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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses emerging issues affecting students with disabilities in standards-based assessment and accountability systems. Challenges and possible strategies for addressing the challenges are provided as identified by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, based on a model developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes. The strategies presented are concrete approaches to address challenges that policymakers and practitioners are seeing in early implementation of inclusive assessment and accountability systems. Strategies include: (1) intensify work on alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, but with more formalized evaluation of opportunity to learn and teacher performance; (2) make general education teachers more responsible for differentiated instruction and help special education teachers focus on preparing students for community life, independence, and employability; (3) develop a standards assessment model with inclusivity built in at all levels, including assessment item and process development, administration, scoring, and reporting; (4) review accountability processes and products to make changes as necessary based on data that are emerging; and (5) articulate civil rights issues to all stakeholders and embrace the reality that all students have the right to an opportunity to learn and fair assessment and accountability practices. Further recommendations are provided. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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Students with Disabilities in Standards-based Assessment and Accountability Systems: Emerging Issues, Strategies, and Recommendations

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February 2001

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Executive Summary

For too long, when we found that some students were not achieving high standards set for them, we lowered the standards for those students. Through standards-based reform, we have an opportunity to change that pattern. Now, for ALL students, we must keep the standards high, and do whatever it takes to help students be successful. We can change the curriculum, the structure, the time it takes to learn, the way we assess, but we cannot lower the standards.

This paper addresses emerging issues affecting students with disabilities in standards-based assessment and accountability systems. Challenges and possible strategies for addressing the challenges are provided as identified by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, based on a model developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes, "Issues Related to Students with Disabilities in Assessment and Accountability Systems." The strategies presented here are concrete approaches to address challenges policymakers and practitioners are seeing in early implementation of inclusive assessment and accountability systems. All of these strategies have potential to increase the positive consequences and minimize the negative consequences of school reform for students with disabilities.

Yet, as documented elsewhere, state and district approaches to standards-based reform vary widely—in the beliefs and assumptions inherent in the system, in the nature of content and performance standards, in the nature of the assessment methods used, and in the degree of stakes (Almond et al., 2000). Thus there cannot be a "recipe" of recommended concrete strategies that will work in all contexts, but we can make some general recommendations built on the strategies discussed here. In that light, we provide a few general recommendations that can apply to all states and districts as we work toward fully inclusive assessment and accountability systems that truly benefit all students.

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Overview

In 1994, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Title I provisions of the Act require that expectations and outcomes for students served by Title I be the same as for all other children. This reauthorization, called the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, also requires that states and districts set challenging standards for student achievement, and develop and administer assessments to measure student progress toward those standards. As they do this, *all* students in schools receiving Title I funds are to be held to these standards, the progress of *all* students is to be measured by these assessments, and results for *all* students must be reported to the public. Using assessment reports reflecting the progress of *all* students toward high standards, schools are to make the instructional and structural changes needed so that *all* of their students have opportunity to meet the standards. These features of Title I law are the core components of what is called standards-based reform: content and performance standards set for all students, development of measurement tools to measure the progress of all students toward the standards, and accountability systems that require continuous improvement of student achievement.

Students with disabilities are specifically included in the definition of "*all*" students in IASA 1994, but the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 1997) further clarify Congressional expectations. IDEA 1997 focused state and district attention on the challenges of full participation of students with disabilities in assessment systems, and in conjunction with the IASA legislation, on the challenges of understanding and developing inclusive accountability systems that will improve outcomes for all students. In other words, the assessment provisions of IDEA must be considered within the context of the accountability provisions of IASA.

Theory of Action

We are several years into national, state, and district efforts at implementing standards-based reform. In 1999, the National Research Council (NRC) published a review of progress thus far in standards-based reform, specifically based on Title I requirements. In this report, the authors suggest that a "theory of action" for driving the reform movement is inherent in the reform legislation:

Generally, the idea of standards-based reform states that, if states set high standards for student performance, develop assessments that measure student performance against the standards, give schools the flexibility they need to change curriculum, instruction, and school organization to enable their students to meet the standards, and hold schools strictly accountable for meeting performance standards, then student achievement will rise.

