RESEARCH

A Framework for Integrating the Common Core Standards to a Functional Skills Curriculum in High School

Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals
2026, Vol. 21(1) 49 - 58

DOI: 10.64546/jaasep.598

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Abstract

A holistic framework that integrates Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with functional skills instruction for high school students with extensive support needs (ESN) is urgently needed for high schools to comply with recent legislation like the California Assembly Bill 181 (2022), that established an alternate diploma pathway that is aligned with alternate academic standards. This paper argues against the false dichotomy between academic and functional curricula and, instead proposes a framework that integrates CCSS into functional activities by isolating specific skills (e.g., literacy, mathematics, collaboration, or technology use) and aligns them with evidence-based practices such as task analysis, video modeling, systematic instruction, prompting, and peer-mediated interventions. Instructional transparency is encouraged through visible classroom standards and academic subject labeling, supporting shared understanding among educators, families, and administrators. Further, the paper posits that functional skills are naturally an authentic context for standards-based instruction, allowing educators to maintain academic rigor while promoting skills needed for post-school readiness. This integrated framework offers a practical approach to curriculum design and instructional planning for students with extensive support needs to prepare students for meaningful postsecondary education, employment, and community life.

Keywords: extensive support needs, functional skills curriculum, Common Core State Standards, alternate diploma pathway, secondary special education.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2006), the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA, 2015), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act reauthorization of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004), have highlighted teaching grade-aligned academic standards using evidence-based practices (EBPs) for all students, including those with extensive support needs. On June 30, 2022, Assembly Bill (AB) 181 marked a significant milestone in California's educational

landscape by introducing an alternate pathway to a high school diploma for students with extensive support needs (ESN) (California Education Code (EC) Section 51225.31). This legislation created a recognized diploma track for students who follow an alternate academic route through the California alternate assessment. This paper argues that the establishment of this alternate diploma pathway for students with significant cognitive disabilities provides a well-defined and equitable route for these students to earn a high school diploma opening new opportunities for post-secondary education and employment. The alternate diploma pathway is specifically designed for students who participate in the alternate assessment, which aligns with California's alternate achievement standards. These standards adapt the state's educational benchmarks into a more accessible format using Core Content Connectors (CCCs). The CCCs link alternate standards to the CCS, with individualized supports outlined in each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This diploma is equivalent to a traditional high school diploma and contributes to the adjusted cohort graduation rate under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), unlike other credentials such as certificates of completion or general equivalency diplomas.

However, as part of the process of working toward this diploma, students with extensive support needs are expected to achieve high standards like their peers in general education, with instruction aligned to the general education content standards (California Education Code (EC) Section 51225.31). This requirement leads special educators to a falsely perceived choice between providing an academic curriculum or teaching functional skills. This perceived dichotomy results from a disconnect between general education standards and functional outcomes.

Proposed Practice: Embedding Standards in Functional Skills

Ideally, educational programs should link general education standards to functional life skills that can be generalized to daily settings (LaRue et al., 2016). Ultimately, a meaningful, individualized curriculum including both functional and academic components can provide a meaningful education individualized to each student's needs and future goals regardless of whether the individual is being educated in segregated or inclusive settings.

However, general and special educators continue to have difficulty integrating general education standards and functional learning opportunities for students with significant disabilities (Spooner et al., 2019). Consequently, students with extensive support needs do not achieve transition outcomes at the same level as their peers without disabilities, continue to live with their parents after high school with limited social networks and employment opportunities and experience limited social networks and employment opportunities (Luftig & Muthert, 2005; Wehman et al., 2014). Researchers are now advocating for integrating functional skills curriculum, which support improved post-school outcomes, with academic content standards that align with the national legislation and reinforce higher learning standards for students with disabilities (Ruppar et al., 2018). While there are several studies linking the common core standards to a modified academic curriculum for students with extensive support needs, there are fewer studies or guidance on linking common core standards to functional skills. This paper seeks to provide an integrated framework for linking common core standards to functional skills with steps for high school educators pursuing this

effort.

Research Support for Embedding Standards in Functional Skills

Functional living skills, or daily living skills, have been defined in the literature as being those skills that may include personal care such as eating, dressing, and hygiene practices; domestic skills such as housework, food prep, and cleaning skills; community skills that may include time and money management, transportation use, community safety skills, and vocational skills; and recreational or leisure skills as well as social and behavior management skills (LaRue et al., 2016). Research indicates that these functional living skills are the key predictors of post-school success in employment, education, and independent living (Haber et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021). Despite the importance of these skills in the students' success, Taconet et al. (2024) concluded that most high schools and post-secondary programs do not offer the full range of these functional skills training to their students (LaRue et al., 2016).

