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ABSTRACT

This report uses a question-and-answer format to address questions raised by parents, educators, and community members concerning accountability and inclusion of students with disabilities in educational assessment programs. The philosophy underlying the inclusion of all students in educational accountability systems is based on three assumptions: that all students can learn; that schools are responsible for measuring the progress of learners; and that the learning progress of all students should be measured. The 37 questions and responses are grouped under four topics, which include participation, accommodations, reporting, and implementation. The questions address such issues as why students with disabilities should take the same test as other students; whether it is fair for students with disabilities to use special accommodations for testing; whether such testing is excessive; and whether test results of students with disabilities should be reported together with or separate from the results of general education students. Questions are answered using empirical data when available, and best practice recommendations are offered. (DB)

ED 404 802

Synthesis Report 24

Questions and Answers

Tough Questions about Accountability Systems and Students with Disabilities

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In collaboration with:

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)

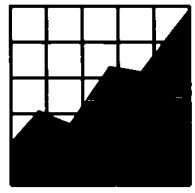
Synthesis Report 24

Questions and Answers

Tough Questions about Accountability Systems and Students with Disabilities

Martha Thurlow • Judy Elliott • Jim Ysseldyke • Ron Erickson

September 1996



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Executive Summary

As states and districts tackle inclusive accountability and assessment systems, they are faced with many hard questions raised by parents, educators, and community members.

- Why should students with disabilities take the test other students take?
- Is it fair for students with disabilities to get to use accommodations when they take their tests?
- Aren't students with disabilities tested enough?
- How do we report the test results of students with disabilities–together or separate from the results of general education students?

This report provides answers to some of the most commonly asked questions addressing the participation of students with disabilities in educational accountability systems. Questions about the use of accommodations, the reporting of the results of all test takers, and implementation issues are included also.

For those questions that cannot be answered completely because of the need for empirical evidence, we have identified what information is still needed. We also indicate what we consider best practice approaches until sufficient data are available.

Moving Toward Inclusive Accountability Systems

Accountability for results is one of the hot topics in educational reform. Accountability is essential in driving education to change to meet the needs of all students. States are implementing assessments for accountability, most often focusing on student achievement levels. Only one state out of the fifty does not now have plans to be administering some form of state assessment within the next two years.

There are a number of challenges that states face as they move toward accountability systems for all students. One of the major challenges is making sure that **all** students are included in their accountability systems. Research has documented that, in the past, state assessments (which are the foundation of most accountability systems) have actually excluded many students who should have participated in the assessments. Most of the students who have been excluded have been either students with disabilities or students with limited English proficiency.

The exclusion of students from educational accountability systems is a problem. All students need to be part of the accountability system so that they benefit from instructional changes and educational reforms that are implemented in response to information on assessment results. They also need to be included so that corruption of the accountability system (e.g., excluding those students for whom it is assumed performance levels will be low) do not occur. It is also important because exclusions often are variable from one place to the next. Whenever assessments in different locations are based on different populations, the meaning of those results become ambiguous and questionable.

The philosophy underlying the view that all students should be included in educational accountability systems incorporates three assumptions:

(1) All students can learn.
(2) Schools are responsible for measuring the progress of learners.

(3) The learning progress of all students should be measured.

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has strong language requiring that to receive Part B funding (which supports special education services), states must assess students with disabilities in the regular state assessment, with accommodations when appropriate, or develop an alternate form of assessment for those students who cannot participate in the regular assessment. States must report the number of students with disabilities participating in the regular assessment, the number participating in the alternate assessment, and must publicly report the performance of these students. These requirements reflect the importance placed on being accountable for the performance of all students, including those with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency.

The purpose of this document is to answer some of the difficult questions that arise when considering the inclusion of students with disabilities in educational accountability systems. The questions are organized within the four topics about which most questions arise:

(1) Participation
(2) Accommodations
(3) Reporting
(4) Implementation

As we work toward facilitating the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems, additional questions are likely to arise. The National Center on Educational Outcomes welcomes these questions, and will respond to them, adding them to updates of this document.

