



State boards can watch policies for red flags that hold students back.

Martha L. Thurlow, Sheryl S. Lazarus, and Kristin K. Liu

Ensuring Students with Disabilities Leave School Ready to Succeed

For almost three decades, federal education policy has attempted to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, leave school ready for post-secondary education and employment.¹ Despite some early gains in academic performance, students with disabilities continue to lag behind their peers without disabilities.

Many factors may produce this gap: lower expectations, limitations in opportunity to learn, and the increasing diversity of the population of students with disabilities, which includes English learners with disabilities and students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS).² Recently, schooling disrupted due to COVID-19 has had a bigger impact on students with disabilities

and English learners than many other groups of students.³

Although federal policies have promoted the inclusion of students with disabilities in educational opportunities, success remains elusive. Yet much has been learned about how best to include students with disabilities in assessments and accountability, graduation requirements, and educational programming. Based on this learning, we highlight red flags to watch for in policy and suggest what state boards of education and other policymakers can do to support students with disabilities so that they leave preK-12 schooling ready for success.

Increasing Diversity of Students with Disabilities

Just as the diversity of the U.S. population has increased over the past decade,

so has the population of students with disabilities. With the special education population now at 14 percent of the U.S. student population, heterogeneity continues to be the hallmark of these students. They vary nationally and within states and districts in the distribution of students within each of the 13 federal disability categories, the severity of their disabilities, ethnicity and race, and economic background, for example. Among the recent implementation challenges for instruction and assessment are two groups of students with disabilities—students who are English learners with disabilities and students with significant cognitive disabilities.

English learners who have been identified as having a disability have increased in number more than either English learners overall (see also article on page 26) or students with disabilities overall.⁴ They vary in their home language, level of English proficiency, primary disability, and academic experience in English. They also vary in number and characteristics across states and localities. For example, states' percentages of students with disabilities who were English learners ranged from less than 1 percent to nearly 28 percent in 2018–19.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities do not fit into one disability category. Most often, they include some students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities, as well as some students in other categories such as traumatic brain injury and deaf-blindness. Students with significant cognitive disabilities demonstrate substantial intellectual and adaptive challenges and require intensive individualized instruction. They are eligible to receive educational and transition services beyond their 12th year in school. The percentage of students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in AA-AAAS also varies considerably across states (figure 1).⁵

Federal Policies

Since 1994, federal policy required states to include all students, including those with disabilities, in standards-based assessments used for Title I accountability under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). With each reauthorization of ESEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education

Act (IDEA), English learners and those with significant cognitive disabilities have received increased attention. For example, ESEA 2015 included English learners' progress in learning English in Title I accountability rather than just Title III accountability.

Both ESEA and IDEA require that all students participate in school-age assessments used for accountability (box 1).⁶ ESEA limits the participation of students with significant cognitive disabilities to 1 percent of the population of tested students. It sets 95 percent of enrollment and 95 percent of students with disabilities in each tested grade as the percentage of students that must participate in assessments for a state to meet its self-identified accountability targets. Accommodations and other accessibility supports must be provided. The laws require indicators of graduation success for these students. Through a least restrictive environment indicator, IDEA also tracks states' success in including students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Although states and districts define the parameters of their high school graduation requirements, ESEA sets a standard graduation indicator for Title I accountability. The adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) is defined as the percentage of ninth graders who leave school four years later with a regular or advanced high school diploma. Although states may also calculate five- and six-year graduation rates, the ACGR must be used in Title I accountability calculations. ESEA also provides for a state-defined alternate diploma for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the state's AA-AAAS.⁷ Students who earn this diploma may be counted as graduating in the ACGR.

