



National Center and State Collaborative

Communicative Competence for Students with the Most Significant Disabilities:

A Three-Tiered Model of Intervention

NCSC Practice Brief

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See also the *NCSC GSEG White Paper* on this same topic, which addresses communicative competence in greater detail, with specific strategies for application at the student, school, and state levels:

Kleinert, H., Kleinert, J., & Kearns, J. (2016). *NCSC GSEG Policy Paper: Communicative competence for students with the most significant disabilities: A three-tiered model of intervention*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center and State Collaborative.



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NCSC Practice Brief

This NCSC Practice Brief will address the challenge of insuring communicative competence for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, as an essential element in ensuring access to the general curriculum. We will 1) examine the literature on what we know about communicative competence for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, 2) propose a three-tier model of intervention that states, districts, and schools can use to improve communicative competence for students with the most significant disabilities, and 3) describe specific measures that states, districts and schools can use to measure the effectiveness of each of these tiered interventions.

What We Know About Communicative Competence for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities (SCD)

Large-scale multi-state studies (Towles-Reeves et al., 2009; Cameto et al., 2010; Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves et al., 2012) have consistently shown that approximately 30% of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (students taking their state alternate assessments on alternate achievement standards) do not yet have a reliable, consistent mode of symbolic communication. Rather, these 30% of students in the alternate assessment are either functioning at an *emerging symbolic* level (using pictures, objects, or regularized gestures to communicate) or at a *pre-symbolic* level (using facial expressions and/or body movements, but without a consistent mode of communication). It also appears that communicative competence does *not* appreciably improve across grades for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

- 1) In a 7 state involving over 12,000 students in the alternate assessment, Kearns et al. (2011) found that percentage of *pre-symbolic* communicators decreased from only 12.6% to 9.5% from the elementary to high school years.
- 2) In an 18 state study involving nearly 50,000 students, Towles-Reeves et al. (2012) found that a full 10% of *high school* students in these states' alternate assessments were identified as pre-symbolic, having no clearly understandable output.

Yet, many of these students without a reliable mode of communication do not have access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Towles-Reeves et al. (2012) found, that for the 10% of students identified as pre-symbolic, only 40% had access to AAC; and for the 18% of students identified as emerging symbolic, only 39% had access to AAC. Based on these large-scale studies, up to 10% of students with the most significant disabilities are exiting school without a reliable mode of communication, and without the opportunity to develop that system.

A Three-Tiered Model of Intervention

We propose a comprehensive approach to communicative intervention that itself based on a three-tiered set of strategies:

Tier I: Ensuring a Collaborative Framework for Intervention. Tier I interventions are designed to create a common framework for enhancing the communicative competence of all students with significant disabilities. *The NCSC Communication Tool Kit* (<https://wiki.ncscpartners.org>) is an excellent professional development tool focused on this first tier of intervention. The Communication Tool Kit is a set of online modules designed to provide educators, SLPs and others with a collaborative set of tools for understanding student communication in its most basic forms and for problem-solving next steps.

Tier Two: Targeted Interventions. Tier Two (targeted) interventions are focused on improving communicative competence for *groups* of students, often at the regional or district level. For example, *Communities of Practice*, often created for teachers and therapists who have completed Tier I activities (such as the NCSC Communication Tool Kit modules), provide members the opportunity to work through the communication challenges facing their students, to brainstorm strategies, and to meet regularly to discuss successful interventions.

Tier Three: Intensive, Individualized Interventions. For students with the most complex communication needs, intensive, *individualized* interventions may be necessary. Teaching Age Appropriate Academics via Communication (TAALC) is an evidence-based, cost and time efficient personnel preparation model developed by the Kentucky Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) to assist school-based teams in building effective communication for all students with significant disabilities.

Measuring the Impact of Communication Interventions

Potential measures of impact for each of the above tiers include:

Tier 1 (All Students with SCD): States may choose to collect and review annual *State-Wide LCI Data* (expressive and receptive communicative status, and presence of AAC), to create a *State-Level Communication Profile* for their students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Alternately, states can track the percentage of students who can be validly assessed on the state's alternate test (not *how well* students scored *per se*, but whether students were able to make clearly interpretable responses to the test items at all).

Tier 2 (Targeted Groups): Districts may choose to annually review District LCI data and the percentage of the students in the alternate assessment who are able to reliably take the assessment. Districts or schools may also want to determine (through staff interviews or surveys) the extent to which team members perceive 1) that their own skills and knowledge of communicative competence have been enhanced, as well as 2) the extent to which they can apply those skills to their students (*with specific examples of how they applied the skills*).

Tier 3 (Intensive Individualized): At this third tier, practitioners will want to measure the extent to which individual students are able to use their communication systems to access the general curriculum, participate in other in-school and school related activities, and establish relationships and friendships with peers. Schools can also survey/interview parents on the extent to which students are able to use their communication system at home and in other community activities, and in facilitating friendship opportunities with their peers.

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