Participation Q & A

Q ***Why should people worry about including students with disabilities in district, state, and other large-scale assessments? There are relatively few students with disabilities, so their scores will not make much of a difference.***

A Students with disabilities comprise approximately 10% of the school-age population. The number of students with disabilities is about the same as the total combined populations of Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, and exceeds the population of 32 states. Furthermore, students with disabilities typically are excluded at differing rates from district and state assessments. Whenever students with disabilities are excluded at differing rates by districts or states, cross-district or cross-state comparisons are invalid.

When students with disabilities are excluded from large scale assessments, they are excluded from policy decisions based on the assessment results. In short, "out of sight is out of mind." Students with disabilities have the legal right to be included in accountability systems, and to be part of the basis for policy decisions that affect them.

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Q ***Which students with disabilities should be included in the assessment and accountability system? Are there some disabilities that should trigger automatic exemption?***

A All students should be included. Exemptions should not occur as a function of disability category or time spent in mainstream education. All decisions about <u>how</u> to account for the performance of students with disabilities should be made on an individual (not disability category) basis. All students do not have to be assessed in the same way or take the same test, but all students should be in the accountability system. Nothing should trigger an automatic exemption from the assessment or accountability system.

Q ***Students with disabilities are overtested as it is; why should they be expected to take these tests?***

A Much of the "overtesting" of students with disabilities is in areas designed to decide whether they are eligible (or remain eligible) for special education services (cognitive, academic, personality, process functioning). These assessments are for compliance purposes, either to determine that a student is eligible for services, or that a student continues to need services.

All students should be part of accountability systems, but not all students should take the same test.

Assessments administered for accountability purposes are "large-scale" or group assessments that are administered to "all" students to document that education is achieving the results that it is supposed to be achieving. Most often, the focus is on documenting that students are learning to the standards expected of them. If they are not, this signals that something must be done in the educational system. There is actually relatively little assessment that is administered for accountability purposes. A typical example of such testing is "spring state testing." Often this testing is administered in only a few grades (for example, grades 4, 8, and 12). Assessment for accountability is needed because it helps to ensure that the educational system is doing what it needs to be doing, and it is important to make sure that the educational system is doing what it needs to be doing for students with disabilities.

Q ***Should students with disabilities be expected to take the same tests as other students?***

A Yes and no. All students should be part of accountability systems, but not all students should take the same assessment. We can think about students as falling into three general groups in relationship to assessments. One group is those students who can take the same assessment in the same way as other students. A second group is those students who can take the assessment with accommodations. The third group is those students who will need an alternate form of assessment to be part of the accountability system.

About 85% of students with disabilities have relatively mild or moderate disabilities; they should be able to take the same tests as other students, some with accommodations. Data on the remaining 15% of students with disabilities may need to be collected using methodologies that differ from those used for other students. This 15% translates to approximately one to two percent of the total student population.

Q Why should a student who is in a different curriculum be included in a statewide or district assessment?

A Two issues are reflected in this question. First, it may be the case that the student is not, but should be, in the same curriculum. That is, the student should be working toward the same standards as students without disabilities. Second, the results of education for all students should be part of state and district accountability systems regardless of the curricula in which they are enrolled, or the educational goals and standards toward which they are working (Thurlow, Olsen, Elliott, Ysseldyke, Erickson, & Ahearn, 1996).

The results of education for all students should be part of state and district accountability systems regardless of the curricula in which they are enrolled, or the educational goals and standards toward which they are working.

Q How is it possible to get buy-in at the district or building level regarding the participation of students with disabilities in assessments?

A The most important thing to do is get involvement of stakeholder groups (both general and special education) at the very beginning of the development of assessment practices and accountability systems and to maintain continued involvement through all stages of the assessment/accountability process (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Olsen, 1995). Parents of students with disabilities and representatives of advocacy groups are important stakeholders and voices to be heard. Systems that have already begun and did not get early participation of stakeholders should move to do so as soon as possible. With everyone at the table, a unified accountability system can be developed that reflects the performance of all students.

