



The NCSC Model for a Comprehensive System of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Alternate Assessments

All students, including students with the most significant disabilities, have the right to participate and make progress in the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997, 2004). Also, all students must be assessed each year on grade-level content in math and reading/language arts in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also called the No Child Left Behind Act-NCLB). States are permitted to use an alternate assessment on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. An AA-AAS is required to be based on the same grade-level content identified for all students, but there are different expectations for achievement on that content than there are for students who are taking the general state assessment.

Common Core State Standards

In 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association released a set of academic content standards in reading/language arts and mathematics referred to as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). (<http://www.corestandards.org>). As of March 2013, the CCSS had been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. The CCSS are based on the skills students need for success in education after high school (post-secondary education) and work. Therefore, college and career readiness was the focus of the CCSS development.

A Comprehensive System of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is developing a common AA-AAS to be implemented across 24 partner states (for a list of NCSC state and center partners see <http://www.ncscpartners.org/about>).

The NCSC approach is to build these assessments as key parts of a broader system, which includes curriculum and instruction. Assessing students without first providing opportunities for learning in a challenging, grade-level curriculum can hardly be expected to result in meaningful changes in student outcomes. NCSC focuses on the essential knowledge for improved college, career, and community outcomes. Given the large range of abilities of the students who take an AA-AAS this also means ensuring that no student is excluded.

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Thus, the NCSC system of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is built on a foundation of communicative competence, so that students have a reliable way to receive information from others and to show others what they know. Students must be able to communicate personal needs, and share information, ideas, questions, and comments about the daily events in their lives and the world in which they live. For students who have not yet developed communicative competence, this must be a priority objective for them now. With recent technology advances, there are many approaches to develop communication systems that allow students to participate in instruction and interaction throughout the day.

College and career readiness in the NCSC model also includes community readiness. Life beyond high school is more than just going to work or college. We learn to become responsible citizens, to vote, to participate in volunteer projects and recreational activities, we develop a network of friends, access health care, make necessary purchases, manage money, and take care of our household and personal needs.

Exhibit 1- The Foundational Principles of the NCSC Alternate Assessment

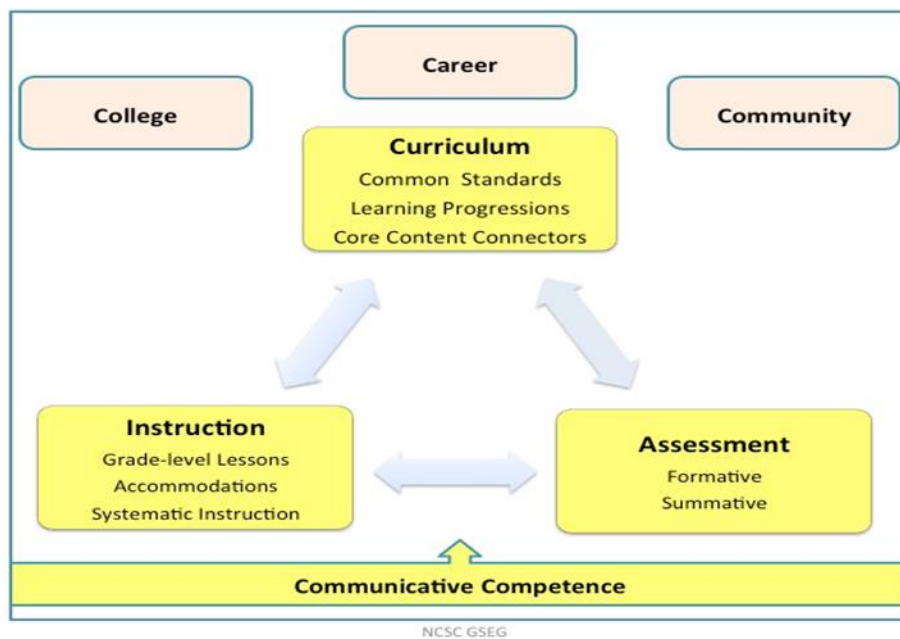


Exhibit 1 shows the relationship of the elements of curriculum, instruction and assessment. It also reflects the importance of communicative competence and preparation for a full life in the community.

