

***Curriculum Alignment Process®:
Ensuring Meaningful Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities***

Developed by: Amy Sevell-Nelson, M.ED. Educational & Organizational Consulting

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Least Restrictive Environment

Federal regulations use the term “least restrictive environment (LRE)” that indicates, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, must receive their services with children who do not have a disability. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general education environment can occur only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that the provision of services in general education settings with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

To meet these requirements, each public school district must have a continuum of alternative placements available to meet the individual needs of children with disabilities.

This continuum must:

- Include the following settings – general education settings, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospital and institutions; and
- Make provision for supplementary services, such as a resource room or itinerant instruction, provided in addition to a general education setting....

The decision about settings for services must be made:

- By a group of persons, including the parents, and other persons knowledgeable about the child, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options; and
- Consistent with the LRE provision of the federal regulations

Each child’s placement (setting for services) is:

- Determined at least annually;
- Based on the child’s IEP; and
- As close as possible to the child’s home.

When determining the LRE, consideration is given to any potential harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services that he or she needs. A child with a disability cannot be removed from receiving services with typically developing peers in an age-appropriate general education setting solely because modifications to the general education curriculum are needed.(1)

Ensuring that students with disabilities receive *meaningful* education within the LRE does not mean simply placing the student within the general education classroom. On the contrary, it demands at minimum annual team-based review of the student’s capabilities and current status, challenges, and learning styles to inform the development of modifications to both curriculum and instruction.

Annually, in the spring, cross-representational teams comprised of members from both sending-and-receiving special and general educators (those familiar with and those who must learn about the student with an IEP) come together to share, learn and collaborate in developing the modified daily schedule for the incoming student. The goal is to establish a common understanding of the student and to craft strategies that will provide the assistance necessary for delivery of meaningful curriculum within the LRE. To the greatest extent possible, the curriculum is aligned with the general education students' daily schedules, curricular focus and grade-level standards. Together the team engages in a facilitated discussion about the student's current status, across a variety of factors that are relevant to understanding and designing meaningful curriculum and instructional modifications for the upcoming academic year.

Discussions frequently address:

- Educationally relevant disability and medically specific information about the student
- The student's learning styles and educational priorities, based on:
 - What is known about the student – picture over time of the student's past and current educational status, and successful instructional strategies
 - Realistic and functional education goals for the student – current IEP goals and consideration of skills that will be essential for the student to achieve successful life outcomes, both during and beyond the school years
 - Alignment with state and national grade-level standards – to ensure fidelity with grade-level educational best practices
- Home life and other social factors that impact the student's educational needs

The *Curriculum Alignment Process* requires a facilitator who is familiar with the process - either a trained Special Education Case Manager, Special Education Administrator or an external consultant.

This flexible process helps to organize decision making for the team.

Thinking together, the team evaluates the impact of the student's educational experiences and plans new ways to teach effectively, to the greatest extent possible, within the general education setting. The process helps to bring focus and agreement on shared goals and learning priorities. Regularly scheduled team meetings are conducted to review formative data and revise strategies, as needed to ensure ongoing success for the student with a disability.

As an outcome, the team develops a side-by-side curriculum alignment of the general education classroom and students' daily routine, *and* that of the student with the disability.

Quite literally, the side-by-side alignment is a visual *split-screen* depiction of the components of the general education daily routine/schedule on one side and that for the student with the disability on the other. It details the flow of the day chunking out curricular areas where *all* students can be taught together - the same curricular focus, instructional styles, etc. *and* specifies where, when, what and who will provide needed curricular and instructional modifications (including push-in and pull-out therapies, sensory breaks, special education instruction, etc.) for the student with the disability.

In the end, all team members have had an opportunity to garner a deeper understanding and shared ownership of the student with a disability. General educators and their special education partners have developed agreement related to all details and logistics of their mutual responsibility of educating the student with a disability.

The *Curricular Alignment Process* is a win-win.

General education teachers learn about and know what supports will be needed and provided for their students with disabilities. The general education teachers are secure that all students will be appropriately educated – they feel part of a team with a shared responsibility and purpose.

Special educators know they have been heard and have achieved clarity of purpose, assured that the details of the curricular and instructional modifications will be carried out in true partnership with their general education colleagues.

Most importantly, students with disabilities and their families become visible and valued members of their grade-level peer group and school community and are ensured meaningful curriculum and instruction within the context of the general education setting.

Using the *Curricular Alignment Process* helps to ensure that students with disabilities receive their education within the LRE as the first option. With ongoing collaborative team meetings, in which formative assessment data are reviewed and necessary instructional modifications are made to assist the student with meeting ongoing success, decisions to move into a more restrictive educational setting are made *only* if objectively warranted.

(1) Understanding IDEA: What it means for preschoolers with disabilities and their families. Q&A Answers to your questions about policies and procedures under Individual with Disabilities Education Act (DEC/CEC, 2010)