole source of information used for developing instructional units, lesson plans, or IEPs.



**10** ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM**Figure 1.3** Examples of Fourth-Grade Math Assessment Items

The perimeter of the figure below is 80 inches.



What is the length, in inches, of the missing side?

- A. 8 inches
- B. 18 inches
- C. 22 inches
- D. 28 inches

Sarah is walking to her friend's house. She leaves her house at 3:45 and arrives at her friend's house at 5:15.

**Step A**

How long did it take Sarah to walk from her house to her friend's house?

**Step B**

Use what you know about elapsed time to explain why your answer is correct. Use words, numbers, or both in your explanation.

**Standards and Curriculum**

By now, you know that standards are intended to drive the curriculum. In the next chapter, you will learn a great deal more about what constitutes “curriculum” and how to find the “general education curriculum.” Before you do that, it is important to find out more about the curriculum that is used in your

**Figure 1.4** Grade 8 Reading Assessment

Choose the word or group of words that means the same, or about the same, as the underlined word. Then mark the space with the answer you have chosen.

A spike is like a \_\_\_\_\_.

A. brick  
B. pillow  
C. dish  
D. nail

Read the story "Arachne" and "Damon and Pythias" and answer the following question.

By allowing Pythias to settle his affairs, Dionysus shows that he can be:

A. brave  
B. compassionate  
C. indifferent  
D. indecisive

Read the story "Wang Yani" and answer the following question.

What advice would Yani probably give to young people? Use details from the story to support your answer.

Write your answer on your answer document.

school or district. Many districts and states have developed K–12 curriculum in content areas that align with their state standards. However, not all districts have such an aligned curriculum. So, it is important that you get a copy of your state's standards and then compare them to whatever curriculum guides exist in your district. Don't forget to examine important curriculum materials such as textbooks. These should also reflect or align with the standards. This activity

## 12 ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM

is something that faculty within an entire school or grade level might need to engage in.

Among the things that you and your colleagues should identify as you investigate your state's standards are the specific topics covered within a subject matter domain. For example, in the standards in Figure 1.2, mathematics in Grades 6–8 covers the same algebraic topics of patterns and functions. Note the changes in the standards from Grade 6, “identify and describe sequences represented by a physical model or in a function table,” Grade 7, “identify and extend an arithmetic sequence represented as a function table,” and Grade 8, “determine the recursive relationship of arithmetic sequences represented in words, in a table or in a graph.” Which main topics does your math curriculum cover across the grade levels?

You should also dig deeper into each of the specific topics to examine the specific skills and types of processes that are included. For example, which computation skills are addressed at which grade levels? What about application of knowledge and skills? What are students expected to be able to do or demonstrate? Are these taught at all grades? Sometimes standards can be overly general and not provide the level of detail necessary to do such a comparison. In that case, you may need to talk to an outside curriculum expert from your district or state to determine exactly what is expected in the standard.

Of course, you should also become very familiar with your state's assessments. The result of this investigation will be a better understanding of what skills are likely to be addressed at specific grade levels. Remember, you can't just focus on the grade(s) you teach, but you must look at what comes before and what will come after. After all of this analysis, you are likely to find some areas that you have ignored in your instruction as well as things you have been teaching that are not reflected in the standards. This may mean changing what and how you teach. It can mean eliminating some content, or it can also mean finding ways to incorporate the standards into specific instructional units or lessons that you do teach.

Also, don't forget to examine your textbooks, reading series, and other curriculum materials. Sometimes textbooks can contradict specific standards, or they may not emphasize certain skills. You need to make sure that you use textbooks and other materials that support the goals of the state standards.

One strategy that can be particularly useful in helping teachers better understand how standards translate into instruction is to examine student work. After teachers understand what is expected, they can jointly identify and discuss evidence of the standards within student papers or other assignments. Students can also be asked to explain. This helps teachers gain a deeper awareness of what a specific standard looks like in practice.

### **Standards and Students With Disabilities**

Standards have had a particular impact on students with disabilities. First, there is increasing evidence that standards are resulting in higher expectations and higher levels of achievement among students with disabilities (McLaughlin et al., in press; Nagle, 2004).