As portrayed by the theory of action, the intended outcome of standards-based reform is increased levels of learning and achievement for *all* students in our nation's schools. The model assumes that all students are included in all components of the reform agenda – standards, assessments, flexibility, and strict accountability.

As standards-based reform is implemented for all students, concerns have been raised that despite the intended positive consequence of higher student achievement for all students, there is the potential for unintended negative consequences. Furthermore, the reform movement has influenced the implementation of additional policies and procedures that must be examined for all students, with and without disabilities. These secondary policies and practices are also implemented with the intent to improve student learning and achievement. For example, states have begun to implement policies to end social promotion. The overall intent of these policies is to ensure that students have mastered grade level material before being promoted. However, among the unintended effects of this policy may be an increase in the number of students retained and in the number of students who drop out (Quenemoen, Lehr, Thurlow, Thompson, & Bolt, 2000).

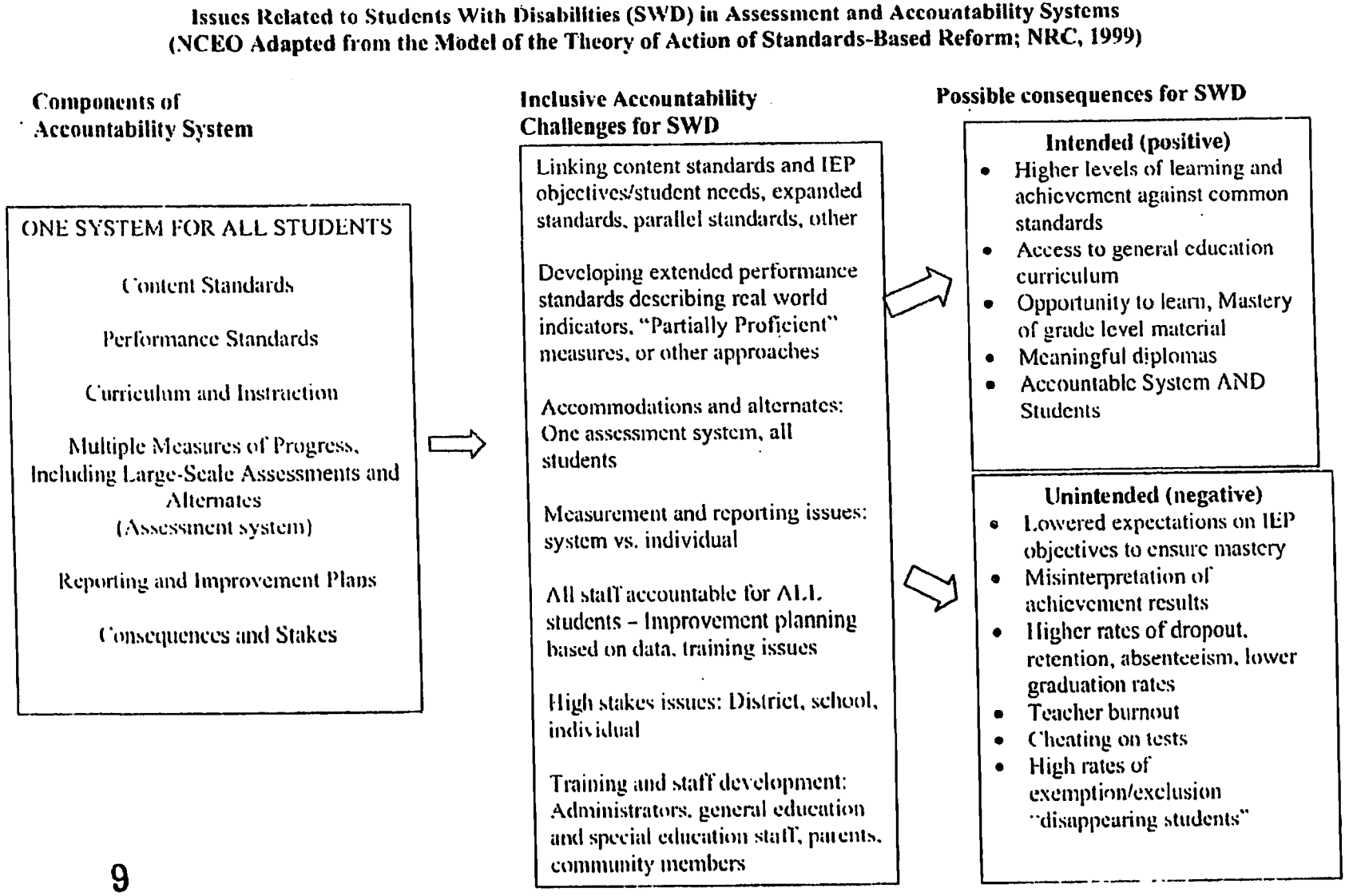
This paper addresses emerging issues affecting students with disabilities in standards-based assessment and accountability systems. Challenges and possible strategies for addressing the challenges are provided, as identified by policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, based on a model developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). Finally, recommendations for action are proposed.

