

University of Northern Iowa

College of Education White Paper:

Literacy Development & Students with Developmental Disabilities

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Recent Federal policy including the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act* require that all school aged students, including those with the most complex developmental disabilities, have access to evidence-based literacy programs. This means sound instruction in reading and writing. These mandates directly reflect a growing body of educational and communication science research demonstrating that all students can develop as readers and writers. Despite laws and research-based evidence, data gathered and reported on by the U.S. Department of Education show that the majority of students with significant developmental and sensory disabilities continue to face unnecessary educational segregation and nonsensical exclusion from critical early written language opportunities. The consequences are devastating and have lifelong implications.

The Iowa Department of Education (DE) has made Iowa a leader among the states through recent initiatives to prioritize and improve literacy instruction for all its young citizens including those with significant developmental and sensory disabilities. In its collaborative development of rigorous statewide academic standards and benchmarks described as the Iowa Core Curriculum, the DE has initiated a historic multiyear plan to support the full participation of those students who traditionally have been excluded from meaningful reading and language arts curricula. The DE has established a clear expectation that students with developmental and sensory disabilities will no longer be tracked into educational environments fraught with low expectations and disjointed or even nonexistent academic opportunities. Rather, all students' educational objectives will be guided by the common Core curricula based on growing research evidence that no student is too physically, too communicatively, or too intellectually disabled to develop as literate citizens. In addition, Federal policy allows for the exemption of a certain percentage of students with disabilities from taking mandated state-wide assessments. For these students, the DE has and continues to improve upon a rigorous, on-going alternate assessment aligned with the Core Curriculum benchmarks. The belief that literacy is a right for every student and one of the most important areas of instruction to enhance the quality of life and promote life long learning provides the foundation for change in the State of Iowa.

Through the development of the multidisciplinary *Collaborative for Disability Studies in Literacy, Language, & Learning*, and in close collaboration with the DE, The University of Northern Iowa is directly addressing and expanding state and national efforts to respond to the instructional needs of students with disabilities. The Center has four areas of focus related to the literacy development of students with disabilities: (a) Professional development (at the preservice and postgraduate level), (b) Family support, (c) Policy, and (d) Scholarship-Research.

- The Center develops model demonstration learning sites, curricular materials, courses, and resources promoting highly qualified teachers and therapists.
- The Center creates resources to support families' promotion of literacy and language development in their children with significant developmental and sensory disabilities.
- The Center develops material (e.g., white papers, multimedia, research reports, etc.) to inform policy makers who can direct resources to promote all children's full citizenship.
- The Center engages in cutting edge research in the areas of literacy development, language therapies, and effective methods of instruction encompassing technologies that bring together children with and without disabilities under the thoughtful guidance of highly qualified educators and therapists. Additionally, the Center acts as a focal point in disseminating national efforts that explore and document effective education-based methods and therapies.