Identifying Viable Alternative Means of Expression

A Decision-Making Tool for IEP Teams

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

May 31, 2024

Introduction

Graduating with a diploma is an important marker of a student’s preparedness for life beyond public education. A high school diploma and corresponding course transcripts signal to colleges and employers that young people have the skills, aptitudes, and readiness for postsecondary education and employment. The right for all students to have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma and transition to college and career pathways is paramount. Historically, however, students with disabilities have experienced inequitable access in receiving a standard diploma compared to their peers (Achieve 2013; U.S. Department of Education 2020). In California, a student’s IEP team can address that inequity by identifying alternative means of expression, personalized for the student, that allow them to meet coursework requirements in ways that are individualized to their unique strengths and needs. This practice brief intends to empower IEP teams to participate in a decision-making process that identifies viable alternative means of expression, which **both** meet the coursework requirements **and** are customized to the student’s strengths and preferences.

Understanding Course Big Ideas

Understanding the coursework requirements for each course of study allows the IEP team to make decisions that are informed by the rigor and related requirements of each course. This means IEP teams must include representatives from general education with deep knowledge of these requirements and the California State Board-adopted content frameworks and standards undergirding these areas. This team-based approach ensures the expression options available to the student with an IEP align with the coursework requirements. The Inclusive Access to a Diploma: Reimagining Proficiency for Students with Disabilities project, in partnership with the California Department of Education, has identified content Big Ideas as the essential starting place for IEP teams as they determine viable alternative means of expression for a student within a specific course of study needed for a standard diploma. **Big Ideas are the central concepts, understandings, or areas of focus that represent what a student will be able to understand and do when taking a course.** Big Ideas organize course standards within the context of the key knowledge needed to show proficiency. When applied within schools and districts, Big Ideas give teachers valuable content information for prioritizing standards based on what is more or less essential to developing a deep understanding of course content.

When designing courses around Big Ideas, the state standards become important success criteria related to a student’s progress in coursework without expecting the student to show proficiency with each standard. Courses designed around Big Ideas also give IEP teams a unique opportunity to identify viable alternative means of expression across a wider array of concepts, standards, and areas of key focus within a course (Rao and Meo 2016). Figure 1 displays an example of a big idea with the content connections and associated standards that drive the success criteria.

Table 1. Big Idea Shapes in Structure Example[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Big Idea: Shapes in Structures | Content Connections:  Taking Wholes Apart, Putting Parts Together, and Discovering Shape and Space | Content Standards:  G-CO.6, C-CO.7, C-CO.8, G-GPE.4, G-GPE,5, G-GPE.7, F.BF.3:  Perform investigations that involve building triangles and quadrilaterals, considering how the rigidity of triangles and non-rigidity of quadrilaterals influences the design of structures and devices. Study the changes in coordinates and express the changes algebraically.  From Chapter 8 (Page 57) of the 2023 CA Mathematics Framework as of December 14, 2023 |

Learning the Needs and Strengths of Students with Disabilities

Collaboration between general and special education teachers is crucial for identifying appropriate alternative means of expression for students with disabilities (Black and Hill 2020; Blanton and Perez 2011). This identification process starts with talking to all IEP team members, especially students themselves and their families, about what the student’s strengths and needs are relative to meeting coursework requirements. Where specific needs have been identified, the IEP team, including the general education teachers with content knowledge in these areas, must determine which Big Ideas of the course represent the most significant challenge for the student. IEP teams should use various types of data to inform this decision, such as formative and summative assessment data, the student and family’s perception of which challenges impact meeting coursework, and detailed explanations with related data describing the interventions and supports that have been attempted within core instruction.

In addition to understanding a student’s needs, IEP teams must explore the student’s strengths to elevate areas of success within the student’s instructional programming. Strengths offer teams ideas for improving the design of a student’s supplementary aids and services and include potential alternative means of expression. For example, imagine a student has proven they can verbally communicate course concepts clearly and effectively via presentations or audio recordings but has struggled with paper and pencil course tests. With this knowledge, an IEP team can write supplementary aids and services, stating the use of verbal communication as a viable medium for assessments, **and** if needed, engage in a decision-making process (detailed below) that defines verbal communication as a specific alternative means of expression related to a challenging course big idea.

Elevating the Role of Supplementary Aids and Services

**Section 300.42** “Supplementary aids and services means aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate in accordance with §§300.114 through 300.116.”

