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Standards-Based Reform and Students with Disabilities _____

The purpose of this paper is to describe the concept of standards-based reform and its implementation by States, with particular attention to inclusion of students with disabilities in assessments. It reports on work conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes, one of several research projects funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and was published in the *Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. The reference citation is shown on the last page of this paper.

Standards-based reform has become the foundation for educational change in the 1990s. According to a report by the National Research Council:

"Standards-based reform includes content standards that specify what students should know and do to demonstrate proficiency, and assessments that provide the accountability mechanism for monitoring whether these expectations have been met and by whom. In addition, standards-based reforms assume that schools should be held publicly accountable for student performance." (McDonnell & McLaughlin, 1997, p. 3)

It is recognized, however, that standards-based reform is being implemented in different ways by States and local education agencies (LEAs).

Standards-based reform encompasses four concepts. First is a focus on establishing *high standards*, both in the rigor of content standards (what students must know and be able to do) and the level of performance that must be demonstrated toward achieving the standards. The American Federation of Teachers (1996) reported that 48 States are now establishing common academic standards for their students. However, the development of standards is an ongoing process as States continue to revise and expand them.

A second concept embedded in standards-based reform is a belief in *accountability*. Accountability refers to "a systematic method to assure those inside and outside the educational system that schools and students are moving toward desired goals" (Brauen, O'Reilly, & Moore, 1994, p. 2).

Accountability can be directed toward the individual (e.g., students must meet certain requirements to earn a certain level of performance to receive accreditation). Related to the belief in accountability is the third concept associated with standards-based reform – the implementation of *consequences* as part of the accountability system. Such consequences may include sanctions such as probational status and rewards such as teacher incentives at the school and district levels. Accountability systems have consequences, even if only in terms of public reporting of the results. Increasing the consequences in the accountability system is a particular focus of recent educational reform. In the most recent studies of educational accountability systems (Bond, Braskamp, & Roeber, 1996; National Education Goals Panel, 1996), 27 States tied consequences for student performance to schools (e.g., loss of funding, awards to staff, etc) and 30 States tied consequences to students (e.g., student promotion, awards or recognition, graduation).

Finally, as part of standards-based reform, there is renewed reliance on the use of *assessments* to measure the performance of students and their progress toward meeting standards. Bond and colleagues (1996) reported that, during the 1995-96 school year, 46 States administered statewide student assessments. This number has increased over time, along with the attention given to the assessments.

Although the language and intent of standards-based reform have emphasized its importance for all students, the extent to which students with disabilities actually have been included in the various aspects of reform is still a question. Four avenues for examining the inclusion of students with disabilities in standards-based reform are: (1) involvement of special education in State-based reform activities, (2) current practices and policies in statewide assessments, (3) reporting of the performance of students with disabilities, and (4) research findings relevant to standards-based reform. Each is discussed below.

INVOLVEMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN STATE-BASED REFORM ACTIVITIES

In 1997, State directors of special education responded to questions about the involvement of their offices in State Department of Education activities related to reform (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997). These directors also indicated the emphasis placed on reform in their States. In general, the more emphasis placed on reform activity, the greater the involvement of special education in that activity. However, there is room for greater involvement. For example, 35 State directors of special education indicated that efforts at establishing or revising educational results, standards, or curricular frameworks were highly emphasized in their states (see Table 1), yet the number of directors who indicated that their offices were highly involved in these efforts was small. Only 12 directors indicated that their offices were closely involved in establishing standards. Similar results were found for other reform areas, as well.

A three-part analysis of State standards documents was conducted to determine the extent to which students with disabilities were considered in the development of the standards (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Gutman, & Geenan, 1997). First, States' standards documents were examined for evidence of involvement in the development process of individuals with disabilities or individuals knowledgeable about disabilities (e.g., special education teacher or administrator, parent of a student with a disability, advocate). This analysis revealed that few States have involved these

individuals as they developed their standards – only 17 percent of States included special educators in the standards development process. Thus, existing standards documents were developed, for the most part, without the involvement of people familiar with disabilities.

Table 1. State-Level Emphasis and Special Education Involvement in Establishing Educational Results, Standards, or Curricular Frameworks

<u>Level of Involvement By Your Special Education Division Or Unit</u>	<u>Emphasis Placed on This Activity By State Educational Agencies This Year (1997)</u>					<u>Total Number Of States</u>
	<u>1: No Emphasis</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5: High Emphasis</u>	
1: Not involved	2 States				2 States	4 States
2				2	3	5
3			3	5	11	19
4			1	4	8	13
5: Closely involved			1		11	12
Total States:	2 States		5 St	11 St	35 States	53 States

The total includes both regular States and unique U.S. territories. Not all States or territories responded.

