

Credit Flexibility Guidance: Students with Disabilities

Background

Students with disabilities represent a wide variety of students with very different needs. Seventy-five percent of these students do not have general cognitive performance deficits as a feature of their disability. As a result, the needs of students can vary considerably. Yet the vast majority of students with disabilities are capable of meeting the same high achievement standards as students without disabilities when provided with effective instruction and accommodations.

Legal Requirements

Students with disabilities (SWD) must have in place at all times an Individual Education Program (IEP) which sets measurable goals and objectives, accommodations and modifications required for the student to successfully access the general curriculum, and methods of assessment which determine if the student is making progress in meeting the goals and objectives.

Practical Considerations for Students with Disabilities Under Credit Flexibility

The IEP requirements are ideally suited to allow LEAs to implement the flexible award of credit to students with disabilities. In addition to the IEP or as a part of the IEP, the student should have a student credit flexibility plan for the award of flexible credit. The student credit flexibility plan should include details which delineate the amount of credit to be awarded based on the academic content standards that are to be covered, exactly what the student must do to earn the credit, a highly qualified teacher (HQT) who will be supervising the implementation of the plan and how the team members will know the student has successfully completed the plan.

SWD already have multi-disciplinary teams in place to write the IEP, determine present levels of performance, determine accommodations and modifications needed for the student to access the academic content standards, and to demonstrate that they have mastered the information presented. These teams are charged with writing transition plans for students at age 16.

The transition plan must include a statement that determines whether the student will graduate by meeting core curriculum requirements or by meeting IEP goals. Every effort should be made by the team to use credit flexibility to insure that every capable student be allowed to meet core graduation requirements through alternative means. This team could be expanded beyond the participants required in the administrative code and federal law to include **business/community partners** who could be providing part of the instruction to SWD. This team could then determine what tasks the student would perform in a business/community setting, what academic content standards would be met by successfully completing the outlined tasks, at what level of competency the tasks would be completed, and what credit would be awarded upon completion.

Because SB311 allows students to be awarded **partial credit and/or dual credit**, a student could earn partial math credit and humanities credit by working on a community project, such as raising funds for the homeless in the area; partial/full speech credit for meeting with groups of elementary or middle school children to discuss areas of interest to the target groups and the SWD; partial math and business credits for working with a local business; or the SWD could earn partial or complete science credits by working with a local hospital, doctor's office, engineering firm, greenhouse or the parks department.

Many schools have used the concept of "inclusion" to allow SWD to access higher-level course work with the assistance of an intervention specialist in the classroom. The IEP team can determine how the coursework will be modified to allow for student success. These accommodations could be as simple as taking tests orally, having the textbook on CD, or having a peer read the textbook to him/her. Some students could require a scribe for written work or assistive technology, such as voice to text software. This system of instruction is most successful when the intervention specialist and the general education teacher **team teach** the class. Several Ohio universities and colleges have begun working with their general education and special education program professors to insure that graduates of both programs are aware of team teaching models to produce better outcomes for SWD.

In recent years the education community has realized that many SWD also may have areas of giftedness. These **twice exceptional children** may need accommodations not only to access the general curriculum, but also to be allowed to enter higher-level courses at the university level or advanced classes in the high school. These students could be considered for PSEO by including university personnel on the student's IEP team. These students may also have areas of giftedness in the arts. Schools could partner with private music teachers, community musical groups, artists, and galleries to provide instruction and experience in these areas for advanced students. Students who are athletically gifted could also be provided credit for advanced instruction in their sport of interest.

SWD also often have the accommodation of "**extra time**" on their IEPs. This term typically refers to having an extra class period to complete an assessment, or an extra day or days to complete homework assignments. This concept of extra time could be extended to months, or quarters to complete coursework. Because SB311 allows the school to award partial credit, the student could take American History, for example, for three semesters or four, instead of the more typical two. The student could be awarded partial credit at the end of the typical two semesters, with the award of full credit when the coursework required by the IEP is completed. This might include work over the summer or two school years to complete the class.

Online class work is another option which could be combined with extra time to complete course work. Students could access class work through an on-line provider to complete and/or supplement traditional "seat time." This could allow the student to complete the work on an individual timeline. (Please note the guidance on on-line teachers in the highly qualified teachers' section).

Online work could also allow students to make up work missed due to illness, hospitalization, suspensions/expulsions which may be a part of the student's disability. It also could be an option for students to supplement a class they are taking with higher-level course work if they are twice exceptional, but not ready to move onto the next level. For example, a student who is excelling in Algebra I but is not ready to move ahead to Algebra II could use online sources to supplement the Algebra II curriculum. The supplemental course work could improve engagement without overwhelming the student with course content for which they are unprepared.

A SWD could use a job in the community to earn partial credit in several disciplines:

- sociology/psychology credit could be earned through customer service goals and objectives
- math credit could be earned through working with money – making change, totaling receipts, determining the amount of supplies needed for the business for a set period of time, calculating wages, taxes, profit margins, etc.
- science credit by working in greenhouses, pet stores, a landscape business, etc.

These credits could be awarded through existing academic content standards or through independent studies arranged by a HQT and a business/community partner.

Teams working with SWDs will need to thoroughly understand the design of appropriate **assessments** for SWDs. Appropriate assessments should provide an accurate measure of the student's performance in relation to the skills and knowledge represented in the core content standards without also measuring aspects of the student's disability. This goal can be accomplished by designing assessments to meet the needs of all learners without changing the constructs that the assessment is intended to measure.

These assessments may be the same assessment taken by all other students, however, a wide variety of assessment methods should be carefully considered with the special needs of each student being taken into consideration. Some methods of assessment that are typically used for SWD include:

- having the questions read to the student and the student responds as all other students do
- having the questions read to the student and the student responds orally or with a communication device
- multiple-choice questions which have two possible responses as opposed to the traditional four or five
- multiple-choice questions in place of short answer responses
- the use of rubrics to score performance-based assessments
- assessment at more frequent intervals to allow the student to break the learning into smaller chunks

- allowing the student to demonstrate his or her knowledge without taking a paper-pencil assessment (i.e. multimedia demonstrations, graphs, tables, illustrations, music, visual art, etc.)
- presenting projects and/or portfolios to an advisor, parents, mentors and classmates
- demonstrations of skills

Multi-disciplinary teams will be important for credit flexibility in dealing with SWD. These teams may include intervention specialists, university partners, business and community partners, educational service centers, teachers in career and technical settings, and general education teachers. Team members who work well together and have a thorough understanding of the learning environments which can be provided by each partner have the capability to significantly improve the outcomes for SWD.

All of these suggestions could require expertise, financial obligations, transportation needs, and staff requirements that all schools are not equipped to provide. **Partnerships** will be important for districts to implement flexible credit for SWD. These partnerships might extend to area businesses, community resources, universities through on campus or distance learning, educational service centers, community agencies which supply job coaches, and community schools. Districts might partner with each other to provide programming, write assessments or alternative curriculum/programming that can be shared and standardized.