

Frequently Asked Questions: Considerations for Exceptional Children

‘Exceptional Children,’ in reference to the Future-Ready Core, refers to students with disabilities, an incredibly diverse population. They range from some of the highest performing students in the most advanced classes to those with the most severe intellectual challenges and every level of functioning in between. In that context, it is important to note that every student, including those with disabilities, have the right to the benefits of education and the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma. For the purpose of this document, ‘exceptional children’ and ‘students with disabilities’ will be used interchangeably.

Do all Exceptional Children participate in the Future-Ready Core Course of Study?

Most students with disabilities in North Carolina Public Schools participate in the Future-Ready Core Course of Study. The academic rigor posed by the Future-Ready Core matches well with these students’ skills, knowledge and goals for post-secondary education, employment and independent living. They should be held to the same high standards as those students without disabilities. Still, these students are identified because their disabling condition(s) is/are having an adverse impact on their education. This impact must be addressed appropriately so these students have the instructional and material support required for their success.

There are some students with disabilities for whom the Future-Ready Core Course of Study is not appropriate, due to the student’s ability levels and post-secondary goals. Of these students, a small percentage more appropriately benefit from the Occupational Course of Study (OCS), which is designed for students to embark on a different route to earning a North Carolina High School Diploma while still ensuring that these students graduate Future-Ready. The OCS has academically relevant and rigorous courses, but the courses are designed to be immediately relevant to employment and independent living after high school. In addition, there are extensive employment training and experience requirements that must be fulfilled and prepare these students for successful competitive employment upon graduation. More information on the OCS is available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/development/mental/>.

Finally, a small percentage of students have disabilities that impact their educational progress such that graduation with a North Carolina High School Diploma (either through the Future-Ready Core or the Occupational Course of Study) is not practical. These students typically have more significant cognitive disabilities and often have additional disabilities. They still are taught content linked to the general curriculum, the Extended Content Standards. The extended content standards also address other educational needs to prepare them for real-life areas such as employment, independent living and recreation/leisure. These students can earn a Graduation Certificate if they must successfully complete 21 course credits in high school and pass all requirements of their Individualized Education Program (IEP), which will be discussed later in this document.

What resources help with planning the participation of Exceptional Children in the Future-Ready Core Course of Study?

In addition to other planning tools families and schools may access for students with disabilities, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the written statement that is developed, reviewed and revised to address the needs of a child with a disability receiving special education. The IEP includes several components, including the following:

- a statement of the child's present level of academic and functional performance, including involvement and progress in the general curriculum;
- a statement of annual goals designed to meet the needs of the child to make progress in the general curriculum and meet other educational needs resulting from the disability;
- a description of how progress on these goals will be measured;
- a statement of the special education and related services to be provided;
- an explanation of the extent to which the student would not participate in the regular classroom;
- a statement explaining the student's participation in State and districtwide assessments;
 - the projected date for the beginning, frequency, location and duration of these services;
- and
- a statement of transition components including course of study (at least by age 14) and transition goals and services (at least by age 16).

The IEP should serve as a core planning tool in the context of the Future-Ready Core, as this will inform all teachers, related service personnel, guidance counselors, administrators and others about the unique needs of each student with a disability. It is also the reference document for the existence of specific disabling conditions, interventions and accommodations that may impact the student's participation and performance in the Future-Ready Core.

The IEP is developed by the IEP Team, which is the group of individuals who represent the collective knowledge about the student with a disability and the services available for him/her. This group includes a school system representative, regular education teacher(s), special education teacher(s), parent(s), and others who work with the student. In high school, the student often participates in the development of the IEP as well. All of these individuals should be considered resources in planning the participation of exceptional children in the Future-Ready Core.

In addition to the IEP Team, each school system has an Exceptional Children Program Director who provides guidance and direction on serving students with disabilities. More commonly known as the EC Director, this person and his/her staff can provide valuable assistance and information on a host of available resources.

Finally, the Exceptional Children Division at the NC Department of Public Instruction provides funding, technical assistance and guidance to local school systems throughout the state in serving students with disabilities. More information is available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/>.