Q When is it okay to modify an assessment and when is it not okay? And, what kinds of modifications are okay?

A Modifying an assessment means changing the content of the assessment. The only modification of an assessment should be a different or alternate assessment. Modified or alternate assessments are for those students (less than one to two percent of the student population) who may not be working toward a high school diploma; however, if a student needs an accommodation (a changed way to take the general assessment), and is unable to participate in the assessment unless the accommodation is available, then it is "okay" to allow the student to use the accommodation during assessment. At this point, the question becomes one about aggregating and reporting results.

We need new research to answer questions about the validity of test results for students with a variety of disabilities, using a variety of accommodations, in district, state, and national assessments for which the purpose is to describe the status of students' knowledge.

Q What effect do accommodations have on test scores? Do they invalidate test scores?

A For most accommodations, we do not yet have answers to these questions. Research is now underway to attempt to answer questions like these. Furthermore, these questions are best answered by first reformulating them in terms of specific accommodations.

Some people might cite research by ETS and ACT as already providing answers that we can use; however, both ETS and ACT were looking at a limited number of accommodations, using nonrepresentative samples of students (only those applying for entrance to postsecondary education institutions), and primarily focusing on predictive validity (Laing & Farmer, 1984; Willingham et al., 1988). We need new research to answer questions about the validity of test results for students with a variety of disabilities, using a variety of accommodations, in district, state, and national

assessments for which the purpose is to describe the status of students' knowledge.

Q ***What are the psychometric issues that are raised by the use of nonstandard assessments? Don't these issues justify not including students in an assessment if they need accommodations?***

Whenever there is any doubt, students should be included rather than excluded.

A The most frequently raised question about accommodations is whether scores gathered under nonstandard conditions (with accommodations) mean the same thing, or can be combined with, scores gathered under standard conditions. If scores from standard and nonstandard conditions are aggregated in reports, it implies that they are measuring the same abilities or constructs. Thus, score comparability is probably the issue of most importance.

The score comparability issues can be translated into several psychometric issues:

- **Construct validity**: Are scores gathered under standard and nonstandard conditions measuring the same abilities or constructs?
- **Criterion-related validity**: Do scores gathered under nonstandard conditions correlate to the same degree with outcome criteria as do scores gathered under standard administration conditions?
- **Reliability**: Are the scores gathered under standard and nonstandard conditions comparable in reliability?
- **Differential item functioning**: Can the standard and nonstandard items be placed on the same measurement scale?

These psychometric comparability characteristics could be studied for different types of accommodations and different types of disabilities.

However, none of these issues is reason for not including students with disabilities in an assessment if they need accommodations. With proper coding of data, the scores from students who use accommodations can be separated from the other scores. Whenever there is any doubt, students should be included rather than excluded.

Accommodations are not necessarily allowed only for students receiving special education or 504 services. These students are, however, the only ones for whom the law requires that accommodations be provided.

Q ***Do accommodations really level the playing field, or do they provide a seemingly unfair advantage to the students who use them?***

A "Level the playing field" and "unfair advantage" are charged terms that reflect divergent views about providing assessment accommodations to students with disabilities. Although we currently do not have the data we need, we can describe the general concepts underlying these terms.

It is easier to discuss these concepts with respect to sensory and physical disabilities. For example, if we are administering a test to high school students and one of the students is blind, few people would charge that the student was being given an unfair advantage if the student was allowed to use a Braille edition of the test and to respond using a special computer. Most people would agree that these accommodations simply level the playing field for the student who is blind (although professionals who know visual disabilities might argue that the student who is blind is still at a disadvantage).

Questions about "level playing fields" and "unfair advantages" most often arise when the disabilities are not so obvious, particularly those disabilities that converge with the area being assessed (e.g., a reading disability and a reading test; dysgraphia and a writing test). We desperately need research before we can begin to resolve these issues, and even then we are better sticking to talking about score comparability, validity, and reliability.

