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# Aligning IEPs to State Standards

**For Students with  
Moderate-to-Severe Disabilities**

Ginevra Courtade, PhD

Diane M. Browder, PhD



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## About the authors

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*Teaching to Standards: Science, Aligning IEPs to Common Core State Standards, and 6 Successful Strategies for Teaching to State Standards*. Currently, Dr. Courtade works closely with the Kentucky Department of Education to provide training and support to new teachers of students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. She also trains teachers nationally to implement academic curricula for their students.

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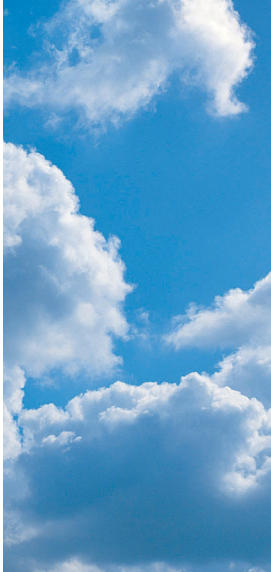
*The authors wish to thank Jean Vintinner, Instructor of Reading from the University of North Carolina–Charlotte for her review of the alignment of the ELA objectives; Karen Karp, Professor from Johns Hopkins University for her review of the alignment of the mathematics objectives; and Rachel Williams, MEd, from the University of Louisville for her review of States’ Standards.*



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from the American Educational Research Association’s Special Education special interest group and the 2009 First Citizens Bank Scholar at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte. In 2011, Dr. Browder was recognized by the state of North Carolina with the O. Max Gardner Award for research that has made a contribution to humanity.





# Introduction

## What does alignment to academic standards mean?

Angela has a standards-based individualized education program (IEP). This means her IEP is based on the standards her state adopted to define the knowledge and skills all students should have within their K–12 education careers in mathematics and English language arts. Her IEP also is in **alignment** with her state’s standards in science and social studies. Angela demonstrates her achievement through the state’s alternate assessment. Angela also helps her teacher track her progress for some priority academic skills. For example, she graphs the number of books she has completed through shared readings. In addition to the core academic content Angela learns, she continues to work on personal care, social skills, and goals related to communication and occupational and physical therapies, all of which she developed with her IEP team. Angela’s local community college has a new program to support and include students who have a moderate-to-severe intellectual disability. Although Angela is only in the seventh grade, she and her class have visited the program and talked about skills needed to be ready for college and a future career.

Developing standards-based IEPs for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities has been an evolving process. In the late 1990s, educators began to respond to the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) to promote access to the general curriculum. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education clarified that an IEP for a child with a disability (as determined by IDEA) must be aligned with the state's academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled. Research, such as that conducted by Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham, and Champlin (2010), has demonstrated that children with disabilities who struggle in reading and mathematics can successfully learn grade-level content and make significant academic progress when the proper instruction, services, feedback, and support are provided.

Some students with disabilities are included in state and district assessments, many times with accommodations, while other students need alternate assessments because they cannot participate in the large-scale assessments, even with accommodations. Alternate assessments have changed over time and continue to evolve, but providing students with the opportunity to learn general curriculum content is an ongoing priority.

An important way that IEPs promote learning the general curriculum is through alignment with state standards. Let's begin by defining some of the terms you will see throughout this book.

## What is the general curriculum?

The general curriculum includes the full educational experience available to all students. **General curriculum content** includes the subjects that all students study, including both core academic areas and subjects like art, music, physical education, and career education. In this book, we will focus on the core academic content areas of mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies. These core academic content areas are addressed by each state's standards.

The **general curriculum context** is the general education classroom. The general curriculum context also includes other school environments where students receive instruction.

## What are standards?

**Standards** are statements of outcomes all learners should achieve. Many states have adopted the common core state standards (CCSS; see [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)), but some states have developed their own set of standards (e.g., Texas, Virginia). Some states have adopted a part of the common core state standards (e.g., Minnesota adopted the English language arts standards but not the mathematics standards), and some states have adjusted the common core state standards (e.g., Florida) to meet their state's interests and needs.

Standards are generally arranged by grade level and content area. For example, if you review the common core state standards, you can look up a content area (e.g., mathematics) and then the expectations for a grade level (e.g., seventh grade). Note that the common core state standards only address two content areas: mathematics and English language arts. Other content areas (e.g., science, social studies) should be reviewed at your state's designated website for academic standards. It is important to know your own state's standards and where to find them online.

Students with disabilities learn these same standards for their grade-level placement. A student with a disability who is chronologically in the eight grade will focus on the eight grade standards. For the student to be successful, educators need to plan for the use of instructional supports, accommodations, and assistive technology.

## What are alternate achievement standards?

An IEP committee can determine that a student's academic performance should be measured against **alternate achievement standards**. These standards are defined by your state and are aligned with your state's grade-level content standards. However, they might be less complex, restricted in scope, or address introductory or prerequisite skills.

These alternate achievement standards are referred to using various terms, including extended standards, essential elements, access points, or simply extensions. Take a moment to become familiar with your state's alternate achievement standards.



## What is an alternate assessment?

Schools are held accountable for students meeting the standards of their state, or in other words, for making “adequate yearly progress.” Schools determine if students are mastering the standards of their grade level through assessments on tasks determined by the state. Some students with disabilities take the general education assessments without accommodations, some students with disabilities take the test with accommodations, and some students take an alternate assessment because they cannot participate in the large-group assessment even with accommodations. An **alternate assessment** focuses on the alternate achievement standards defined by the state. The alternate assessment is also determined by the state.

## What is a standards-based IEP?

An IEP (individualized education program) is a requirement of IDEA (2004) and specifies the special education services a student with disabilities will receive. The IEP for students who participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards includes:

- a statement of the present level of performance in both academic achievement and functional performance,
- a statement of measurable annual goals (both academic and functional),
- a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives,
- a description of how student progress toward the goals will be measured,
- a statement regarding related services and supplementary aids and services (based on peer-reviewed research) to be provided,
- an explanation of the extent to which the student will not participate in the general education classroom,
- a statement of any accommodations needed to measure academic and functional achievement of the student,
- the frequency, location, and duration of services, and
- postsecondary goals beginning when the student is 16 years old.

