Establishing District Policies to Support Alternative Means of Expression

Tools for School Governing Boards and District Cabinet Members

Authors: Zach Smith, Sara Doutre, and Beth Clavenna-Deane

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Executive Summary

This practice guide is designed to help district and community leaders implement policies that support students with disabilities to have alternative means of expression when meeting rigorous standards-based learning expectations. Integrating choice into learning is essential for inclusive, culturally sensitive teaching and is key to fostering student independence. Since introducing more options represents a significant change, it’s important for the entire school community—students, families, teachers, specialists, curriculum committees, and others—to collaborate in making this a reality. This practice brief provides clear and practical ways district and community leaders can support educators in these efforts. The responsibility for this shift cannot rest solely with general education and special education staff; it needs to be a collective effort.

California Law Requires Alternative Means

In the state of California, each local educational agency (LEA) has the autonomy to choose whether to require additional coursework for graduation. Many LEAs adopt the University of California and the California State University coursework requirements, known as “A–G courses,” in addition to the state minimum requirements to ensure students are prepared for four-year college admissions. Tied to these requirements, the California *Education Code* mandates that each LEA must establish alternative means that can include practical demonstration of skills and competencies (expression options) for students to complete their course of study and earn a diploma.

The governing board, with the active involvement of parents, administrators, teachers, and pupils, shall adopt alternative means for pupils to complete the prescribed course of study that may include practical demonstration of skills and competencies, supervised work experience, or other outside school experience, career technical education classes offered in high schools, courses offered by regional occupational centers or programs, interdisciplinary study, independent study, and credit earned at a postsecondary educational institution. Requirements for graduation and specified alternative modes for completing the prescribed course of study shall be made available to pupils, parents, and the public.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Starting with the District Mission, Vision, and Values

The foundation for supporting increased student agency within instruction and assessments is often most powerfully tied to a district’s mission, vision, and values statements. These tools symbolize the driving beliefs carried by the community and should inform the creation of district and school policies. Having a mission, vision, and values that highlight equity, agency, and inclusivity elevates the value of students having access and opportunities to choose what they need to be successful.

Mission, vision, and values statements are made even more impactful when they include goals and benchmarks tied to closing opportunity gaps for historically marginalized student groups within their school population (Leithwood 2010). These metrics make the cultural aspirations of a school community visible and achievable and, when paired with a system of accountability and support structures, create a path for the school community to tangibly realize elements of its mission, vision, and values. As school systems embark on journeys to reimagine major shifts away from long-established strategies, such as changing the way assessments are offered by providing students with alternative means of expression, it is essential to take a layered support to systems change—one that names the role that each member of the educational community (school board members, families, students, administrators, teachers, counselors, and anyone else with ties to teaching and learning) plays in achieving the change (Darling-Hammond et al. 2003).

Clear and Concrete Guidance for Integrated General Education and Special Education

Successfully integrating alternative means of expression to promote flexible models for meeting a district’s graduation requirements requires districts to create cross-departmental infrastructure for these supports early as part of the overall design of graduation structures (Heidrich 2017; Smith, Klare, and Fowler 2020; U.S. Department of Education 2020; Wilkins and Huckabee 2014). Successful application of alternative means of expression for students with disabilities also requires district policies, oversight, and technical assistance focused on general education and special education staff to work together to create infrastructure supporting these students to have individualized ways to meet graduation requirements (Black and Hill 2020; Blanton and Perez 2011; Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood 2017; Pellegrino, Weiss, and Regan 2015). Essentially, districts need clear and concrete infrastructure that allows specially designed instruction (SDI) defined within a student with a disability’s individualized education program (IEP) to integrate seamlessly into the districts’ overall infrastructure for supporting flexible ways for any student to meet graduation requirements.

The table below provides considerations for school board members and district cabinet teams regarding policy decisions cultivating teaching, learning, and assessment structures supportive of students having alternative means of expression. Within each consideration, guidance is broken down via a scaled rubric establishing “floor,” “bridging,” and “ceiling” policies and considerations based on varying levels of inclusivity. The “floor” frame establishes baseline considerations of IDEA-protected rights for students with disabilities. The “bridging” frame expresses policies seeking to build on these basic protections. Lastly, the “ceiling” frame provides policymakers with considerations for ways to enact alternative means of expression for all students. Each policy level should build on the level before it.