Advocates for functional skills focus argue that schools should prioritize life skills so that students can live independently, participate in the community, and make life-style choices (Mazzotti et al., 2021). Functional skills support self-reliance, community integration, and prepare students for adult life. Ayres et al. (2011) suggest that functional skills training best delivers the goals most valued by students with extensive support needs. Advocates for a standards-based curriculum (SBC) believe that academic subjects such as language, science, and social studies, provide students with ESN the opportunity to reach their intellectual potential and prepare for future careers. For example, Courtade et al. (2012) argue that academic skills are a right for all students. They contend that functional skills are not prerequisites for academic learning and that limiting students with ESN to functional skills alone could restrict their academic and professional growth.

Implementation Steps

Embedding standards into a functional curriculum requires a systematic and realistic approach. The approach involves the following steps: a) prioritizing the standards; b) selecting the focus of the functional skill to be taught; c) using an evidence-based practice to instruct; and d) displaying standards in the classroom.

Prioritizing the Standards

First, recognizing that students with ESN learn best through repetition and practice (Westling et al., 2020), educators should list a few prioritized standards that they wish to address in a year. This author recommends that the list could be based on identifying which educational standards are most relevant to their students by understanding student needs and functioning levels; analyzing student abilities and skills; considering resource availability, staff availability and expertise; and finally considering the tasks typically done in the classroom. For example, if the student is identifying key vocabulary from job-related signs and instructions (e.g., 'Caution,' 'Exit'), then the teacher can prioritize the common core standard, ELA - CCS: RI.9-10.4, which is to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. Similarly, if the students are working on measuring ingredients during cooking, linking quantities to real-world tasks like making a recipe then a standard like Math - CCS: HSN-Q.A.2, which is to define appropriate quantities for the purpose of descriptive modeling may be useful.

Then, the teacher needs to consider the student ability. For example, if the teacher would like to include the standard ELA: CCS: SL.9-10.1, which is to initiate and participate effectively in a range of

collaborative discussions, then it is important to think about if it is possible to group students together for a discussion; enable participation in various modalities; and create opportunities for frequent discussions in classroom activities.

Similarly, as an example for considering resource availability, if the teacher would like to prioritize the standard ELA: CCS: RI.9-10.2, which is to determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development, then it is necessary to see whether the classroom has the necessary software or resources to provide the student with access to technology for text reading to be able to implement it successfully in the classroom. An example related to Math would be if the teacher wanted to implement the Math standard Math: CCS: HSA-REI.A.1, which is to explain each step in solving a simple equation, they could think of what manipulatives may be necessary to solve these equations when using practical tasks like budgeting or purchasing.

The next step is to create a detailed instructional matrix that details how standards can be embedded into each functional activity. Linking Common Core standards to functional skills can be done strategically by focusing on specific aspects of functional skills. The goal is to align teaching methods with the desired functional outcomes and the standards that are to be addressed.

Focusing on Specific Aspects of a Functional Skills

By shifting the focus on an aspect of a functional skills, different standards can be embedded for the same functional skills. The following example shows how meal preparation can be linked to various common core standards in several lessons by changing the focus of the skill being taught.

Focus on Measurement. The teacher may select CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.HSN.Q.A.1, which is to use units as a way to understand problems and to guide the solution of multi-step problems; choose and interpret units consistently in formulas; choose and interpret the scale and the origin in graphs and data displays. When teaching, students could be asked to measure ingredients using cups, teaspoons, and tablespoons. During this activity, the emphasis is on understanding quantities, units, and proportions. Students learn to estimate, measure, and add fractions (e.g., half a cup, two teaspoons). They practice reading measurements and quantities while solving word problems like, if we need to double this recipe, how many cups of flour do we need?

Focus on Reading the Recipe. The teacher may use ELA Standard: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7, which is to analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account. In a cooking lesson, this standard can be applied by having students analyze recipe information presented in different formats, such as visual recipe cards, digital slides, video, and written instructions. Students compare and interpret the details provided in each format, focusing on how each medium emphasizes different aspects of the recipe, like ingredient lists, visual images of steps, or cooking techniques.

Focus on Group Cooking Activity. The teacher may use ELA Standard: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, which is to initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. In a cooking lesson, students apply this standard by engaging in group discussions to plan the recipe execution, share ideas, and build on each other's input. They discuss

roles, clarify steps, and exchange suggestions to ensure the recipe is completed accurately and efficiently.

Focus on Digital Literacy/Technology Integration. The teacher may use the ELA Standard: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.6, which is to use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically. In a cooking lesson, this standard can be applied by having students use technology to document and share their recipe work. They might use a shared digital platform to write up their recipes, add photos of each step, or share tips and reflections on the cooking process.