The main difference in the IEP requirements for students who participate in an alternate assessment aligned to alternate achievement standards is the inclusion of benchmarks, or short-term objectives.

Educators have been creating IEPs since the first federal law for students with disabilities was passed in 1975 (known then as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act). However, the current concept for IEP creation is the **standards-based IEP**. A standards-based IEP includes goals that promote learning of the state standards. It does not try to include a goal for every state standard in every content area. (This would result in a very long document!) Instead, it provides goals for the strategies students need to develop to learn the general curriculum content. Sometimes, the goals help focus priorities within the general curriculum content for students who take the alternate assessment.

## Who are students with moderate-to-severe disabilities?

As discussed earlier, students in alternate assessments may be working on extensions of their state standards. When No Child Left Behind (2001) was passed, states were allowed to count up to 1% of students participating in their assessment system as proficient using alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. For this reason, students who participate in alternate assessments are sometimes referred to as “the 1%.” Federal policy refers to students who take an alternate assessment as having “significant cognitive disabilities.”

Each state sets its own eligibility criteria, but these criteria cannot be based on the disability label (e.g., having a severe intellectual disability does not automatically qualify the student to take an alternate assessment). Although students who take alternate assessments may include students from any disability category who have more severe levels of the disability, this book focuses on students who have a moderate-to-severe intellectual disability. This intellectual disability may accompany other disabilities (such as autism) or sensory or physical impairments.

We have chosen to use the term “intellectual disability” rather than “cognitive disability” because the term is recognized broadly by professional organizations and is recognized under Rosa’s Law, a federal law signed in 2010 (Civic Impulse, 2016) that changed references in federal law from “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded individuals” to “intellectual disability” and “individuals with an intellectual disability.” For shorthand, we use the term “moderate-to-severe disability” to refer to students with intellectual functioning that is at least moderately impaired and to students who may also have multiple disabilities.

## What is alignment?

**Alignment** is the process of matching educational components of standards, instruction, and assessment. When these components are matched, the purpose and goals of each are strengthened. Instruction can be aligned with assessment, assessment can be aligned with state standards, and IEPs can be aligned with state standards to help align instruction with the general curriculum. Before considering alignment in more detail, it is helpful to consider three reasons why alignment is important.

### 1 IEPs aligned with state standards can prepare students for state assessments.

To meet alternate achievement standards, students need instruction that is aligned with the academic content standards for their grade. The IEP is not meant to restate all of these content standards, but rather should specify the skills the student needs to acquire to promote access to the general curriculum and those that help the student meet the alternate achievement standards. State standards can seem overwhelming to the classroom teacher and other educators. The IEP helps the team know the priorities for addressing these standards.

### 2 For students to show progress in academic content, they need appropriate academic instruction.

In the past, educators sometimes taught functional or life skills curriculum as a replacement for the general curriculum. Life skills are important for increased independence and transition to adult living, but students also need the opportunity to participate in the general curriculum for their grade level. Young students especially need the opportunity to gain skills in literacy and math. Sometimes in the past, students with moderate-to-severe disabilities received little or no academic instruction. Because students with moderate-to-severe disabilities need direct and systematic instruction, they are not likely to learn the academic skills of the general curriculum unless they receive this type of instruction.

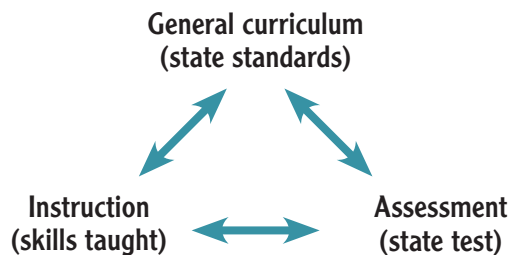
The IEP is not intended to define all of the student's instruction, nor does it function as the student's curriculum. Instead, it assists in helping to set priorities for what the student will master and how he or she will access the broader content of the general curriculum.

### 3 Well-aligned IEPs can promote meaningful academic instruction.

Deciding which academic skills to teach students with moderate-to-severe disabilities can be difficult. Sometimes a goal that is chosen does not appear to be “real reading” or “real math” when presented to general educators. Other times it is clearly academic, but with little real-life use or meaning for the student. Sometimes it is academic, but not relevant to the student’s current grade-level content. Knowing how to align an IEP to state standards can help planning teams select academic goals that are meaningful for the student while also promoting access to the general curriculum.

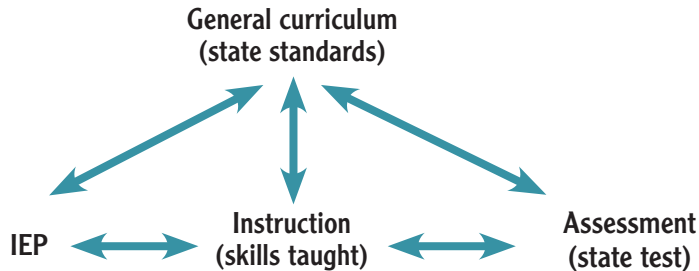
Remember, alignment occurs when there is a match between the written standard, the instruction of the standard, and the tested curriculum. The alignment of these educational components is illustrated in Figure I.1. Notice that the instruction addresses content to be covered by the state test and also links to state standards.

**Figure I.1 When Educational Components Align**



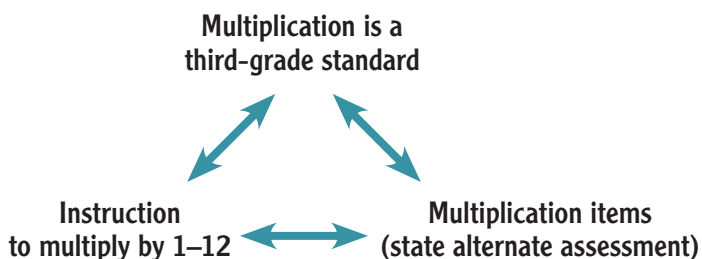
The IEP also can help define priorities for student mastery within the tested curriculum, as well as skills students can use to access grade-level content. When a student has an IEP, well-aligned educational components will look like those illustrated in Figure I.2. Notice that the IEP helps focus the instruction.