Source: Erickson & Thurlow (1997)

The second part of the analysis of State standards (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Gutman, et al., 1997) focuses on how States specified whether students with disabilities would be held to State standards. Most States (77 percent) refer to "all" students in their standards. However, 49 percent mention "all" students without stating whether this includes students with disabilities; 8 percent specifically mention students with disabilities; and 20 percent give information on accommodations that might be needed to provide these students the opportunity to reach these standards. Only 23 percent of the States made no mention of "all" students or students with disabilities.

The third analysis of standards documents focused on the extent to which non-academic standards were addressed in the States' documents (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Gutman, et al., 1997). These areas, such as social or emotional development, citizenship, and physical health, are frequently of importance to students with disabilities. This analysis revealed that States do indeed identify standards in a variety of areas other than academics. The extent to which information is available in non-academic areas is not known. State assessment and accountability systems typically focus only on academics. And, State directors indicated that their own offices do not routinely collect or publish data reflecting non-academic domains (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997).

CURRENT PRACTICES AND POLICIES IN STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS

The use of statewide assessments as part of educational accountability systems is widespread, but the specifics of the assessments vary greatly from one State to the next. Most assessments are administered in grades 4, 8, and 11, but at least two States administer assessments in every grade from kindergarten through grade 12. The subjects most frequently covered in statewide assessment are mathematics, language arts, and writing, with science and social studies close behind. Writing assessments, and criterion-referenced tests are used most often, followed closely by norm-reference tests. Slightly fewer States administer performance assessments, and only four States currently use portfolios as part of their statewide assessments. Currently, there is a tremendous amount of State activity related to assessments, which means that the characteristics of State assessment systems change frequently. A significant amount of the activity surrounding State assessments involves including students with disabilities.

In a 1997 survey, approximately 60 percent of States placed high emphasis on developing or revising the participation and exemption policies for students with disabilities in assessments (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997). At the same time, about 40 percent placed high emphasis on their accommodations policies. This is just one indication of the tremendous amount of activity that has surrounded these policies in the past five years. Since 1995 when the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) published States' participation (Thurlow, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1995b) and accommodations policies (Thurlow, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1995a), 34 States have updated their policies on participation, and 32 have updated their policies on accommodations (Thurlow, Seyfarth, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1997).

Participation in State Assessments. Although the participation of students with disabilities in assessments emerged as an issue in the early 1990s, its importance grew with the IDEA Amendments of 1997, which require States to report on the participation of students with disabilities in assessments (see Elliott, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Erickson, 1997; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Erickson, & Elliott, 1997). In 1997, there continued to be a lack of good data on the participation of students with disabilities in assessments, despite the high emphasis placed on this issue. Twenty-four of fifty-three State directors reported that their offices do not currently collect or receive information on the rate at which students with disabilities participate in any of their statewide assessments. State special education directors report that a leading inhibiting factor for increased participation of students with disabilities in assessment is the "high stakes" attached to school or district performance. This is followed by the tendencies of some teachers and parents who wish to protect students from stressful testing situations, the variation in implementation of participation guidelines, and inadequate monitoring of implementation. Of the 27 States indicating that their offices collect or receive information on the number of students with disabilities tested in statewide assessments, only nine actually provided numbers when asked to do so.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Documentation. The IDEA Amendments of 1997 call for increased access for students with disabilities to the general education curriculum; the amendments also included several requirements for documentation on the IEP. For example, there must be documentation of whether students will participate in the regular State assessment or in an alternate assessment that is to be developed and conducted by no later than July 1, 2000. Furthermore, IEP's must document both instructional and assessment accommodations that a student requires.

In 1997, however, only six State directors of special education indicated that their States had a requirement for IEP documentation related to State content or curriculum standards (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997). In addition, 75 percent of State directors indicated that documentation of

instructional accommodations is a current IEP requirement; approximately 55 percent indicated that their States require documentation of which assessment a student will take and which accommodations are provided during the assessment.

Alternate Assessments. Alternate assessments are designed for those students with disabilities who are unable to participate in general large-scale assessments used for accountability purposes by districts or States (Thurlow, Olsen, Elliott, Ysseldyke, Erickson, & Ahearn, 1996). The IDEA Amendments of 1997 require that such assessments be developed and conducted no later than July 1, 2000, and the performance of students reported. In 1997, the development of alternate assessments was still in conceptual form in many States. Only Kentucky had a fully implemented alternate assessment for those students unable to participate in the regular assessment. Maryland was field-testing its alternate assessment. Numerous other States indicate that they are "planning" or "considering" development of alternate assessments.