Model for Considering Issues Related to Students with Disabilities in Standards-based Assessment and Accountability Systems

The model shown in Figure 1 illustrates an adaptation of the theory of action of standards-based reform. The model shows:

- The components of the accountability system driving school reform (content standards, performance standards, curriculum and instruction, assessment systems, reporting and improvement plans, consequences, and stakes),
- Challenges that arise as students with disabilities are included in the system, and
- Examples of some issues affecting students with disabilities in inclusive accountability systems and secondary policies and practices.

Figure 1. Model for Considering Issues Related to Students with Disabilities in Standards-based Assessment and Accountability Systems



DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Accountability System: a systematic collection, analysis, and use of information to hold schools, educators, and others responsible for the performance of students and the education system. (Education Commission of the States, 1998.)

Assessment System: a process of collecting data for the purpose of making decisions. (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2001.)

Testing: the process of administering a test to an individual or group to obtain a score. Testing is one way to gather assessment information. (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2001.)

The model was initially adapted from the NRC model by staff at NCEO, and was further refined after discussion by 135 participants at the June 2000 Alternate Assessment Forum in Salt Lake City, Utah. (For complete proceedings from the Alternate Assessment Forum in Salt Lake City, Utah, see http://www.coled.umn.edu/nceo/OnlinePubs/Forum2000/ForumReport2000.htm.) Participants were primarily state department of education assessment and special education staff, but also included some local or regional education staff, university staff, parents, and test publisher staff. The model was used in a Forum plenary session designed to facilitate conversations to identify and explore the effects of assessment and accountability systems for students with disabilities, as experienced up to this point.

The process was divided into three rounds. In round one, groups of four to eight people discussed a series of questions about inclusive accountability challenges for students with disabilities, and then discussed the consequences of these challenges for students with disabilities. In round two, one person from the original group remained at a table with the original notes, and others left to join new groups. The same series of questions was posed in the second round with the newly formed groups. In round three, participants returned to their original discussion groups to address needed strategies at the state, regional, and national levels to resolve issues that arise from identified challenges and consequences.

For each of the three rounds of discussion, recorders at each table completed discussion recording forms and notes capturing participant responses. At the completion of the process, documented participant responses to each round of discussion were collated according to the three categories of: (1) perceived challenges, (2) perceived positive or negative consequences, and (3) perceived strategies. Brief summaries of the challenges, consequences, and strategies as perceived by the participants are presented below by general category. These summaries are followed by some general recommendations and concluding remarks.

It is important to remember that these challenges, consequences, and strategies are the *perceptions* of a group of involved stakeholders at one point in time. It is hoped that researchers and policymakers can use the summary to develop informed research questions and policy revisions where necessary. Further, it is hoped that practitioners at the state and district levels can make use of proposed strategies and recommendations to continuously improve standards-based assessment and accountability systems so that all students benefit from them.

