

Educating Students With Disabilities: Do You Pass the Test?



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Students who have disabilities need special support in the classroom and on standardized tests.

By Martha L. Thurlow

If some students are failing, it is the administrator's responsibility to start the conversation about how the teacher plans to address the problems.

—Ohio Department of Education, 2004

Student testing and state test results are in every educator's thoughts. This is particularly true for principals, who are responsible for ensuring that the total student body, including all student subgroups, show adequate yearly progress (AYP). One subgroup often cited as a challenge in the current push to improve academic performance, especially in secondary schools, is students who receive special education services and have IEPs. These students not only must receive appropriate instruction but also be allowed to take assessments that are designed in a way that enables them to demonstrate what they know.

Principals can and should take several steps to ensure that these students receive the opportunities they need to learn and perform their best on state assessments. First, principals must be familiar with current laws regarding the

participation of students with disabilities in state and district assessments. Both the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) explicitly define expectations for schools, districts, and states. Further, principals need to know about best practices in instruction, including the supports and accommodations that students with disabilities need so they can show what they know and are able to do. Finally, principals must work together to ensure districtwide consistency in the implementation of accommodations and alternate assessment decisions across grade levels, from elementary through high school.

Federal Mandates

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and IDEA 2004 mutually emphasize that provisions for "all students" include students with disabilities. Since 1997, IDEA has required that students with disabilities participate in state assessments and that their performance be reported. States and districts are also required to develop

alternate assessments for students who cannot participate in regular state- or districtwide assessments and to provide accommodations in both instruction and assessment as needed by students with disabilities.

Key provisions in the law. When ESEA was reauthorized in 2001 as NCLB, the participation of students with disabilities was reinforced and included in accountability provisions.

Both IDEA 2004 and NCLB are complex laws that have been clarified through regulations and guidance documents. Key provisions of the current laws include:

- Basing state standards assessments on grade-level expectations that apply to all students, including those with disabilities, and demonstrating that the assessments are aligned to these expectations.
- Ensuring that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who work on grade-level content standards may be tested using alternate assessments that are based on alternate-achievement standards. Up to 1% of all students may be considered proficient for AYP purposes on the basis of these alternate achievement standards.

Both alternate assessments that are based on grade-level achievement

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standards and alternate assessments that are based on alternate achievement standards must be developed by a state or district.

Although both IDEA 2004 and NCLB require that all students participate in standards assessments, in spring 2005 the U.S. Department of Education added flexibility to the law to allow some additional students with disabilities to be held to modified achievement standards. The new guidance allows states to apply flexibility to a group of students who do not have significant cognitive disabilities but who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to show what they know on the general assessment. Although additional guidance regarding the application of modified achievement standards is expected from the Department of Education, this additional flexibility is not intended to be a means of excluding students with disabilities from standardized assessment and state and district accountability. Only a small fraction (2%) of all students (up to about 20% of all students with disabilities) in a given state can be held to modified standards.

Why do secondary education leaders need to know these laws?

Both NCLB and IDEA 2004 are complex laws with high-stakes consequences for schools. Administrators need to have a basic understanding of these laws if they are to capitalize on the opportunities provided for their schools (e.g., flexibility in assessment accommodations policies and options for alternate assessments), even if their districts have not yet designed a district plan for complying with the law. Further, school administrators must ensure that all students with disabilities are included in assessments and the determination of AYP and that these students receive appropriate and effective accommodations when needed. Specifically, it is important to ensure that staff members know how to accommodate students during instruction, make good decisions about assessment accommoda-

Identifying Instructional Accommodations

The following strategies are recommended to help teachers identify the most appropriate instructional accommodations for their students with disabilities (Elliott & Thurlow, 2006, p. 56):

- Ask the students, individually, about what helps them learn better. What gets in the way of them showing what they really know and can do?
- Consider the strengths and weaknesses of students in areas linked to the curriculum. Identify those skills or behaviors that seem to consistently get in the way of learning.
- Teach students how to use their accommodations. If students do not know how to use an accommodation, it will be of no benefit.
- Observe the effects of provided accommodations to determine whether the accommodation is being used and the extent to which the accommodation seems to be useful to students.
- Collect data on the effects of accommodations that are used by individual students.

Source: Elliott, J. L., & Thurlow, M. L. (2006). *Improving test performance of students with disabilities...On district and state assessments* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

tions or participation in alternate assessments of various types, and provide students with disabilities with access to the general curriculum.

Ensuring Appropriate Accommodations

Accommodations in instruction or assessment are intended to minimize the impact of the student's disability without giving the student an unfair advantage over his or her nondisabled peers. Instructional accommodations include a variety of techniques and supports intended to provide students with disabilities full access to the general education curriculum. Examples include changes in the way instruction is delivered (e.g., repeating directions, providing oral directions, and modifying materials), the way the student responds (e.g., allowing dictated rather than written responses and extending time for the student to complete assignments), or the environmental supports the student uses (e.g., increased lighting or a study

carrel). Accommodations should be listed in the student's IEP.

