



## Chapter 1 Introduction

# What Does Alignment to Academic Standards Mean?

Angela has a standards-based IEP that is based on the Common Core State Standards which her state adopted to define the knowledge and skills all students should have within their K-12 education careers in mathematics and language arts. Her IEP also aligns 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 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, therapy, and social goals which 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 in the general curriculum is through alignment with state standards. Since 2010, many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards define the knowledge and skills that students are to learn in their K-12 education ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)). 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, language arts, science, and social studies. States have standards for what students will learn in these core content areas. The general curriculum **context** is the general education classroom and other school environments where students receive instruction.

## What are Standards?

Standards provide statements of outcomes all learners should achieve. Through the use of general assessments (e.g., a 4th grade reading test), schools determine if students are meeting the expected targets for their grade level. Schools are accountable for students meeting these achievement targets, that is, for making adequate yearly progress. Standards are usually arranged by grade level and content area. For example, if you look at the Common Core State Standards ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)), you can look up a content area (e.g., mathematics) and then the expectations for a grade level (e.g., 7th grade). At the time this book was written, there were standards developed in Mathematics and English Language Arts. Most states

have adopted these common core standards, but also have additional standards in other content areas like science and social studies.

Students with disabilities learn these same standards for their grade level placement. A student with a disability in the 8th grade will focus on the 8th grade standards. For the student to be successful, educators need to plan for the use of instructional supports, accommodations, and assistive technology. Students who cannot participate in the general assessment and take an alternate assessment may focus on some priorities within these core standards. These may be provided by the state in a special curricular planning resource for students who take alternate assessment. These prioritizations are sometimes called curricular frameworks or extended standards, or simply “extensions.”

Here is an example of a Common Core State Standard in Writing for 4th Grade:<sup>1</sup>

*Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.*

- a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.*
- b. Use dialogue and description to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.*
- c. Use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events.*
- d. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.*
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/writing/grade-4/>

Students with disabilities can be taught to write a narrative with all five characteristics using assistive technology, instructional supports, and accommodations (e.g., dictate to scribe). For example, as an accommodation, some students with severe disabilities

Take a few minutes to look up both the Common Core State Standards and what your state's education website contains on standards. Can you find any information on extended standards? (You may find it under Alternate Assessment.)

may need to dictate the passage to a scribe. That is, they may be able to compose it, but not have the mechanics of writing. Some students may also need the support of sentence strips, pictures with captions, or objects to help create this dictation. Some may be able to use software that creates the word

when a picture is selected. An extended standard for 5th graders taking alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards might focus on some components of the narrative and alternatives like using dictation to scribe.

For example, an extended standard might be:

*Write narratives that summarize familiar experiences (e.g., coming to school, going to grocery store) that include the situation, characters, a sequence of three events, and a conclusion. Writing may be completed using assistive technology and supports such as sentence strips, pictures, and objects with captions.*

### **What is a Standards-Based IEP?**

An IEP, or individualized education plan, is a requirement of IDEA (2004)<sup>2</sup> and specifies the special education services a student with disabilities will receive. The IEP for students who participate in alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards includes: (a) a statement of the present level of performance in both academic achievement and functional performance, (b) a statement of measurable annual goals (both academic and functional), (c) a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives, (d) a description of how student progress towards the goals will be measured, (e) a statement regarding related services and supplementary aids and services (based on peer-reviewed research) to be provided, (f) an explanation of the extent to which the student will not participate in the general education classroom, (g) a statement of any accommodations needed to measure academic and functional achievement of the student, (h) frequency, location, and duration of services, and (i) postsecondary goals beginning when the student is 16 years old. The main difference

<sup>2</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U. S. C. §1400, H. R. 1350.

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 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.

### **What is Alternate Assessment?**

Students who are not able to take the general state assessments with or without accommodations are provided an alternate assessment. This alternate assessment is developed by the state and administered with students who are identified by their IEP teams as needing this option. In some states, educators collect a portfolio of products to document student progress. In other states, educators administer an assessment with performance tasks students complete, or use a checklist summary of achievement. Some states use a hybrid of these methods. Whatever method the state selects, educators follow state guidelines for the administration of the assessment. This book focuses on students who will take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, an option abbreviated as AA-AAS.

