

## **Creating Access to the General Curriculum with Links to Grade Level Content for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Seven Criteria**

*This is an executive summary of the criteria used by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for the Links for Academic Learning Alignment Model. For full description of the conceptual model, please see the following article. A description of the alignment methodology is also available upon request.*

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Current federal policy requires that students with disabilities participate in large scale assessments and be included in schools' scores for adequate yearly progress. Students with significant cognitive disabilities may participate in an alternate assessment with alternate achievement standards, but these standards must be linked to grade level content and promote access to the general curriculum. Because most research with this population has focused on nonacademic life skills, few guidelines exist for teaching and assessing skills that are linked to grade level content. One challenge to developing research and practice in grade-linked academic content for students with significant cognitive disabilities is the absence of a clear conceptual framework. This paper, developed by a team of special education, curriculum content, and measurement experts, proposes a conceptual definition and criteria for linking instruction and assessment to grade level academic content.

### **Definition of the Concept: Linking to Grade Level Content with Alternate Achievement**

To be linked to grade level standards, the target for achievement must be academic content (e.g., reading, math, science) that is referenced to the student's assigned grade based on chronological age. Functional activities and materials may be used to promote understanding, but the target skills for student achievement are academically-focused. Some prioritization of the content will occur in setting this expectation, but it should reflect the major domains of the curricular area (e.g., strands of math) and have fidelity with this content and how it is typically taught in general education. The alternate expectation for achievement may focus on prerequisite skills or some partial attainment of the grade level, but students should still have the opportunity to meet high expectations, to demonstrate a range of depth of knowledge, to achieve within their symbolic level, and to show growth across grade levels or grade bands.

### **Criteria for Instruction and Assessment that Links to Grade Level Content**

1. The content is academic and includes the major domains/ strands of the content area as reflected in state and national standards (e.g., reading, math, science.)

- a. Source: USDOE, 2005, p. 17 -Functional life goals are not appropriate achievement measures for AYP purposes. *Although most alignment methodologies begin with assumption the focus is on academic content, this cannot be assumed in alternate assessment due to the historical context for curricular priorities for this population.*
  - b. What we consider: whether alternate assessment, any extended standards, classroom instruction/ professional development focus on academic content
2. The content is referenced to the student's assigned grade level (based on chronological age).
  - a. Source- USDOE, 2005, p. 26- AA should be "clearly related to grade-level content, although it may be restricted in scope or complexity or take the form of introductory or prerequisite skills." *Although alignment studies of general assessment can focus on assessments by grade level, how "grade level" links are established in AA needs to be tracked due to historical practice of ungraded classes*
  - b. What we consider-alignment with grade level/ grade band content
3. The achievement expectation is linked to the grade level content, but differs in depth or complexity; it is not grade level achievement. It may focus on prerequisite skills or those learned at earlier grades, but with applications to the grade level content. When applied to state level alternate assessments, these priorities are accessible to IEP planning teams.
  - a. USDOE, 2005, p. 16; 26-27- Alternate achievement expectations may reflect an expectation for learning a narrower range of content and content that is less complex while still challenging; may be prerequisite skills or those learned at earlier grade levels. *The concept that students may learn some grade level content without grade level achievement is new for many educators*
  - b. What we consider- DOK, balance, etc (Webb's criteria) expecting difference from general assessments alignment
4. There is some differentiation in achievement across grade levels or grade bands.
  - a. Source- USDOE, 2005, p. 21- Achievement may focus on grade bands or grade levels. *Defining outcomes for growth across grades is typical for academic content, but different than the "catalog" approach often used in functional life skills curricula*
  - b. What we consider- how grade band/level distinctions are made; or whether expectations for growth across grades is evident in other ways
5. The focus of achievement promotes through access to the activities, materials, and settings typical of the grade level but with the accommodations, adaptations, and supports needed for making progress in the general curriculum.
  - a. Source-concept of age appropriate partial participation extended to grade

appropriate alternate achievement. *The difference between a young student and an older student with SCD is in the application of early academic skills to be age and grade appropriate*

- b. What we consider- overall extent to which access to general curriculum is promoted (e.g., whether materials, tasks are age/grade appropriate; do they include adaptations of grade level activities/ materials; does training include examples of use in inclusive settings)
6. The focus of achievement maintains fidelity with the content of the original grade level standards (content centrality) and when possible, the specified performance (category of knowledge).
    - a. Sources- Achieve model of alignment; NAAC resources on “Is it plumb?/ is it square?"/ categories of knowledge. *One of the most difficult challenges is selecting tasks for assessment and instruction that have fidelity with the original state standard*
    - b. What we consider- content centrality; performance centrality; teacher training in near/ far alignment
  7. Multiple levels of access to the general curriculum are planned so that students with different levels of symbolic communication can demonstrate learning.
    - a. Source- Symbolic levels described in communication research; our own work on accessing curriculum by student’s symbolic level; DOE regulations permit multiple alternate achievement standards (December 9, 2003). *Some students with significant disabilities rely on nonsymbolic communication or may have limited intentionality in communication; consideration needs to be given to expectations for these students*
    - b. What we consider- symbolic level of tasks in alternate assessment and examples given in training materials