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# Aligning IEPs to TEKS



**For Students with Moderate  
and Severe Disabilities**

**Ginevra Courtade, PhD  
Diane M. Browder, PhD**



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# Introduction

## What does alignment to academic standards mean?

Angela has a standards-based IEP (individualized education program) based on the state of Texas academic standards. Texas adopted these standards to define the knowledge and skills all students should have within their K–12 education careers. The state of Texas academic standards are known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS. They address the academic areas of mathematics, English language arts and reading, science, and social studies. Angela’s IEP aligns to these standards. Angela demonstrates her achievement through the state’s alternate assessment, known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness Alternate (STAAR® Alternate).

Angela also helps her teacher track her progress for some priority academic skills. For example, she uses an object chart to keep track of how many books she has completed through shared readings. In addition to the core academic content Angela learns, she also continues to work on personal care and has therapy and social goals that she developed with her IEP team. Angela’s local community college has a new program to support and include students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities. Although Angela is only in the

7th 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 and severe disabilities is an evolving process. In the late 1990s, educators began to respond to the requirements of IDEA (1997) to promote access to the general curriculum and to include all students in state and district assessments. Some students needed alternate assessments because they could not participate in large-scale assessments with accommodations. Although alternate assessments have changed in the last 20 years and are likely to continue to evolve, 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 and career education. In this book, we will focus on the core academic content areas of mathematics, English language arts and reading, science, and social studies. These core academic content areas are addressed in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). They can be viewed at [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

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. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are the state of Texas standards for what students should know and be able to do. Sometimes these standards are referred to as Knowledge and Skills statements. TEKS are arranged by grade level and content area. For example, if you review TEKS, you can look up a content area (e.g., mathematics) and then the expectations for a grade level (e.g., 7th grade).

Through the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®), schools determine if students are mastering the essential knowledge and skills for their grade level. Schools are accountable for students meeting these standards, that is, for making adequate yearly progress.

Students with disabilities learn these same standards for their grade-level placement. A student with a disability in the 8th grade will focus on 8th-grade TEKS. For the student to be successful, educators need to plan for the use of instructional supports, accommodations, and assistive technology.

## **What is alternate assessment?**

Students who are not able to take the general State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), are provided an alternate assessment, known as STAAR Alternate. This alternate assessment is developed by the state of Texas and administered with students who are identified by their IEP teams as needing this option. In Texas, educators administer an assessment with performance tasks determined by the state. Whatever method the state selects, educators follow Texas guidelines for the administration of the assessment.

## **What are vertical alignments?**

Texas has also created TEKS Vertical Alignment documents. These documents list TEKS curriculum from pre-kindergarten through end of course, giving an overview of the Knowledge and Skill statements across grade levels. The student expectations provide access points to the general education curriculum. The access points can serve as prerequisite skills for STAAR® Alternate.



## What is a standards-based IEP?

An IEP, or 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 STAAR® Alternate is based on access points (prerequisite skills) and 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 towards 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
- Frequency, location, and duration of services

- Postsecondary goals beginning when the student is 16 years old

The main difference in the IEP requirements for students who participate in 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. A newer concept 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 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 severe disabilities?**

As described under “What are standards?” students in alternate assessments may be working on extensions of TEKS. When No Child Left Behind (2002) was passed, states could count up to 1% of students participating in the assessment system as proficient using alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards. For this reason, students who participate in STAAR Alternate are sometimes referred to as “the 1%.” Federal policy refers to students who take alternate assessment as having “significant cognitive disabilities.”

Each state sets 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 STAAR Alternate). Although students who take STAAR Alternate may include students from any disability category who have more severe levels of the disability, this book focuses on students who have a moderate or severe intellectual disability. This intellectual disability may accompany other disabilities, such as autism, or sensory or physical impairments.

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

## **What is alignment?**

Alignment is the process of matching two educational components, which then strengthens the purpose and goals of both. Instruction can be aligned

with assessment; assessment can be aligned with TEKS; and IEPs can be aligned with TEKS 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 TEKS 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 it should specify skills for the student to acquire that will promote access to this curriculum and help the student meet the alternate achievement standards. TEKS 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 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 or severe disabilities received little or no academic instruction. Because students with moderate and severe disabilities need direct and systematic instruction, they are not likely to learn academic skills unless they receive this instruction.