### **Who are Students with Severe Disabilities?**

As described under “What are Standards?” students in AA-AAS may be working on extensions of the state standards. When No Child Left Behind (2002)<sup>3</sup> 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 AA-AAS are sometimes referred to as “the 1%.” Federal policy refers to students who take AA-AAS 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 AA-AAS). Although students who take AA-

<sup>3</sup> No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat.1425 (2002).

AAS may include students from any disability category who have more severe levels of the disability, this book focuses especially on students who have a moderate or severe intellectual disability. This intellectual disability may accompany other disabilities such as autism, sensory, or physical impairments. We chose to use the term “intellectual disability” rather “cognitive disability” because the term is recognized broadly by professional organizations and under Rosa’s Law,<sup>4</sup> a federal law signed in 2010 that will change 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. For example, 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 should specify skills for the student to acquire that will promote access to this curriculum and 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 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

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-2781>

past students with moderate and 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.

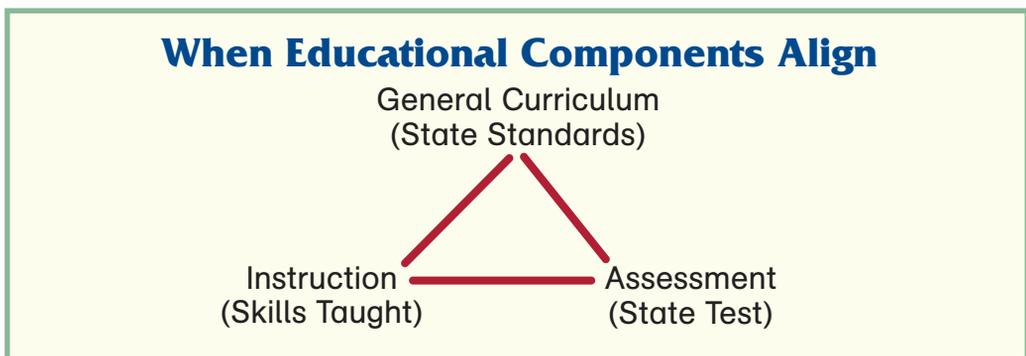
The IEP is not intended to define all of this instruction, nor does it function as the student's curriculum. Instead, it points the way for you to set priorities for what the student will master and how s/he will access the broader content.

### 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 be “really reading” or “really 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 state standards can help planning teams select academic goals that are meaningful for the student and promote access to the general curriculum.

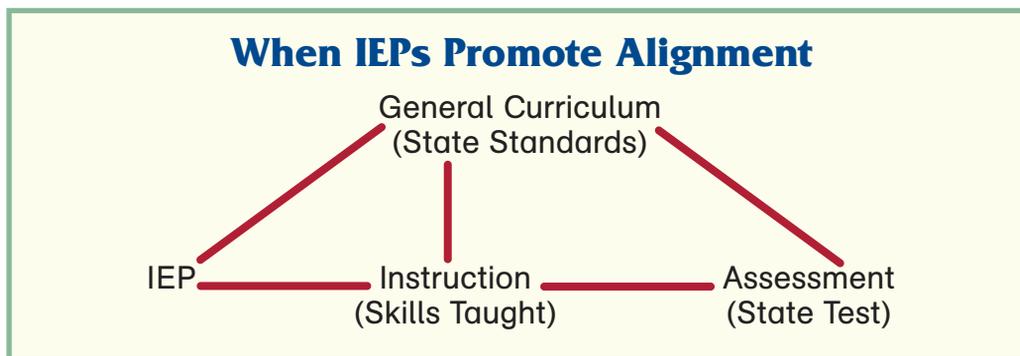
## Further Understanding Alignment

Alignment occurs when there is a match between the written, taught, and tested curriculum. The alignment of these educational components can be illustrated as follows:



Notice that the instruction addresses content to be covered by the state test and links to the state standards.