Perceived Challenges

Content and Performance Standards for All Students

Participants perceived challenges in designing a system to measure performance of all students against common standards. They suggested that the challenges vary depending on the nature of the state and district content standards as suggested in earlier writing on the gray areas of assessment systems (Almond, Quenemoen, Olsen, & Thurlow, 2000). The greatest challenges appear to be in states with highly specific content requirements, with limited flexibility as to *how students will learn* to the standards, and with limited flexibility as to *how students will show* what they know and are able to do. A more general challenge in all states is how to adjust performance standards for the alternate assessment for students with the most significant disabilities. However, some participants suggested that content and performance standards provide a clear directive on "what" students, including those with disabilities, need to know and be able to do, and that the standards force us to address "opportunity to learn" issues for *all* students.

Accommodations and Alternate Assessments – One System, All Students

Challenges involved in designing one assessment system for all students include varying understanding of accommodations, modifications, and alternate assessment, as well as issues of technical adequacy of these options. Numerous writers have called attention to these issues (Thurlow, House, Boys, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 2000; Tindal, 1998; Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). According to participants, there can be a mismatch between purposes of assessment for system level instructional improvement versus individual instructional planning. Another mismatch may be between the need to have data that have high validity and reliability versus moral, ethical, and inclusion issues. The "one system, all students" challenges closely intertwine with measurement and reporting issues.

Measurement and Reporting – Psychometric Soundness

Technical and psychometric difficulties with existing assessment systems were perceived as a

major issue, but fairness of use of results is a related and complicating issue. Some of the challenges identified by participants include: putting all students on the same scale versus accountability for all, a need for a balance between what makes sense for improvement planning versus psychometric soundness, and how to compare fairly across schools, districts, and states with so many uncontrolled variables.

School Improvement Planning Based on Data for ALL Students

The development of the assessment system is meant to yield data that will drive instructional improvement. For instructional improvements that benefit all students to occur, several challenges have to be addressed, including training on purpose and uses of data, and ensuring that all students, specifically those with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency, are included in the improvement processes. Helping local teams understand their roles, and the complexities of making good plans based on the data are major challenges to states and districts, as perceived by these discussants.

Training, Professional Development – All Partners Supporting All Students

Discussants expressed a belief that there is a high and immediate need for broadly based training for administrators, parents, and both general and special education teachers. This echoes the concerns raised by the National Research Council in *Testing, Teaching, and Learning* (1999, p. 3): "In our view, standards-based policies can affect student learning only if they are tied directly to efforts to build the capacity of teachers and administrators to improve instruction."

High Stakes Issues

States and districts vary in the stakes attached to their assessment system. There were both system level and individual student level issues raised about high stakes. Participants discussed whether we are just looking at "testing" all students OR testing all *and* using results for improvement. Other questions they raised involved the civil rights implications of various approaches to diplomas, and whether the system should be held accountable prior to holding students accountable.

Perceived Consequences for Students with Disabilities

Positive Consequences

The discussion groups recognized anticipated positive consequences of standards-based reform

efforts for students with disabilities in implementation thus far. These positive consequences include:

Higher Levels of Learning and Achievement Toward Common Standards

Discussants reported a perception that the linking of the state standards and the functional curriculum for students with the most significant disabilities has improved IEP goal writing, and has refocused the IEP on instruction and curriculum. Some reported that more students with disabilities are being included in the general education curriculum and in general education classes. In addition, teachers report doing more authentic instruction, and using more instructional accommodations. However, given the limited time that we have had focused efforts to include all students, there was limited discussion of actual measurement of achievement gains for students with disabilities at this point in time.

Access to General Education Curriculum

Participants speculated that schools could become more inclusive as general and special educators partner to ensure all students have access to the general education curriculum. They perceived that "ownership" of special education students is now shared with general education more so than in the past. Here again, the evidence was anecdotal, but perceptions were generally positive.

Opportunity to Learn, Mastery of Grade Level Material

As special education students are expected to learn toward high standards, IEP teams, general education staff, and special education staff are forced to rethink how students spend their time in school. For example, teachers have suggested that as they learn new assessment strategies for their students participating in alternate assessments and link those strategies back to instruction, they have refocused on learning and away from caretaking.

Accountable System and Students, Meaningful Diplomas

Participants observed that teachers report they are thinking of new ways to assess students, simplifying IEPs, and getting down to what is important. The new accountability provisions open communication pipelines from state to local, and administrators to providers. Ultimately as we implement standards-based reform, there is a perception that we have refocused on core learning and skills, and the ability of students to apply the skills in multiple settings. That makes the diploma – whichever option the student earns – more meaningful.

