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Developing Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities _____

Published in the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the *Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, this paper provides an understanding of alternate assessments and critical issues that are part of accountability systems. It also highlights the efforts of two States to include all students in their accountability systems. The reference citation is shown on the last page.

Standards-based reform is gaining momentum across the United States as virtually every State implements an accountability system. Although standards and assessments may vary from State to State, at least two components are similar: (1) public reporting of results and (2) the use of rewards (e.g., teacher incentives) for schools and districts that make satisfactory progress toward identified standards, or sanctions (e.g., probational status) for schools and districts that do not make such progress.

Although most States encourage the use of testing accommodations to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities, there is great variation in the numbers of students who actually participate. In fact, participation rates range from 0 percent to 100 percent, depending on the State (Erickson, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996). However, when students with disabilities are exempted from the testing process, they typically are not included in the accountability system, which means that school and district staff are not held accountable for the progress of these particular students (Thurlow, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1995).

State reports suggest that large numbers of students with disabilities, and most with significant disabilities (approximately 1 to 2 percent of the total student population) are exempted from participation in large-scale assessments that form the basis of accountability systems. The reasons for their exclusion include the following:

- Current general assessments are not relevant to their needs.
- * They are typically participating in an alternate curriculum.

- * An IEP team reviews their progress annually and determines that participation in large-scale assessments is not appropriate for a particular child.
- * Student progress on IEPs has served as the accountability measure for special education.
- * Developing new assessments for this group of students is resource-intensive (e.g., fiscal and manpower) and technically difficult.
- * Test administration rules and guidelines have traditionally required students to be tested at their age-appropriate test level instead of their actual instructional level. (For example, a 10-year-old child working on the first grade level would be tested at the fourth or fifth grade level.) This may lead to diagnostic information that is not very helpful.
- * School administrators may not want to include some students with disabilities because administrators believe these students' test scores may negatively affect the overall school score.
- * Some school administrators and teachers do not want specific students included because they believe that it would subject these students to high stress.

The current special education evaluation process (i.e., IEP development and review) focuses on individual students. Although evaluating individual progress is important, it is also necessary to evaluate the school's effectiveness in preparing students with disabilities for life as adults in communities, and holding school personnel accountable for the progress of these students (Brauen, O'Reilly, & Moore, 1994).

To address these issues, the IDEA Amendments of 1997 require all States to:

1. Report to the public on the performance of students with disabilities participating in regular assessments (20 U.S.C. 1412[a][17][B][iii]);
2. Conduct alternate assessments for students who cannot participate in State and district-wide assessment programs (20 U.S.C. 1412[a][17][A][iii]); and
3. Report to the public on the performance of students with disabilities participating in alternate assessments (with the same frequency and in the same detail as they report on the assessment of nondisabled children) if doing so would be statistically sound and would not result in the disclosure of performance results identifiable to individual children (20 U.S.C. 1412[a][17][B][iii]).

WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS?

There are three predominant types of large-scale assessments for students with disabilities: general assessments, general assessments with accommodations, and alternate assessments. The majority of students take the general, large-scale assessments without any accommodations; others may benefit from the use of changes in setting, presentation style, response style, extended time, or alternative supplies or equipment (accommodations); and a small percentage need to participate in alternate assessments.

As explained by Ysseldyke and colleagues (1997), "alternate assessments are used when students do not 'fit' within the regular assessment program, or when the tests typically used to not 'fit' a segment of the school population (p. 2)." These alternative methods of gathering information on student achievement may look similar to the general assessments (i.e., similar performance measures) but will probably differ in format or content.

PUTTING ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS IN PRACTICE

With the passage of the IDEA Amendments of 1997, all States are in the process of developing strategies for including students with significant disabilities in their accountability systems. Some States are already implementing this process. Two examples, Kentucky's Alternative Portfolio system and Maryland's Independent Mastery Assessment Program, are described below.

