

Q The discussion around Common Core State Standards and Next-Generation implies raising student expectations, requirements, and assessments. What does this mean for special education students? What should be the focus of the conversation on Common Core State Standards with teachers of special education?

A By **Dr. Kathleen Weigel** and **Dr. Richard Jones**

It is a natural to be concerned about how the changes in expectations implied by the Common Core State Standards and particularly Next-Generation Assessments will affect students with disabilities. One of the challenges in thinking about education services for students with disabilities is recognizing the diversity of this population.

We use the common label “students with disabilities.” However, this group of students includes both very intelligent students who need to overcome emotional or learning disabilities and other students with very limited cognitive abilities or severe physical disabilities that thwart their learning. Consequently, the solutions of how to prepare or adjust to this group of students are also varied.

Many Students Will Rise to Meet Expectations

We have learned from our implementation of standards and assessment over the past decade that many schools have tended to underestimate the potential of their students with disabilities. In the name of protecting the students, we have often counseled them out of challenging learning experiences. By setting higher expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, we have been pleasantly surprised how many students have been able to meet these challenges. We should make sure we do not lower expectations for students. So the first caution is not to assume that students with disabilities will be incapable of handling more challenging work.

Next-Generation Assessments Will Require Application

The Next-Generation Assessments require students to apply knowledge, not simply to recall facts. The new tests will have more Quadrant D learning as described in the Rigor/Relevance Framework®. To prepare for these tests, teachers must ensure that students apply what they are learning to real-world situations. As you help teachers make adjustments to instruction by adding rigor and relevance, this requirement may actually make it easier to engage students with disabilities effectively.

Here is some great advice on instruction from International Center consultant Patricia Harrington:

- Special education students need, perhaps more than other students, to experience the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in a way that is relevant to their lives. One way to make sure this happens is to either take students to a location where they can see others using the focus skill. As long as students know why they are at this location and are aware of the skills/content they are learning, these neurons will activate and allow them to “see” how the skill is used and they will more likely be able to replicate the use of the skill at their personal best level.
- In addition to seeing the skill or content “used in action,” students will need to go back into the classroom and use the skill, reflecting on the context in which they saw it being used in the real world. Involve special education students in showing what they understand about the skill/content through their multiple intelligences (especially visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, naturalist, and bodily-kinesthetic), and their chances of success are higher!

Make Sure IEPs Are Truly Individualized

Teachers often look at an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as a burden to comply with administrative requirements. But IEPs are an opportunity to create a dynamic working document that accurately describes the needs of each individual student with a disability and ensures they have access to useful instruction. Students with disabilities also benefit greatly from interaction in the community. The students should be engaged in external learning experiences that help them see how to apply their academic skills.

Some schools isolate students with special needs. But most of these students actually learn better when they are out in the community interacting with others, and it ensures a focus on those skills that are relevant to the real world.

Culture of Inclusion

Those schools that are better able to serve the needs of students with disabilities create a culture of inclusion. We do not mean just the instructional practice of inclusion where students are served in regular education classrooms but rather an entire school community that demonstrates inclusion and includes students with disabilities as equal members of the school community. This has a lot to do with relationships.

Kathy observed a recent event at Atlantic Community High School, Delray Beach, Fla., that exemplified this culture of inclusion. One of the students with disabilities in the JROTC program has very low cognitive abilities. Both the teacher and peers have embraced the student and helped her do her best in the academic program. Recently the JROTC held its military ball. All of the students encouraged the special needs student to participate. She had never worn a fancy dress or been to a formal dance, but students and staff stepped in to be sure she had an pretty dress and her nails and hair done. A family member volunteered to be her escort for the evening, and she participated fully in the special event. The way the students embraced her inclusion made school a richer experience for the student.

This anecdote reminds us that school is not simply about academic achievement but about social and emotional involvement too. Students who feel socially connected to school perform better in the classroom. When we see parents advocating for their child with disabilities, it is often the barriers around social involvement of students that parents want to overcome.

As we think about academic programs to serve the students, we must not forget the all-important social inclusion. Student inclusion is vital, but it starts with teachers and adults promoting this positive behavior and modeling it for other schools.

Key Elements to Serving Students with Special Needs

A recent white paper developed by the International Center, "Fewer, Clearer, Higher — Common Core State Standards: Implications for Students Receiving Special Education," by Ray McNulty and Larry Gloeckler, offers excellent guidance to teachers and administrators on this issue.

The International Center has identified five key elements that schools must address to support the achievement of students receiving special education services:

1. **Ownership:** understanding among staff that students receiving special education services are the responsibility of all
2. **High expectations:** understanding by administrators, faculty, and students that all students will be challenged and expected to perform to the best of their ability
3. **Intervention systems:** policies, procedures, and protocols to ensure that struggling learners meet academic and/or behavioral expectations as measured by improved performance
4. **Inclusion/collaborative teaching:** teaching methodologies in which students receiving special education services are included in the general education classrooms and have access to both content and special education expertise

5. **Organization/professional development:** successful programs for all struggling learners that depend on alignment of and access to standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment and data-driven professional development to support teachers in achieving goals