Negative Consequences

Participants also perceived negative consequences in implementation, which are described in the following categories:

Lowered Expectations on IEP Objectives to Ensure Mastery

There was concern expressed that assessments may begin to address only lower level skills, ones that all can accomplish, as teachers and schools raise concerns about accountability indices. Concomitantly, IEPs may reflect this focus on lower level skills in more limiting annual objectives. States that have developed an IEP-based alternate assessment are at highest risk for this unintended negative consequence. Additionally, if states and districts interpret standards-based measures as being demonstrated only through traditional academic exercises (e.g., classroom based learning, testing), we may short-change students with respect to employability skills or life skills education while they spend more time on academics outside of applied settings.

Misinterpretation of Achievement Results

There was discussion of possible inappropriate use of scores. For example, high stakes based on large-scale assessment scores may provide incentives to include more students in alternate assessment, or a backlash may develop that suggests that disability is the reason students cannot learn or cannot perform well on assessments, thus students with disabilities should not be expected to learn. Alternatively, interpretations of low scores for students with disabilities may be used to suggest that special education is not effective, without attention to the complexities of establishing valid and reliable trend lines within a population that is constantly shifting (Bielinski & Ysseldyke, 2000; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, in press).

Higher Rates of Dropout, Retention, Absenteeism, Lower Graduation Rates

Participants discussed concerns that challenging standards and inappropriate use of assessment data without appropriate interventions and opportunities to learn will cause students with disabilities to give up, drop out, be retained, or be truant.

Staff Burnout, Cheating on Tests, Other Symptoms of an Unworkable System

There have been numerous headlines related to teacher burnout, high rates of teacher and principal retirements or resignations, and cheating on high stakes tests during the past few years. No one would argue that the challenges of implementing such massive reform has taken its toll on otherwise dedicated professional staff. Participants did not address this item in any detail – and some suggested that change is never easy, and this shift to standards-based accountability is a major shift.

High Rates of Exemption/Exclusion – Disappearing Students

Finally, there was concern expressed that schools may become less inclusive with high stakes

test pressures. Schools may be unwilling to "house" classes of students with significant disabilities if having a large number of students in the alternate assessment lowers the accountability index rating for that site. Participants suggested that this can be addressed by formulas in the accountability system to allow for unusual population profiles, or through equating processes to integrate results from the alternate assessment into the accountability indices. The expression was used that "Kids and teachers are hiding under rocks from the assessment – special education, private schools, teachers exempting students, moving kids – who's accountable for them?"

From the discussion on perceived positive and negative consequences of the challenges, participants moved to identifying concrete strategies to maximize positive and minimize negative consequences of standards-based reform for students with disabilities.

Strategies to Address Consequences

The discussion groups at the Alternate Assessment Forum identified numerous strategies to address consequences. These strategies fall into five broad categories:

- Improvement of instruction
- Improvement of assessment tools, measurement, and reporting
- Improvement of the accountability system
- Training of multiple partners
- Addressing high stakes and related civil rights issues

Strategies for Improvement of Instruction include intensifying work on alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, but with more formalized evaluation of opportunity to learn and teacher performance. Discussants suggested that integration between special education and general education is a key strategy, making general education teachers more responsible for differentiated instruction, and helping special education teachers focus on preparing students for community life, independence, employability. A key strategy here is to improve preservice training for all educators, since general education needs more attention to individualized teaching, and special education needs more attention to specialized assessment, planning, and teaching.

Strategies for Improvement of Assessment Tools, Measurement, and Reporting include the development of a standards assessment model with inclusivity built in at all levels, including assessment item and process development, administration, scoring, and reporting. Participants suggested that states and districts need to ensure that all students are assessed and that the

determination of a particular type of participation is appropriate. States and districts can compare strategies used elsewhere to be sure every student counts, perhaps through using accountability indices to incorporate different levels of performance for general assessment and alternate assessment; through sending scores of students in separate facilities back to the home school, or by coding carefully, yet ensuring every score counts, even if additional data are required to fit the assessment results into the accountability system fairly.