Kentucky's Alternate Portfolio

Assessment and accountability form just one part of the educational reform in Kentucky known as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). With the advent of KERA, most curricular and instructional decisions were to be made at the school building level. With this new autonomy, however, schools became accountable for student learning through the performance-based assessment system. In Kentucky, schools receive cash awards or sanctions based on their assessment scores. Baseline scores for two years are calculated to reflect a threshold score. Schools must exceed their threshold score to be eligible for cash awards. Schools that fail to reach their threshold score or fall significantly below their threshold may receive technical assistance from the State Department of Education and are subject to extreme sanctions such as removal of staff.

The assessment system uses performance assessment methodologies that are based on a common curricular framework of 57 Academic Expectations. These expectations are determined for all students, who produce writing and mathematics portfolios that represent a collection of best work, on-demand performance events, and standardized assessment scores (i.e., California Test of Basic Skills). The standardized assessment is not used in the accountability index, an aggregation of student assessment data that results in school classification for rewards or sanctions (Petrosko, 1998). Students with disabilities are fully included in the assessment system. Students with disabilities can participate in the general assessment system with or without specifically determined accommodations. Students for whom writing and mathematics portfolios would be inappropriate participate in the assessment system through an Alternate Portfolio. An Alternate Portfolio score weights equally with the combination of assessments in the general system. The scores are reported through the accountability index. In addition, scores for students in the Alternate Portfolio are tracked to the child's neighborhood school, so that schools are encouraged to have ownership of the results of all students who reside within the school's attendance area. The Alternate Portfolio does not relieve the school of its responsibility for the education of that student.

Less than 1 percent of Kentucky's students, or approximately 850 per year, develop Alternate Portfolios. The severity of disability category alone is not a basis for exemption from the assessment process. In fact, only one student has been exempted in the past six years. All other students have participated in one of the assessment formats. Specific eligibility requirements for the Alternate Portfolio limit participation to those students with significant cognitive disabilities that are not the result of specific learning disabilities; hearing, vision, physical, or emotional/behavioral impairments; and who, even with appropriate modifications and support, are unable to complete the regular program of studies (Kentucky Systems Change Project, 1997). Following State guidelines, each student's IEP team determines which assessment the student will participate in and identifies accommodations as needed.

The Alternate Portfolio is based on a unified set of six learning goals and 28 of the 57 Academic Expectations identified for all students. An example of an Academic Expectation is: "Students use research tools to locate sources of information and ideas relevant to a specific need or problem" (Kentucky Department of Education, 1993). For one student, a critical function of "using research tools" may be to use an augmentative communication system to ask a question or request assistance. Another student may conduct a survey of employers about appropriate dress for work.

An Alternate Portfolio contains several types of information, including a letter to the reviewer written or dictated by the student or interpretations of the student's communication by peers; examples of a student's mode of communication; and an individualized daily schedule with examples of how the student is learning to use the schedule. Eighth and twelfth grade students must include a resume and/or evidence of vocational skills. A letter of validation from the parent must also be included. Finally, the portfolio must include 8 to 10 entries that show student performance in multiple settings with appropriate supports and peer interactions. Evidence of student performance can be instructional program data, photographs or videotape, and permanent products. A single entry may incorporate any or all of these approaches.

Portfolios are scored by teachers using a holistic scoring approach. This approach incorporates key standards in six scoring dimensions that must be shown within and across entries in order to score at high levels. The holistic scoring guide shows performance indicators at four levels: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. These indicators reflect those used in the general writing and mathematics portfolio. The scoring dimensions for the Alternate Portfolio are grounded in best programming practices for educating students with moderate and severe disabilities.

A recent survey of teachers involved in the alternate assessment suggested that teachers saw benefit of including these students in school accountability indices (Kleinert, Kearns, & Kennedy, 1997). Some of the benefits reported by teachers included instructional programming related to students following their own schedules, students evaluating their own performance, and an increase in the number of students using augmentative communication systems (Wheatley, 1993). Teachers also expressed frustration with the amount of time required to develop an Alternate Portfolio and scoring reliability, and some teachers perceived that the process is an assessment of teachers or programs, rather than student progress.