REPORTING THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Even when students with disabilities are included in State assessments, their scores may not be reported (Erickson, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Elliott, 1997). In an earlier analysis, it was discovered that 14 of 24 States with written policies specifically excluded the scores of students with disabilities when assessment results were reported (Thurlow, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1995b). In 1997, State directors of special education in 31 States reported that the performance scores of students with disabilities were disaggregated for one or more of their State assessments (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997).

In States where scores of students with disabilities were not disaggregated, State directors indicated that the primary reasons included (1) lack of time, (2) lack of resources, and (3) inability to identify students with disabilities in the databases. Few States indicated that the reason was a concern about possible misinterpretation or that there was no need for the information.

In those States that did disaggregate data on students with disabilities, the scores were primarily reported in internal review documents for both State and local education administrators (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997). States that report assessment results for students with disabilities are shown in Table 2. Only ten States include the disaggregated performance of students in their regularly released reports on educational results (Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Shin, & Coleman, 1997).

Analysis of State accountability reports from 47 States and Washington, DC (Thurlow, Langenfeld, et al., 1997) revealed a number of other findings. The analysis looked at 113 accountability reports that were given to NCEO between 1995 and 1997. The reports covered data from the 1993-94 school year through 1995-96, depending on the time the report was received from the State and the most recent reports the States had available. The analysis looked at the types of inputs, processes, and results that States use as educational indicators for students with and without disabilities. Existing reports that include data on students with disabilities are extremely variable in the types of information presented. Most report on enrollment, and few report on performance. When performance data are presented, they may be provided for only a subset of the data available for general education students. Often it is unclear when students are included or excluded from specific pieces of information presented in State accountability reports.

Table 2. States That Report Assessment Results for Students with Disabilities

* Separate results for students with disabilities not included in reports	AK, AL, AR, AZ, CO, DC, DE, FL, HI, IA, ID, IN, KY, MA, MD, ME, MI, MO, MS, MT, ND, NE, NH, NJ, NM, NV, OH, OK, OR, PA, SD, TN, UT, VT, WA, WV
* Separate results for students with disabilities included in general education reports	GA, KS, NC, RI, SC, TX, VA
* Results for students with disabilities included in separate report	CT, LA
* Separate results for students with disabilities included in both general education and separate reports	NY
* No accountability report (a)	CA, MN, WY

(a) California's testing system is currently under revision; Minnesota is currently developing an accountability system; an assessment system is under consideration in Wyoming.

Data are current for June 1997.

Source: Data were taken from Erickson, Ysseldyke, et al., 1997

RESEARCH FINDINGS RELATED TO STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Considerable energy is now being invested in research to address several of the critical issues that face States and local education agencies as they move toward the participation of students with disabilities in their reforms and accountability systems. In December 1997, the U.S. Department of Education funded 19 assessment-related projects. Three of the national projects are discussed below

In the first project, the Department of Education is looking at efforts that will increase the number of students with disabilities and limited English proficiency who participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In another, the National Center for Education Statistics has established a line of research that addresses both students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency (Olson & Goldstein, 1997). In the third project, the NCEO focuses on educational outcomes for all students. Among some of the initial findings of all of these efforts are:

- * More students can be included in large scale assessments than have typically been included.
- * Specific guidelines for IEP members and other decision makers can increase the reliability of decisions that are made about participation in assessments and about the types of accommodations that are needed.

- * Some accommodations that may have been controversial in the past (e.g., marking on the test booklet rather than on an answer sheet, reading a math test to the student) do not seem to alter the validity of the test. (The most frequently used accommodations can be classified in one of four areas: [a] setting [taking the test in a separate room, a carrel, or a small group]; [b] scheduling [extended time, breaks during testing, or testing on certain days]; [c] presentation [using braille or large print, sign language presentation of directions, recording directions]; and [d] response [computer-generated and scribe-recorded answers, point to answers, mark in booklet]).
- * Alternate means of assessment for students with disabilities are being discussed and developed, allowing increased participation in assessment and accountability systems.
- * Parents and teachers overwhelmingly view the current emphasis on higher standards and participation in aligned assessment programs as positive and beneficial to helping student with disabilities achieve better educational results.
- * Current performance reporting practices for students with disabilities need to be dramatically improved to better inform public and policy-making audiences.

Eight additional projects were funded through OSEP, and another eight were funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Findings from these project are not yet available.

SUMMARY

Standards-based reform is being implemented within the educational system, and special education is beginning to play an increased role in reform efforts. States are placing high priority on the issue of inclusion of students with disabilities in State assessments and accommodations for these students. However, the data on student participation in statewide assessments continue to be inconsistent. The increased emphasis on reporting in the IDEA Amendments of 1997 is designed to improve participation and accommodation data. States are also addressing alternate assessments for students with disabilities. Reporting of performance assessments for students with disabilities varies widely across States, from reporting of disaggregated data in regular State accountability reports to separate reporting to no reporting.

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