Thus, the same functional skill of meal preparation can be taught in various ways to achieve different standards and learning goals. The key is to be clear about the focus of the skill (e.g., math, literacy, social interactions, or digital literacy) and then align the chosen instructional mode to achieve that focus while maintaining a connection to functional outcomes. This ensures that both academic and practical life skills are developed simultaneously.

The Big Bridge of Evidence-based Practices (EBPs)

The bridge that special educators have at their disposal to firmly link functional skills to common core standards is the use of EBPs (Table 1). Using EBPs in instruction makes instruction rigorous and relevant to the individual needs of students. EBPs provide a structured approach that supports skill acquisition, independence, and standards alignment, allowing educators to tailor their strategies to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Here are some examples of using EBPs that serve as a bridge to teaching to CCS.

Task Analysis. In this example, The teacher aligns a functional skill of wiping down counters with the Math Standard: CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.HSG-MG.A.3, which is to apply geometric methods to solve design problems (e.g., design an object or structure to satisfy physical constraints or minimize cost; work with typographic grid systems based on ratios, by using the evidence based practice of task analysis. This activity can be connected to understanding geometric shapes and spatial awareness. Here, students will practice methodically covering areas of the counter, paying attention to space, proportions, and shapes (e.g., wiping in a grid or circular motion). The task analysis would look as described below, with items 3 and 4 being the focus area of the lesson.

1. Preparation
    - Gather cleaning supplies (cleaning spray and paper towels or cloth).
    - Check that the counter is clear of objects before starting scanning the counter from right to left.
2. Identify Counter Area
    - Observe and mark the area that needs to be cleaned. Look for any visible spills, stains, or crumbs that require special attention.
3. Apply Cleaning Solution
    - Apply the cleaning spray across the counter in a grid pattern or from one side to the other, depending on the size and shape of the counter.
4. Wipe in Sections (Spatial Awareness)
    - Start wiping from one end of the counter to the other. Use geometric movements, like overlapping circles or a consistent back-and-forth pattern, to ensure even coverage.
    - Practice spatial awareness by visualizing the counter in sections, making sure each section

is cleaned thoroughly before moving to the next.

5. Check for Missed Areas
    - Visually inspect the counter and feel for any sticky spots or areas that may need another wipe.
6. Final Inspection and Clean-Up
    - Rinse or dispose of the cleaning cloth/paper towel.
    - Return cleaning supplies to their storage area.

Systematic Instruction with Explicit Modeling. The teacher may use the ELA standard ELA SL.9-10.1, which is to initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively to align with a holiday card making business in their class. The following activities of student collaboration would then be added to the sequence of systematic instruction of explicit modeling during the process to meet the selected standard of collaboration. Tables 1 and 2 further show examples of how time management and community navigation can be linked to high school CCS using EBPs for instruction.

Table 1

Aligning Functional Skills to Common Core Standards

Functional Skill	Instruction - Evidence-Based Strategy	Functional Activity	Common Core Standard
Scheduling and Time Management	Task Analysis with Visual Supports: Break down scheduling steps using visual aids like planners, clocks, and charts.	Identify days, times, events. Students learn to organize tasks into categories, estimate time for each, and create a daily plan.	ELA: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7 - Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., charts, schedules) to determine key ideas and organization.
Scheduling and Time Management	Systematic Instruction with Prompting: Use verbal and visual prompts to guide students in creating a weekly study plan. Gradually reduce prompts to foster independence.	Students can graph their time allocation for various tasks and study sessions.	Math: CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.HSF.IF.C.7 - Graph functions expressed symbolically and show key features of the graph.
Scheduling and Time Management	Peer-Mediated Instruction:	Pair students to discuss and evaluate each other’s schedules, reflecting on priorities, conflicts, and time distribution	Social Studies: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 - Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, building on others' ideas.

Scheduling and Time Management	Video Modeling: Show video examples of effective time management and planning routines.	Students watch the model, then practice scheduling tasks in sequence.	Science: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.9-10.3 - Follow precisely a complex multistep procedure when carrying out experiments, taking measurements, or performing technical tasks.

Preparation and Gathering Materials. During this step, students engage in discussions with the teacher and peers about the materials needed, asking questions and sharing ideas, which works on effective communication and collaboration.

Designing the Layout. Students discuss design ideas with peers, building on each other's suggestions and expressing their own clearly.

Cutting and Arranging. Students conduct ongoing discussions about techniques and sharing of strategies.

Writing Messages Inside the Cards. Students compose their own messages, with the teacher providing individualized feedback.

