



# Access for All

Six principles for principals to consider in implementing CCSS for students with disabilities.

BY MARGARET J. McLAUGHLIN

**T**oo often under the various state-developed standards and assessments, accommodations for students with disabilities—a heterogeneous group with varied characteristics and needs—have not been adequately addressed or have been ignored. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative provides an historic opportunity to improve access to rigorous academic content standards for students with disabilities. However, implementation of CCSS must begin with the characteristics of these students clearly in mind. Because no single method or approach provides all students with access to the Common Core, the two most important areas that need to be addressed in implementation are instruction and assessment.

As principals implement CCSS in their schools, key principles about educating students with disabilities must be on the radar screen.



# 1

## **Recognize that students with disabilities are a heterogeneous group and require individualized educational planning.**

A student with a learning disability is likely to have different needs than a student with a visual impairment, and that student has different needs than a student with autism. Students within the same category of disability can also vary tremendously in terms of the supports and services they might need to truly access the CCSS. This is the reason that the education of students with disabilities is guided by their individualized education program (IEP) specifying the supports and accommodations to help each student access the CCSS. These supports and services should be based

on a careful assessment of the student's current level of performance in the standards. The supports and accommodations should address any aspect of a student's disability that is interfering with learning, including those that are emotional, behavioral, or physical.

The best way to meet the needs of this group of students, as well as other students, is for teachers to understand and apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). According to the National Center on Universal Design for Learning, UDL emphasizes that an effective goal must be flexible enough to allow learners multiple ways to successfully meet it. To do this, the standard must not embed the means (the how) with the goal (the what).

What is meant by this? Here's an example from the CCSS on mathematics: "apply and extend previous understandings of multiplication and division and of fractions to multiply and divide rational numbers" (Grade 7, The Number System, 7.NS, item 2, p. 48). This standard is flexible enough that all learners can meet this goal because it does not specify how it must be done.

# 2

## **Distinguish between accommodations and modifications.**

Providing multiple means for students to learn the standards, as well as express what they know and can do, is consistent with the concept of accommodation. But, too often educators use these terms interchangeably without a sound understanding of the difference.

An accommodation can be a device, practice, intervention, or procedure provided to a student with a disability that affords equal access to instruction or assessment. Its purpose is to reduce or eliminate the impact of the student's disability so that he or she can achieve the standard. A key point is that an accommodation does not change the content being taught, nor does it reduce learning or achievement expectations. An example is using a text-to-speech device or an iPad to help a student with a reading disability access grade-level text and respond to questions that demonstrate comprehension. Another common accommodation may be extra time to complete an assignment.

In contrast, a modification may also be a device, practice, intervention, or procedure. However, in this case a teacher is changing the core content



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standard or the performance expectation. For example, a student may use read-aloud or text-to-speech technology, which is an accommodation when the intended goal is for the student to obtain and comprehend content knowledge, but might be a modification in the CCSS foundational skills that require students to read common high-frequency words by sight. Another example of the importance of teachers being able to distinguish the differences occurs with the standards that require students to tell or write. In these instances, the key question is whether verbal communication and writing without the aid of a computer are essential elements of the particular standard.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes indicates that accommodations are generally grouped into the following categories:

- Presentation (e.g., repeat directions, read-aloud, large print, Braille);
- Equipment and material (e.g., calculator, amplification equipment, manipulatives, assistive and instructional technologies);
- Response (e.g., mark answers in book, scribe records response, use a pointer);
- Setting (e.g., study carrel, student's home, separate room); and
- Timing/scheduling (e.g., extended time, frequent breaks).

## 3

**Support an environment and set expectations that teachers will understand, and use evidence-based practices.**

Principals are central to enabling teachers to understand how to better address the learning needs of students. A key factor in creating better instruction is providing opportunities for general and special education teachers to share knowledge about

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The Institute of Education Sciences' **What Works Clearinghouse** provides evidence-based special needs interventions.

Tap into resources and information on **universal design for learning** at the National Center on Universal Design for Learning website.

evidence-based practices or interventions, as well as how to apply these to instruction in the CCSS.

Several specific interventions have effectively improved learning for students with disabilities. The common features of these instructional interventions include providing explicit, intensive instruction and frequent monitoring of individual student learning. This translates to teachers being able to precisely identify the conceptual and procedural knowledge and skills in mathematics, English language arts, and science that students are expected to learn; teach those skills directly and clearly; and provide opportunities for students to have concentrated time and instruction to master the skills.

