



Assessment Fact Sheet



What Are State and Districtwide Assessments?

Most people involved in special education think of “assessment” as the tests and evaluations used by a school system to determine whether or not a child is eligible for special education and to pinpoint specific types of special learning needs. These assessments are the basis for making instructional decisions about an individual child.

In the context of general education reform, “assessment” has a different meaning. Assessment refers to tests given to large groups of students. Usually these assessments help school districts and states find out how well students have learned the content and skills set forth in state and

districtwide educational standards. Generally, these assessments are “paper and pencil” tests given under uniform conditions.

In 1997, 47 states had some form of state assessment system. State assessments frequently serve two purposes: (1) to provide information about individual student achievement, and (2) to measure the success of school systems in order to hold educators accountable for student achievement. Test scores may be used to make decisions about student proficiency (including minimum competence for promotion to the next grade or high school graduation), to compare schools and school districts, or to guide policy decisions.

Why is it important for students with disabilities to participate in testing?

Assessment is an important part of education reform. Testing provides schools with critical information that

can be used to improve student achievement. Students with disabilities benefit from state assessments in many ways.



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Benefits of testing include:***Schools Accountable for the Progress of All Students***

Test scores are used to measure a school's success in teaching students. To understand if schools are successfully teaching students with disabilities, participation in the assessments is critical. When all students take the test, superintendents, principals, and teachers realize that they are accountable for the achievement of all students. If students with disabilities do not take the test, the school may not think their achievement is important.

Raised Expectations for Children with Disabilities

A goal of school reform is to set high expectations and raise the level of learning for *all* students, including students with disabilities. In the past, schools often had very low expectations for students with disabilities and did not provide the supports and services they needed to make progress in the general curriculum. When schools simply "exempt" students from testing, educators do not have to question their assumption that children with disabilities are incapable of learning the general curriculum.

Requiring students with disabilities to participate in assessments raises the expectations for the students and for schools. It is clear to educators that students with disabilities are expected to learn the general curriculum. Schools will be held

accountable for the high academic achievement of students with disabilities and will have a strong incentive to make sure that students receive the supports and services they need to master, to the best of their ability, the state standards set forth for all students.

Policies and Programs Developed to Address the Needs of Students with Disabilities

To help students learn more and meet high standards, schools are developing new programs and services. Results from tests can be used to improve programs and to gather information about promising practices. If students with disabilities are included in assessments, their needs will be considered when making decisions about education policies, programs, and practices. Therefore, the resources and services students with disabilities receive in the future could be unfairly limited if students with disabilities are excluded from assessments.

High Stakes for Individual Students

For individual students, the importance of assessments may be even more immediate. Increasingly, test scores are used to decide who will receive a diploma or promotion, or who will go to college. Students with disabilities must take the tests in order to have an equal chance to participate in future life activities. If students do not participate in assessments, they may not receive a diploma or be promoted to the next grade.

**What does the law say about participation of students with disabilities in assessments?**

The 1997 amendments to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) recognize the

importance of assessment as a way to improve educational results for students with disabilities.

Therefore, IDEA requires the participation of students with disabilities in all state and districtwide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations and modifications. *Every child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) must now address participation in state or districtwide assessment of student achievement (or part of such assessment).* Participation in large-scale assessments is also required by the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*.

If needed, students with disabilities have the right to receive accommodations during testing. An accommodation generally does not change the test content or difficulty. Rather, an accommodation allows a student to demonstrate what he or she knows.

For a relatively small percentage of students with more complex disabilities, the IEP Team may decide an alternate assessment is necessary. Alternate assessments provide a different kind of

test to enable students to show what they know and are able to do. Students who take alternate assessments should receive the same benefit as students who take the regular assessments if they can demonstrate they have the knowledge required for that benefit. States are required to provide alternate assessments no later than July 1, 2000.

All test scores of students with disabilities must be used in the same manner and reported with the same detail and frequency as are test scores of other students. The state and districtwide scores of students with disabilities must be reported together with the scores of all other students, as well as separately, in order to track the progress of different groups of students.

Some examples of assessment accommodations that may be considered by IEP teams

Presentation

Use of Braille or large-print materials; a reader (person or computer); sign language; assistive technology

Response

Dictation to a scribe or tape recorder; pointing to response; assistive technology

Setting

Placement in quiet room such as a study hall, library, study carrel; at front of room; in small group; alone

Timing/Scheduling

More time; more breaks; time of day

How families participate

Most importantly, parents, as key members of IEP teams, can make sure that their child's IEP complies with the new requirements of IDEA.

All IEPs must state how the student will participate in the assessment program.

Make sure that the IEP team decides how your child will participate in the assessment, for example:

- ✓ Under usual conditions (without accommodations),
- ✓ With accommodations, or
- ✓ With an alternate assessment.

By following these steps, parents can help ensure that their child's IEP addresses full, fair, and meaningful participation in assessments:

1. Identify the goals of the student's instruction.

With the IDEA amendments of 1997, the IEP must now address the student's participation in the general curriculum. When thinking about the instructional goals, a good place to start is to find out what the other students in your child's age group are learning. Then incorporate these curriculum goals into your child's IEP.

2. Identify and list in the IEP the supports, services, and accommodations that are needed for your child to meet the instructional goals, and to participate and make progress in the general curriculum. The supports, services, and accommodations should be based on your child’s strengths, weaknesses, and educational goals.

3. Identify and list in the IEP any accommodations that are needed for your child to participate in state or districtwide assessment programs.

Generally, the accommodations used during classroom instruction should also be provided during testing. Accommodations usually should not be introduced for the first time during an assessment. They should be part of the student’s ongoing instruction. However, testing conditions

may require some accommodations not typically used in the classroom. Steps should be taken to introduce the student to new accommodations before the test is taken.

4. Consider the pros and cons of having your child take an alternate assessment.

The deciding question should be: Does my child need a totally different test in order to demonstrate what he or she knows and is able to do? Also consider whether further accommodations or adaptations would increase the likelihood of participation in the regular assessment. If an alternate assessment is being considered, make sure that your child will have equal opportunities to receive any benefits or services related to the testing, (e.g., promotion, graduation, provision of services or programs).



Policy questions/considerations

Ask for copies of papers and memos that discuss issues about how children with disabilities will participate in the assessment. In addition, the following questions may help parents gather information they should consider when making decisions about their own child’s IEP. They also identify issues that will have an impact on how well the state assessment system is being designed to serve the needs of students with disabilities as well as other diverse learners.

✓ Does your state have state or districtwide assessments?

✓ Do all students with disabilities participate in the assessments?

✓ Do the people making the tests have experience testing children with disabilities?

✓ Were students with disabilities included in making and field testing the assessments?

✓ How will the assessment scores of students with disabilities be used and reported?

Information in this **Fact Sheet** is based on the *PEER Information Brief, “Assessment: A Key Component of Education Reform,”* by Martha L. Thurlow, Ph.D.

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