

# Curriculum Modifications 101

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

*IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) states: "A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum." For example, a 10-year-old student should not be removed (or denied placement) in a fifth grade classroom just because he isn't reading at grade level—the class reading material (in this case) should be modified so he can "be involved and make progress" (per IDEA) in the fifth grade curriculum. This is one in a series of articles about curriculum modifications.*

It's pretty simple: under the law, a child should not be denied placement in a regular ed classroom just because she needs curriculum modifications. Unfortunately, many students with disabilities are routinely segregated in special ed/resource rooms because they aren't "at grade level" in reading, math, or other academic subject.

Some educators may feel a student won't benefit from traditional academics—but they've probably never given the student the opportunity to try! (And when they do, they'll be pleasantly surprised!) Other educators may feel they don't know how to modify curriculum or don't have the personnel/resources to do so. Parents, too, often feel ignorant or helpless when it comes to curriculum modifications. And while there is no recipe book for curriculum modifications—no one-size-fits-all strategy would work since each child, each class, each subject, each teacher is different—modifying curriculum *is not* rocket science! All that's required is teamwork between educators, students, and parents, combined with our collective common sense.

Even though nine-year-old Haley isn't reading at grade level, there are many ways she can "*be involved and progress in the general curriculum*" (per IDEA) in the fourth grade general ed class. The classroom reading books (for language arts) can be recorded on audiotape, and Haley can listen to the tapes during class and at home. Who can record these books? There are several options.

Each state has an agency (called "Services for the Blind" or similar title) that maintains a library of books on tape, and it may also transfer new books to tape, provide large print materials, and more. In general, these services are not limited to people with

visual disabilities—those with reading and learning disabilities may also be able to use these services.

Alternatively, Haley's parents, classmate(s), or a community volunteer can record the books on tape. Under IDEA, providing accommodations is the school's responsibility (as a related service), and some school administrators willingly follow the law. In practice, however, many educators drag their feet or otherwise refuse to fulfill their obligations. When this occurs, it seems criminal for Haley to go without

just because of the educators' "bad behavior," so Haley's parents, brothers and sisters, classmates, or volunteers can pitch in to get the job done!

If recording Haley's books isn't feasible and/or appropriate for her needs, there are other alternatives. Someone (educator, parent, older sister, volunteer, etc.) can "rewrite" chapters of Haley's social studies book, for example, so that they're shorter and include only the main points, using words Haley can read. Alternatively (and/or concurrently), Haley can learn social studies via one or more videos or computer games/programs that cover the topics, doing hands-on activities (collecting pictures from magazines and making a "book," drawing maps or pictures, etc.), working in a small group with other students, and by a variety of other means. The inability to read or "reading below grade level" is *not* a barrier to learning!

Jaime needs curriculum modifications to learn geography. He has difficulty reading/learning from traditional maps and globes. Computer programs and map puzzles do the trick. Meredith struggles with math, so using a calculator, computer games, and hands-on manipulatives are helpful. Maria is learning history by watching videos recorded off the History

**Those who trust us  
educate us.**

*George Eliot*

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Channel and participating in role-plays. Ryan has difficulty handling the equipment used in chemistry experiments and understanding some of the concepts in the chemistry textbook. His mom and teacher have found other books in bookstores that cover the learning objectives and which use easy-to-handle equipment (like common objects found in the home). Julie can write, but she's at risk of falling behind, simply because writing is a very time-consuming process. Writing on a computer is the solution.

Again, there is no recipe to accurately prescribe curriculum modifications for every child in every class. But when parents, students, and educators collaborate, we can arrive at ideas that work. *Student involvement is crucial!* We need to ask the student, "How do you think you could learn this subject best?" Let's explore all possibilities!

In addition, other students can contribute their wisdom. A child's classmates can be very helpful in coming up with ideas. A student from a particular class can provide invaluable information about that grade level. For example, a fifth-grader can give us ideas on the fourth grade class he was in the year before. While we might not routinely consider a child to be a "curriculum expert," he really is! He sees things from a student's perspective, is intimately aware of the activities of that class, and he can help us see things differently.

In essence, "seeing things differently" can enable us to create successful curriculum modifications. In most cases, parents already see things differently—they're experts on their kids and they've created accommodations for their kids at home and in other settings.

Parents also know how their kids learn best, and *children know how they learn best*. But sometimes they're not aware they possess this valuable knowledge! Kate doesn't think she has much to contribute when brainstorming curriculum modifications for her son, Robert. But when asked, "What are his favorite things

to do? How does he spend his free time?" Kate has the answer. Robert loves to tinker—he loved playing with blocks when he was younger, and he likes to dismantle/reassemble his mom's mixer and other motorized things as a teenager. Robert seems to learn best by "doing" instead of reading. Curriculum modifications that include hands-on activities will probably meet Robert's needs.

Seeking Kate's input is important, but asking for Robert's input is even more critical. We often make too many assumptions about a child and his learning, then make decisions based on these assumptions, and if/when the child fails or is unsuccessful, we tend to blame the child *instead of examining our own actions*. If we ask the student, listen to him, and trust his wisdom, *we'll* make fewer mistakes!

There are many different ways of learning, and many books on the subject of "multiple intelligences" at libraries and bookstores. Some of us are auditory learners, while others learn best visually, or through touch, music, art, and so forth.

Unfortunately, many public schools are overwhelmingly biased toward reading and other traditional methods as the preferred style of learning. But occasionally, we may come across thoughtful, progressive educators who encourage and support a variety of learning styles to ensure all children learn! All children *can* learn; it's up to us to support their learning styles (instead of trying to make them fit the mold), and provide the assistive technology devices, curriculum modifications, and other supports they need, as required by IDEA.

A child's disability is not a barrier to successful learning. The barrier lies in our attitudes and our unwillingness to do *whatever it takes* to meet a student's needs. Teamwork and collaboration between educators, parents, and students can ignite the fires of creativity and jump-start positive change.

During the collaborative process, remember to use the, "What will it take?" strategy of negotiation [see that article on my website]. When we choose to be flexible and creative, and when we're guided by a student's wisdom and hopes, we can't go wrong.