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

**3 Well-aligned IEPs can promote meaningful academic instruction.** Deciding what academic skills to teach students with moderate and severe disabilities can be difficult. Sometimes the goal that is chosen does not appear to really be reading or math when presented to general educators. Sometimes 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

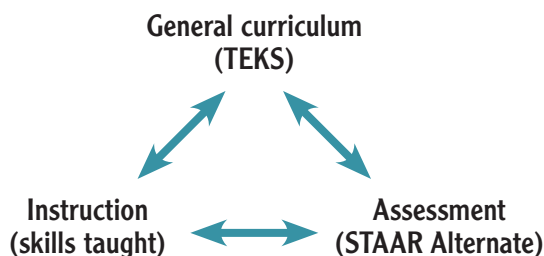


to TEKS can help planning teams select academic goals that are meaningful for the student and promote access to the general curriculum.

## Further understanding alignment

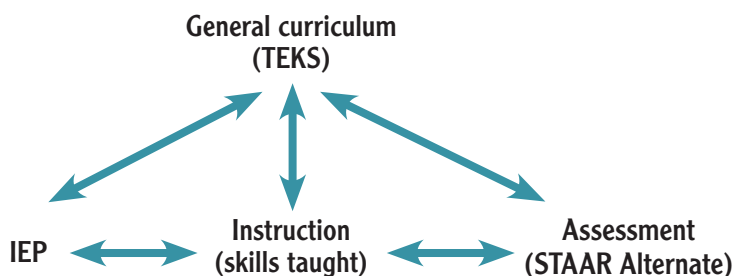
Alignment occurs when there is a match between the written, taught, and tested curriculum. The alignment of these educational components is illustrated in Figure 1.1. Notice that the instruction addresses content to be covered by the state test and also links to TEKS.

**Figure 1.1** When educational components align



The IEP can help define priorities for student mastery within this curriculum as well as skills students can use to access grade-level content. When a student has an IEP, well-aligned educational components can be illustrated as in Figure 1.2. Notice that the IEP helps focus the instruction.

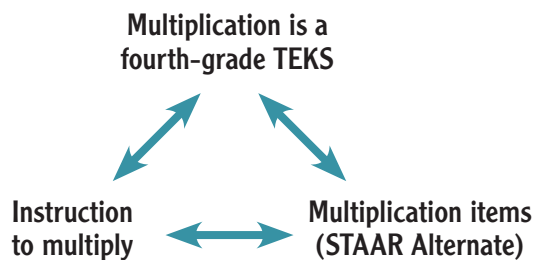
**Figure 1.2** When IEPs promote alignment



To see what the pattern looks like when IEPs don't align, consider this hypothetical general education context in which educational components are aligned.

Ms. Jones is teaching her 4th-grade class to multiply numbers. TEKS 4th-grade mathematics standards include beginning multiplication. The state of Texas's 4th-grade STAAR Alternate math assessment might measure how well her students multiply. In this example, the taught curriculum aligns well with both the written curriculum (TEKS) and the tested curriculum (via STAAR Alternate). The alignment can be diagrammed as shown in Figure 1.3.

**Figure 1.3 Alignment for fourth-grade math standard**

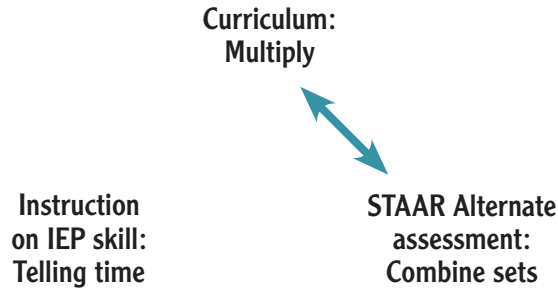


Ms. Smith is the special educator for 4th-grade students with moderate and severe disabilities. Her students participate in alternate assessment. One portion of the assessment might determine if students can group items and count the sets (a prerequisite skill for addition and subtraction). The only math skill Ms. Smith has targeted for her students' IEPs is telling time. In this example, students do not have instruction aligned to Grade 4 Knowledge and Skill statements. See Figure 1.4.

To her credit, after learning more about alignment to TEKS and considering her students' skills, Ms. Smith decides to add instruction on combining sets for her 4th-grade class. Ms. Smith presents this as an early vocational task in creating supplies packets at a job site. She has students make three sets of art supplies with two pens in each set. And she has them create bags for the homeless shelter with three items in eight bags. They then find out how many items they have used in all.

