

# Assessment

## A Key Component of Education Reform

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### Introduction

Assessment is a key component of special education and education reform. Children are assessed individually to determine their eligibility for special education services and to ascertain learning needs. Education reform initiatives usually rely on large-scale standards-based assessments – student progress is measured relative to a set of state, district, or national standards. Thus, what students know and are able to do is compared to standards of knowledge and skills, rather than to the performance of other students.

Assessments used for education reform often are referred to as state or districtwide assessments because they are designed to measure the status of the education system for all students. They may also be called large-scale assessments because large groups of

students are tested in a relatively short period of time and under uniform conditions so that results can be compared across groups of students. You may recall taking these kinds of tests when you were in school.

In the past, large-scale assessments were not always considered important for students with disabilities – it was assumed that special education assessments provided sufficient data on how well students were doing in school. Typically, however, special education assessments have not provided information on what students know and can do relative to local and state standards.

Tests used in assessments probably are different from the ones that you took. In addition to typical multiple-choice tests, alternative assessments are being used.





Many of these alternative forms of assessment require students to provide written responses, and often the responses are expected to be several paragraphs long. The tests may also include performance-based assessments that take a variety of forms including: essays, problem-solving items, science experiments, production of art work, and portfolios of student work and computer simulations.

The 1997 amendments to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) require the participation of students with disabilities in state and districtwide assessment programs, regardless of the format of the assessments. This addition to the law means that the education system must be accountable for the results of education for all students.

### **What Is Results-Based Accountability?**

Standards-based assessments often are part of a larger accountability system — a system that holds an individual or group responsible for student learning. Results-based accountability is different from the compliance-based accountability of special education. Both approaches to accountability can be used at the same time. Results-based accountability looks at the important question, “Is the student learning?” Compliance-based accountability asks the question, “Is the student receiving the services written on his or her IEP?”

Accountability is a more encompassing term than assessment. It can include more than the collection of data from tests, record reviews, and other performance assessments. A system is accountable for all students when it makes sure that all students count (or participate) in the evaluation program of the education system. Counting all students does not mean that all students take the same test. Rather, it means that all students’ learning and progress are accounted for and included when reporting on the education system.

### **Have Students with Disabilities Been Included in Assessment and Accountability Systems?**

Studies show that students with disabilities have been excluded to an unreasonable extent from large-scale assessment programs and from results-based accountability systems. About 50% of students with disabilities have been excluded from various assessments at the national, state, and local levels. But the exclusion rates vary from 0% to 100%. And, these are only estimates. Most states and districts have a difficult time saying exactly how many students with disabilities participated in their large-scale assessments.

With the passage of the 1997 amendments to IDEA, exclusion of students with disabilities from state and

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districtwide assessment programs is no longer acceptable. IDEA now requires that students with disabilities be included in state and districtwide assessment programs, with needed accommodations and modifications. Specifically, students with disabilities are expected to participate in state and districtwide assessments, using accommodations where appropriate, and their scores are to be reported with the same frequency and in the same detail that the scores of other students are reported. To ensure that all students with disabilities are included, it may be necessary to use alternate assessments. Alternate assessments, however, should be needed for the relatively small percentage of students unable to participate in regular state and districtwide assessments. There should be no exclusion of students with disabilities from state and districtwide assessment programs.

Why be concerned about the exclusion of students with disabilities from assessments and accountability systems? Out of sight is out of mind – individuals excluded from assessments are not likely to be considered in policy decisions that affect all students. Students with disabilities must be considered and included in the assessment of what students know and can do. To understand whether education is working for students with disabilities, inclusion in assessments and accountability systems is critical. Major changes in policies and practices are needed as explained below to ensure that all students with disabilities are included in state and districtwide

assessment programs. Implementing the new IDEA requirements appropriately will require significant effort on the part of parents, educators, students, test-designers, policy makers, and others. In the mid-1990s, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) identified three points in the assessment process where exclusion of students often occurs. In each of these three phases of the assessment process, substantial changes are required:

1. development of the assessment,
2. administration of the assessment, and
3. reporting results of the assessment.

### **1. At the time of development**

Students with disabilities often are not considered when items are developed, and they are not included when assessments are field-tested. As a result, assessments may not have appropriate items for students with disabilities. Frequently, there are insufficient test items to accommodate the diversity and range of skills of students with disabilities.

### **2. During administration**

A second point of exclusion occurs during the administration of the assessment. This is the kind of exclusion most people know about. Low expectations, totally separate curricula, and lack of needed accommodations have led schools to exempt students. To protect students with disabilities from having to “suffer” through a test they may





fail, parents have been encouraged to keep students home, or students have been pulled out of the classroom to watch a movie, or go on a field trip when the state or district-wide assessment was to be given.