Q ***Why are accommodations available only for students receiving special education or 504 services?***

A Accommodations are not necessarily allowed only for students receiving special education or 504 services. These students are, however, the only ones for whom the law requires that accommodations be provided. Some states are now either thinking about or trying the provision of accommodations to all students needing them. Others provide them for students with temporary and/or immediate medical conditions.

Q ***Won't it cost a fortune to make all of the accommodations that will be requested? Wouldn't it be better to spend the money educating students?***

A We do not have good cost data on the provision of accommodations. We do know, however, that most of the accommodations that students need (or that their teachers say they need) are not costly. They often do require some additional thought about logistical issues, however. We need good information on the costs (and benefits) of accommodations.

At the same time that we collect cost information, we need to look at the accommodations that are recommended and the accommodations that are used. There is some indication that teachers (and IEP teams) are recommending more accommodations than students probably need. There is some evidence, for example, that teachers/IEP teams very often recommend that the student be given extra time. Yet observations of those students during testing have indicated that most of the students do not use the extra time.

Providing accommodations is a part of instruction for many students, including students with disabilities. It is important that this element of instruction be evident both during instruction and during assessment. Educating students and providing accommodations go hand in hand, and

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accountability for instruction via the use of assessments is now an accepted approach. Beyond this, many educators see the process of identifying and trying accommodations as a useful part of preparing the student for the student's future as postsecondary student, worker, and citizen.

Q ***What kinds of modifications/accommodations can be made in an on-demand situation and still have the scores mean the same thing for all students?***

The purpose of an accommodation is to level the playing field, not to provide an advantage to some students.

A An on-demand situation is one in which the student must perform a specific task at a specific time (e.g., multiple choice, constructed response, performance event). This question is one of score comparability. It is not the situation (i.e., type of test), however, that defines score comparability, but rather the specific accommodation being used and the focus of the assessment. But, even if we knew those variables, we do not yet have the research base to answer this question.

Q ***How does the purpose of the assessment affect whether accommodations are allowed?***

A Assessment has many different purposes, including the determination of whether a student will graduate, the comparison of schools, and the description of the status of education in the nation or a state. The purpose of an accommodation is to level the playing field, not to provide an advantage to some students.

Although some states do allow different accommodations depending on the purpose of the assessment, it is not clear that there is any justifiable reason for doing so. There is no research basis for answering this question. Intuitively, however, it might be argued that the test of whether an accommodation is allowed should be the "society test": What would society allow?

Originally, it was parents of students with disabilities who argued for the "society test." They suggested that their children would have to go off into society and function there. What society would allow them when they were functioning as citizens and workers should be allowed during an assessment. Thus, if the purpose of an assessment was to show what students know and can do, it might be argued that students could use whatever accommodations they needed, for this is what society would allow them to do. For certain types of tasks (e.g., to show speed of performing), society probably would not allow students to use extra time.

Obviously, answering this question in the abstract is difficult. As for most questions about accommodations, we need to be talking about a specific accommodation and a specific assessment.

Ideally, the scores of students receiving accommodations would be aggregated with the scores of all other students.

Q Should the assessment results of students receiving accommodations be reported separately?

A Yes and no. Ideally, the scores of students receiving accommodations would be aggregated with the scores of all other students; however, most psychometricians would argue that first it is necessary to demonstrate that the accommodated scores are comparable to those obtained without accommodations. Many have argued that until we have the research basis for combining scores, scores obtained from accommodated assessments should be reported separately. Some states are reporting the numbers of students who used accommodations, and the scores of these students.

Q Isn't the logical way to determine appropriate testing accommodations to match accommodations to instruction?

Several states require that any accommodations used during assessment be restricted to ones that are used by the student during instruction. In many states, accommodations that students are to receive during instruction are

recorded on the IEP. When this is the case, it is easy to determine which accommodations are possibilities for the assessment.