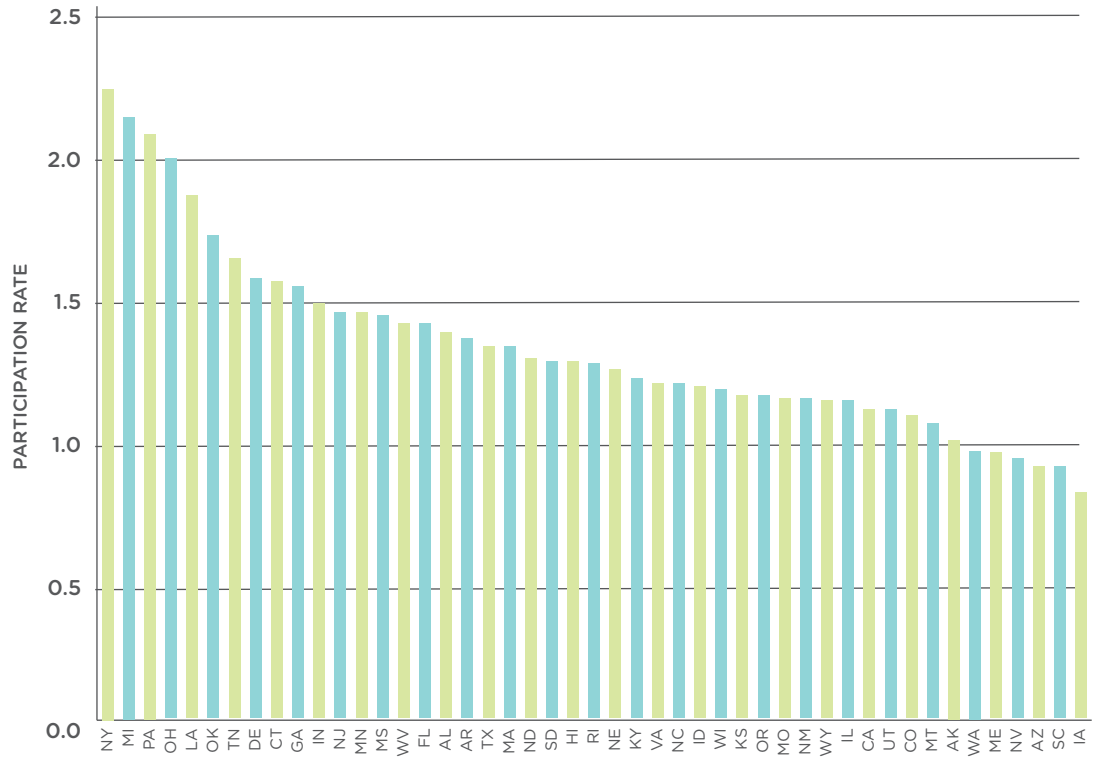
Red Flags

Most state education policies have been enacted to be consistent with federal law. Most state boards of education adopt standards that define academic and language goals for all public school students in the state. They set parameters for state-level assessments to monitor student progress toward meeting academic standards so students leave high school ready for postsecondary education and employment. State boards regularly identify criteria for English proficiency

At 14 percent of the U.S. student population, heterogeneity continues to be the hallmark of these students.

State boards should be wary of adopting policies that inadvertently limit opportunities for students with disabilities.

Figure 1. AA-AAAS Participation Rates by State for Grade 8 Reading, Based on Total Tested Grade 8 Students in 2017-18 (percent)



Source: Adaptation of figure 3 in Yi-Chen Wu, Sheryl Lazarus, and Kristin Liu, "2017-2018 APR Snapshot #24: AA-AAAS Participation and Performance" (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2021).

Note: Three states did not submit data to the U.S. Department of Education on participation in the 2017-18 Reading AA-AAAS.

that English learners must reach to exit services to develop their language skills.

State boards should be wary of adopting policies that inadvertently limit opportunities for students with disabilities and thereby reduce the likelihood they will leave school ready for post-secondary education and employment. Several indicators for assessment, graduation, and inclusion policies may be red flags. We highlight five.