**Figure I.2 When IEPs Promote Alignment**



To see what the diagram looks like when instruction aligns, consider a hypothetical general education context in which educational components are aligned. Ms. Jones, a general education teacher, is teaching her third-grade class to multiply using numbers 1–12. In her state, a third-grade mathematics standard includes beginning multiplication. Her state’s third-grade math assessment will measure how well students multiply. In this example, her instruction (the taught curriculum) aligns well with both the written curriculum (state standards) and the tested curriculum (state test). This alignment is illustrated in Figure I.3.

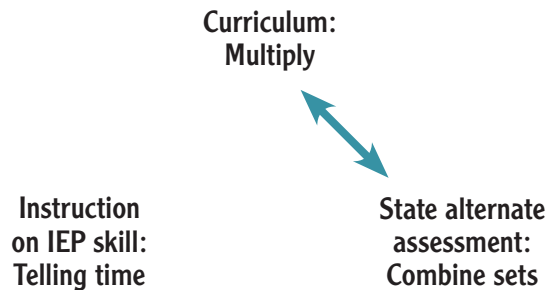
**Figure I.3 Alignment for Third-Grade Math Standard**



Ms. Smith is the special educator for third-grade students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Her students participate in the state’s alternate assessment. One portion of the assessment determines if students can group items and count the sets (a concrete form of multiplication). The only math skill Ms. Smith has targeted for her student’s IEPs is telling time. Figure I.4 illustrates

what the diagram looks like when students do not have instruction aligned to state standards.

**Figure I.4 Instruction Not Aligned to Standards**

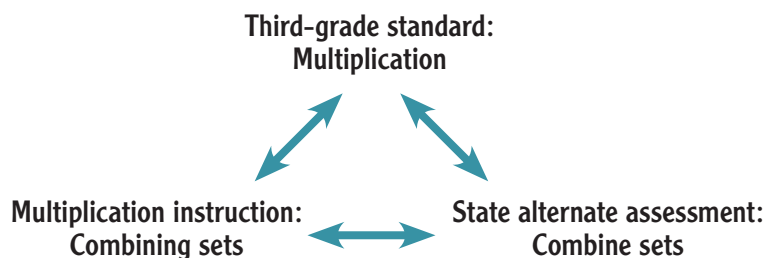


To her credit, after learning more about alignment to state standards and considering her students' skills, Ms. Smith decides to add instruction on combining sets for her third-grade class. Ms. Smith presents this as a task for preparing for a science lesson on "dancing raisins." She has her students make three sets of science supplies. First, they organize the sets by placing one measuring cup in each set. They calculate how many measuring cups they have used in all, and Ms. Smith writes the equation on a whiteboard. Then, she has the students organize two pencils for each set. Again, they calculate how many pencils they have used in all, and Ms. Smith again writes the equation on the whiteboard for the students. Finally, she has them add three raisins to each set. They calculate how many raisins they have used in all, and she writes the equation. To help her students understand, Ms. Smith also uses pictures to represent the items, and she uses numbers and the mathematical symbols "x" and "=" in the equations she writes.

She also works with Ms. Jones, the general education teacher, to come up with other ways to represent multiplication so that all students can have the option of using a wider range of manipulatives for the lessons. The students with disabilities work with peers to check their multiplication worksheets by creating sets of items. Ms. Smith now has instruction that aligns with standards and the state's alternate assessment, as illustrated in Figure I.5.

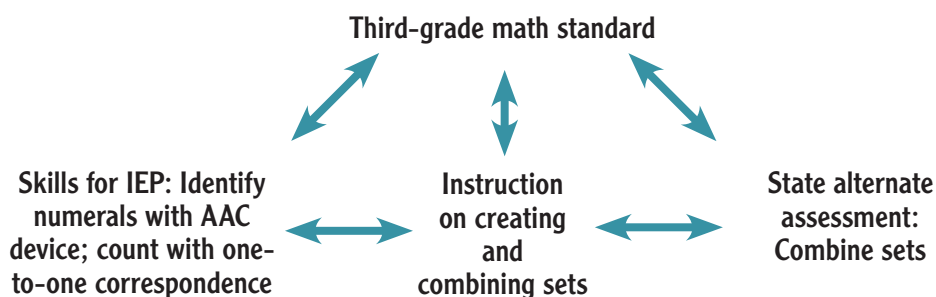


**Figure I.5 Third-Grade Math Instruction Aligned to Standard**



When planning for one of her students, John, Ms. Smith considers that he's struggling to combine sets because he has only limited use of one hand. He makes most of his responses through the use of his augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) device, or through using a switch that functions as a mouse for the computer. To master the concept of combining sets, John first needs to learn how to create and then count sets. Consequently, the IEP team decides that one IEP goal for John will be to learn to identify numerals with his AAC device. For example, when the teacher says, "Nine," John will locate the numeral 9 on his device. This goal provides broader access to numerous math activities in third grade. In addition, an IEP goal will address counting with one-to-one correspondence in order to accurately form sets. This is a fundamental numeracy skill that will allow John to access higher level math skills. Figure I.6 shows how his IEP promotes alignment of his instruction of the third-grade standard related to multiplication for mathematics.

**Figure I.6 John's Aligned IEP Goal**

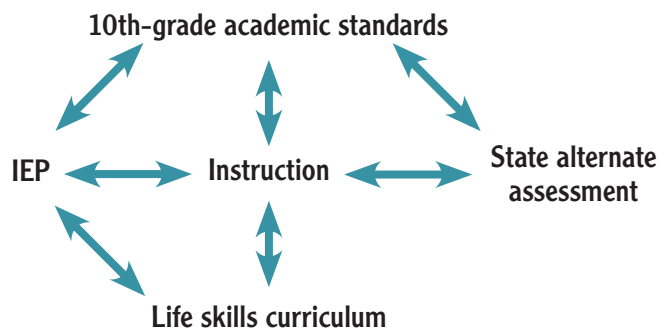


Let's explore alignment with the high school curriculum. This can be especially challenging when the gap between the general curriculum and students' current academic skills is large.