Maryland's Independent Mastery Assessment Program

In 1989, the Maryland Board of Education adopted the report of the *Sondheim Commission on School Performance*, which called for educational reform through rigorous standards and a new assessment. The Commission stipulated that "all children can learn equally rigorous content." Therefore, all children should be included in the accountability process (Haigh, 1996). Currently, two assessment forms form the "student performance" component of the Maryland School Performance Program:

Maryland Functional Tests (MFTs) which consist of four minimum competency tests in reading, writing, math, and citizenship which must be passed for graduation, and the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). The MSPAP is a collection of performance assessment administered to a matrix sampling of students in grades 3, 5, and 8. The tasks are designed to measure what students have learned based on identified State outcomes. The assessments are integrated across subject matter content and emphasize the application of knowledge and skills in content areas. Each assessment requires multiple student responses that can include open-ended responses, writing mathematical findings, and group activities. Results are not reported for individual students, rather, they are used to provide descriptive data about a school's performance at targeted assessed areas. Additional plans to take effect with the 2004 graduating class include requiring passing of all four of the MFTs to exit eighth grade and the implementation of a high school assessment that will be similar to the MSPAP, with passing required for graduation.

In an effort to include students with diverse learning styles, a wide array of accommodations were identified for students with disabilities, those eligible for Section 504 support, and those identified with limited English proficiency. All students with disabilities take the MFTs and MSPAP unless their IEP committee determines that the student is receiving a functional life skills curriculum, rather than the curriculum based on the Maryland learning outcomes of reading, writing, language usage, math, science, and social studies. The Independence Mastery Assessment Program (IMAP) was developed for those students with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot participate in the MFTs and MSPAP.

IMAP development was guided by a Stakeholder Advisory Committee composed of parents, special educators and administrators, principals, local district accountability coordinators, assessment and measurement specialists, employers, and representatives of advocacy and adult service organizations. Exit standards (age 21 years) were identified in the personal management community, career/vocational, and recreation/leisure content areas with enabling standards in the learner areas of communication, decision-making, behavior, and functional academics. A back-mapping process was used to identify outcomes and indicators for benchmark ages of 5, 8, 10, 13, and 17.

A series of chronologically age-appropriate performance tasks has been developed for each content area. Opportunities to engage in activities leading to the learner areas embedded in each task. For example, a vocational task for a student aged 17-21 could focus on preparing to engage in a community-based job and obtaining the necessary clothing, supplies, and equipment. The student's performance is scored on actual work preparation skills, as well as on communication with nondisabled co-workers, problem solving, appropriate behaviors, and use of functional academic skills. After task completion, each student participates in a discussion that analyzes his/her performance.

Six scoring rubrics are used for each task. They are student performance, program supports, communication, decision making, behavior, and functional academics. The student performance rubric is a 4-point scale, with the highest score awarded to those students who complete the task with minimal assistance from peers and co-workers. A lower score is assigned for completing the task with support from teachers or other special education personnel. The program support rubric assesses chronological age-appropriate supports that are provided only as needed to promote maximum independence.

The IMAP product for each student is a portfolio consisting of at least two videotaped on-demand performance tasks, descriptions/examples of program supports (e.g., communication systems, behavior management plans), descriptions of previous experiences (e.g., vocational, community

participation), and an optional parent survey that addresses student skills outside of school. Portfolios, including the videotapes, are evaluated during the summer by a group of three special educators (who do not know the student). This summer session is a professional development opportunity for the teachers, as well as a formal scoring session. Scoring results are reported at the school level for the school that the student attended at the time of the assessment.

Currently, 12 of the State's 24 districts participate in IMAP. Because it has not yet been formally adopted as part of the State's accountability system, IMAP focuses on program improvement. With the implementation of the IDEA Amendments of 1997, the current IMAP framework is being expanded to include all school districts in Maryland.

