

Leveling the Playing Field: A Look at Special Education and Standardized Testing

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"All schools for miles and miles around
Must take a special test,
To see who's learning such and such—
To see which school's the best.
If our small school does not do well,
Then it will be torn down,
And you will have to go to school
In dreary Flobbertown."
Hooray for Diffendooper Day!
By Dr. Seuss

A key component to statewide educational reform is mandated district and statewide assessment for all students. In order to receive federal grant money, states must develop plans to improve education, which outline strategies for improving teaching and learning. To ensure students are mastering basic and advanced skills in core content areas, these strategies must include a process for setting statewide student performance standards and for assessing achievement on those standards.

Before the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997), little or no achievement data had been collected on students with disabilities. Now with the implementation of the high school exit exam and the SAT/9 the inclusion of children with disabilities in data reporting will require a balancing act. Test scores alone do not provide an accurate picture of what special education students have learned. All students need to be counted and accounted for in reports on how well our schools are performing. However, this does not mean all students should be assessed under the same conditions using the same test. It is important to level the playing field with appropriate accommodations as well as avoiding over reliance of a single test to demonstrate student learning.

In April 2000, a poll was conducted by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Sylvan Learning Center, and Harris Interactive, entitled "State-Mandated Educational Assessments: Survey of Parents' Perceptions". This survey revealed that parents throughout the country are confused by standardized testing and state mandated assessments. Eighty-seven percent feel ill equipped to help their children prepare for tests. Fifty-six percent do not believe testing is a true measure of learning. Forty-eight percent find inconsistencies between their children's test scores and report cards. Fifty-seven percent of parents believe some academic skills are being neglected because of the emphasis on assessment. Finally, about half disagree or are undecided as to whether standardized tests should determine promotion or graduation.

It is critical for parents, educators, and students to understand the inclusion of all students in district and statewide mandated assessments and the correlation between assessment results, student instruction, and learning outcomes. A number of federal laws mandate the inclusion of all students in assessments: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the American Disabilities Act of 1990, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997. Assessment is a part of the educational accountability system. It is intended to provide essential data relevant to measuring individual student progress against standards or by evaluating programs.

Special education law requires an ongoing comprehensive assessment of special needs students to establish the nature of their disability and the basis for instructional programming. However, testing is only one of many strategies used in educational assessment to obtain information about the special education student. Special education teachers are held accountable for ongoing evaluation of learning and continue to need procedures which monitor student progress more frequently and with less time and expense than standardized tests.

Special education students often have difficulty demonstrating their capacities and, usually, follow a specialized academic program incorporating accommodations tailored to maximize their academic strengths and minimize their weaknesses. As a result, children with learning disabilities are focused on meeting the goals established for them in their own Individual Educational Plans developed for them, not on an arbitrary, uniform district or statewide goals.

Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, in his recent State of American Education address, called for caution and for "states to make a mid-course review of their testing programs to ensure that high-stakes tests do not result in inaccurate measurements, excessive student stress, and a narrowed curriculum...Students need to be challenged, not traumatized." In addition, he states, "If all our efforts to raise standards get reduced to one test, we've gotten it wrong. If we force our best teachers to teach to only one test, we will lose their creativity and even lose some of them from the classroom (p. 17)."

In summary to ensure assessment for all students is not an isolated activity, Senator Paul Wellstone, a Democrat from Minnesota, is calling for much more dramatic action. He recently introduced a bill in the United States Senate, which would recommend the following:

Require states and districts to use multiple measures of student performance.

Require, if tests are used, that they be valid and reliable.

Measure what the students were taught.

Provide accommodations for students with limited English proficiency and disabilities.

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