For example, an IEP team is planning for Ramona, a 10th-grade student with severe disabilities who currently has no reading skills but who enjoys the social context of being with typically developing peers in English class. A standard for a 10th-grade English course targets understanding symbolism in poetry and other literature. The IEP team wants to build on Ramona's social success by promoting some literacy skills that link to the poetry focus of 10th grade. Since Ramona has used picture symbols for basic needs and social communication, the IEP team considers how she might learn the more abstract symbols of poetry. Similarly, the team considers the standards in other academic areas like math and science. Because of Ramona's age, the team also wants to target some life skills, like learning to follow picture/word directions to complete a vocational task.

While this state's alternate assessment only targets academic skills, Ramona's progress in learning life skills is also important for her transition planning. Figure I.7 shows how the team used the IEP to focus on both life skills and the general curriculum.

**Figure I.7 Ramona's IEP Includes Life Skills and the General Curriculum**



## Writing IEPs that align to state standards

Once the concept of alignment is clear, it's helpful to consider several guidelines for developing an IEP that includes goals that align to state standards. The product that results from this process is a standards-based IEP. The guidelines offered below require learning more about the general curriculum as outlined in state standards and determining how to create access to it for your students with moderate-to-severe disabilities.

### Guideline 1: Become familiar with your state's standards.

The IEP team first needs to become familiar with the state standards for the student's assigned grade level. For many states, this will mean reviewing the common core state standards (available at [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)) for the academic areas of English language arts and mathematics. Information on other state standards and on standards related to science and social studies is typically available on your state's education agency website.

The "assigned" grade level for your students is usually based on chronological age, and this typically differs from the "instructional" grade level for students who have moderate-to-severe disabilities. For example, a student who is 7 years old will probably be assigned to second grade. In contrast, her instructional grade level may be at a beginning point of academic learning and may not correspond to a specific grade-level designation. To pinpoint objectives for academic learning while focusing on alignment, the educational team needs to consider how to create access to the student's assigned grade level (e.g., second grade) standards while also using information on the student's "present level of performance" (instructional grade level).

Typically, states post documents that provide educators with a deeper understanding of the standards and how to address concepts instructionally. As an example, the state of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has a subsite—known as Common Core Instructional Support Tools—that is designed to support teachers in their understanding of the common core and essential elements of the standards. This web page includes links to documents that help teachers "unpack the standards." The unpacking documents discuss in more detail the knowledge and skills students are expected to master at each particular grade. Table I.1 is an example of a standard "unpacked" related to English language arts (Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details) for second grade.

**Table I.1 North Carolina Common Core Instructional Support Tool**

2nd-grade English language arts standards	Unpacking the standard
Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details	
1. Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.	Students are required to use textual evidence to support their thinking as they ask and answer general questions. These questions ( <i>who, what, when, where, why, and how</i> ) focus on what the text says explicitly and include key details.
2. Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.	Students are required to retell stories and determine the central message using literature from diverse cultures, including folktales and fables. Students begin to understand that characters are people who are involved in a story. Character development is discussed in terms of the characters' reactions to what is taking place in the story.
3. Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.	Use questions and prompts such as: Who are the characters in the story? What are the most important events that happened in the story? What in the text leads you to that answer? What lesson is this story teaching you? How did the characters solve the problem in this story?

From the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016.

To illustrate Guideline 1, the following scenario of Camilla demonstrates how her teachers became familiar with the state standards.

### **Camilla's Scenario**

Camilla is a 12-year-old seventh grader with severe disabilities. Her IEP team includes Camilla, her parents, her special education teacher, a speech-language pathologist, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and the general education teachers from the seventh grade class to which Camilla is assigned. Prior to the IEP meeting, Mr. Hargrove, a seventh-grade teacher, gave Camilla's parents and the specialists copies of the seventh-grade state standards and learning goals. He also read them with Camilla prior to the meeting. At the meeting, he had each seventh-grade teacher describe curricular priorities for the year.

## **Guideline 2: Become familiar with your state's approach to alternate assessment and alternate achievement standards.**

As described earlier, states can use alternate achievement standards in considering adequate yearly progress (AYP) for up to 1% of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Many states provide curricular frameworks or extensions for the state standards for use in planning for students who will take the alternate assessment. These extensions are not different content than the content standards. In fact, states must be careful that their alternate assessments align with content standards as one step in demonstrating the technical adequacy of this assessment system.

With the 2010 release of the common core state standards (CCSS), the U.S. Department of Education, through the Office of Special Education, awarded grants to two consortia to address the process of creating the alternate assessments. These two consortia are (1) Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) and (2) the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC). These consortia consist of state department of education partners and psychometric and special education experts. Both consortia developed alternate assessment systems but used different conceptual frameworks as the basis for how students with significant developmental disabilities learn academic content. DLM used learning maps and essential elements in the development of an alternate assessment and alternate assessment standards (AA-AAS).

The NCSC created a framework of learning progressions as the foundation for the development of their AA-AAS.

Table I.2 on page 22 is an example of a first-grade and a seventh-grade English language arts standard and the essential elements of the standard (i.e., the alternate standard) for DLM and the essential understandings of the standard from the NCSC.

Not all states have chosen to participate in the assessments designed by DLM or the NCSC. Some states have designed their own alternate assessment based on their state standards. Whatever method the state selects, educators follow the guidelines for the administration of the alternate assessment. These may be provided by the state in a special curricular planning resource for students who take the alternate assessment. For more information on DLM and whether your state is participating in DLM AA-AAS, see [dynamiclearningmaps.org](http://dynamiclearningmaps.org). For more information about the NCSC and whether your state is participating in NCSC AA-AAS see [ncscpartners.org](http://ncscpartners.org). Both alternate assessments feature an online delivery and were implemented beginning in the 2014–15 school year.

