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## Participation and Performance of Students with Disabilities In State Assessment Systems

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This module was published in the *Twenty-Third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2001)*, which was distributed in May 2002. One figure has been omitted in this version, but its data are explained in the text. Two figures have been converted to tables, and the numbers of other tables have been changed. These changes have no effect on the content of the module. The citation is:

U.S. Department of Education. (2001). Participation and performance of students with disabilities in State assessment systems. *Twenty-third annual report to Congress on the implementation of the individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. (pp. I-7 to I-18). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

The *Twenty-Third Annual Report* may be downloaded from:

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Products/OSEP2001AnIRpt/index.html>

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## Participation

In 1999, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) asked State directors of special education to provide their most recent frequency data on the participation of students with disabilities in State assessments (Thompson & Thurlow, 1999). In the past, most States were able to provide only estimates of the participation of students with disabilities in State assessments. In 1997, prior to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 15 States provided actual participation numbers (Erickson & Thurlow, 1997). In 1999, 23 States provided these data.

Although the Federal requirement is for States to report the number of students with disabilities participating in State and district assessments, participation rates (reported as percentages) are useful for policymakers evaluating the inclusiveness of assessment programs. Using State-provided numbers of students participating in assessments and child count data, NCEO calculated participation rates for specific administrations of State tests (Thompson & Thurlow, 1999). These estimated rates are contained in Table 1. Rates of participation varied from less than one-fourth of students with disabilities to all students with disabilities.

Table 1. Percentage of Students Receiving Special Education Services Who Participated in State Assessments

<u>State</u>	<u>Elementary</u>	<u>Middle Sch</u>	<u>High School</u>
	<u>K-5</u> <u>Percent</u>	<u>6-8</u> <u>Percent</u>	<u>9-12</u> <u>Percent</u>
1	44	43	27
2	81	73	51
3	52	63	53
4	51	79	78
5	62	66	56
6	100	100	100
7	95	95	---*
8	96	93	91
9	84	89	---*
10	65	70	51
11	83	88	93
12	88	90	---*
13	62	59	46
14	80	78	61
15	48	56	32
16	94	91	91
17	58	74	67
18	74	72	70
19	39	42	41
20	90	85	50
21	92	94	---*
22	89	---*	---*
23	23	15	26

Note: Because there were multiple tests in some States and multiple grades in others, total numbers are not available.

\* = No test administered at this level.

Source: Thompson & Thurlow, 1999.

In the original report, this was Table I-3.

There are several factors that State directors of special education believe may work against the full participation of students with disabilities in large-scale assessment programs, especially in States where accountability systems have significant consequences for students or schools (Thompson & Thurlow, 1999). The top three factors are:

- \* High stakes (i.e., sanctions or rewards) attached to school or district performance.
- \* Lack of exposure to the curriculum or content included in tests; and
- \* The perception of teachers, parents, and others that large-scale testing is irrelevant to the educational success of students with disabilities.

An analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggested that the provision of accommodations also affects the participation rate of students with disabilities. NAEP participation rates were higher in grades 4 and 8 (but not grade 12) when accommodations were provided (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Since accommodations are included in students' IEPs, fewer students will participate in assessments if the terms guiding the use of accommodations for specific assessments are in conflict with students' IEPs. For example, if a student's IEP specifies multiple breaks during testing but a particular assessment's guidelines say to break only at specific times, that student is less likely to participate in the assessment.

## **Performance**

NCEO analyzes State education reports to determine what types of information are provided on students with disabilities. Previous analyses had shown that few States (11 in the first analysis and 13 States in the second analysis) reported test-based results for students with disabilities. For the most recent analysis, 170 reports were collected from State accountability offices and State special education offices between March 1999 and August 1999. This analysis found that only 14 States included participation data, and only 17 States included performance data for students with disabilities in State assessments (Thurlow, Nelson, Teelucksingh, & Ysseldyke, 2000).

According to public reports, participation rates in State assessments varied from 33 percent to 97 percent of students with disabilities. Performance levels also varied widely, with the differences between rates of students with disabilities who met State standards versus all students ranging from 20 percent to 50 percent. Table 2 summarizes the performance data obtained from State reports.

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Table 2. Summary of Reports on Educational Results of Students with Disabilities

- \* 17 State disaggregated performance data as specified in IDEA for students with disabilities: Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.
- \* Of 74 reports that did not include data on students with disabilities, over 50 included performance data on regular education students.
- \* The most frequently reported content areas for assessment are reading (17 States) and mathematics (17 States).
- \* 16 States tested and reported on students with disabilities in three or more content areas.
- \* While 20 States reported graduation exam results for regular education, only 35 percent (7 States) reported these results for students with disabilities: Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.
- \* It is important to keep in mind participation factors (e.g., percentage of students with disabilities actually being tested) when examining the performance of students with disabilities. Higher proficiency rates may also be a result of increased exclusion of student scores or lower standards.
- \* The differences in proficiency rates between all students and students with disabilities on 8th-grade State assessments ranged from:
  - \* 23 to 47 percent in reading
  - \* 19 to 42 percent in math
  - \* 25 to 44 percent in writing
- \* New York, Rhode Island, and Texas presented unique data on students with disabilities in the domain of Academic and Functional Literacy.
  - \* New York: Test scores on Occupational Education Proficiency exam
  - \* Rhode Island: Test scores on health content area in statewide assessment
  - \* Texas: Test scores on college entrance examination (TASP)
- \* Kansas continued to report data in the domain of personal and social well being (number of violent acts toward staff and students).