States and districts must account for *all* students (e.g., absences, excluded, regular, accommodated, alternate), and how they do so should be included as an element of the monitoring process. An additional framework for special education and limited English proficient students may be helpful: for example, instead of four levels, add a fifth category that might include access skills. For example, for the alternate assessment participants, we may explore the use of prerequisites for skills that help us make scores more meaningful in the short term; for limited English proficient students, we may explore the use of prerequisites for English. Care would be needed to avoid using these categories as a way to circumvent all students being measured, however. Working toward more accommodation friendly assessment systems while balancing issues of reliability and validity is essential. Test publishers have to work more closely with their customers, the states and districts, on solving technical issues, and researchers must be partners in the effort.

Strategies for Improvement of the Accountability System include review of accountability processes and products to make changes as necessary based on data that are emerging. Participants recommended keeping varied perspectives in the stakeholder mix, since having people who do not think students with disabilities should be in the system work with you helps you to address tough questions up front rather than after implementation is entrenched. Include special education and LEP staff in early discussions about accountability, and involve parents and policymakers as well. States need to take the time to consider all aspects of accountability. Learn from other's mistakes. Develop or adopt a usable model for continuous improvement for use by school improvement teams, and provide training and support as local teams implement the model.

Strategies for Training of Multiple Partners focus on changing attitudes and on building skills. Training for special educators is a must, and should include how to collect a body of evidence and strategies to collect data on students with diverse needs. But administrators and general education teachers must be included in the training – all the partners need basic assessment literacy, and an understanding of how assessment data are used to identify improvement strategies. State and local partnerships that include higher education are needed for developing and implementing training. It is important to conduct multiple meetings where people sit down and talk through the issues. Include parents in development, in refinement, and in delivery of training. All partners, including parents and students as appropriate, may need to understand why it is

important to have higher expectations for all children, including those with the most significant difficulties.

Strategies for Addressing High Stakes and Related Civil Rights Issues include the strategies of directly articulating civil rights issues to all partners, and embracing the reality that all students have the right to an opportunity to learn, and to fair assessment and accountability practices. Keep discussions open and all partners involved as diploma options, promotion requirements, or access to interventions are determined. Understand and carefully abide by the valid uses of specific assessment data for various purposes, and educate legislators and governors on the appropriateness of various approaches for varying purposes and uses. Develop skills of teachers and teams in developing a body of evidence of student work that can supplement assessment scores for high stakes decisions for students, and develop policymakers' understanding of the need for multiple measures.

Recommendations

Including students with disabilities in standards-based assessment and accountability systems is one way to ensure all students have equal opportunities to learn to high standards, and is required by Federal law. Yet state and district staff who are implementing standards-based reform are finding that challenges in implementation of fully inclusive systems arise from many different sources, ranging from the technical adequacy of existing assessment instruments for all students to the attitudes and beliefs of educators and other stakeholders about what students with disabilities can and should learn. Each of these challenges can affect students with disabilities in positive or negative ways, depending on how they are addressed.

The strategies that emerged from the discussions at the Alternate Assessment Forum in Salt Lake City are concrete approaches to address challenges policymakers and practitioners are seeing in early implementation of inclusive assessment and accountability systems. All of these strategies have potential to increase the positive consequences and minimize the negative consequences of school reform for students with disabilities in some settings. Yet, as documented elsewhere, state and district approaches to standards-based reform vary widely – on the beliefs and assumptions inherent in the system, on the nature of content and performance standards, on the nature of the assessment methods used, and on the degree of stakes (Almond et al., 2000). Thus, there cannot be a "recipe" of recommended concrete strategies that will work in all contexts, but we can make some general recommendations built on the strategies discussed here. In that light, here are a few general recommendations that can apply to all states and districts as we work toward fully inclusive assessment and accountability systems that truly benefit all students.

1. With essential internal and external partners, use a data-based continuous improvement process to monitor the implementation of your inclusive assessment and accountability systems.