There are many reasons for exclusion that occurs at the point of administration. Among the most common are:

- Written guidelines that are exclusionary or vague;
- Restrictions on accommodations;
- Altruistic, yet misguided, concerns about possible negative effects of tests on students with disabilities; and
- Incentives created by the assumption that students with disabilities will perform poorly and the desire to have a school or state “look good” in comparison to other schools or states.

### 3. When reporting results

A third point of exclusion occurs when the reports of results are prepared.

Often, the scores of students with disabilities are omitted. Scores are omitted, in some cases, due to a concern that the performance of students with disabilities will negatively impact the overall results of the assessment. On the other hand, states and districts sometimes are unable to separate the scores of students with disabilities from those of other students. When this is the case, it is difficult to hold schools accountable for the achievement of students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

## What Are Assessment Accommodations?

Generally, assessment accommodations are changes in how the assessment is presented, where it is presented, the timing or scheduling of the assessment, and how the student can respond. States and districts use a number of terms to refer to the concept of accommodation. Frequently used terms include: adaptation, modification, and alteration.

<sup>1</sup> The 1997 amendments to IDEA have specific reporting requirements. See *Reporting of Results* on page 6.

## Common Testing Accommodations

### Presentation

Braille; oral reading; signing of directions; interpretation of directions

### Response

Mark response in booklet; use template for responding; point to response; use word processor; scribe

### Setting

In study hall; with small group; at home with appropriate supervision; in special education class

### Timing/scheduling

Extended time; more breaks; sessions extended over several days

It is important to find out how these terms are used in a particular location. The use of accommodations during assessments is probably the most controversial aspect of the participation of students with disabilities in large-scale assessments.

There are a number of technical and implementation issues related to the use of accommodations and their effect on test scores. These issues require additional research and negotiation to help create a fully inclusive assessment system. However, by law, students with disabilities must now be included in state and districtwide assessment programs with appropriate accommodations.

## An Action Plan for Assessment: What Needs to Happen?

In less than a decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of attention that our nation pays to assessments given both in and outside of the classroom. Assessment and accountability have moved to the forefront of reform efforts, and now IDEA requires that students with disabilities be included fully in state and districtwide assessment programs. Building a system that is accountable for all students should be the goal of our education system. If we begin our planning and development of assessments with this end in mind, then we can proactively address the issues of accountability for the learning of all students.

## General Action Steps

Be in the know. Find out what your state or district is doing in the assessment arena. Does your state have a state assessment? Is there a districtwide assessment? Obtain copies of participation, accommodation, and reporting guidelines. If your state does not have a state or districtwide assessment, find out what is currently being developed to account for student learning. In either case, check to see how students with disabilities are considered in the guidelines or the development of the assessment and policies.

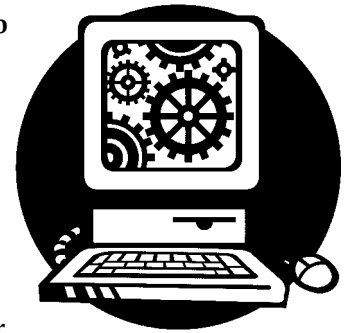
The following checklist can be used to guide your efforts:

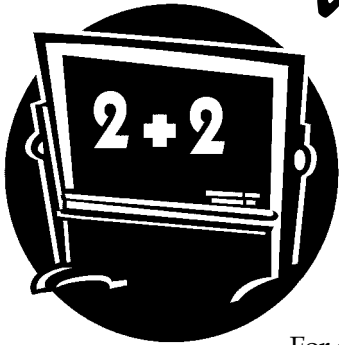
### ✓ *Instrument Development*

Find out whether individuals knowledgeable about disabilities are involved in the development of test items or new assessments, and whether students with disabilities are included when assessments are field-tested. Field testing helps identify problems and the need for more varied items. Test items can be dropped, modified, or added during this phase to allow more students to participate.

### ✓ *Instrument Administration*

Check to determine whether students with disabilities are participating in the assessment. When sampling procedures are used for a new assessment, the sample should be representative of all students.





## ✓ *Partial Participation*

Even though a student may not be able to take all parts of an assessment, the student should be included in those parts in which participation is possible.

## ✓ *Alternate Assessment*

For a relatively small percentage of students with disabilities, it may be necessary to have an alternate assessment. Generally, these assessments are for students with significant disabilities who may need a different type of assessment to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. Check to see whether an alternate assessment is available or being developed in addition to the regular assessment. The 1997 amendments to IDEA require states with state and districtwide assessment programs to conduct alternate assessments beginning July 1, 2000, for students who need them. Since individual determinations are made by the IEP team a relatively small percentage of students with disabilities will require alternate assessments.

## ✓ *A Monitoring System*

It is important for assessment systems to monitor adherence to the assessment guidelines. Find out whether your state and districtwide assessment systems include mechanisms to:

- Check that students receive the appropriate assessment (regular or alternate).
- Verify that appropriate accommodations are provided during the assessment.

- Remove incentives for exclusion from the regular assessment. Some states have achieved this by assigning the lowest possible proficiency level score to all excluded students when determining school, district, and statewide scores.