Source: Thurlow et al., 2000

In the original report, this was Table I-4.

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There were increases in the reporting of performance data for students with disabilities but not to the extent that might be expected, given the timelines in the IDEA Amendments of 1997. Of the 41 States that provide information other than financial data on students with disabilities, 17 States disaggregated performance data for students with disabilities on statewide assessments. A handful of States included information in their State accountability documents on how

students with disabilities perform over time and whether their performance improves from year to year (Thurlow et al., 2000).

For the 17 States that presented information on statewide assessments, the most frequently reported content areas were reading (17 States) and mathematics (17 States). Eleven States reported science data, 10 reported writing data, and 6 reported social studies data. Sixteen States reported on students with disabilities in three or more content areas.

## **Reading Achievement**

In the 17 States with disaggregated performance data, between 5 percent and 87 percent of students with disabilities who were tested met performance standards in reading. The differences in passing rates for all students and students with disabilities ranged from 12 to 49 percentage points. In grade 8, the grade for which the most States reported data, the differences in passing rates for all students and students with disabilities in reading performance ranged from 23 to 47 percentage points, using criterion-referenced measures.

## **Mathematics Achievement**

Mathematics performance was similarly variable. Overall, 3 percent to 74 percent of students with disabilities met mathematics performance standards in the 17 States with disaggregated performance data. The differences in passing rates of students with disabilities and all students ranged from 13 to 42 percentage points. For 8th graders taking criterion-referenced mathematics exams, the differences in passing rates ranged from 19 to 42 percentage points.

These results are consistent in direction with results from the NAEP assessment of mathematics skills in 1996 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In the 1996 NAEP, students with disabilities scored between the 9th and 18th percentile, varying by grade and sub-sample. Across grades and sub-samples, the NAEP mathematics scores of white students with disabilities were higher than those of minority students with disabilities.

Using a large longitudinal database, NCEO examined the effect of transitions between regular education and special education across grades on performance trends for the special education populations. The study also examined the effect of changes in assessment exemption rates across grades for students with disabilities. NCEO found that the highest achieving special education students left special education to return to regular education, and that the lowest performing regular education students who had been referred to and found eligible for special education entered special education (Bielinski & Ysseldyke, 2000). The result of this movement between regular and special education was a substantial increase in the performance gap over time between regular education and special education students across grades. The study also revealed that the reduction in assessment exemption rates from testing that has occurred over time -- and that is reflected in this study primarily in the higher grades -- added to the size of the gap.

When the same special education students were tracked over time, however, the performance gap decreased slightly (Bielinski & Ysseldyke, 2000). These findings have significant implications for the States as they begin to publicly report disaggregated data on students with disabilities, particularly if attempts are made to track performance across time. Failure to document and account for changes in students' special education status and previous assessment exception rates could result in misinterpretations about the effectiveness of special education services. Restricting the group of students for longitudinal analysis to those who received special

education services during the first year of the analysis and following their performance, regardless of whether they continued to receive special education services, will provide a more accurate indication of progress over time. Thus, States should consider ways to report on both the performance of all students with disabilities and the longitudinal performance of a clearly defined targeted group of students receiving special education services.

### **Change in Participation Rates and Performance Levels of Students with Disabilities**

NCEO's 2001 *Survey of State Directors of Special Education* (Thompson, Thurlow, & Boys, 2001) asked directors whether the most recent test participation rates of students with disabilities on their State assessments had changed from previous years. Similarly, directors were asked whether the most recent test performance levels of students with disabilities on their State assessments had changed. (See Table 3.)

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Table 3. Change in Test Participation Rates of Students with Disabilities  
Over Previous Testing Years

* Lower than previous years	2 percent
* Higher than previous years	56 percent
* About the same as previous years	24 percent
* Comparison data not available	18 percent

Source: Thompson et al., 2001

In the original report, this was Figure I-4.

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The assessment participation rates of students with disabilities have increased in over half of the States and remained the same in another 25 percent of States. Only one State reported participation rates that are lower than in previous years. Nine States reported that they were in their first year of testing and did not have comparison data from previous years. State directors of special education attributed an *increase* in participation rates primarily to these factors:

- \* IDEA regulations requiring participation in statewide assessments;
- \* Requirements of State accountability programs;
- \* Alternate assessment participants being exempt in previous years; and
- \* Increased flexibility in test accommodations.