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**Figure 1.4 Instruction not aligned to TEKS**

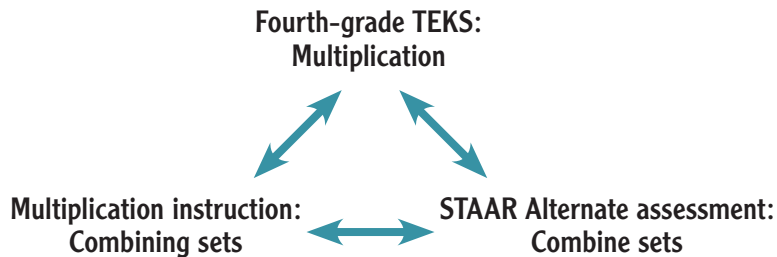


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To help her students understand, Ms. Smith uses pictures of the task with numbers and the mathematical symbols “+,” “-,” and “=.” She works with Ms. Jones, the general education teacher, so all students have the option of using a wider range of manipulatives for the addition and subtraction lessons. The students with disabilities work with peers to check their worksheets by creating sets of items. Ms. Smith now has instruction that aligns to TEKS for 4th grade. See Figure 1.5.

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**Figure 1.5 Fourth-grade math standard**

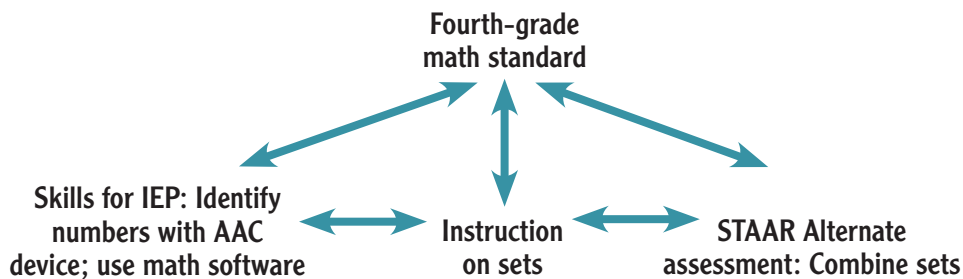


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When planning for one of her students, John, Ms. Smith considers that he’s challenged in learning to combine sets because he has only limited use of one hand. He makes most of his responses through the use of his augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) device, or through using a

switch that functions as a mouse for the computer. To master the concept of combining sets, John needs to learn how to first create and then count sets. So the team decides that one IEP goal for John will be to learn to use the first portion of a math software program that introduces multiplication by showing pictures of arrays of items. John also needs to learn to identify numbers 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 4th grade. Figure 1.6 shows how his IEP promotes alignment of his instruction of the 4th-grade Knowledge and Skill statement for mathematics.

**Figure 1.6 John’s aligned IEP**

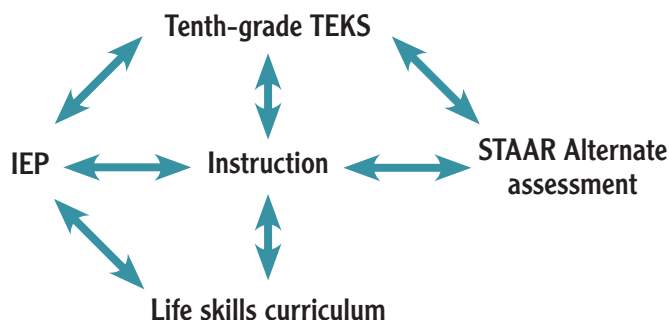


Let’s explore alignment with high school curriculum. Alignment with high school curriculum can be especially challenging when the gap between the general curriculum and students’ current academic skills is large. For example, TEKS for a 10th-grade English course targets understanding symbolism in poetry and other literature. The 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 typical peers in English class.

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 TEKS 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. Figure 1.7 shows how the team uses the IEP to focus on both life skills and general curriculum. While Texas’s alternate assessment only targets academic skills, Ramona’s progress in learning life skills is also important for her transition planning.

**Figure 1.7 Ramona’s IEP includes life skills**



## Writing IEPs that align to TEKS

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

### Guideline 1: Become familiar with TEKS

The IEP team first needs to become familiar with TEKS for the student’s assigned grade level. TEKS addresses academic areas of English language arts and reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. The “assigned” grade level, usually based on chronological age, typically differs from the instructional grade level for students with moderate and severe disabilities.

