

Introduction

In 1997 and again in 2004 changes were made to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that were designed to strengthen the right of students who have disabilities to a free appropriate public education and to ensure greater accountability for those students. The law includes language that clearly communicates the expectation that special education must be connected to the general education curriculum. In fact, IDEA asserts that the education of students who have disabilities can be made more effective when schools ensure their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible. The law also requires that students with disabilities participate in state and local assessments, with appropriate accommodations, or in an alternate assessment if necessary.

The IDEA clearly anchors special education in the general education curriculum and assessments and accountability. American schools are rapidly moving toward a system based on challenging standards, assessments, and high-stakes accountability for every student. Within this context, understanding what it means to provide “access” to the general education curriculum is more important than ever. If schools and individual students are held to higher expectations, then teachers must know how to provide every learner an opportunity to meet these new expectations.