However, teachers face a number of challenges in their efforts to provide students with disabilities access to standards. One challenge, which we discussed earlier in this chapter, is the limited amount of time that is available to teach all of the skills that teachers believe students with disabilities need to learn. The pace of instruction has increased in general education classrooms due to the amount of content that is expected to be covered under the state standards, so there is less time to support students who may require more time or have a lesson taught differently or be given more opportunity to practice skills.

For a student who has skill deficits, the challenge is often how to teach the specific skills and also allow the student to keep up with the grade-level curriculum. Helping students with disabilities succeed in a standards-driven curriculum requires that teachers know the core and essential knowledge embedded in content standards and how to assess where a student is performing with respect to that core knowledge. In the following chapters, you will learn how to do all of these things. But, before you begin to focus on an individual student, let's take a final look at the big picture of how state standards, coupled with the emphasis on accountability, is changing how we think about special education.

## **A NEW WAY TO THINK ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION**

The foundation of special education rests with the guarantee that each eligible student receives a “free and appropriate public education” or FAPE. What is appropriate for an individual student is to be determined by parents and a multidisciplinary team of professionals. These decisions are evident in a student's IEP, which specifies the annual educational goals and the special education and related services that a student requires to meet those goals.

The traditional model of developing IEPs and of designing special education viewed students with disabilities in isolation of broader general education curricular goals. Children were tested; their learning strengths and deficits were identified; and individual goals, objectives, and strategies were devised to meet the deficits. Educational evaluations were typically conducted in isolation from the larger general education curriculum and focused on discrete skill deficits. IEPs often were a collection of isolated skill objectives that led to isolated instruction (Shriner & DeStefano, 2003). A student's program may have been individualized, but it was based on annual goals and thus separated from the scope and sequence of a curriculum. Often, the IEP became *the* curriculum for a student.

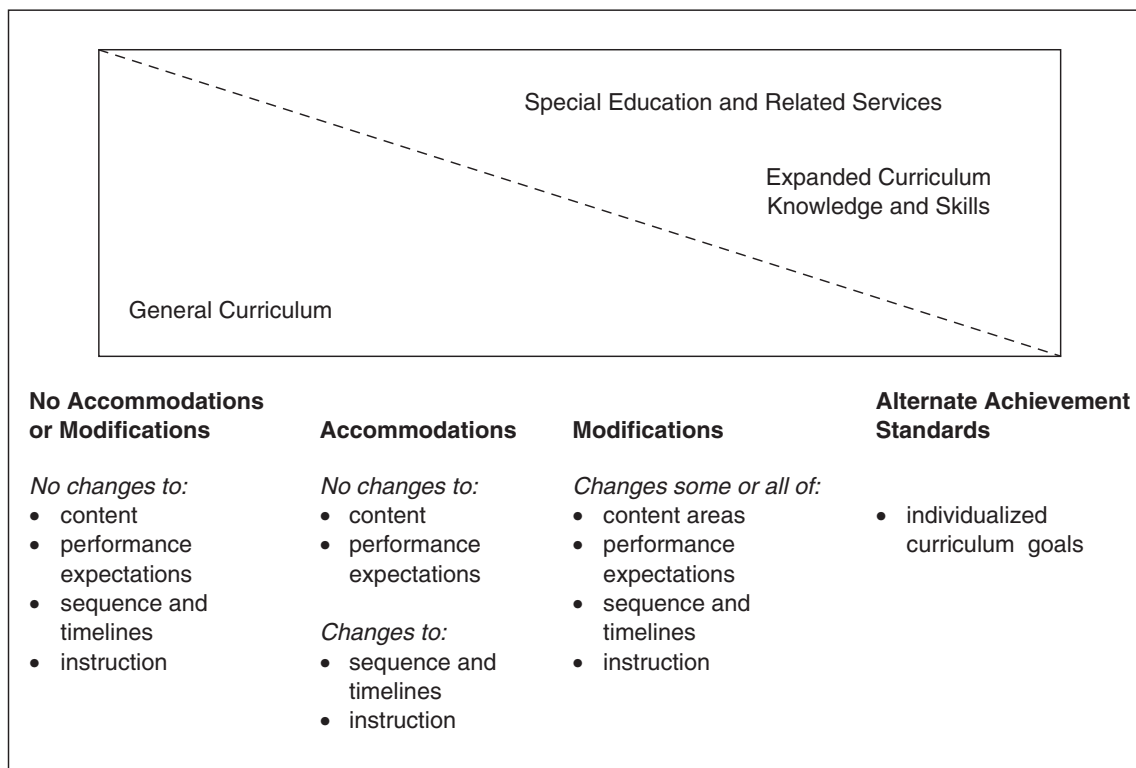
Within the standards-driven reform model, special education is evolving into an array of services and supports that provide a student access to the general education curriculum, and the IEP becomes a tool that specifies how to implement general education curriculum with an individual student.