1. Pervasive low expectations for students with disabilities. It is easy to claim high expectations for all students without realizing that policies developed to support some students may actually reflect low expectations for them. Low expectations were most blatant in the early 1990s, when assessment practices revealed low expectations during instruction. At that time, students with disabilities were excluded from state tests because it was assumed testing was

too difficult and stressful for them, or students with disabilities were placed in tests designed for a lower grade level than the one in which they were enrolled. Pervasive lower expectations existed despite evidence that the performance of students with disabilities overall covered the same range of scores as did those of students without disabilities.⁸

Similarly, when states were first developing AA-AAAS, they tended to create tests with little relationship to academics, based on the incorrect assumption that students with significant cognitive disabilities could not learn academic content. Also, English learners often were excluded from academic instruction and assessments.⁹

2. Different requirements for assessment participation. Although less obvious than in the past, low expectations remain embedded

in policy and practice. When states were asked to state the number of students that had to be included in assessment data before the state or schools would be held accountable for their performance (known as the minimum *n* size), many states opted to identify a higher number for students with disabilities (and for English learners) than for other groups of students. Thus states were less likely to be held accountable for these students at the district or school level—yet another indicator of a lack of confidence in education systems' ability to support students with disabilities.

In addition, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams have tended to identify increasing numbers of students to participate in an AA-AAAS, which holds students to different performance expectations that are appropriate for students with significant cognitive disabilities but not for others. Growth in the percentage of students assigned to AA-AAAS over time suggests that school staff are looking to these assessments as a way to avoid holding students with disabilities to the same performance standards as students without disabilities.¹⁰

Graduation policies also may inadvertently doom students with disabilities to postsecondary failure. Although students with disabilities may need accessibility features and accommodations to demonstrate knowledge and skills, they should not be held to different standards unless they are appropriately included in the AA-AAAS.

3. Lack of careful consideration of accessibility and accommodations. Although there

has been much progress in developing assessments based on universal design for learning (UDL) principles (see article, page 32),¹¹ state policies often do not adequately support staff training on how to make appropriate accessibility and accommodations decisions for instruction and assessment.

For example, some students may need more time to complete school assignments (as well as assessments) than other students. English learners with disabilities may need accessibility features and accommodations to support their developing English skills as well as their disability.

4. Misunderstanding of how interim assessment data can support instruction. Formative, interim, and summative assessments have different purposes. Using one for a purpose for which it was not intended compromises the usefulness of results. For example, interim assessments, administered several times in a school year to measure within-year progress, cannot replace summative assessments and vice versa. If interim assessments are a required state or districtwide assessment, the state or district must provide appropriate accessibility and accommodations as well as an AA-AAAS for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Many states and districts have not heeded these requirements.¹²

5. Perpetuating myths about the dangers of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Although inclusion of students with disabilities has increased overall, there continue to be myths about the

Box 1. AA-AAAS Participation

Federal law requires that the AA-AAAS be used only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, and it indicates how many students should participate. Before ESEA was reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), its precursor (known as No Child Left Behind) did not cap participation in the alternate assessment. It merely capped at 1 percent the percentage of enrolled students taking these assessments who could count as proficient for accountability purposes. To dissuade schools from using AA-AAAS where it was not intended, ESSA set a limit on participation, at no more than 1 percent of students tested in a subject area.

Be aware of the history of low expectations for students with disabilities and how that history has been perpetuated.

dangers of inclusion in general education, especially for students with significant cognitive disabilities.¹³ One such myth is that providing individualized instruction and supports for these students is too difficult. Other myths are that most would be better served in separate settings and that their inclusion in general education classrooms is too distracting for students without disabilities and their teachers.

What State Policymakers Can Do

Policy decisions do affect what takes place in the classroom, even when they seem removed from teaching and learning. There are several things state policymakers can do to ensure their policies are enacted with care.