## ✓ *Reporting of Results*

The *IDEA Amendments of 1997* require states and districts to report the scores of students with disabilities in two ways. First, school, district, and statewide summaries must report the scores of all students with disabilities together with the scores of all other students ("aggregated" scores). This is important because if the scores of students with disabilities are only reported separately, the achievement of students with disabilities is likely to be considered as less important when evaluating school performance.

In addition, school, district, and statewide summaries must also report the performance of children with disabilities separately from the scores of students without disabilities ("disaggregated" scores) to allow analysis of student performance and identification of specific trends. The number of students with disabilities taking regular state or districtwide assessments must be reported, as well as the number of students taking alternate assessments. If a student is excluded from regular testing for any reason, find out what the procedure is for including their alternate test results in testing reports. For example, Kentucky assigns the scores of all students to their neighborhood schools, regardless of the school they actually attend.

## Individual IEP Action Steps

With the *IDEA Amendments of 1997*, IEPs must now address a student's participation in state or districtwide assessments of student achievement. During the IEP process, attention needs to be given to:

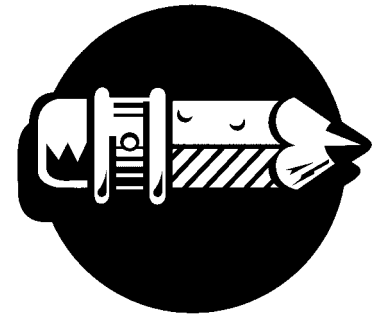
- (a) the goals of instruction, which must be linked to the general curriculum,
- (b) the kinds of instructional accommodations used in the classroom, and
- (c) the accommodations needed to enable participation in assessments.<sup>2</sup>

The following issues and questions should be addressed during the IEP development process:

- Identify the goals of the student's instruction. With the *IDEA Amendments of 1997*, the IEP must address the student's participation in the general curriculum.
- What kinds of instructional supports, services, and

accommodations are indicated on the IEP? Are these accommodations appropriate given the student's strengths, weaknesses, and educational goals?

- What kind of accommodations, if any, are necessary for the student to participate in state or districtwide assessments? Are the accommodations used during classroom instruction the same as those provided during tests? If not, why not? 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.
- If a student is being considered for an alternate assessment, consider whether further accommodations or adaptations would increase the likelihood of participation in the regular assessment.



## Some Final Words

Increasingly, states are expected to implement systems of education that emphasize higher standards and accountability for all students. State assessments are being revised in response

to changes in the law, public challenges, and national initiatives. Assessment results help policymakers make decisions to improve education programs. It is imperative, therefore, that students with disabilities participate in these assessment and accountability systems.

Participation will help ensure that American schools address the learning needs of our diverse student population.

<sup>2</sup> See 614(d)(1)(A)(v) which states that: "A statement of any individual modifications in administration of state or districtwide assessment of student achievement that are needed in order for the child to participate in the assessment must be included in the IEP."

## Resources

*Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities.* NCEO Policy Directions Number 5 by M. Thurlow, K. Olsen, J. Elliott, J. Ysseldyke, R. Erickson, & E. Ahearn (1996) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Assessment Guidelines that Maximize the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments: Characteristics and Considerations.* A report by J. Elliott, M. Thurlow, and J. Ysseldyke (1996, Synthesis Report 25) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments.* NCEO Policy Directions Number 6 by M. Thurlow, J. Ysseldyke, R. Erickson, and J. Elliott (1997) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Making Decisions About the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments.* A report by J. Ysseldyke, M. Thurlow, K. McGrew, and M. Vanderwood (1994, Synthesis Report 13) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Outcomes Assessment for Students with Disabilities: Will it be Accountability or Continued Failure?* An article by M. McLaughlin and S. Hopfengardner-Warren appearing in *Preventing School Failure* (1992, vol 36, issue 4, pp. 29-33).

*Providing Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments.* An NCEO Policy Directions Number 7 by J. Elliott, J. Ysseldyke, M. Thurlow, and R. Erickson (1997) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Recommendations for Making Decisions About the*

*Participation of Students with Disabilities in Statewide Assessment Programs.* A report by J. Ysseldyke, M. Thurlow, K. McGrew, and J. Shriner (1994, Synthesis Report 15) at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Reporting the Results of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments.* NCEO Policy Directions Number 8 by R. Erickson, J. Ysseldyke, M. Thurlow, and J. Elliott at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

*Testing Accommodations for Students with Disabilities.* A report by W. King, J. Baker, and J. Jarrow (no date) at the Association on Higher Education and Disability, University of Ohio.

*Testing Students with Disabilities: Practical Strategies for Complying with District and State Requirements.* A book by M. Thurlow, J. Elliott, and J. Ysseldyke (1998), published by Corwin Press, Inc. (Thousand Oaks, CA).

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