The new model of special education is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

In this model, a student's IEP is based on an assessment that indicates where a student is functioning (e.g., at what level is the student's knowledge, skills, and processes within specific subject matter) within the general education

## 14 ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM

**Figure 1.5** Special Education and the General Curriculum



curriculum, which reflects the standards. The goals for special education instruction as well as the accommodations and services and supports required to help the student access and progress in the curriculum are also specified. The IEP should address how special education will supplement the general education curriculum by providing instruction in specific curricular areas or skill areas not addressed in the general education curriculum. Decisions about an IEP are individualized, but they start from the expectation that the student is to learn the general education curriculum, and special education's role is to help the student learn and progress in that curriculum. We will provide much more information about the IEP in Chapter 6.

### Challenges for Special and General Education Teachers

There are a number of challenges facing all teachers as they implement standards, assessments, and accountability reforms with students with disabilities. The most significant of these challenges is how to enable each student to access the critical knowledge and skills specified in the standards. The stakes for schools and for students are higher than ever. If students do not have meaningful access to the general education curriculum, they cannot be expected to become proficient on state and local assessments. Poor performance on these assessments can lead to consequences for schools. What is more, consequences

for students are also increasing. Students who do not do well in the general education curriculum may not be promoted from one grade to another or receive a high school diploma.

Access to the general education curriculum must become the cornerstone of a student's IEP and define the special education and related services that will be provided. These changes to the IEP will require changes to special education instruction and the organization of special education in the schools. To provide access will require much more of special education teachers.

The quick fixes and simplistic approaches have already been tried and rejected. Providing access to the general education curriculum will require a new way of thinking about both special education and individual students with disabilities. Teaching that ensures that all students have access to the general education curriculum will involve having knowledge of subject matter content, processes involved in learning, and strategies for designing instruction. Teaching that ensures access to the general curriculum requires an integrated understanding of the separate and combined effects of all three of these domains in the teaching and learning process.

This book is designed to help you integrate these three domains of knowledge to ensure that all students have meaningful access to the general education curriculum. In Chapter 2, you will learn about curriculum. We will examine what the general education curriculum really is and how it influences what happens day-to-day in a classroom. In Chapter 3, we will discuss the recent research on human learning and the implications of this research for designing effective instruction. New ideas about learning underlie much of the school reform movement and are beginning to have a profound effect on every aspect of schooling. We will discuss the teaching implications of this research and provide you with a rationale for making instructional design decisions that match student learning. In Chapter 4, we will discuss assessment strategies to help you know when a student is succeeding in the general curriculum as well as how to monitor their progress. In Chapter 5, we will discuss how to plan instruction that is accessible for all students, and we will describe the continuum of supports that creates access to the general curriculum. In Chapter 6, we will provide strategies for developing an IEP that provides access to the general education curriculum. Finally, in the Appendix, we have provided a list of resources for teachers and administrators seeking additional information about some of the issues we discuss in the book.

As you will see, the challenge of making the general education curriculum accessible for all students requires a new way of thinking and problem solving. This is not a "how-to" book. It is a "how to think" book. We hope that it will stimulate conversations and actions in your own school that enable you to find new ways to be effective with all of your students.