Examine every education policy for unintended consequences that may impact students with disabilities. Every policy should be reviewed for possible unintended consequences. In the early 1990s, there were unintended consequences arising from policies that aimed to “protect” students with disabilities. Students were “excused” from having to take state tests if they had an IEP. Consequently, teachers did not need to worry about whether these students learned the tested content, and many students as a result had less opportunity to learn grade-level content.¹⁴ And freed from the responsibility for thinking about test accommodations, educators tended to not think about accommodations for instruction either.

Similarly, graduation policies often excused students with disabilities from the requirements for a high school diploma. And without understanding the consequences, IEP teams sometimes held students with disabilities to different standards early in their school years so that the students fell further and further behind what they were expected to learn.

Directly address expectations for students with disabilities. Five steps could be taken to address low expectations head on.¹⁵ First, be aware of the history of low expectations for students with disabilities and how that history has been perpetuated. Second, seek input from parents and educators on the consequences of the expectations to which students have been held. This input likely will reveal that students with disabilities who were held to high

expectations excelled while similar students for whom there were low expectations did not.

Third, examine data on assessment participation and performance. Assignment of students to the AA-AAAS can harm students who should be held to grade-level achievement standards by reinforcing low expectations. Fourth, require that persistently low-performing students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and that their instruction is high quality. Students who are behind their peers likely need both remediation and acceleration strategies, in addition to special education services.

Fifth, continue to monitor the progress of these students toward reaching grade-level content standards. English learners with disabilities will also need intensive instruction to increase English language skills needed to participate in and be successful with content instruction. Both must occur if English learners are to catch up.

Review the accessibility of state assessments, including accommodation policies. Critical to the success of students with disabilities is adequate access to what is being taught and what is being asked of them on an assessment. The first step in achieving this goal is the use of UDL in both instruction and assessments. For assessments, this means designing each assessment to be accessible for a wide variety of test takers. Universally designed assessments will include varied testing populations during development, pilot tests, and field testing; the precisely defined constructs to be tested; unbiased, accessible items; and items that are amenable to accommodations. States should require universal design for all state and districtwide assessments.

Understand the different purposes of interim and summative assessments. Most interim assessments are commercially produced but not all. A recent convening of experts and stakeholders highlighted the confusion and challenges around different types of assessments, particularly interim ones.¹⁶ Among the convening recommendations were to check whether students with disabilities are included, with needed accommodations or with an alternate interim assessment, and to ensure that interims are aligned to grade-level content standards.

Debunk myths associated with the inclusion of students with disabilities in general

education classrooms. Least restrictive environment provisions in IDEA make it clear that the general education classroom is the starting placement for every student with a disability. Only those students who cannot receive a satisfactory education there—with the assumption they have been provided needed supplementary aids and services to enable them to participate—should be assigned to a more restrictive setting.

Multitiered systems of support (MTSS) can support the learning of all students, including those with significant cognitive disabilities and English learners with disabilities,¹⁷ by providing academic and behavioral instruction and interventions through a tiered system in which all students receive core instruction (tier 1) and fewer students receive supplemental instruction or interventions (tiers 2 and 3). Ongoing screening and progress monitoring are built into the framework. In addition, incorporation of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) programs can dramatically improve the likelihood that inclusion is successful.

There is ample evidence that including students with disabilities in general education classrooms does not interfere with the progress of students without disabilities. In fact, evidence suggests that inclusive schools and classrooms benefit both.¹⁸ The more that state boards ensure state policies embrace the latest research and inclusion strategies, the greater the likelihood that students with disabilities will be included in general education classrooms,¹⁹ which is vital for setting them up for success upon graduation. ■

¹Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorizations of 1994, 2001, 2015 (20 U.S.C. §§ 630 et seq.); Individuals with Disabilities Education Act reauthorizations of 1997, 2004 (20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.).

²ESEA refers to these students as “students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.” In this article, we use the shortened “students with significant cognitive disabilities.”