State directors of special education reported that the assessment performance levels of students with disabilities have increased in about a quarter of the States and remained the same in another 32 percent of States. (See Table 4.) Four States reported lower performance levels than in previous years. The director in one of these States commented: "The lower levels of performance may be the result of increased participation of students who previously received an

alternative form of assessment as determined by their IEP team." Over a third of the State directors reported that either their States have not yet disaggregated performance data for students with disabilities or that this is their first year of testing, and they do not have data from previous years to use for comparison purposes.

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Table 4. Change in Test Performance Levels of Students with Disabilities Over Previous Testing Years

* Lower than previous years	8 percent
* Higher than previous years	22 percent
* About the same as previous years	32 percent
* Comparison data not available	38 percent

Source: Thompson et al., 2001

In the original report, this was Figure I-5.

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### Alternate Assessment

Alternate assessments are designed for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in general State or district assessments. As shown in Table 5, the NCEO *Survey of State Directors of Special Education* found that most States link alternate assessment content to State standards, but they do so in different ways (Thompson et al., 2001). Nineteen States (38 percent) started with State standards, expanding them to be inclusive of all students. Fifteen States (30 percent) began with functional skills that were then linked back to standards. Eight States (16 percent) supplemented their standards with functional skills that are not directly linked to standards, and four States (8 percent) based their alternate assessments on a set of functional skills, with no link to State standards.

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Table 5. Status of Alternate Assessments Across States

	<u>Number Of States</u>	<u>Percent Of States</u>
Alternate assessment content		
* State standards (may be expanded)	19	38
* Functional skills linked back to State stds	15	30
* State standards plus functional skills	8	16
* Functional skills only, no link to State stds	4	8
* Other	4	8
Performance descriptors		
* Same as general assessment (e.g., basic, proficient, advanced)	13	34
* Different from general assessment (e.g., independent, emergent)	17	45
* State has not made a decision about this yet	8	21

## Inclusion in State reports

* Student counted as assessment participant, and actual score is aggregated with scores of all other assessment participants	8	16
* Student counted as assessment participant, but actual score is reported separately	20	40
* Other	6	12
* State has not made a decision about this yet	16	32

Source: Thompson et al., 2001

In the original report, this was Table I-5

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Thirteen States (34 percent) reported that they use the same performance descriptors for their alternate assessment as for the general assessment, making aggregation possible. Seventeen other States (45 percent) said they select performance descriptors for their alternate assessments that differ from those used for the general assessments. At least eight States (21 percent) have not yet decided on performance descriptors.

About a third of the States ( $n = 16$ ) have not decided how alternate assessment performance will be included in their State reports. Of those that have, eight States (16 percent) have decided that the scores of alternate assessment participants will be aggregated with the scores of other assessment participants. In 20 States (40 percent), alternate assessment scores will be reported separately.

## Difficulties in Reporting Data for Students with Disabilities

Differences in data collection and management systems may contribute to difficulties in reporting data for students with disabilities. Many States collect data at different points in time, through different offices, and for different purposes. In their study of performance and participation rates of students with disabilities in Oregon's State assessment, Almond, Tindal, and Stieber (1997) discovered that joining two extant databases was difficult because the two systems did not share a common student identifier. The researchers pointed to the historical and legal conditions under which these two databases were created and how those precedents may have interfered with the eventual merging of the two systems. The researchers also noted assessment difficulties for assessments conducted at particular grade levels. Such assessments generally rely on age-to-grade designations and thus may exclude students from non-graded programs, those who started school late, or those who repeat a grade. States may need to retool their data collection and management systems to ensure that all students with disabilities are included in performance reporting. Additional challenges in reporting these data include:

- \* Information systems that do not identify students with disabilities in State assessment procedures;
- \* Inaccuracy in marking answer documents by students, staff members, or proctors;

- \* State policies that exclude students with disabilities who receive any type of accommodation or those who use "non-standard" accommodations;
- \* Lack of standardized procedures for calculating participation rates;
- \* Use of information on the number of students who were absent from the assessment;
- \* Data aggregation at the school or district level but not at the State level;
- \* State reports that do not explicitly describe the population sample or disaggregate the data of students with disabilities; and
- \* Policies that allow for the collection but no public reporting of data on students with disabilities.

## Summary

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 required that students with disabilities be included in large-scale assessments and provided for the use of accommodations or alternate assessments where necessary. The amendments also stipulated that State educational agencies must report on the performance of students with disabilities with the same frequency and in the same detail as they report on the performance of non-disabled students. Recent research indicates that the participation of students with disabilities in statewide and districtwide assessments still varies considerably across States. Similar variations are seen in States' reporting of assessment results for students with disabilities. Although barriers to increasing assessment participation, performance, and reporting still remain, NCEO studies have found that the States are making progress toward meeting the requirements set forth in the IDEA Amendments of 1997. Research has also suggested methodologies that will enhance States' abilities to accurately monitor performance trends over time.

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