Instruction

In order to maximize learning opportunities with their peers (classmates without disabilities), it is important for students with significant cognitive disabilities to be provided with access to grade-level content/lessons, needed accommodations and systematic evidence-based instruction.

It is important that students with significant cognitive disabilities use instructional materials and participate in activities that are age-appropriate and that allow them to progress with their peers. Shared learning experiences with same age peers provide opportunities to develop necessary social skills and to practice essential communication skills. The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provide a framework for educators to use multiple ways to teach the content, multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge and multiple ways to engage ALL learners. Individualization, including accommodations as needed, is built into grade-level lessons.

Systematic, evidence-based instruction ensures that instruction is based on research that shows how students learn. It provides frequent opportunities for student responses, students are given immediate feedback on whether their responses are correct and there are ongoing checks for student understanding. It also means that instructional changes are based on a careful and continuous review of the student's performance.

Curriculum

The "Curriculum" element in the learning triangle in Diagram 1 refers to the NCSC framework for helping teachers understand and modify curriculum based on CCSS. Part of the challenge of providing access to the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities is determining how to make it meaningful. Students may need reduced breadth (number of topics or objectives to learn), depth (the levels of understanding expected for each topic/objective), or complexity (e.g., the time, steps and memory involved) compared to typical peers.

The NSCS model is based on a prioritized portion of the CCSS that supports access to the general education curriculum in each grade, at reduced depth, breadth, and complexity when necessary. It also promotes meaningful participation in grade-level instruction with peers without disabilities. NCSC has created two tools to assist in the planning process: the Learning Progression Framework and the Core Content Connectors.

The Learning Progression Framework is the pathway that students typically take toward mastering skills for college and career readiness, as they move through the grades. Learning targets are the stepping stones ("the big ideas") that students learn as they move along that path. Experts at NCSC looked at these learning targets together with the grade-level content expectations from the CCSS. They used this information to identify prioritized academic content to guide the instruction and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities from kindergarten through high school. This prioritized content is referred to as the Core Content Connectors (CCCs). Each CCC represents a teachable and assessable part of the content. Related CCCs are used in lessons to create deeper understanding. The CCCs are specifically intended to

promote success as students advance with their peers without disabilities to the next grade. They are the starting point for instruction, not necessarily everything an individual student can and should learn.

Assessment

The final element of the NCSC learning triangle in Diagram 1 is the assessment itself. There are both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments take place throughout the school year, are built into the instructional materials and provide regular feedback about student progress. The annual summative assessment discussed here is the NCSC Alternate Assessment. It will give schools and districts the information they need to provide additional instructional and curriculum resources to teachers. In addition, the results of the summative assessment should be useful to educators in identifying appropriate instructional goals and objectives, as well as ongoing supports, for each student. A student's summative assessment score is just one measure of college and career readiness.

The Role of Professional Development

An underlying assumption in the NCSC model is that materials and resources are necessary to assist special and general education teachers in understanding and using the content standards and information on how the curriculum progresses from grade to grade. Without these materials and resources, the curriculum and instruction will not have the necessary impact for students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or students may simply not have access to instruction based on the content standards.

A system of professional development that includes materials and training resources helps teachers understand the content of the curriculum. In addition, sample units and lessons provide teachers with examples for how to develop and use lessons based on the content. Next, a set of evidence-based instructional practices give teachers the tools they need to provide high quality instruction. Finally, modules (online training units) are important to help teachers develop their own lessons and provide student supports. A comprehensive set of professional development resources ensures that students have been prepared to participate in the assessment. It also ensures that the results of the assessment are valid and useful to Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams in identifying individualized learning goals and on-going supports.

Educators and parents in every state can view and use materials and training resources developed by NCSC, whether or not they are in a NCSC partner state. They are posted on the NCSC Wiki at https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/mediawiki/index.php/Main_Page. For a description of each component of the NCSC Curriculum and Instructional Resources see the document called *The NCSC Diagram and Explanation* at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>.