### **Camilla's Scenario** (continued)

Camilla's state provides extensions of all standards for the state. For reference at the IEP meeting, Camilla's teacher made copies of the extended standards for seventh grade (Camilla's grade level) for mathematics and English language arts (ELA). The teacher studied them carefully before the IEP team meeting. At the meeting, the mathematics, ELA, and science teachers were interested to see how the standards had been extended for students who take the alternate assessment. Mrs. Beck, the special education teacher, explains to Camilla's parents how the essence statements have been developed to help students like Camilla access standards and how they are used by the state to develop the alternate assessment.

Note that not all members of an IEP team may have seen the standards or extended standards. Members of the IEP team may want to share copies of key resources related to a student's grade level. Special educators now have quality resources available to help them to understand the academic content and to plan instruction. One set of resources developed by special education



**Table I.2 Essential Elements and Essential Understandings of Two CCSS Standards**

<b>English Language Arts</b> <b>Reading: Informational Text: Key Ideas and Details</b>		
<b>Grade 1 CCSS standard</b>	<b>DLM essential element</b>	<b>NCSC essential understanding</b>
RI.1.2 Identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.	EE.RI.1.2 With guidance and support, identify details related to the main topic of a text.	<p><b>Essential Understanding:</b> Answer a simple question about the main topic of an informational text.</p> <p><b>Core Content Connectors:</b> 1.RI.d2 Identify the main topic of an informational text.</p> <p>1.HD.d5 Discuss key details and main topic of a preferred text.</p> <p><b>Progress Indicator:</b> RI.d Approaching informational text with a question to answer; identifying key details and main topics.</p>
<b>Grade 7 CCSS standard</b>	<b>DLM essential element</b>	<b>NCSC essential understanding</b>
RI.7.3 Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).	EE.RI.7.3 Determine how two individuals, events, or ideas in a text are related.	<p><b>Essential Understanding:</b> Identify the main idea of a text. THEN Identify key details related to the main idea of a text. THEN Identify a factual summary/ statement about the text.</p> <p><b>Progress Indicator:</b> M.RI.j Using supporting evidence to summarize central ideas, draw inferences, or analyze connections within or across texts (e.g., events, people, ideas).</p> <p><b>Core Content Connectors:</b> 7.RI.j4 Provide/create an objective summary of a text.</p>

**Note:** From Dynamic Learning Maps Essential Elements for English Language Arts, 2014, and the National Center and State Collaborative Wiki, 2014.

experts can be found at [wiki.ncscpartners.org](http://wiki.ncscpartners.org). This site contains resources such as content modules, designed to help educators understand academic content that may have been forgotten (e.g., how to determine the volume of a container); curriculum guides that provide information about specific content but also provide guidance on how to teach and make academic content meaningful for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities; and graduated understandings, which may help break the standards down into teachable skills. The general education teacher who is a member of the IEP team can also serve as a resource person to the team in understanding the focus of the academic content for this grade level. It may be important to have general education teachers from each major content area provide input.

### **Guideline 3: Keep the planning student-focused.**

Sometimes the state standards and requirements for assessment may seem to overwhelm the IEP process. To keep the planning focused on a student's individual needs, you might begin with an overview of recent progress and strengths. The student might also lead the meeting by reviewing recent achievements (perhaps using an electronic program to demonstrate). Members of the team who have conducted recent assessments and worked with the student should present their findings to begin building a consensus of the student's educational needs. The student's preferences and individual goals can then provide a starting point for planning. The team should consider the student's current performance in academics, communication, and other areas to identify skills that could be used to promote access to the



grade-level content, as well as any accommodations and supports that will be needed.

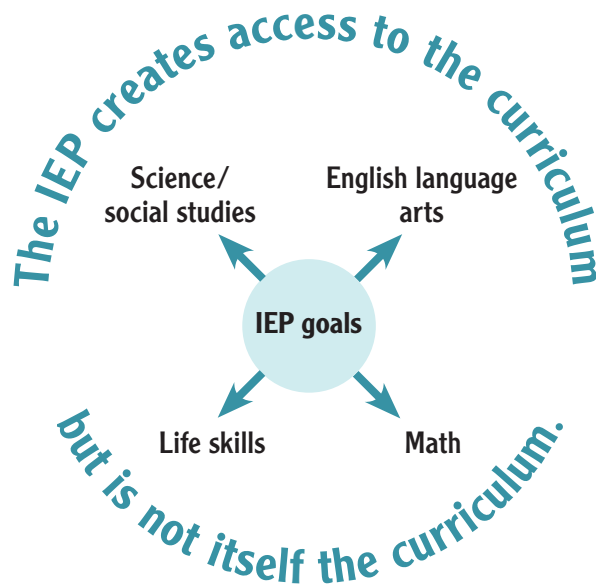
### **Camilla's Scenario** (continued)

Camilla is learning to direct her own IEP meetings. She began the meeting by using her augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) device to give a greeting and to ask participants to introduce themselves. After the introductions, she presented her recent achievements. She used an iPad and a graph she created using a graphing app. Next, team members summarized her present level of performance. Camilla then continued her presentation showing pictures of her preferences and goals. Both Camilla's goals and the various team members' reports produced draft goals for the IEP that will focus on Camilla's need to expand her communication skills, improve her range of motion, and participate more in her personal care. She asked for goals related to her love of swimming, to have more time with friends, and to use the computer more at school. Her parents affirm these goals and note their priority that the team "not give up" on teaching reading to Camilla.

## **Guideline 4: Consider both specific academic goals and broad access goals.**

With the student's individual needs and preferences articulated, the team can consider ways to access the grade-level content that will be meaningful for a student while addressing state standards. At this point in the meeting, it may be helpful for the general education teachers to discuss the highlights of the curriculum for that grade level and for the team to have the standards in front of them. In selecting goals, the team should consider each academic content area. The team should not try to recreate the entire curriculum in the IEP by writing a goal for every possibility within an academic area (e.g., every goal possible for a science unit). Instead, the team should focus on priorities for academic learning and skills to access the broader curriculum. Figure 1.8 illustrates how the IEP creates access to the curriculum. Note that the IEP is not meant to be a curriculum.