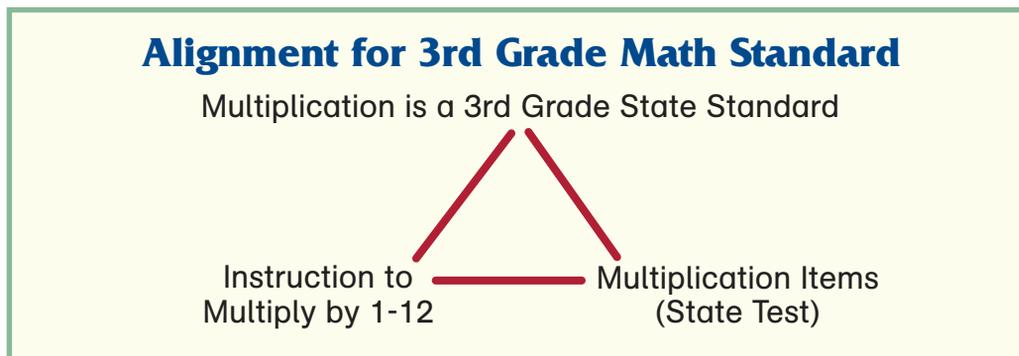
The IEP can help define priorities for student mastery within this curriculum as well as skills students can use to access grade-level content. When a student has an IEP, well-aligned educational components can be illustrated in this way:



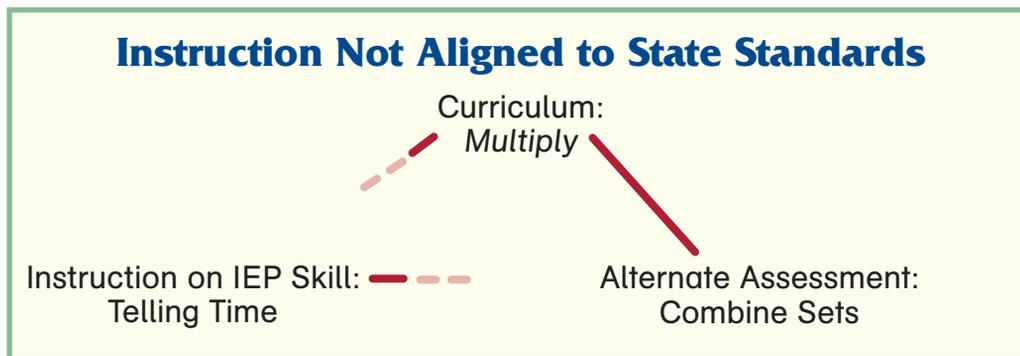
Note that the IEP helps focus the instruction.

To see what the pattern looks like when IEPs don't align, consider a hypothetical general education context in which educational components are aligned. For example, Ms. Jones is teaching her third grade class to multiply using numbers 1-12.

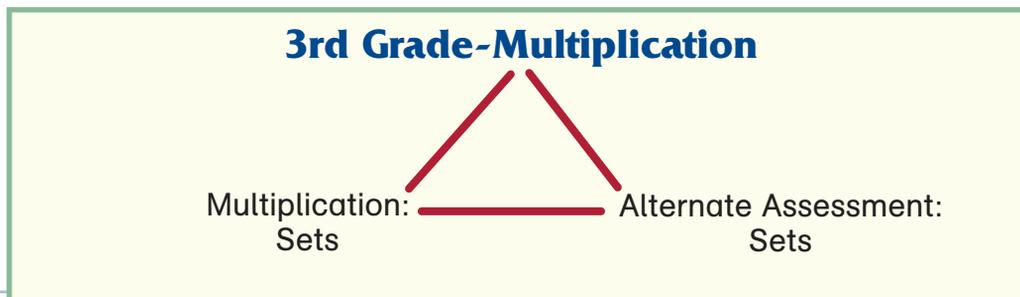
Her state's 3rd grade mathematics standards include beginning multiplication. The state's 3rd grade math assessment will measure how well her students multiply. In this example, the taught curriculum aligns well with both the written curriculum (state standards) and tested curriculum (state test). The alignment can be diagrammed like this:



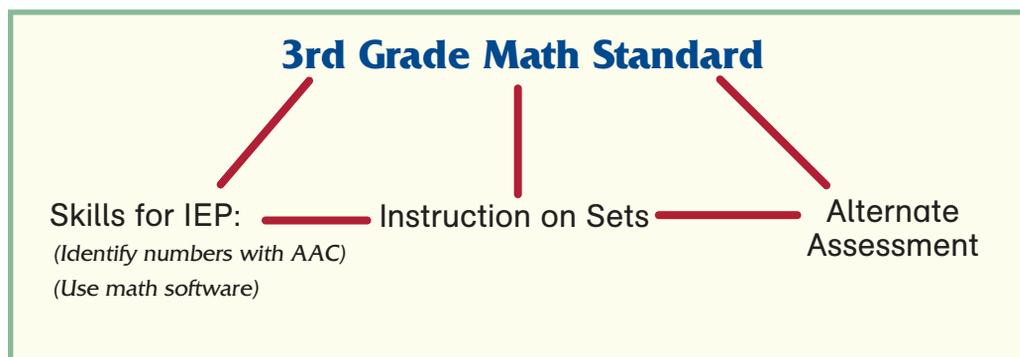
Ms. Smith is the special educator for 3rd grade students with moderate and severe disabilities. Her students participate in the state's alternate assessment. One portion of the assessment determines if students can group items and count the sets (concrete form of multiplication). The only math skill Ms. Smith has targeted for student IEPs is telling time. In the following example, students do not have instruction aligned to state 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 3rd grade class. Ms. Smith presents this as an early vocational task in creating supplies packets at a job site. For example, the teacher has them make three sets of art supplies with two pens in each set. Or, they create bags for the homeless shelter with three items in eight bags. They then find out how many items they have used in all. To help her students understand, Ms. Smith uses pictures of the task with numbers and the mathematical signs "x" and "=". She works with Ms. Jones, the general education teacher, so all students can have the option of using a wider range of manipulatives for the multiplication 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 as follows:

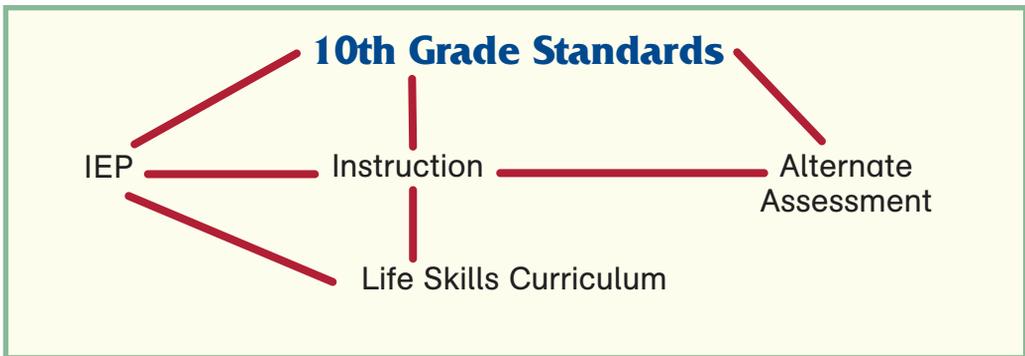


When planning for John's 3rd grade year, Ms. Smith is aware that he's challenged in learning to combine sets because he has only limited use of one hand. He makes most of his responses through the use of his voice output picture communication AAC device, or through using a switch that functions as a mouse for the computer. Currently, he only uses the switch to activate cause-and-effect software games. 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 will be for John 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 can locate "9" on his device. This goal will provide broader access to numerous math activities in 3rd grade. Here is how his IEP promotes alignment of his instruction to the 3rd grade math standards:



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, state standards for 10th grade English target understanding symbolism in poetry and other literature. Here the IEP team is planning for Ramona, a student with severe disabilities who currently has no reading skills but 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 the state 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. The following diagram shows how the team uses the IEP to focus on both life skills and general curriculum. While this state’s alternate assessment only targets academic skills, Ramona’s progress in learning life skills is also important for her transition planning.