Gluing and Assembling. Students finalize their designs, adjusting placements for optimal visual appeal by seeking feedback from the other peers and staff in class.

Publishing and Sharing the Cards Digitally. Students photograph and upload their cards, adding their own captions or messages, after discussing with their classmates. Students use technology to produce and publish their work, engaging with others through the online platform. ***Displaying Standards in Classroom***

An important final step after integrating standards into the functional curriculum is to make these standards visible to the students, staff, parents, and school administrators. Displaying standards prominently in the classroom serves as a visual reminder of the learning goals for both students and staff. Teachers can use visuals like charts, posters, or bulletin boards which are updated regularly to reflect current topics. Displaying standards in classrooms reinforces educational goals and provides accountability and transparency.

When developing daily schedules, listing subjects such as ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, rather than functional skills or activity descriptions, helps reinforce the alignment with content standards. For instance, instead of Morning Routine or Cooking Activity, labels like Math Skills - Measurements, or ELA - Sequencing Events help make the standards alignment clearer. Using subjects also provides a visual confirmation to other classroom visitors that students are working on the same standards as their peers, reframing the deficit and exceptional beliefs about disability in schools.

Final Tips for Teachers

Start with the IEP Goals

Start by identifying a manageable set of high-priority standards that are most relevant to students' current abilities and post-school goals. Review IEPs and if they are not aligned, then adjust standards to match students' learning objectives.

Assess Student Needs

Always start with student strengths, areas for growth, and individual preferences. Comprehensive assessments will provide insights into how to tailor instruction effectively.

Gather Resources

Before implementation, spend time gathering materials, tools, and resources needed for instruction. This includes visual supports, manipulatives, technology, and curriculum guides that align with chosen standards.

Make an Instructional Matrix

Develop an instructional plan that maps standards to specific functional activities (see tables 1 and 2). The matrix should include goals, instructional strategies, and methods for monitoring progress.

Use Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) Already Being Used in Classrooms

Use task analysis, video modeling, peer-mediated instruction, and other EBPs to teach

Table 2

Community Navigation

Functional Skill	Instruction - Evidence-Based Strategy	Functional Activity	Common Core Standard
Community Navigation	Task Analysis with Visual Cues: Break down steps for navigating public transportation using maps, schedules, and visual aids.	Students identify locations, directions, and timings to complete a route.	Math: CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.HSN-Q.A.1 - Use units to understand and solve problems.
Community Navigation	Systematic Instruction with Prompting: Use verbal and gestural prompts to guide students in locating and reading street signs and public transportation schedules. Reduce prompts gradually to foster independence.	This involves interpreting location-based vocabulary (e.g., "Stop," "Exit") in a real-world context	ELA: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text..
Community Navigation	Role-Playing and Social Stories	Students role-play navigating community locations (e.g., bank, store) using social stories. They practice asking for directions or help, supporting communication skills.	Social Studies: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 - Engage in collaborative discussions with diverse partners.
Community Navigation	Video Modeling and Simulations	Students watch video demonstrations of navigating public transit and practice with a community simulation app. They apply skills by identifying routes	Science: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.9-10.3 - Follow precisely a

and solving transit problems.	multistep procedure when carrying out tasks.

functional skills effectively while addressing academic standards.

Collaborate

Work closely with paraeducators, therapists, and families to ensure consistency and reinforcement of skills across environments. Collaboration is key to helping students generalize skills in different settings.

Monitor and Adjust

Regularly evaluate student progress and adjust instruction as needed. Use data collection tools to track mastery of both functional and academic skills. This ensures continuous improvement and responsiveness to students' needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating academic standards with functional skills in high school has the potential for an inclusive curriculum that meets the unique needs of students with extensive support needs (ESN). Integrating common core standards with functional skills curricula creates better post-school outcomes, increased inclusivity in general education classrooms, and skill generalization of functional tasks. Students gain practical life skills along with academic knowledge, preparing them for meaningful employment, independent living, and community engagement. For example, mastering budgeting skills through math standards can directly improve financial independence.

The steps for this process include systematically prioritizing standards, embedding them into functional activities, and leveraging evidence-based practices so that educators can offer their students access to both academic and real-world skills that prepare them for post-school success. Further, displaying standards visibly in the classroom provides transparency and accountability, while using core academic subject labels for classroom schedules signals to students, paraeducators, and visitors alike that all learners are pursuing meaningful, standards-aligned goals. Although this paper explicitly addresses activities and standards related to high school (and possibly post-secondary), ultimately, it shows how educators can bridge academic rigor with functional skill development to create an equitable educational experience for students with ESN, to transition successfully into adulthood with confidence and independence.

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