As this pertains to the CCSS, let's look at a Grade 4 English Language Arts Standard: "Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension." While many students may be able to achieve fluency through repeated practice of silent or oral reading, students who struggle with reading need specific fluency instruction. Again, using a common example, they need direct or explicit practice with reading passages beginning at levels where they

are fluent and with reading in small, timed segments. This, coupled with continuous assessment or monitoring of the reading errors, helps teachers identify the specific areas or words that are causing problems, so they can focus specific attention on building those skills. This type of practice must be provided until mastery, and must be of sufficient time and consistency (intensity) to move the student forward. So, teachers must have the opportunity to learn about practices that work and also how to provide students opportunities for this type of instruction, whether through peer-assisted learning, small group instruction, or similar arrangements.

## 4

### **Augment end-of-year state assessments with a schoolwide assessment program that can measure progress and growth.**

Assessing the progress of students in the CCSS will be essential. Five new assessment consortia are developing ways to assess achievement of the Common Core standards.

These include:

- Race-to-the-Top Regular Assessment Consortia
- Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
- SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)

Alternate Assessment Consortia (to assess alternate achievement standards for students with significant intellectual disabilities):

- Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)
- National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC)

The English Language Proficiency (ELP) Assessment Consortium:

- ASSETS: Assessment Services Supporting ELs through Technology Systems

The vast majority of students with disabilities will participate in the same assessments as their peers, although they will be entitled to accommodations.

However, in addition to the state assessments, schools must put together an assessment system that can monitor student progress. Principals need to develop systems that build on continuous monitoring of student progress to augment the end-of-year snapshot measurement approach. These include curriculum-based measures, such as reading fluency probes, as well as performance-based tasks that can be measured across classrooms with common rubrics. Teachers, both general and special educators, should have time to examine and discuss student work and identify exemplary performance, as well as those areas where students are faltering.

## 5

### **Understand and support the alignment of IEP with the CCSS**

An IEP that is based on standards is one in which individual educational goals are directly linked to grade-level content standards. These IEPs define an individual plan of accommodations and supports that are designed for each child and intended to enable the child to meet the standards. Principals must provide resources that special and general education teachers need to develop standards-based IEPs.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education suggests the following six steps for creating a successful standards-based IEP.

**Step 1:** Consider the grade-level content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled or would be enrolled based on age.

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**Step 2:** Examine classroom and student data to determine where the student is functioning in relation to the grade-level standards.

**Step 3:** Identify the present level of academic achievement and functional performance.

**Step 4:** Develop measurable annual goals aligned with grade-level academic content standards.

**Step 5:** Assess and report the student's progress throughout the year.

**Step 6:** Identify specially designed instruction, including accommodations and/or modifications needed to access and progress in the general education curriculum.

## 6

### Hire and support the best special educators.

When hiring new staff, look for special educators who are graduates of accredited professional preparation programs; have mastered the specialized skills for safe and effective practice, including empirical research, disciplined inquiry, informed theory; and have the wisdom of practice for their area of expertise.

In addition to hiring the best staff, principals must appreciate the role of professional development in helping teachers fully understand the CCSS and the implications for their day-to-day practice. Special and general educators should participate together, learning how to develop specific instructional units or modules that can address a range of learners. Principals also need professional development to better understand the needs of students with disabilities and the effective practices for these students.

Topics for such joint professional development include:

- Understanding all aspects of UDL;
- Understanding how to use data to monitor progress;
- Learning how to use assistive and

instructional technology to provide accommodations; and

- Creating effective ways for special educators to work alongside and in full partnership with general educators through co-teaching and collaboration.

The principal's most significant challenge is in preparing and further developing the knowledge and skills of not only special educators, but all teachers and related service personnel who are sharing the instructional responsibilities for students with disabilities.

The principal must foster a collective responsibility for the achievement of students with disabilities and help teachers define their role in providing access to the standards. If teachers do not deeply understand the standards, they are unable to design supports and accommodations or instruction that will provide a potential for mastery. If teachers are not familiar with various means of assessing progress, they won't know how instruction needs to be adjusted to increase the probability of mastery. If teachers are not deeply knowledgeable about the various effective 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 English language arts and math is slim.

Finally, principals need to understand the importance of creating supportive social and behavioral environments that will enable all students to access and achieve success in the general curriculum. The most important challenge is to ensure educators are prepared to achieve that purpose. ■

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