**Figure I.8 The IEP Creates Access**



**Camilla's Scenario** (continued)

In reviewing both the science and math standards, the team realized that Camilla did not have symbols in her AAC system to be able to communicate math and science concepts. They developed an IEP that focused on increasing her comprehension and use of 20 key words and symbols that she would frequently encounter in these subjects. For both social studies and science, Camilla would need an alternative to the paper-and-pencil activities that were frequently used by the class.

The team determined that another access goal, one that would also relate to her preference for computers, would be to learn to select a picture from an array of pictures from her online textbook (and related resources) to express key concepts. One of the specific math skills for her to master this year, as the seventh graders focused on measurement and data analysis, was the preparation and interpretation of graphs using spreadsheet software. They talked with Camilla about making some graphs related to her swimming activities.

To participate more fully in seventh-grade English language arts and reading, the team targeted having Camilla select pictures to identify the main idea, conflict, and resolution from a narrative text read to her by one of her friends. To keep working toward reading, they also decided to have her participate in a reading class that used a systematic phonics instruction program (i.e., *Early Reading Skills Builder*, by Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Wood, 2015). They also decided to use short summaries of novels from English class or information from social studies written using a software program that generates picture-word symbols (i.e., Symbol Support). The teacher would begin with single words and short phrases and build toward passage reading.

## **Guideline 5: Ask the question, “Is it really academic?”**

After choosing some academic content and access skills, it is important for the IEP team to take a second look at the goals and to consider questions such as, Is this really English language arts? Is this really math? (Or science? Or social studies?). Sometimes, in extending standards, the academic component becomes lost. General education teachers can be especially helpful as resource people in making sure that the final goals have clear links to academic content.

As an example, a common core state standard for English language arts for seventh-grade is:

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

Consider the following examples to see how some objectives align more closely to the standard than others.

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## IEP Objective 1

- Camilla will use her AAC device to greet peers in English class.

### **Is this objective aligned to the English language arts standard?**

No. Although this is an important social skill the team will probably want to keep on the IEP, it is not an English language arts or reading skill. Camilla needs additional English language arts objectives that focus on the elements of literature.

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## IEP Objective 2

- Camilla will acquire 20 sight words that relate to activities in her community and home.

### **Is this objective aligned to the English language arts standard?**

Although this objective is a reading task and an English language arts standard, it does not link to state standards that other seventh graders will be learning. Again, the IEP team may keep this objective, but more work is needed to access the general curriculum.

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## IEP Objectives 3, 4, and 5

- After hearing text summaries read aloud, Camilla will select the major theme of each using response options that include text with picture symbol support.
- Camilla will sequence 3 events from text read aloud to her using response options that include text with picture symbol support.
- Camilla will organize story grammar elements related to fictional text on a graphic organizer and use the organizer as a support when summarizing the text.

### **Are these objectives aligned to the English language arts standard?**

Yes, these objectives are well-aligned. Notice that the content of the standard is to identify the theme of a text. One of Camilla's objectives focuses on identifying themes. The performance expected in the original standard is threefold: to analyze, make inferences, and draw conclusions about the



theme. The objective targets alternative ways for Camilla to perform all three by using response options with picture symbol support. Although Camilla cannot read seventh-grade passages, she can access age-appropriate literature by listening to text or summaries of text read to her by her teacher and peers. Given Camilla's grade level, these text summaries will likely be adapted from novels, as from other books, with a couple of paragraphs for each chapter. The teacher may focus on one chapter at a time. To help Camilla have an organizational framework for the novel, the teacher might use an overview of the text (e.g., the preview given on the back cover of the novel). From this, Camilla could be taught to find the pictures that depict the theme. Then, as the teacher presents each chapter, Camilla could use the graphic organizer to help her identify setting, characters, problems, solutions, and events that occurred in the chapter. By the end of the novel, her graphic organizers can be a support for presenting a summary of the novel and for helping her identify how the setting and characters influenced the theme.

## IEP Objective 6

- Camilla will identify letter-sound correspondences for initial consonants and vowels and use this skill when writing using software that anticipates spelling from the first letters.

### **Is this objective aligned to the English language arts standard?**

This is a goal that broadly accesses the curriculum. Phonemic awareness is a critical step toward learning to read. This objective is important to Camilla as she learns the decoding skills to become an independent reader. However, this objective does not align with a seventh-grade standard, so something more is needed (see the previous discussion). In contrast, it will be on her IEP as a target for promoting beginning reading.

### **Guideline 6: Do not “force-fit” IEP goals into alignment.**

Do not “force-fit” IEP goals and objectives into alignment with academic standards. Students with moderate-to-severe disabilities may require therapy goals and life skills goals that will be part of the IEP but do not have any clear links to academic standards. They may also need some remedial academic work like Camilla's ongoing acquisition of decoding skills for reading. A standards-based IEP for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities may have some goals that do not align with state standards.

However, an IEP team can get off track if it begins with the goals for therapies, remedial academics, and life skills. In this case, the IEP team would need to align them in reverse to grade-level content standards. For example, a student may need to continue to learn toileting skills. Trying to determine a language arts or math standard that links to toileting can either be a waste of time or promote instruction that infringes on personal privacy and dignity. Toileting is a legitimate goal in itself that need not link to an academic content standard. A better approach is to develop academic goals by beginning with the academic content standards, rather than trying to fit functional goals to align to grade-level academic standards.

## Writing measurable IEPs

### Measurable goals

All IEP goals should be measurable. When a goal isn't measurable, it cannot be judged as met or not. A measurable goal, formulated clearly in writing, is one in which the entire IEP team, or any one working with the student, can agree has been met. To measure something implies action or a particular operation (Bateman & Herr, 2006). Table I.3 presents examples of goals and indicates the element missing from those that are not measurable.