Table 1: District Policies Supporting Alternative Means of Expression

| Policy area | “Floor” policies | “Bridging” policies | “Ceiling” policies |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Diploma offerings | Create district infrastructure for students with disabilities to work toward the minimum requirement diploma or an A–G diploma.  | Establish district infrastructure for select student populations, including those with disabilities to work toward the minimum requirement diploma or an A–G diploma. | Create district infrastructure for all students to have flexibility in the diploma requirements they pursue.  |
| Alternative means of expression  | Establish IEP meeting protocols for students with disabilities in secondary settings defining students’ medium of expression for select courses needed for graduation to meet minimum requirements.  | Establish board policy and IEP team meeting protocols supportive of students with disabilities in any setting to have alternative means of expression to show learning across any requirement (A–G, minimum, grade level promotion, and so on). | Establish board policy for all students to have alternative means of expression when meeting content proficiency requirements, including but not limited to A–G diploma, state minimum diploma, and grade level promotion.  |
| Community engagement | Policies and communication plans spread awareness of alternative means of expression as a possibility within instruction.  | Community input and listening sessions gather feedback on viable and preferred mediums of expression for the student body.  | Community and students are presented with opportunities to co-construct, revise, and reimagine expression options that meet content success criteria.  |
| Professional development | Ongoing professional development is provided to teachers regarding how to embed alternative means of expression within core instruction.  | Alternative means of expression are built into educator evaluation criteria and include job-embedded coaching for how to apply options to coursework.  | District creates its own sample coursework, performance tasks, and tools based on the input of the community for providing alternative means of expression contextualized to the strengths and preferences of the community.  |
| Core instruction | Adopted policies call out provisions for students with disabilities to receive their IEP-defined supplementary aids and services including accommodations within core instruction.  | Adopted core instructional frameworks and curricula provide guidance on differentiation within core instruction.  | Adopted core instructional frameworks and curricula call out, celebrate, and naturally embed alternative means of expression or choice as a cornerstone of the design.  |
| Educator collaboration | Training for site leaders and educators on how to support co-planning between general education and special education.  | Protected time for general education and special education teachers to discuss students’ IEP-defined alternative means of expression within content instruction.  | Protected time for weekly co-planning between general education and special education teachers related to the integration of alternative means of expression for all students, starting with those with disabilities.  |
| IEP attendance | District policies require general education teachers to attend IEP meetings and include provisions connecting IEP attendance to employee-paid time. | Staff (including general education) trained in their roles within the IEP and best practices regarding IEP facilitation, including but not limited to decision-making regarding selecting students’ alternative means of expression.  | District policies require and compensate secondary general education teachers to attend IEP meetings to support a selection of viable alternative means of expression for students with disabilities to meet graduation requirements.  |

Sample AI-Produced Board Policies

The project team used AI software to generate a sample policy statement based on the criteria and policies described in the previous section. This sample language offers a model for districts to explore but in no way should be directly adopted outside a formal and community-driven vetting process.

Policy Statement on the Advancement of Alternative Means of Student Expression

Whereas [School District] recognizes the inherent value of individualized student expression as a cornerstone of an equitable and comprehensive education, and understanding that such diversity in expression is critical to the cultivation of a dynamic and inclusive learning environment, the District hereby commits to the development and implementation of educational strategies that acknowledge and support the multifaceted nature of student learning, particularly for those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Whereas the District acknowledges the necessity of aligning these strategies with state educational standards, the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the professional obligations as negotiated in the collective bargaining agreements with our educators;

Therefore, be it enacted by the [School District] Board of Education that

1. The District shall develop and maintain a curriculum adoption process that rigorously evaluates and selects materials and methods conducive to a range of student expression. This process will systematically ensure alignment with the aforementioned statutes and agreements and shall be reviewed periodically to maintain legal and educational soundness.
2. The District shall provide and advocate for instructional practices that include alternative means of expression, upholding our legal and ethical responsibilities to all students, as defined within the professional bounds of existing contracts and work agreements.
3. The District shall seek and incorporate stakeholder input, including from community members and educators, in a structured manner that honors contractual limitations and seeks to optimize the contribution of professional time toward curriculum development.
4. The District shall obligate and facilitate ongoing, legally compliant professional development that is intrinsically tied to our curricular goals, enabling educators to effectively integrate diverse means of expression within their instructional repertoire.
5. The District shall institutionalize compensated collaboration and co-planning time in educator schedules as per collective bargaining agreements, ensuring this practice is supported by policy and is reflective of the educational mandates of the state.
6. The District shall require, by policy, the attendance of general education teachers at IEP meetings, compensating such attendance as required by law and policy, to affirm the essential role these educators play in fulfilling the legal requirements of the IEP process and in promoting curricular coherence.

This policy shall be governed by the laws of the state and the regulations of the [School District] and shall be subject to periodic review to ensure ongoing compliance with all applicable legal and contractual obligations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this practice brief emphasizes the importance of establishing district policies to support alternative means of expression in education. By integrating choice into learning and providing students with disabilities with flexibility in how they meet rigorous standards-based expectations, we can foster student independence and create inclusive, culturally sensitive teaching environments. The document highlights that implementing these policies requires collaboration among various stakeholders within the school community. Furthermore, it outlines specific considerations for policymakers regarding diploma offerings, alternative means of expression, community engagement, professional development, core instruction, educator collaboration, and IEP attendance. Overall, by adopting clear and concrete guidance that aligns with state requirements and involves all members of the educational ecosystem from parents to teachers to administrators, districts can effectively empower students through diverse means of expression for a comprehensive education experience.

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1. *EC* Section 51225.3(b) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)