Some people would disagree. They cite specific accommodations that would be appropriate during instruction but not during assessment (for example, interpreting directions for a student, or giving the student feedback on response correctness after the student completes the first item). Other people suggest that there are some accommodations that are appropriate during assessment but not during instruction (e.g., putting the student in a separate room).

Educators need guidelines and checklists for defining student needs that require accommodations.

In general, however, the requirement that instructional and assessment accommodations be aligned seems to be a good guideline to follow, and then to modify for specific exceptions.

Q Should accommodations be disability specific? For example, should only students with "X" disability be allowed to use "Y" accommodation?

A Accommodations should not be disability specific. Rather, they should correspond to the needs of the student. Even though there may be a tendency for students with the same disability to need the same kinds of accommodations, this is not a good basis for making decisions. Rather, a decision tree with branches focusing on student characteristics and needs is more justifiable.

As this question implies, however, there is a need for some guidance about what kinds of accommodations are useful for specific kinds of needs. Educators also need guidelines and checklists for defining student needs that require accommodations.

Q ***If an assessment starts including students with disabilities, won't it have an impact on the performance trends, making it difficult to compare performance across years?***

A Performance trends that do not reflect the participation of students with disabilities may or may not be affected by more inclusive assessment policies. In cases where such effects are found, assessment officials will need to clearly communicate changes in how these results are reported. It is important to remember that the problem of score incomparability was not caused by students with disabilities, but by exclusionary assessment practices in the past that presumed the achievement of students with disabilities was not important. To support a system of accountability for *all* students, new baselines that are more inclusive of *all* students should be established.

It is important to remember that the problem of score incomparability was not caused by students with disabilities, but by exclusionary assessment practices in the past that presumed the achievement of students with disabilities was not important.

Q ***Won't including the scores of students with disabilities skew school building results?***

A Yes, if you are willing to believe three faulty assumptions:

(1) *that test results that exclude students with disabilities are somehow more "normal" than those derived from a school's total population of students.* Schools are just as responsible for the academic gains made by students with disabilities as they are for those students without disabilities.

(2) *that test results do not already include scores from students with very real learning problems.* We know that states use different criteria in identifying students with disabilities, and that many students at risk of academic failure do not qualify for special education services. The scores of these students are already being included in the results.

(3) *that the scores of students with disabilities, taken as a whole, will be lower than those of the population of students*

without disabilities. The educational services provided to the majority of students with disabilities are designed to help students succeed, to make it possible for them to meet the same academic standards as their peers without disabilities. We should not presume–or worse yet, expect–that their levels of achievement will be any different from any other particular group of students.

The best approach to reporting assessment results for students with disabilities depends upon your purpose for reporting.

Q How can scores from an assessment administered under non-standardized conditions be combined with scores from an assessment given under standardized conditions?

A Non-standardized conditions are sometimes necessary to accommodate the unique needs of individual students. These accommodations can take a variety of forms, including changes in the presentation of test items, the student's response mode, the timing of the test, or the test setting. The critical question raised when using non-standardized conditions is what effect these changes have on the validity and reliability of the assessment itself. Currently, research is being conducted in many states to determine the effect of accommodations on the psychometric qualities of assessments. States are taking different approaches to combining and reporting scores. Some are assuming that all accommodations are justified and therefore can be combined and reported together with other scores. Some states are combining only scores from a select list of accommodations that the state has determined are "okay." Other states are continuing to separate all scores from accommodated assessments, with some reporting them separate and others simply not reporting those scores.

Q What is the best way to report assessment results to reflect the participation and performance of students with disabilities?

A The best approach to reporting assessment results for students with disabilities depends upon your purpose for reporting. To reflect their

participation in a unified system of accountability, the scores of students with disabilities should be integrated into the performance of schools and school districts, with supporting data provided to show the number or percentage of students excluded from the assessment. However, if your intent is to evaluate and improve the services specifically provided to students with disabilities, it may be prudent to disaggregate test results, and compare the scores of students with disabilities against the general student population, or longitudinally over different periods of time.

