

No Teacher Left Behind: Training Teachers to Meet the Challenge of Accessing the General Curriculum for Deafblind Students

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The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have changed educational practice for students with disabilities. All students are now expected to study the general education curriculum—fundamental academic subjects such as English/language arts, math, science, and social studies—and to demonstrate knowledge of the curriculum through extensive testing.

This change for special education students also signifies a transformation for their special education teachers. In order for students with disabilities to participate effectively in the new system, their teachers must learn about the general curriculum content and redesign their educational practices. Traditionally, special education teachers focused primarily on goals and objectives related to skills such as orientation and mobility, Braille reading, use of technology, and activities of daily living. Now, all special education teachers responsible for instruction in a general curriculum core subject area must be highly qualified in that area and be able to demonstrate knowledge and skills beyond specialized learning strategies and therapy.

This article describes how a training program developed by the University of Massachusetts Boston helped teachers of deafblind students at Perkins School for the Blind to learn how to align the curriculum they already use with the Massachusetts general curriculum in order to ensure meaningful participation for their students. It is a program that can be adapted for use in other states to educate teachers who work with students who are deafblind.

Education Reform in Massachusetts

NCLB mandates that all students be measured on their knowledge of the general curriculum, but states can design their own curricula and assessments. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA) requires that all students participate in a standards-based academic curriculum focused on English/language arts, math, social sciences, and science and technology. It also requires that all students pass a rigorous test based on these curriculum frameworks in order to receive a high school diploma. About 40 percent of states have similar student-based accountability measures. Other states hold schools and districts (rather than students) accountable.

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In Massachusetts, as in other states, students with substantial disabilities were previously exempted from large-scale assessment programs. With the passage of MERA, Massachusetts created one set of curriculum expectations for all children. Children with disabilities are now held to the same academic curriculum standards and expectations as their typical peers.

Meeting the Challenge

To provide an opportunity for special education teachers to learn about the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston designed a 12-credit graduate certificate professional development program called *Charting the Course: Adapting the Curriculum Frameworks for All Learners*. CSDE is a research and training institute dedicated to promoting quality education and social development for students at risk for academic and social failure. The certificate program was created by CSDE associates, all of whom are practicing special-education administrators, under the leadership of Gary Siperstein, CSDE Executive Director. It contains six 2-credit modules that address the following topics:

Module 1: Education Reform

Reviews state and federal laws that have led to recent changes in educational practices in the United States. MERA itself is assigned reading material.

Module 2: Special Education Reform

Reviews the history of special education practices, ranging from institutionalization to the right to a free, appropriate education to the right to participate in the general education classroom and curriculum. The book *Educating One and All* (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997) was a key source for the development of this module.

Modules 3 and 4: Curriculum Frameworks and Adaptations for Students with Disabilities

Describe how to connect curricula currently being used by special education programs with the state curriculum frameworks in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Module 5: Assessment

Teaches the skills teachers need to determine the types of accommodations that students with disabilities must have in order to participate in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). It also describes how to use a portfolio assessment format for students who will participate in MCAS through MCAS-Alt, the state alternate assessment model for students who cannot show what they know and can do through standard administration, even with accommodations.

Module 6: Philosophical Steps to Implementation

Pulls together all of the elements teachers need to formulate a personal and professional view of education for students with disabilities in a changing educational environment.

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The program was designed to be highly interactive. It focuses on clearly describing current practice and actively planning the best ways to match students' needs with state curriculum requirements.

Training Teachers at Perkins School for the Blind

Teachers at Perkins School for the Blind were the first group of educators to participate in the training course. Perkins, the oldest private school for the blind in the United States, has been in operation for 175 years. The school provides educational services to students, including day and residential educational programs at the Perkins campus in Watertown, Massachusetts, as well as a variety of state, national, and international outreach programs. The Perkins School for the Blind Deafblind Program serves a wide range of students with varying needs. Many students have other disabilities in addition to deafblindness. The program is internationally known as a leader in the education of deafblind children. Perkins' goal is to offer the best education possible for each learner, and the school prides itself on the quality of its programs and the professional integrity of its faculty.

Twenty-six teachers and other staff members from Perkins participated. They represented the full range of Perkins programs: Deafblind (serving students ages 3–22), Lower School (ages 5–14), Secondary Services (ages 14–22), and Outreach (to individuals of all ages who are served within the community). Six staff members from the Deafblind Program participated—two administrators and four teachers.

Training sessions were based on the course modules from *Charting the Course: Adapting the Curriculum Frameworks for All Learners* and were offered over the course of one school year. Each began with a full-day Saturday session and were followed by a series of after-school meetings. This schedule provided a concentrated introduction to each topic and ample time between sessions to apply new information.

Each module followed a consistent pattern. At the beginning, participants discussed their knowledge about the topic of the module for that session, created a list of questions about things that perplexed them, and expressed their frustration and concern about the changes they and their students faced. Each module concluded with a project that teachers could use right away to help them begin to transform their current practices to match the content and focus of education reform.