IMAP was designed to change instruction. Regardless of the special education placement, all students should have ongoing, regular opportunities to engage in community-based vocational experiences that facilitate effective transition to employment opportunities following school. Likewise, it is expected that students will begin to regularly engage in self-evaluation of their individual performance. Experiences in the first two years of the IMAP process revealed that minimal instructional time was devoted to the critical thinking skills of decision making/self-evaluation by students with significant disabilities. However, employers on the Stakeholder Advisory Committee felt strongly that these skills needed to be addressed early in school to allow sufficient time for skill development.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Including students with significant disabilities in accountability systems and developing the alternate assessments that will serve as the assessment mechanism are complicated tasks.

One goal of IDEA is to foster increased and expanded ownership for the education and services provided to students with disabilities. To accomplish this goal, a number of issues need to be considered within the context of each State's accountability system. Most of these can be addressed in two ways: within a unified system (e.g., Kentucky) or an alternative system (e.g., Maryland). Both approaches have merit; however, each time a decision is made to adopt an alternative component (i.e., standards, assessment framework, scoring rubric, reporting framework), an additional barrier is drawn that separates students with significant disabilities from the larger student population (McLaughlin & Warren, 1994).

Eligible Population

Perhaps the most significant and controversial issue to be addressed is the identification of the population of students eligible to participate in alternative assessments. Currently in many states, large numbers of students with disabilities are exempted from general assessments because they read below grade level, lack sufficient comprehensive skills, disrupt the testing environment, or become frustrated during testing. Others are exempted because they have significant cognitive disabilities that prevent them from participating in most large-scale assessments, particularly those based on academic content versus those addressing vocational or personal management. The intent of IDEA is for a small number of students to participate in alternate assessments with the large majority of the remaining currently exempted students being included in the general assessments. Therefore, as State departments of education develop eligibility policies, care should be taken to avoid identification of eligible or noneligible groups of students. The ultimate decision should be made by the IEP team on an individual basis within the framework of IEP development and review.

Identification of Standards

Standards for students with disabilities need to be challenging, comprehensive, and realistic. Most States have already identified the standards that serve as the foundation for the general assessments. Depending on the nature of the standards, additional standards may need to be developed. Standards that focus on academic areas may not be broad enough to be relevant to the needs of students with significant disabilities and will need to be expanded or replaced by alternate assessments that address relevant areas. However, many States have developed broad standards that can facilitate a system wherein all students work toward similar standards while exhibiting their progress in different ways.

The process of identifying alternative or additional standards should include geographic and cultural diversity, educators from the continuum of educational settings, parents, students, or former students receiving special education services, employers, and adult service agency representatives.

Purpose of the Assessments

It is essential that the purpose of the alternate assessment be clear to everyone. If a State requires that a student pass a particular assessment to advance to a higher grade or to graduate, then the schools must ensure that parents are fully informed of their options regarding an alternate assessment and that students with disabilities have access to instruction that will prepare them also to advance or graduate. Furthermore, students with disabilities should not be recommended for alternative assessments if their exemption from the general assessments is viewed as a way of increasing the school's score.

Assessment Format

Assessments should reflect the broadest possible range of knowledge and skills needed for a positive quality of life. For students with significant disabilities, this range should encompass vocational, personal management, leisure, and community orientation skills. However, it is impractical to propose developing a series of assessments that would cover all the necessary areas and that would be taken by every student.

There are options that enable assessors to evaluate the progress of groups of students toward meeting standards. Kentucky's portfolio approach presents a common framework for all portfolios while allowing for individual flexibility (e.g., focus areas) in selecting actual entries. Maryland has adopted two approaches. For the MSPAP, each student is randomly assigned to one of three groups. Each group takes a different assortment of performance assessments. Individually, the assortments do not provide a complete picture of individual student progress toward meeting State standards; but, analyzing performance across three assessment groups offers a "bird's eye" picture of overall progress of the group. IMAP offers an alternative approach, with local school district accountability staff randomly assigning each student to a task while allowing school-based staff to select a second task for each student. An additional consideration is whether the alternate assessment will be an on-demand task (i.e., IMAP) or an ongoing process (i.e., Kentucky's portfolios). On-demand tasks allow a snapshot of performances by a large group at one particular time. A portfolio process can offer the opportunity to see change over time.