Avoid explaining away discouraging results by placing blame on others; there's enough of that already.

Q What should be done when the assessment results for students with disabilities get misused by the media, realtors, or others?

A As the saying goes, "fight fire with fire." Use the media to your advantage. If the efficacy of your district's or state's services to students with disabilities is being questioned on the sole basis of assessment results, hold informational town meetings, write editorials and press statements to challenge the use of assessment data for such purposes. Document other ways in which your services make a difference for students, their families, and their communities. Avoid explaining away discouraging results by placing blame on others; there's enough of that already. Construct positive strategies that can bring about improvement, and let others know about your plans.

Q How can the results of an alternate assessment be compared to the results of on-demand tests?

A Alternate assessments are generally reserved for those students whose disabilities are so significant that they cannot participate meaningfully in the traditional assessment, even through the use of accommodations. Some states are now using or developing such assessments for their statewide accountability systems. Approaches are currently being explored to merge

the results of these alternate tests with the scores of the general assessment. This is facilitated when states have broad-based standards for all students.

Q ***Should assessment results of students with disabilities be reported separately?***

A It depends on your purpose for doing so. Schools, districts, or states may wish to report separate scores for students who were provided accommodations. This would allow them to examine trends in achievement, as a means to evaluate programs and services, as well as to look at which accommodations are most used by students It is not reasonable to separate scores simply to compare scores of students with and without disabilities unless there is a very specific purpose for doing so.

It is not reasonable to separate scores simply to compare scores of students with and without disabilities unless there is a very specific purpose for doing so.

Q ***What are the advantages and disadvantages of reporting results by category of disability?***

A If specific programs, such as those provided to students with learning disabilities, are the object of programmatic evaluation, then disaggregating results might be helpful; however, our ability to categorize a student's disability is far from perfect, and the variety of services provided to students with similar disabilities reduces our ability to use such results for programmatic improvement. An additional problem: small numbers of students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness) could lead to reporting scores that identify individual students; this would be inappropriate.

Implementation Q & A

Q ***Given that most decisions about participation and accommodations are made by IEP teams, how is it possible to make sure that their decisions are informed and avoid benevolent exemptions or over-accommodation (recommending more accommodations than the student needs)?***

A At least two things need to happen:

1. Efforts must be directed toward information dissemination and exchange about assessment and inclusive accountability systems. IEP teams have a much greater charge than determining program eligibility and service delivery. They must also make informed decisions about who participates in specific district or state assessments and what accommodations will be used. Often students are exempted from these assessments due to lack of information about what they are, why they are important, and their purpose. Traditionally, IEP teams have focused on classroom tests and instruction rather than on large-scale assessments. All are important pieces of making decisions about participation in large-scale assessments.

2. A set of criteria for making these decisions must be adopted by decision makers and IEP teams to enable them to make consistent and individualized decisions about participation in district and state assessments and about the use of accommodations. NCEO has developed such criteria (Elliott, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996). The criteria, in checklist format, can be used as a part of the IEP process and attached to each student's IEP.

IEP teams have a much greater charge than determining program eligibility and service delivery. They must also make informed decisions about who participates in specific district or state assessments and what accommodations will be used.

Q ***Logistically, how is it possible to provide all the assessment accommodations needed by students with disabilities, and still continue the instruction process?***

A It is imperative that teachers and other building stakeholders be a part of the process when planning the logistics of assessments. In some districts, resource room teachers are in charge of all students taking the assessment under altered conditions. It is not uncommon for these teachers to monitor all students taking year-end exams under accommodated conditions. This requires much collaboration and planning. Teachers often know what is needed to make this complex scheduling work. For example, paraprofessionals can be used to supervise and assist students in need of accommodations while the teacher continues with the instructional process for other students.

It is imperative that teachers and other building stakeholders be a part of the process when planning the logistics of assessments.