For example, a student who is 7 years old will probably be assigned to 2nd 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. In focusing on alignment, the educational team considers how to create access to the student’s assigned grade level (e.g., 2nd grade) while also using information on present level of performance (instructional level), to pinpoint objectives for academic learning.

In addition, recall that the state of Texas provides vertical alignment of TEKS. The vertical alignment documents list Knowledge and Skill statements from pre-kindergarten to secondary levels and align student expectations across the grades. The student expectations are prerequisite skills for STAAR Alternate and provide access points to the general education curriculum and can be the basis for instruction.

Knowing this information may provide a deeper understanding of TEKS and how to address concepts instructionally. As a reminder, information on TEKS is available for viewing and printing at [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us) and STAAR Alternate TEKS Vertical Alignment Documents can be found at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/special-ed/staaralt/vertalign/>

To illustrate Guideline 1, read about Camilla and how her teachers became familiar with TEKS.

### **Camilla’s Scenario**

Camilla is a 12-year-old 7th grader with severe disabilities. Her IEP team includes Camilla, her parents, the special education teacher, the speech-language pathologist, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and the general education teachers from the 7th grade to which Camilla is assigned. Mr. Hargrove, a 7th-grade teacher, gave Camilla’s parents and the specialists copies of the 7th-grade TEKS and learning goals prior to the IEP meeting. He also read them with Camilla prior to the meeting. At the meeting, he had each 7th-grade teacher describe curricular priorities for the year.

## **Guideline 2: Become familiar with STAAR Alternate**

As described earlier, Texas uses alternate achievement standards in considering adequate yearly progress (AYP) for students with significant intellectual disabilities. Texas summarizes the student outcomes for TEKS

in essence statements. The essence statements are used for STAAR Alternate and link the expectations for grade level to a prerequisite skill. These statements are not different content than TEKS, but three tasks have been provided at differing levels of complexity.

- **Level 1—Beginning Awareness**—is the least complex and involves responding at the beginning awareness level.
- **Level 2—Basic Recall**—is moderately complex and involves students recalling information recently presented.
- **Level 3—Application**—is the most complex and requires students to apply knowledge.

One assessment task per essence statement per subject is evaluated, and the student must perform based on pre-determined criteria. The state of Texas provides STAAR Alternate resources at [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill (TEKS) statements and student expectations for each reporting category tested in STAAR are summarized into essence statements. The statements (written each year) are used to create test items used for STAAR Alternate. The essence statements link the grade-level expectations of TEKS to the prerequisite skills listed in the vertical alignments. Table 1.1 on page 20 provides examples of a Grade 6 English language arts (ELA) and reading TEKS, as well as the essence statements related to each Knowledge and Skill statement.

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

For reference at the IEP meeting, Camilla’s teacher makes copies of the essence statements for 7th grade (Camilla’s grade level) for mathematics and ELA and reading. The teacher studied them carefully before the IEP team meeting. At the meeting, the mathematics and ELA and reading teachers are interested to see how the TEKS have been extended for students who take the STAAR 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 TEKS and how they are used by the state to develop the alternate assessment.

**Table 1.1 Grade 6 ELA and reading TEKS**

<b>Knowledge and Skill statement</b>	<b>Essence statement</b>
<b>6.5 Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Drama.</b> Students understand, make inferences, and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of drama and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. (Supporting Standard)	Identifies the structure and elements of drama.
<b>6.6 Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Fiction.</b> Students understand, make inferences, and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of fiction and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. (Readiness and Supporting Standard).	Recognizes how elements of fiction contribute to plot development.
<b>6.8 Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language.</b> Students understand, make inferences, and draw conclusions about how an author’s sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provides evidence from text to support their understanding. (Readiness Standard)	Recognizes the meaning of figurative and sensory language in literary texts.

The example on page 21 presents a Grade 5 science Knowledge and Skill statement. The essence statement and instructional ideas for teaching it are also provided, showing how a student’s level of performance can be addressed. It further describes activities all students can participate in, and how specific students can participate, based on their levels of performance.