Scoring Rubrics

Traditionally, the goal of assessments has been to determine whether the student knows subject matter content. More recently, the focus has changed to whether a student can apply knowledge. When evaluating students with significant disabilities, additional issues need to be considered. Given the nature of the disability, a student may require support to complete certain tasks. This support has typically been provided by paid staff (e.g., special educators, job coaches, counselors). The advent of natural supports has resulted in a new focus on roles that others can play. Both Kentucky and Maryland have chosen to award higher performance points to those students receiving natural supports than to those receiving supports from staff.

This results in multi-point scoring rubrics. Both Kentucky and Maryland use 4-point scales. Kentucky uses descriptive terms, and Maryland uses numeric terms. In an effort to create a unified accountability system, consideration should be given to the adoption of comparable scoring rubrics for both general assessments and alternate assessments.

Administration of Alternate Assessments

Resources required for administration of alternate assessments vary according to the nature of the specific assessment. Developing alternate portfolios may require no more resources or logistical support than are required to develop the general portfolios. Likewise, when performance assessments are aligned with performance-based instruction, administration will not require significantly more resources. Difficulties in resource allocation (e.g., manpower, equipment) tend to arise when the assessment looks very different from day-to-day practices. If students are engaged in community-based instruction and self-evaluation activities occur regularly, the actual assessment session should not pose dramatic logistical problems.

Scoring of Alternate Assessments

The viability of the alternate assessment system may rest with the reliability of the scoring process. Lessons learned from Kentucky and Maryland point to the impact training has in achieving reliability.

These States have adopted different scoring approaches. Each Kentucky Alternate Portfolio is scored at least twice. The first scoring is conducted by the student's own teacher with (ideally) the input of another trained scorer. The second scoring is done at a regional level by scorers blind to the initial score, as well as to the district submitting the portfolio. Alternate portfolios that lack consensus between the two scores are evaluated a third time by a State employee.

Maryland's IMAP portfolios are scored simultaneously by three trained scorers who represent districts other than the district submitting the portfolio. Their scores are averaged to obtain a final score.

Reporting of Scores

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 require that the public in each State receive a report on the performance of students with disabilities with the same frequency and in the same detail as is reported for nondisabled students. However, the reporting must be statistically sound and cannot violate the confidentiality of individual students.

Several benefits can accrue when scores are reported in the disaggregate (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). Validity can be strengthened when the scores of a particular group that have "uncertain meaning" are separated, thus increasing the validity of the larger group. Second, disaggregation removes the "unfair burden" placed on schools with larger numbers of students with significant disabilities. Finally, disaggregating scores of a particular group may focus additional attention to that group, thus focusing more public interest on the educational services provided to the target group of students. Care must be taken in describing the disaggregated group to ensure confidentiality of individual students.

However, disaggregation of scores, particularly for very small groups as would be found in the alternate assessment population, raises serious threats to reliability. In addition, unless the disaggregated group was described (which would threaten individual confidentiality), there would be little benefit in separately identifying the group.

SUMMARY

Including all students in systems of public accountability is critical to expanding the concept that principals and, when appropriate, general educators, also assume responsibility for students with disabilities. Traditionally, responsibility for these students has rested solely with special educators. In the future, this focus of responsibility should shift to the whole school.

Although many students with disabilities currently participate in large-scale assessments, the challenge is to develop rigorous, alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities that are based on standards relevant to their post school needs. However, participation in alternative assessment needs to be used cautiously because the majority of students with disabilities can participate in the large-scale assessments.

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