How do the FRC's new requirements impact the education of Exceptional Children?

The Future-Ready Core Course of Study employs new requirements that affect all exceptional children. These can be met by most students, but it is important to be aware of the changes and appropriately prepare and be ready to give correct guidance and instruction.

- Increased rigor in electives
 - Overview – The Future-Ready Core Course of Study requires six credits in electives, two of which must be in Career Technical Education, Arts Education or Second Language. The other four credits may be part of a developed concentration that is focused on student interests and post-secondary goals, though the concentration is not required.
 - Implications for Exceptional Children – Most Exceptional Children take elective courses like all other students, so this may be of no special consequence to them. Some students, though, may have some of their elective course slots identified for special education instruction. If this is the case, these may need to be arranged around the two-credit requirement for Career Technical Education, Arts Education or Second Language. Special education courses intended to support these electives will not count toward the two-credit requirement.

- Increased rigor in mathematics
 - Overview – The Future-Ready Core Course of Study now requires students to complete higher levels of mathematics courses. As listed in the Future-Ready Core overview, students must now successfully complete Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II (or Integrated Math I, II and III) plus an additional mathematics course aligned to their post-high school goals.
 - Exemption for Students with Specific Learning Disabilities in Mathematics – General Statute 115C-81b states that “the State Board shall not adopt or enforce any rule that requires Algebra I as a graduation standard or as a requirement for a high school diploma for any student whose individualized education program (i) identifies the student as learning disabled in the area of mathematics and (ii) states that this learning disability will prevent the student from mastering Algebra I.” With this statute, these students are not required to pass Algebra I or any courses higher than Algebra I. Specific items of note:
 - A student’s IEP may have a primary area of eligibility other than ‘specific learning disability’, yet the student could still have a specific learning disability in mathematics listed elsewhere in the IEP.
 - Students receiving this exemption still must earn four mathematics credits, though these can be in courses less rigorous than Algebra I. Decisions on these courses for individual students are made at the local level.
 - If a student eligible for this exemption still opts to take the Algebra I course [or any other mathematics course with an End-of-Course (EOC) test], he/she must adhere to rules associated with these courses (i.e., student must take the EOC test; EOC score must count at least 25 percent toward the student’s final grade for the course; etc.). Participation in one or more of these statewide assessments must be listed in the student’s IEP, including all necessary accommodations and whether an alternate assessment is required.
 - Substitution for the Mathematics Sequence – There may be other infrequent instances in which the principal grants a substitution to the mathematics sequence. These may include some students with disabilities, though students without IEPs also may be considered. These are students who, despite appropriate and focused intervention in mathematics over time,

have demonstrated unusual difficulty in mastering mathematics concepts. In these instances, it should be stated clearly to the student and the parents that, though the student may graduate with a North Carolina High School Diploma, he/she might not qualify for admission to colleges and universities (e.g., those in the University of North Carolina system) and will likely not be prepared to be successful in mathematics at the post-secondary level without adding additional coursework in mathematics. Also, the student's success in required science courses may be negatively affected by the lack of mathematics proficiency. More information on this substitution is located in the Mathematics Sequence section of this document.

- Implications for Exceptional Children – Some students with disabilities may find this increased rigor in mathematics more challenging than previous expectations. It is imperative that the instruction and supports be in place to help these students achieve. These supports must be in place in elementary and middle school, not just high school. Refer to the information below for resources that can be helpful in educating these students to achieve at higher levels.

What solutions are in place to help Exceptional Children succeed in the Future-Ready Core Course of Study?

In addition to the solutions in place in regular classrooms designed to help all children succeed, these are some topics that address the needs of exceptional children.