Another consideration is the window of testing. If testing is done over a period of three weeks, for example, with assistance teachers can manage the process by staggering the actual testing. Teachers rightfully ask, "How am I to continue the instructional process, meeting goals and objectives, if I have to spend the majority of three weeks in the testing process?" However, many teachers do not see the relevance or connection of "spring testing" to classroom instruction. One reason may be that the results of these assessments are viewed as having little relevance to classroom instruction. Another reason may be that test results are not available for review until the summer after these students have left the grade. Continued reinforcement is needed on the importance of assessment, and why it is important to view assessment and instruction as a unit. And, information gathered from the assessment must be shared with teachers in a timely and meaningful fashion.

Q ***What does all this assessment stuff have to do with instruction?***

A It is not uncommon to hear teachers say, "I would rather teach kids than give these tests that have little, if any, relation to what goes on in the classroom." Educators need to view assessment and instruction as inextricably linked. How does one know what has been learned, the effects of programs, and other innovations if learner behavior is not assessed? If the assessment bears little resemblance to what has been taught during classroom instruction, then one can understand the perspective of this question. There needs to be a direct link between assessment and instruction. To the extent that there is not a direct link, then the gap must be closed. The results of district and state assessments need to be presented in a manner that provides useful information to those who need it for instructional purposes–teachers.

The results of district and state assessments need to be presented in a manner that provides useful information to those who need it for instructional purposes–teachers.

Q ***If tests are used for high stakes for students (e.g., high school diploma), and students with disabilities do not participate, or they are excluded, do they not graduate?***

A Many states hold students with disabilities to the same standards as other students, including course credits and passage of an exit exam, in order to receive a standard diploma. Other states award a regular diploma upon completion of a student's IEP program. Still others award a modified diploma or a certificate of completion upon successful completion of IEP goals and objectives. Many of these options are practices that the state has suggested to the local education agencies (LEAs). In many states, LEAs have been given wide discretion in establishing requirements and practices, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly which policies may actually be used. Therefore, it is important you know the policy and practice of the state in question (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995).

As established in the *Debra P. v. Turlington* case, the high school diploma is a protected property, which makes it subject to protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. This court case imposed the requirements of curricular validity and adequate notice on high school exit exams. Even though this case only addressed general education students, it is not difficult to see how the situation could easily generalize to students with disabilities. The bottom line is that if a state requires students to pass a high stakes test in order to receive a diploma and students with disabilities do not participate, they may not graduate. Keep in mind that the potential for litigation is tremendous if all stakeholders are not fully informed and/or do not "sign off" in agreement.

States must address the need for alternate assessments for students unable to take the traditional assessment.

Q What should be done when a state doesn't have an alternate assessment, but a student needs one?

A States must address the need for alternate assessments for students unable to take the traditional assessment. Typically, these students are those with greater learning needs. Alternate assessments, like traditional assessments, need thoughtful consideration in their development. It is not recommended that one be "put together" and administered any differently than one that is developed, field tested, and reported for the majority of students. Therefore, if you have students in need of an alternate assessment, but your state does not have one, then something must be developed in order to include all students in the accountability system. For example, curriculum-based evaluation, video taping performance, and portfolios could be implemented immediately to capture progress of students' learning.

Q ***Isn't it better to include a student without accommodations than to accommodate and not be able to aggregate that student's scores with the scores of other students?***

A No. When in doubt, include and accommodate the student in the assessment. We do not yet know the impact of assessment accommodations on the validity of test scores. If a student requires an assessment accommodation to "level the playing field," then not providing it introduces the possibility of the assessment measuring the student's disability, not the student's ability.

The combining of scores gathered under standard and nonstandard conditions assumes that the test scores are measuring the same abilities. Since we do not know the actual impact of accommodations on score comparability under these two conditions, students should be accommodated and reported in a way that indicates scores of students who took the assessment under altered conditions.

If a student requires an assessment accommodation to "level the playing field," then not providing it introduces the possibility of the assessment measuring the student's disability, not the student's ability.