In Modules 1 and 2, participants examined the critical foundation elements of education reform—MERA, IDEA, and the history of recent changes in special education—and explored the impact of each element on current educational practices.

When working on Modules 3 and 4, they examined the curricula already used by each Perkins program and compared them with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The philosophy of the Deafblind Program is to offer an individualized curriculum based on the needs of each child. Instructional content is developed through the use of several different types of curricula. Most students begin with a unit-based curriculum organized around themes such as readiness skills for reading and math (matching, sorting, sequencing); social skills, gross and fine motor skills, and community experience; early science concepts; and music, art, and multisensory concepts. Students move from this to a functional academic, academic, or vocational curriculum. The process of aligning existing curricula with the state curriculum frameworks was possible once the outcomes of each of these curricula were described. Using a model developed by Heidi Hayes Jacobs (1997), the participants mapped their current curricula onto the state frameworks. As a result, they were able to review the standards and make connections to the curriculum they used everyday in their classroom. They were happy to find that they were already teaching many of the curriculum framework standards.

During Module 5, participants linked the state's assessment program to the individualized education program (IEP) format and to the way student performance data was already being collected at Perkins. The assessment model of McTighe and Wiggins (1999) and the guidance of Thurlow, Elliott, and Yssledyke (1998) about the participation of students with disabilities were essential resources for this section.

Outcomes

Although the curriculum program officially lasted only one year, it resulted in far-reaching and unanticipated outcomes that have transformed the Perkins community.

Curriculum and Assessment

The program provided structured, extended time to explore and become familiar with the state curriculum frameworks. The practical nature of the modules inspired teachers to begin a number of new projects. For example, one teacher selected poems

for early literacy learning from the state's English/language arts curriculum framework and adapted several short poems to meet the language-level needs of her students.

Faculty members who participated in the program also created tools to help them manage the work of aligning their curricula with the state standards for English/language arts, math, science, and history. These included checklists used to identify standards from the state curriculum that were directly related to outcomes in curricula already used at Perkins. They also created a database of the state standards to make it easier to locate specific standards in the curriculum frameworks. This is much more efficient than reading through the curriculum frameworks each time a teacher needs to make decisions about instructional content for a specific student.

Increased knowledge of the general curriculum helped teachers move beyond apprehension about the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to analyze the way participation in the standard MCAS was affected by a student's disability. They identified test items that require visual or auditory experiences that deafblind students cannot access. They devised ways in which test items could be adapted or interpreted without changing the intent of the test.

As they became comfortable with MCAS-Alt, the state alternate assessment model, they realized that the portfolio alternate assessment format could use data already routinely gathered for progress reports. They felt more in control of the teaching-assessment process and more confident that they—and their students—could participate meaningfully.

Initially seen as distinct elements, curriculum and assessment are now viewed as connected components of an instructional cycle in which student learning is continually assessed. The student is at the center of this cycle, and the goal is to always help them access grade-level curriculum at their individual instructional level. The curriculum frameworks, the IEP, and the school curriculum provide important information that guides the shape of each student's program. The information gathered through MCAS and classroom assessment documents student progress and refines the focus and direction of each student's educational program. What began as a cumbersome process has become second nature. As a result, higher-level academic content is being offered for all students. Also, the efforts and accomplishments of the Perkins community were acknowledged by the Massachusetts Department of Education in commendations for the match between

their instructional program and the curriculum frameworks.

Professional Relationships and Development

Once teachers felt confident of their abilities to master the elements of education reform, they began to feel more comfortable sharing what they knew. A number of teachers became experts on the curriculum frameworks and the assessment process and now provide assistance and support to Perkins faculty members who did not attend the training and to colleagues at other schools. At least two participants went on to become instructors for the certificate course. Professional connections that formed between staff members during the program have had a significant impact on the Perkins community. Deafblind Program teachers feel more connected with each other, and teachers and administrators more easily turn to one another for help to solve problems or discuss program changes.

Participation in the program also changed the way professional development activities are planned and implemented at Perkins. Previous activities were typically designed to meet the needs of individual program groups by focusing on their instructional strategies and specific curricular issues. Faculty members from different programs rarely interacted, and there was very little discussion of a general curriculum. This was the first time that administrators and faculty from all programs participated in one shared activity. It was so successful that a process for continuing to provide cross-program professional development opportunities was established.

Outreach

The expertise of Perkins faculty in applying elements of education reform to students with significant disabilities has been acknowledged by other schools and programs as demonstrated by the following:

- ◆ Requests to assist other special education schools in Massachusetts with their use of the curriculum frameworks;
- ◆ Requests to assist other schools along the East Coast to meet the goal of access to the general curriculum for all students;
- ◆ Invitations to present at statewide conferences.

Through the support of the Hilton/Perkins International Program, the model of curriculum access used at Perkins has also been shared with and successfully used by schools in other countries, including Russia, Argentina, Brazil, England, and Africa.

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