There is evidence that fewer students in high schools receive accommodations than do students in middle schools, who in turn receive fewer accommodations than students in elementary schools receive (Thompson & Thurlow, 1999; Thurlow, 2001). Yet older students may have greater need for accommodations. Older students should be more aware of their own needs for accommodations than younger students and ask for accommodations if they are not provided. Supports and accommodations during instruction are important because they are the pathway to ensuring that the students learn the relevant content.

Testing accommodations are those supports needed by students with disabilities to demonstrate what they know on standards assessments. Like instructional accommodations, these might include oral versus written presentation of directions, extended time limits, testing in a small room, and dictation of

responses. Consistency between accommodations that students receive in instruction and in assessments is important. Teachers and support personnel should work with individual students to identify the accommodations that are needed for classroom instruction and classroom tests.

There are decision-making issues to consider beyond what is legally mandated. The following simple “do’s and don’ts” list (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003, p. 70) can help

educators conduct a quick information check on how teachers are providing accommodations.

Do n’ts:

- Do n’t introduce a new accommodation for the first time for an assessment.
- Do n’t base the decision about what accommodations a student will use on the student’s disability category.
- Do n’t start from the district or

state list of approved accommodations when considering what accommodations a student will use in an upcoming test.

- Do n’t pick accommodations once and then never again re-evaluate the need for them or for new ones.

Do’s:

- Do systematically use accommodations during instruction and carry these into the assessment process.
- Do base the decision about accommodations, both for instruction and for assessment, on the needs of the student.
- Do consult the district or state list of approved accommodations after determining what accommodations the student needs. Then re-evaluate the importance of the accommodations that are not allowed. If they are important for the student, request their approval from the district or state if this is required.
- Do evaluate the student’s accommodations periodically. As students move through school and improve skills, the specific accommodations needed may change.

Proven Practices for Ensuring Success

School administrators will find an examination of model programs helpful in considering practices to enhance achievement in their schools, particularly regarding the achievement of students with disabilities. The following programs are recommended as examples of best practices:

The Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts. The Donahue Institute (2004) studied urban public schools, identifying 11 practices that are central to successful achievement of elementary and middle school students with special needs, with implications for what will work in high schools:

- A pervasive emphasis on curriculum alignment with the state standards
- Effective systems to support curriculum alignment
- Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum
- Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement
- A well-disciplined academic and social environment
- Use of student assessment data to inform decision making
- Unified practice supported by targeted professional development
- Access to resources to support key initiatives
- Effective staff member recruitment, retention, and deployment
- Flexible leaders and staff that work effectively in a dynamic environment
- Effective leadership.

Standards-Based Instruction for All Learners. Another valuable resource was created by the state of Ohio (2004). It addresses such questions as, How can a student with skills far below grade level possibly master grade-level indicators? and How can teachers with unequal classes be held to the same level of accountability?

Source: Donahue Institute. (2004). *A study of MCAS achievement and promising practices in urban special education: summary of field research findings: A cross-case analysis of promising practices in selected Massachusetts urban public schools.* Hadley, MA: University of Massachusetts. (See www.donahue.umassp.edu for this and other reports.)

Ohio Department of Education. (2004). *Standards-based instruction for all learners: A treasure chest for principal-led building teams in improving results for learners most at-risk.* Columbus, OH: Author. (See www.ode.state.oh.us/exceptional_children/PDF/Treasure%20Chest.pdf.)

Providing Access to the General Curriculum

Accommodations on assessments are important, but improving student performance on state and district assessments ultimately relies on ensuring that these students are learning throughout the year. With the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB, educators are learning that too little has been expected of most students with disabilities and that they can learn and do much more when expectations are raised. This is true of all students, including those with cognitive disabilities (McGrew & Evans, 2004). Occasionally the media reinforces this fact, such as a newspaper article that reports the graduation of a young woman with Down syndrome from a

high school in Massachusetts after she passed the state's new tough high school exit exam (Bombardieri, 2002).

Ensuring genuine learning opportunities for all students requires that school leaders focus on providing access to the general curriculum to students with disabilities (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). Some factors that are important for principals to emphasize include matching curricula to grade-level content standards, holding high expectations, and identifying instruction approaches and supports that help students meet those expectations.

Because assessments are based on state content standards (or district standards in some cases), students must learn grade-level content. Educators need to start from the position that students can achieve grade-level standards and back off only when they have tried their full repertoire of supports and best supplemental services, including optimal accommodations. It is particularly important for administrators to ensure that their staff members have professional development opportunities that reinforce simple teaching principles—such as first plan, then manage and deliver, and then evaluate instruction (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliott, 1997). Working with IEP team members, such as the school psychologist, also can help teachers develop appropriate accommodations for instruction and assessments for individual students.

Informing the Educational Pipeline

Students often come to secondary schools without the skills they need to work on secondary-level content. In elementary and middle level schools, decisions for students with disabilities are often made by IEP team members, who may not know the secondary-level educational standards, the sequence of standards, or which ones are prerequisites to upper-level courses. Knowing what is essential and what can be put aside for students with disabilities is often the key to ensuring that they arrive in high

schools with the foundational skills for grade-level content. It is incumbent on school leaders to coordinate decision making regarding accommodations and alternate assessments to provide consistency across grade levels. With the proper commitment to providing the necessary supports, all students, regardless of their disabilities, can meet high standards. **PL**

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