- Differentiated Instruction - Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The aim is to help each student succeed by meeting that student where he or she is in the learning process and modifying curriculum and instruction accordingly. More information on Differentiated Instruction is available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/whatworks.pdf>.
- Universal Design for Learning – Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for designing instructional materials and lessons to be used by the widest range of students. Like constructing a building, using the right principles for instructional materials and lessons can allow access by students of all kinds of abilities and disabilities. More information on UDL is available at <http://www.cast.org/index.html>.
- Assistive Technology – Many students with disabilities require and benefit from assistive technology (AT). This is any piece of equipment or system that is used to maintain, increase or improve functioning of an individual with a disability. AT can be an item as simple as a pencil grip to very complex technological devices like text-to-speech software for computers. The AT required by a student with a disability will be listed in that student's IEP. Schools are encouraged to explore the full range of AT items that may be helpful for students to successfully complete Future-Ready Core course requirements. More assistive technology information can be found at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/instructional/technology/>.
- Special Education – Students with an IEP receive special education, that is, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. This instruction is beyond what the regular education teacher can provide and means adapting the content, methodology or delivery of instruction. It can include explicit instruction in core academic skills, such as reading and mathematics. A significant resource for this is the North Carolina State Improvement Project II (NCSIP II). NCSIP II aims to improve instruction for students with disabilities in core content areas by using research-based instructional and learning techniques. More information is available at <http://www.ncsip.org>.

Special education also includes instruction in other areas unique to the needs that result from the disability (e.g., communication skills for students who are deaf or hard of hearing; behavioral skills for students with serious emotional disabilities; independent living skills for students with intellectual disabilities, etc.). This instruction often is helpful for success in Future-Ready Core courses, but also helps prepare students to fulfill the intent of the Future-Ready Core, that is, to become globally-competitive, responsible and productive citizens.

- Alternative Instructional Delivery Systems – As programs for students are developed, it may be helpful to consider alternate means of delivering instruction in addition to the typical classroom. For some students, there may be other methods that better match a student’s learning styles and needs. One example is the North Carolina Virtual Public School, a resource that offers online courses and services for students throughout the state. More information can be found at <http://www.ncvps.org>.

What can schools do to prepare Exceptional Children for the Future-Ready Core Course of Study?

In addition to the resources listed above, there are some overarching strategies middle and high schools can use to prepare exceptional children for the Future-Ready Core Course of Study.

- Middle School

- Plan with the future in mind – The primary purpose of middle school is to prepare students for high school. Examine the Future-Ready Core Course of Study requirements and determine the middle school instruction necessary to prepare the student with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful.

- Address core academic skills – The increased rigor posed by the Future-Ready Core places a premium on core academic content, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics. Directly address specific areas of need in these core areas, even if it involves explicit instruction on particular skills.

- High School

- Work closely with the IEP Team – The student’s IEP Team is the group of people who know the student and represent the programs and services the student receives. It is important that the IEP Team know the Future-Ready Core requirements and consider them in the development of the IEP. Refer to this team for specific guidance in how a student with a disability can be best instructed in a Future-Ready Core course.

- Develop a comprehensive high school plan – It is imperative that an overarching plan be developed for the student’s entire high school career. This would include the Future-Ready Core requirements and a sequence for fulfilling them; it could also include other factors that consider the unique needs of the exceptional child.

- Consider all options of support – Students with disabilities often have many resources affiliated with their IEPs. Some of these are more obvious, such as academic supports through special education. Other services are less readily recognized but can be helpful for Future-Ready Core requirements. For example, many high school students with disabilities establish a relationship with adult agencies (e.g., NC Division of Vocational Rehabilitation) that may serve them after they exit high school. These agencies can be helpful with transition services, including assistance with post-secondary education, employment and independent living. These services can be directly relevant to appropriate course selection, especially in mathematics, science and elective areas.

- Use flexibility designed in law and policy for students with disabilities – While all schools will strive to graduate students through the Future-Ready Core Course of Study within four high school years, students with disabilities are allowed, by federal and state law, to attend public school through age 21. Often additional time is necessary to address the Future-Ready Core requirements, any additional local requirements, and the needs brought on by the student’s disability. Little is gained by a student graduating with basic course requirements met but with inadequate preparation for life after high school. Schools and students are encouraged to take the time required to prepare each student to successfully graduate.

Whom should I contact if I have additional questions?

For more information, contact your local Exceptional Children Director or the Exceptional Children Division at the NC Department of Public Instruction, (919) 807-3969.