Q ***If standards are modified for some students, how should their assessment results be reported?***

A The bigger question here may be, "Why are students' standards modified?" Modifying standards can mean students need a different curriculum. There needs to be a wider breadth of standards to encompass a greater range of students. If a student participates in a different or modified curriculum, the student should still be considered for partial administration of the standard assessment. Most important is that the assessment align with what the student is learning. Do these students need modified standards or alternate assessments for the original standards? Examine the original standards. Are they broad enough to encompass the continuum of students in your district or state?

Q ***If assessment results of students with disabilities are included in reporting, won't schools with higher concentrations of such students look worse than schools with few students with disabilities?***

A It is important to include data on all test takers in the reporting of assessment results. Calculation of participation rates needs to include the number of students with disabilities in both the numerator and the denominator. In doing so not only are all students accounted for, but it is easier to pinpoint the percentage of students with disabilities in a given district and then if needed make comparisons from one district or building to the next, based on the percentage of students with disabilities in the total school population. The challenge, of course, is getting everyone to use the same formula for calculating participation rates (Erickson, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996).

In some districts, it has been shown that if students with disabilities would have been included in reports, overall district scores would have been higher!

It is vital to point out that other students may impact school scores. Students with disabilities typically have been accused of lowering the average assessment results. In some districts, however, it has been shown that if students with disabilities would have been included in the reports, overall district scores would have been higher! We need to widen our purview from who is going to impact results to what instructional considerations need to be addressed in order to meet the needs of all students.

Q ***What is the relationship among standards, assessments, and accountability?***

A Standards set the stage for instruction. Instruction is both driven by and drives assessment. This is not teaching to the test, but aligning and integrating the content of the assessment within the daily routine of instruction. It certainly does not make sense to hold students accountable for information they have not been taught. If we truly are accountable for

all students' learning, then our job is to prepare students to meet standards via instruction and assessment. If they do not meet the standards, we must ask why and further examine the instructional process and opportunity to learn provided for the assessment.

Q What should be done about educators who are unwilling to provide accommodations?

A One needs to look at and assess directly the underlying reasons why educators are unwilling to provide accommodations. If a student's IEP indicates an assessment accommodation is needed, then it is illegal not to provide it. The same goes for Section 504 students. If there is no policy indicating that all students should get accommodations they need, then teachers may resist the practice of allowing assessment accommodations. Many see the standards and assessment reform as the latest bandwagon to education (can we blame them?). Educators have begun to question and/or resist practices that come their way–especially those left unexplained.

The bottom line: there need to be criteria and policy set for those who are eligible for accommodations, the conditions under which they are provided, and training for when and how to provide them.

In general, teachers who have been trained about the what and why of assessment accommodations and how to work out the logistics of providing them to students needing them (before implementation of district and state assessments) are more likely to be accepting of the process. The bottom line: there need to be criteria and policy set for those who are eligible for accommodations, the conditions under which they are provided, and training for when and how to provide them.

Q What should be done if parents refuse to allow their children to participate in the assessment?

A Parents can refuse to allow their children to participate in any and all assessments. However, this refusal is usually based on misinformation. It is important to address these concerns by building awareness among parents

of the importance of accountability systems and the participation of their children in these systems.

Administrators should never encourage parents to keep their child from taking part in an accountability system. In fact, administrators should have in place several formal mechanisms (e.g., training or special notices) to let parents know the purposes of testing programs and why it is important for their children (all children) to participate. They can do so by letting parents know about the policy, instructional decisions, and consequences that are based on assessment results.

It is important to train educators and make parents aware of the role of accommodations in instruction, in assessment, and in life.

Q What should be done if parents insist that their child be tested without accommodations?

A It is important to train educators and make parents aware of the role of accommodations in instruction, in assessment, and in life. It will continue to be important as well to hold meetings designed to address the issues of participation in assessment and use of accommodations with the parents and other members of the IEP team. It is important to find out the reasons behind parents foregoing needed assessment accommodations for their child. Open discussion and documentation of decisions are probably the best ways to prevent any party from insisting on one course or another.

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