**Table I.3 Measurable IEP Goals**

Not a measurable goal	Measurable goal
Joyce will improve her comprehension. ( <i>Improve how?</i> )	After participating in a read aloud of grade-appropriate text, Joyce will identify 4 elements of the passage (characters, setting, problem, solution) with 100% accuracy.
Nick will improve his graphing skills. ( <i>Improve how? To what level?</i> )	When given access to computer graphing software, Nick will correctly convert a table of numbers into three types of graphs in 3 of 4 trials.
Barry will identify the concept of the science lesson. ( <i>What concept should he identify?</i> )	After participating in a science inquiry lesson and given key vocabulary words, Barry will correctly fill in the blank in a concept statement using the key words in 8 of 10 trials.

## Measurable objectives

In developing the IEP, it is important to write objectives that have several qualities. First, they should be short-term and should provide a progression toward achievement of the annual goal. Second, they should target skills that are clearly measurable. Finally, objectives should target active student participation.

Once the IEP team has identified general goals for the student, it's important to translate them into specific, measurable short-term objectives. To define these objectives, consider the student's present level of performance related to the annual goal. For example, one of Camilla's goals was to select from response options a phrase with a picture cue to represent concepts in her academic studies. Currently, Camilla selects some picture symbols on her AAC device. She also points to pictures in a magazine when asked questions like, "Where is the dog?" In contrast, she has not yet learned to use response options with picture cues to represent broader concepts (e.g., a map of the United States to represent that country). The team can build from this present level to an annual goal, by writing objectives that fill in the levels between the two points. Transforming Camilla's present level of performance to an annual goal on her IEP may look like the following.

### Camilla's Scenario (continued)

**Present level of performance:** Camilla uses pictures on her AAC device to ask for basic needs and to greet friends. She also points to pictures of familiar objects or people. She does not yet use pictures to represent concepts.

- **Annual goal:** By the end of the school year, Camilla will select response options, including text with picture cues, to represent major concepts described in class for a variety of academic topics with 100% accuracy.
- **Objective 1:** Given 30 new pictures and symbols selected from academic areas and presented on the computer, Camilla will select the picture or symbol named with 100% accuracy.
- **Objective 2:** Given an array of 3 response options with picture cues that relate to a lesson, Camilla will select the response option that represents the vocabulary from the lesson for 10 new concepts per quarter with 100% accuracy.

- **Objective 3:** Given an array of 3 response options with picture cues that relate to a lesson, Camilla will select the response option representing the overall concept of the lesson with 100% accuracy when asked what the lesson was about.

## Writing goals and objectives for active participation

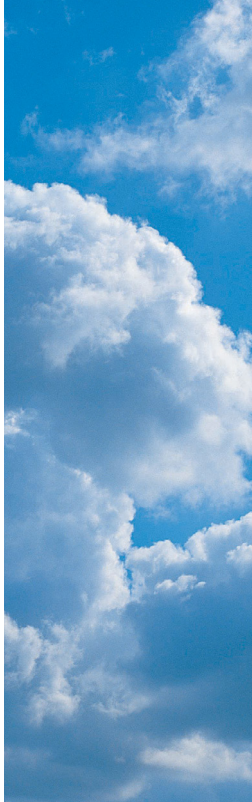
As the IEP team is writing and developing measurable goals and objectives, it is important to consider how the student can be an active learner. Active participation occurs in the general curriculum when the student acquires independent responses that demonstrate understanding of the academic content standard.

In contrast, passive participation is one in which the student simply has to cooperate with or tolerate physical or other guidance. For some students with severe intellectual and physical disabilities, it may be difficult to target an independent response, but active participation is possible if the student has at least one voluntary movement. For example, a student who has physical disabilities may not have the fine motor skills to point to a book that he would like read to him. Passive participation would be the result of hand-over-hand assistance to help him choose a book.

In this example, the teacher is actually making a choice for the student, leaving him or her with no independent response. The student's preference of book to be used for the literacy activity is not acknowledged. An active alternative would be to have the student use eye gaze (an independent, voluntary response) to indicate which book he or she would like. Or, the student might use a switch connected to a computer that scans through book selections (an independent, voluntary response). Table I.4 on page 32 contrasts responses that promote active participation from those that encourage passive participation; note how the active participation responses simplify the physical demands and promote independent responding and how the passive responses do not require independent responding.

**Table I.4 Passive Versus Active Participation**

Passive participation	Active participation
<p><b>Response:</b> Brittany will circle the correct answer to comprehension questions with physical guidance.</p> <p><b>Problem with this response:</b> Brittany's physical disabilities do not permit her to use a pencil without help. This assistance cannot be faded. There also is no way to determine if Brittany has any understanding of the comprehension question.</p>	<p><b>Response:</b> Brittany will use a laser-head pointer to select 1 of 2 response options that include picture cues to support the text to answer comprehension questions (with 3 out of 5 correct).</p> <p><b>Advantage of this response:</b> Brittany has the head control to move the light to her selection. Since the pictures support the text, Brittany can have a long-term goal of fading the use of pictures cues and responding to text only.</p>
<p><b>Response:</b> Kevin will listen to a story the teacher reads.</p> <p><b>Problem with this response:</b> "Listening" is not an observable, measurable behavior. Students who are quiet and looking at the reader may not be attending at all. Kevin could be daydreaming.</p>	<p><b>Response:</b> After the teacher has read each page of a story, Kevin will independently touch the page to indicate that it is time to turn it for 3 of 4 opportunities.</p> <p><b>Advantage of this response:</b> Kevin is now actively engaged with the story. Kevin might also have a goal like Brittany's to show comprehension. The teacher might also ask him to touch pictures on the page to answer questions about the story.</p>
<p><b>Response:</b> Kirsten will accompany a peer who will buy Kirsten's lunch.</p> <p><b>Problem with this response:</b> Kirsten is not performing any part of the academics of paying for her lunch; she is merely accompanying someone else.</p>	<p><b>Response:</b> When at the checkout, Kirsten will ask a peer to help her purchase her lunch by activating the \$ symbol on her AAC device to communicate, "Help me pay" for 9 of trials.</p> <p><b>Advantage of this response:</b> Kirsten is now actively engaged in paying for her lunch. As she learns more about money, she could also indicate how much her peer should give the cashier.</p>



# Part I

## Strategies to create access to state standards

One of the most difficult challenges educators face is determining ways to make state standards accessible to students who currently have few academic skills. For example, how can a high school student with limited use of symbols access general curriculum that focuses on symbolic literary concepts? Or, how can a student who is only beginning to recognize numerals access mathematics content that is introducing concepts like fractions? These are not easy questions to answer, but we offer four basic strategies to help create access to state standards.