## Selecting IEP Goals to Promote Alignment

Once the concept of alignment is clear, it’s helpful to consider 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. These guidelines require learning more about the general curriculum as outlined in the state standards and determining how to create access to it for your students with moderate and severe disabilities.

### Guideline One: Become Familiar with State Standards

The IEP team first needs to become familiar with state standards for the student’s assigned grade level. For most states, these will incorporate the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English Language Arts. 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

The “assigned” grade level is usually based on chronological age, which for students with moderate and severe disabilities typically differs from the instructional grade level.

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. The following figure illustrates this concept.

### **Develop Alignment Based on Assigned Grade Level for General Curriculum Access**



Information on state standards is typically available on each state's education agency website. This information may provide a deeper understanding of the standard and how to address this concept instructionally. Table 1.1 provides an example adapted from the Massachusetts Department of Education that includes the state standard, the essence of the standard, and instructional ideas.

Since 2010, most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics.

Table 1.1

**Strand: Earth and Space Science**  
**Topic: Earth in the Solar System<sup>5</sup>**  
**Grade Level 6-8**

<b>Learning Standard as Written</b>	Recognize that gravity is a force that pulls all things on and near the earth toward the center of the earth. Gravity plays a major role in the formation of the planets, stars, and solar system, and in determining their motions. (Standard 8)
<b>Essence of the Standard</b>	Gravity is a force. The effects of the earth's gravitational pull and the motion of objects in the solar system.
<b>Instructional Idea</b>	At grades 6-8 (or an equivalent age), 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."

<sup>5</sup> Examples abstracted from the Resource Guide to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Students with Disabilities: Science and Technology/Engineering published by the Massachusetts Department of Education <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt/rg/sci.pdf> pp. 260-261.

Table 1.1  
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## Strand: Earth and Space Science

### Topic: Earth in the Solar System

#### Grade Level 6-8

How All Students Can Participate in this Activity Addressing Learning Standard(s):	Possible Assessment Strategies and Portfolio Products
<p><b>As Written for This Grade Level</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data chart showing Sonia's ability to determine force of gravity on objects</li> <li>• Videotape of Sonia's participation in this experiment with her lab partners</li> <li>• Hypothesis formulated by Sonia and her group</li> <li>• Lab report written by Sonia using scientific procedure</li> <li>• Graph of mass vs. time for the objects used in Sonia's lab group's experiment</li> </ul>
<p><b>At Lower Levels of Complexity (Entry Points)</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data chart showing Milos's ability to weigh objects</li> <li>• Milos's chart recording the actual weight of each object</li> <li>• Videotape of Milos using the spring balance to weigh selected objects</li> <li>• Milos's self-generated graph of the weight of each object</li> </ul>
<p><b>Addressing Access Skills embedded in academic Instruction</b></p> <p>Lester helps select the objects for experimentation. He follows directions to drop and test each object with his lab group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field data chart showing Lester's ability to drop/test each object within 5 seconds of a request</li> <li>• Line or bar graph summarizing the field data chart</li> </ul>

Sometimes states create extensions for each of the Common Core State Standards. Here are some examples from the Colorado Department of Education. Used with permission.<sup>6</sup>

*Table 1.2*

## Reading Standards: Literature

### Eighth Grade

Key Ideas and Details	Extension
Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	Answer simple literary questions based on a completed graphic organizer comparing characters or other story elements in a picture-based, 5-10 sentence passage.
Craft and Structure	Extension
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.	Identify the meaning of simple idiomatic phrases used in a story by matching with their concrete meanings.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	Extension
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.	Compare characters in written text read aloud with those in film version.
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	Extension
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.	Participate in reading activities in adapted 8th grade literature.

<sup>6</sup> Used with permission from The Colorado Department of Education <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/UAS/CoAcademicStandards>.