## TEKS Grade 5 science

- **The strand:** Earth and space
- **The focus of the strand:** The focus of this strand is on demonstrating an understanding of force, motion, and energy and their relationships.
- **Knowledge and Skill statements:** 5.6 The student knows that energy occurs in many forms and can be observed in cycles, patterns, and systems. (Readiness and Supporting Standard); 3.6 The student knows that forces cause change and that energy exists in many forms. (Supporting Standard)
- **Vertical alignment and access points:** Design an experiment that tests the effect of force on an object.
- **Essence statement:** Knows that Earth’s surface is constantly changing and consists of useful resources.
- **Lesson focus:** At Grade 5, students observe the speed at which objects of various mass fall from the same height. Using a chronometer to accurately measure time, they plot the data as “mass versus time.”

Instructional activity promoting participation of all students:

- **As written for this grade level:** Sonia and her lab group select 10 objects of different masses to test. They test the force of gravity on these objects by dropping them from their second-story classroom. For each object, they record the time it takes to fall to the ground and plot mass vs. time on a graph to assess their findings.
- **For lower levels of complexity (entry points):** Milos uses a spring balance to weigh each object chosen by his lab group. After participating in the experiment with his peers, Milos records the data on a spreadsheet and generates a graph of the results.
- **Addressing access points:** Lester helps select the objects for experimentation. He follows directions to drop and test each object with his lab group.

Not all members of the IEP team may have seen these statements or curricular resources. One or more members of the team may want to share copies of key resources related to this student's grade level. The general education teacher who is a member of the IEP team also can serve as a resource person to the team in understanding the focus of the academic content for this grade level. In high school, it may be important to have general education teachers from each major content area provide input.

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

Sometimes TEKS and requirements for assessment may seem to overwhelm the IEP process. To keep the planning focused on this student's individual needs, begin with an overview of recent progress and strengths. The student might lead the meeting by reviewing recent achievements (e.g., maybe using a PowerPoint presentation). Members of the team who have conducted recent assessments and worked with the student can 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 can be used to promote access to the grade-level content and accommodations and supports that will be needed.

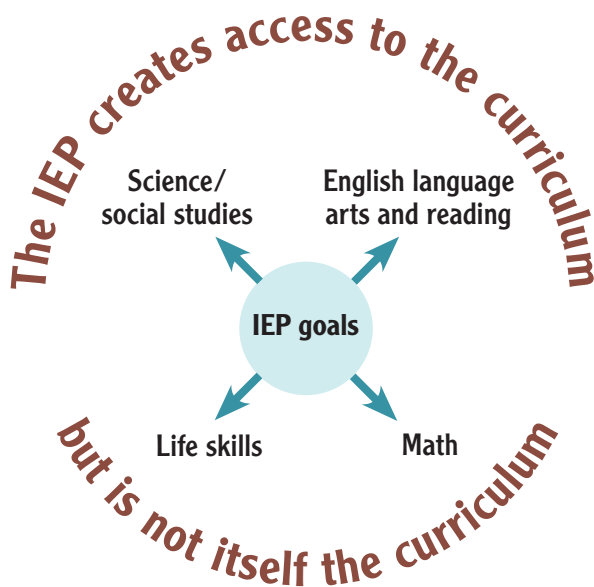
#### **Camilla's Scenario** *(continued)*

Camilla is learning to direct her own IEP meetings. She begins 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 presents a PowerPoint presentation of her recent achievements. Next, team members summarize her present level of performance. Camilla then continues her PowerPoint presentation showing pictures of her preferences and goals. Both Camilla's goals and the various team members' reports produce draft goals for the IEP that focus on Camilla's need to expand her communication skills, improve her range of motion, and participate more in her personal care. She asks for goals related to her love of swimming, to have more time with friends, and to use the computer. 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 and address TEKS. 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 Texas standards in front of them. In selecting goals, the team should consider each academic content area. The team should not try to recreate this entire curriculum on the IEP, for example, by writing a goal for every 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 1.8 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 7th graders focused on measurement and data analysis, was the preparation of graphs using spreadsheet software. They talked with Camilla about making some graphs related to her swimming activities.

To participate more fully in 7th-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 towards 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 Ahlgrim-Delzell, Woods, & Browder, 2014). 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 team to take a second look at the goals and to consider questions such as, Is this really English language arts? Is this really reading? (or math? science? social studies?). Make certain in extending TEKS, that the academic component does not become lost. The general education teachers can be especially helpful as resource people in making sure that the final goals have clear links to academic content. Consider the following examples to see how some objectives align more closely to the standard than others.