   - Recognize from the start that the systems can be continuously improved, and encourage feedback and open discussions of what is working and what is not within education and with the public. Expect the test publisher or developers of your assessment system tools to be involved in these discussions.

   - Study the implications of early implementation of the assessment system and the accountability system using a research based evaluation model managed by a neutral research organization (e.g., University, research firm) if possible. Include measurement of consequences of your system for special populations as a design requirement. Use the data to develop test specifications, and expect your test publisher or developers to respond to needs you identify. Expect the people or organizations providing technical expertise to help you solve problems of accessibility as you identify them. Work with policymakers to make sure that accountability policies are refined to address identified needs.

   - Work hard to discern the difference between blind resistance to change and the informed insight of stakeholders who see legitimate problems with the system. Working often and openly with a broadly based implementation advisory group of stakeholders with varied and strong perspectives will help you sort through the noise of early implementation.

   - Make sure your advisory group clearly addresses and includes the targeted populations that have had traditional "performance gaps," and their representatives. These groups include, but are not limited to, students with disabilities, limited English proficient students, disadvantaged students, and ethnic minorities.

   - Develop an open relationship with leaders of news organizations in your state. Offer them seminars on the assessment and accountability system, and provide good information on the consequences of an inclusive assessment and accountability system for all groups of students.

2. Identify all the key stakeholders, and keep communications open among all partners as implementation occurs. Commit to a top-down, bottom-up partnership in learning how to include all students fairly. Some leaders in state assessment and accountability systems call this "growing this from the classroom and school up!"

- Work with legislators and governors to build their commitment to and understanding of a flexible, continuous improvement model of assessment and accountability systems that benefit all students.

- Listen to, learn from, and respond to the students, parents, teachers, and schools in the front lines of implementation of assessment and accountability, including those from all special populations.

- As a state or district leader, be willing to take a stand for changes or improvements that will help all students reach toward high standards, and then show what they know and are able to do. Then be willing to sell the rationale to leaders both at the legislature and in the classroom if it is necessary. A time of great opportunity for positive change for all students is a time for courage and commitment.

3. Keep the standards high and keep your focus clear.

   - "Keep your eyes on the prize" of all students and all schools being successful.

   - Provide resources, strategies, training, or whatever it takes to help schools improve teaching and learning. That may include helping them understand what the data mean for different groups of students, or how to develop good school improvement plans. It may require specific training on instructional methods, on structural options for the school day and classroom, varied approaches to assessment, or WHATEVER it takes to help students be successful.

   - You may find you need to change the nature of some of your state or district content or performance standards, based on thoughtful review and consideration of what the citizens of your state or district believe all students should know and be able to do. Keep the standards high for all students, even as you change the precise nature of the standards.

Conclusion

For too long, when the education system found that some students were not achieving high standards set for them, the system lowered the standards for those students. Through standards-based reform there is an opportunity to change that pattern. Now, for *all* students, we must keep the standards high and do whatever it takes to help students be successful. There can be changes in the curriculum, the structure, the time it takes to learn, the way we assess, but there cannot be lowering of the standards.

With the great opportunity to ensure that all students will be successful comes some risks. According to our model, the intended positive consequences of standards-based reform for students with disabilities include:

- Higher levels of learning and achievement against common standards
- Access to the general education curriculum
- Opportunity to learn, and mastery of grade level material
- Meaningful diplomas
- Accountable system AND students

Yet we are also seeing negative and unintended consequences such as:

- Lowered expectations on IEP objectives, in order to ensure mastery
- Misinterpretation of achievement results
- Higher rates of dropout, retention, absenteeism, lower graduation rates
- Teacher burnout
- Cheating on tests
- High rates of exemption/exclusion – disappearing students

There are many concrete strategies for states and districts to use to increase the positive consequences of standards-based reform for students with disabilities and to minimize the negative ones. States and districts can share their experiences and ideas to generate more strategies. But in the long run, a methodical and thoughtful commitment by all stakeholders to all students is required if standards-based reform is to benefit all students. By recognizing the benefits and the risks, by working together to identify and overcome challenges and continuously improve our systems for measuring student outcomes, and by holding our schools accountable for all students, all students and all schools can be successful.

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