- Match ELA and math skills to grade-level academic content.
- Promote self-determination skills.
- Use assistive technology to increase active, independent responding.
- Apply skills to real-life activities to give meaning and relevance to the academic concept.

Each of these strategies is described in detail in the four chapters that follow.



# Match ELA and mathematics skills to academic content

The first strategy to consider when creating IEP objectives that align with your state's academic content standards is that of focusing on skills that promote broad concepts in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. One of the challenges of developing standards-based IEPs is that the discrepancy between the student's assigned grade level (e.g., eighth grade) and instructional level (e.g., the student might be a nonreader, an early symbol user, or nonverbal) may be large. To address the student's current instructional level, the educational team must select specific objectives that promote student mastery of new ELA and mathematics skills while also teaching the concepts of grade-level content. To promote mastery of these ELA and mathematics skills (which sometimes are foundational skills) concurrent with grade-level content, it's necessary to understand the components of these two key academic standards.



# English language arts (ELA)

## Focus of ELA standards

Most state standards for English language arts include strands for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. In addition, standards for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects are included in the common core state standards (2010) for Grades 6–12. Each strand defines expectations the students must meet to be prepared to enter college and workforce-training programs.

Before reviewing examples of ELA standards, note that the reading strand is structured to reflect the major topic areas a National Reading Panel (NRP) report (2000) described as critical for learning to read. The NRP identified these five essential components: (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) fluency, (4) vocabulary, and (5) comprehension.

- 1 Phonemic awareness.** Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, recognize, and manipulate the individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound. This skill is critically important to associating the sounds in words with the letters that represent these sounds and essential in learning to read. A precursor to phonemic awareness is rhyme—hearing that the end of words sounds the same—and syllable blending and segmentation are also precursors. These skills are helpful to developing phonemic awareness. In phonemic awareness, students learn to blend sounds together to form a word, students learn to identify beginning, ending, and middle sounds, and finally, they learn to segment the separate sounds in a word like *pin*: /p/ /i/ /n/.



- 2 Phonics.** Phonics pairs the spoken sounds in the words with the written letters (graphemes) in words. Phonics gives students the skills they need to read/decode and spell new words. Students pair knowledge of the printed alphabet with the phonemes in a word. While students may master learning to read some words “on sight,” phonics is critical to learning to read.
- 3 Fluency.** Fluency is the ability to read with speed and accuracy. Fluency is often associated with comprehension of text. Students who are fluent readers recognize most words at a single glance and read text smoothly and accurately, thereby ensuring comprehension of the text read.
- 4 Vocabulary.** Vocabulary is also important in learning to read. Students need to recognize words quickly and also to comprehend what these words mean. Students with moderate-to-severe disabilities may learn to recognize large numbers of sight words, but have little use for this knowledge if they do not know what the words mean. Students need to learn the meaning of words that are not already part of their communication repertoire.
- 5 Comprehension.** Comprehension is gaining meaning from both the individual words in a passage and the overall passage. Even before students learn to decode or recognize printed words, they begin to acquire comprehension skills through listening to passages read to them.

## Example ELA standards

Let’s explore state standards for English language arts. Table 1.1 beginning on page 38 displays the strands in English language arts (i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language) included in the common core state standards and explains the major expectations of students for each strand.

You’ll see that each strand has substrands, as well as standards for each substrand and for each grade level. As an example, Table 1.1 shows strand and substrand standards for Grades 1, 3, 5, and 8. Notice how standards become more difficult as the student advances in grade level while the overall student expectation of the strand remains intact. Table 1.1 presents examples only; a complete listing of the common core state standards for English language arts is available at [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org), or a listing of your state’s standards is available at your state’s website for academic standards.

**Table 1.1 Example English Language Arts Standards for Grades K, 1, 5, 8**

Reading: Literature		
Substrand	Kindergarten (K)	Grade 1
Key Ideas and Details	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.	Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
Craft and Structure	Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.	Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).	Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.	With prompting and support, read prose and poetry of appropriate complexity for Grade 1.

Grade 5	Grade 8
Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.	Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).	Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the Grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of Grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

(Table continues)

**Table 1.1 Example English Language Arts Standards for Grades K, 1, 5, 8 (continued)**

Reading: Informational Text		
Substrand	Kindergarten (K)	Grade 1
Key Ideas and Details	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.	Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
Craft and Structure	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.	Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear (e.g., what person, place, thing, or idea in the text an illustration depicts).	Use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas.
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.	With prompting and support, read informational texts appropriately complex for Grade 1.

Grade 5	Grade 8
Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.	Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a Grade 5 topic or subject area.	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.	Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.
By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the Grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the Grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

(Table continues)

**Table 1.1 Example English Language Arts Standards for Grades K, 1, 5, 8 (continued)**

<b>Reading: Foundational Skills</b>		
<b>Substrand</b>	<b>Kindergarten</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>
Print Concepts	<p>Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page.</li><li>• Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.</li><li>• Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.</li><li>• Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.</li></ul>	<p>Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.</p>
Phonological Awareness	<p>Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize and produce rhyming words.</li><li>• Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.</li><li>• Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.</li><li>• Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.</li><li>• Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.</li></ul>	<p>Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Distinguish long from short vowel sounds in spoken single-syllable words.</li><li>• Orally produce single-syllable words by blending sounds (phonemes), including consonant blends.</li><li>• Isolate and pronounce initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in spoken single-syllable words.</li><li>• Segment spoken single-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds (phonemes).</li></ul>

Grade 5	Grade 8
N/A	N/A
N/A	N/A

(Table continues)