Dear Colleague Letter from the Office of Special Education

Reauthorization of ESEA
Ensuring that all children, including children with disabilities, are held to rigorous academic standards and high expectations is a shared responsibility for all of us.
To help make certain that children with disabilities are held to high expectations and have meaningful access to a State’s academic content standards, we write to clarify…
that an individualized education program (IEP) for an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State’s academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled.
Research has demonstrated that children with disabilities who struggle in reading and mathematics can successfully learn grade-level content and make significant academic progress when appropriate instruction, services, and supports are provided.
Conversely, **low expectations** can lead to children with disabilities receiving less challenging instruction that reflects below grade-level content standards, and thereby **not learning what they need to succeed at the grade in which they are enrolled.**

Expectations for IEPs:

- Provides FAPE
- Based on the individual needs of the student
- Takes into account the impact of the child’s disability on his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum.
- Goals must be aligned to grade level content standards, must be achievable, must be sufficiently ambitious to close any achievement gaps.
Interpretation of General Education Curriculum:

the same curriculum as for nondisabled children based on the State’s academic content standards for the grade in which a child is enrolled, regardless of the severity of the disability.
Reiterates the Definition of Specially Designed Instruction:

“adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability…so that the child can meet the educational standards…that apply to all children.” 34 CFR 300.39(b)(3)
For those with significant cognitive disabilities:

- Alternate Academic Achievement Standards must be aligned with grade level standards
- May be restricted in scope or complexity or take the form of introductory or pre-requisite skills.
Standards:

- Retains requirements to adopt challenging academic standards that apply to ALL public schools and their students, including students with disabilities.
Assessment: States must ensure that for each subject, the total number of students assessed using an alternate assessment does not exceed 1 percent of the total number of students in the state who are assessed in that subject.
Graduation and diplomas:

- States may not preclude a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities who takes an alternate assessment from attempting to complete the requirements for a regular high school.

- Prohibits states from counting lesser credentials, such as certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or GED – as a regular high school diploma.
High Expectations

Educating students with disabilities is a shared responsibility

Ensures access to general education curriculum and grade level standards.

Focus on alternate assessment aligned to grade level standards for students with severe cognitive disabilities