Before identifying alternative means of expression, IEP teams must assess the degree to which students are receiving the global supports defined within their IEP that allow the student to access general education coursework. As seen in the definition above, supplementary aids and services describe the specific supports a child needs to access the general education curriculum and become a legally protected right once signed into the IEP. Supplementary aids and services are highly individualized to the needs of the child. Extended time within assessments, working in small group settings, access to specific assistive technology, and special seating are all examples of supplementary aids and services that can be applied across a wide array of instructional contexts. Defining alternative means of expression for specific Big Ideas within a course as a form of supplementary aid and service further supports a child’s access to the curriculum by providing more specific details regarding how a student communicates their understanding of the course’s big idea.

Planning Outside the IEP

Even though much of the guidance provided within this practice brief is specific to the context of the IEP, the conversations and planning that happen regarding how a student communicates their understanding of Big Ideas related to graduation do not (and should not) only happen within a formal IEP. The ongoing implementation of the services, goals, and supports defined within the IEP requires continual collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Established recurring partnerships between educators are necessary to enact alternative means of expression continually given the wide array of content areas needed for graduation and the fact that all general education teachers with content area expertise will likely not be able to attend each IEP meeting (Black and Hill 2020; Pellegrino, Weiss, and Regan 2015).

For educators to partner this way, it cannot fall on their shoulders alone to create these planning and support infrastructures. It is the role of local education agency (LEA) representatives to create the conditions for this collaboration (Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood 2017). District and school administrators, acting within their LEA representative role within the IEP, must create master schedules, organize training structures, and create monitoring systems that empower educators to collaborate in this manner (Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood 2017). For alternative means of expression to authentically take root in modern educational systems, local educational communities must take these integrated approaches to teaching and instructional design.

Decision-Making Regarding Alternative Means of Expression

When determining if an individualized alternative means of expression is necessary for a student to show their understanding of a course’s Big Ideas and related standards, IEP teams must first determine the degree to which existing IEP and non-IEP supports and services are available to assist the student in their area of need. The following questions can support IEP teams when determining whether an individualized alternative means of expression is necessary, and when appropriate, how to design an option that aligns with the rigor of the big idea *and* is based on the strengths and needs of the student. These questions should be seen as a starting place for the IEP team and educator collaborative teams when the data shows a course needed for graduating with a diploma represents a significant challenge for the student.

1. Which course big idea does the data show as the greatest need for the student?
2. What are the key success criteria of this big idea?
3. What supplementary aids and services are already in place for this student?
   1. Does the data show these supports to be working (providing access to the content)?
4. What preapproved alternative means of expression are available to this student within the course design?
   1. Will any of these methods work for this student?
5. What are the student’s strengths related to expressing understanding?
   1. Can these strengths be applied to this big idea without sacrificing the rigor requirements?

Figure 2. Alternative Means Decision-Making for Students with an IEP Flowchart

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| **Question 1: Which course Big Ideas does the data show are the greatest need for the student?** |
| * *Insert course Big Ideas representing areas of greatest need.* |

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| **Question 2. What are the success criteria for the Big Ideas?** |
| * *List of success criteria.* * *These should be locally defined using content frameworks and standards.* |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question 3. What relevant supplementary aids and services are already in place for this student?** | | **Question 4. What pre-approved alternative means of expression are available to this student within the course design?** | | **Question 5. What are the student’s strengths related to expressing understanding?** | |
| * *List of IEP defined supplementary aids and services.* * *Tools and mediums that have shown success in other contexts.* | | * *List of assessment models or expression options already built into the course design.* | | * *List of student’s strengths, preferences, and interests related to communication and assessment.* | |
| **Can this student meet the success criteria via standard assessment and IEP practices?** | **No** | **Will any of these methods work for this student?** | **No** | **Can these methods be applied to this big idea and success criteria?** | **No** |
| **Yes** |  | **Yes** |  | **Yes** |  |
| **Viable Alternative Means of Expression to Demonstrate Understanding** | | | | | **Need to Focus on Prerequisite Skills** |

Source: Developed by Alternative Means to a Diploma Project 2024.

Conclusion

Earning a diploma does not have to be achieved using a narrow set of assessment routes. Students with disabilities can especially benefit from key educators in their lives partnering to forge new routes to proficiency based on both the rigor of the content requirements and these students’ unique strengths and needs. This practice brief was designed to give IEP teams in California new and easy-to-use tools and strategies for making alternative means of expression more common for students with an IEP within core instruction.

References

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1. (California Department of Education 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)