³Dia Jackson and Jill Bowdon, “Spotlight on Students with Disabilities,” Research Brief (Washington, DC: AIR, 2020); Patricia Garcia-Arena and Stephanie D’Souza, “Spotlight on English Learners,” Research Brief (Washington, DC: AIR, 2020); Anya Kamenetz, “Survey Shows Big Remote Learning Gaps for Low-Income and Special Needs Children,” NPR, May 27, 2020; Penny Rosenblum et al., *Access and Engagement: Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Students Birth-21 with Visual Impairments, Their Families, and Professionals in the United States and Canada* (Arlington, VA: American Foundation for the Blind, 2020).

⁴Yi-Chen Wu, Martha L. Thurlow, and Kristin Liu, “Understanding the Characteristics of English Learners with Disabilities to Meet Their Needs during State and Districtwide Assessments,” NCEO Brief 24 (Minneapolis:

National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021).

⁵Yi-Chen Wu, Sheryl Lazarus, and Kristin Liu, “2017-2018 APR Snapshot #24: AA-AAAS Participation and Performance” (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2021).

⁶IDEA requires participation of all students with disabilities in all state- or district-required assessments, even if not used for Title I accountability.

⁷The state-defined alternate assessment must have requirements that are consistent with the state criteria for a regular high school diploma. See Martha Thurlow et al., “Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities” (Minneapolis and Charlotte, NC: NCEO and National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2016).

⁸Rachel F. Quenemoen and Martha L. Thurlow, “Students with Disabilities in Educational Policy, Practice, and Professional Judgment: What Should We Expect?” NCEO Report 413 (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2019).

⁹Kristin Liu et al., “Voices from the Field: Making State Assessment Decisions for English Language Learners with Disabilities” (Minneapolis: NCEO, IVARED Project, 2013).

¹⁰Yi-Chen Wu et al., “Trends in AA-AAS Participation and Performance for 2007–08 to 2016–17,” *Data Analytics* 12 (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2020).

¹¹Sheryl Lazarus et al., *An Updated Guide to Universally Designed Assessments* (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2021).

¹²Michelle Boyer and Erika Landl, “Interim Assessment Practices for Students with Disabilities,” NCEO Brief 22 (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2021).

¹³In general education classrooms, teachers address the needs of all students, including students with disabilities, by carefully considering student access needs when developing standards-based IEPs, universally designing instruction, and collaborating across general and special education to provide support to students. For more on inclusive education of students with significant cognitive disabilities and ways to universally design instruction so all students, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, can benefit, see TIES Center, www.tiescenter.org.

¹⁴Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, “Unintended Effects of Educational Reform in New York,” *Educational Policy* 6 (December 1992): 397–414; Linda Darling-Hammond, “The Implications of Testing Policy for Quality and Equality,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 73 (November 1991); Sheryl S. Lazarus et al., “Getting Ready for the 2021–22 School Year: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Testing Children with Disabilities,” NCEO Brief 26 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, NCEO, August 2021).

¹⁵Martha L. Thurlow and Rachel F. Quenemoen, “Revisiting Expectations for Students with Disabilities,” NCEO Brief 17 (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2019); Quenemoen and Thurlow, “Students with Disabilities in Educational Policy, Practice, and Professional Judgment.”

¹⁶Sheryl Lazarus et al., “Using Interim Assessments to Appropriately Measure What Students with Disabilities Know and Can Do: Advisory Panel Takeaways and NCEO Recommendations,” NCEO Report 427 (Minneapolis: NCEO, 2021).

¹⁷Martha L. Thurlow et al., “MTSS for All: Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, NCEO/TIES Center, January 2020).

¹⁸See Kids Together Inc., website, www.kidstogether.org/inclusion/benefitsofinclusion.htm.

¹⁹See TIES Center, website, www.tiescenter.org.

Martha L. Thurlow, Ph.D., is senior research associate, Sheryl S. Lazarus, Ph.D., the director, and Kristin K. Liu, Ph.D., the assistant director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota.