

## What Is It?

Including students with learning disabilities (LD) in the assessments used by states and local education agencies is now required by federal laws. Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Improving America's Schools Act require that the performance of students with disabilities be reported to the public. Consequently, administrators, practitioners, and parents must make careful decisions about the type of assessment that is appropriate for individual students, about the student's need for accommodations, and the nature of those accommodations. These decisions will have an impact on how a student's scores are accounted for in the educational system and on whether the student receives a standard high school diploma or gains admittance to an institution of higher education. However, there are few guidelines for how to make good decisions regarding test participation and accommodations, and poor decisions may result in unintended consequences for students' educational success.

The assessments at issue here are those used by states and districts to document the academic achievement of students. Sometimes these tests are used for system accountability. In such cases, the data for schools or districts are reported publicly and may be used to reward schools in which students perform well, or to sanction those schools with poor student performance. In 20 states and many districts, tests now are used for student accountability, where performance determines whether students will move from one grade to the next or receive a standard diploma. These assessments have been dubbed "high-stakes" assessments because of the serious consequences that befall a child who does not pass them.

Testing accommodations, which are changes in testing materials or procedures, are generally seen as essential to enabling students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. For example, students with vision impairments may need large print, or students with reading disabilities may need extra time. Accommodations, however, are fraught with controversy related to the specific purpose of the test and the nature of the test. Exercising caution for

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students with LD who will be taking high-stakes assessments must involve recognizing the nature and purpose of the assessments, as well as state and district policies regarding accommodations. Consideration of intended and unintended consequences must guide decisions about the ways in which students with LD participate in the assessments.

## For Whom Is It Intended?

The assessment provisions in IDEA 97 are directed toward all students with disabilities. Students are to participate in either the regular state and district assessments, or in alternate assessments for those students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the general assessments. Students with LD are commonly recognized as a primary group to be included in assessments. Since most of these students should have access to the general curriculum, should be working toward state and district standards, and should be earning standard high-school diplomas that give them access to employment or higher education. At the same time, these students often need accommodations to ensure that they have access to the curriculum and an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge on tests. The issue of accommodations is where many of the cautions related to including students with LD in high-stakes assessments arise.

## How Does It Work?

Decisions about the participation of students with LD in state and district assessments are made by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams, as are decisions about the accommodations that students need for instruction and assessments. The inclusion of either the student's classroom teacher (not just a curriculum specialist), or at a minimum, direct input from that teacher, is a critical component for making these decisions.

**Participation decisions.** Decisions about participation in assessments should be driven by the goals of instruction, not by beliefs about how well the student will do when taking

the test. This will ensure that the system is held accountable for educating students with LD. Of course, decisions that affect the graduation of the student are more complex, requiring careful consideration of accommodations used and options available.

**Accommodation decisions.** Decisions about accommodations are made by the student's IEP team. The accommodations that are recommended for a student should be aligned with what the student uses during instruction, but they are not necessarily exactly the same. For example, while the teacher or peers may read directions or assessment items to the student in the classroom, this accommodation may need to be changed to an audiotape presentation during an assessment. Accommodations should be based on student need—designed to allow the student to demonstrate knowledge and skills rather than merely the effects of the disability. Further, the decisions may have to be tempered with knowledge about what the state or district “allows.” All states and most districts now have written policies on testing accommodations; generally the policies were developed either by assessment personnel alone or with input from an advisory group. The policies vary considerably, with the same accommodation allowed in one place but prohibited in another. Few of the policies have been based on research findings since research on the effects of accommodations during high-stakes testing is still in its infancy.

While the IEP team can authorize use of any accommodations that the student needs, accommodations that are not approved by the student's district may result in scores that do not count—either for student or system accountability. Thus, the IEP team must know what the consequences are of selecting specific accommodations for a student, as well as the nature of the assessments for which decisions are being made. These considerations all interact to determine the best decisions for individual students for specific assessments. Whether the student should take a test without needed accommodations, or should take the test and request special consideration, perhaps through a waiver process, is an important decision that IEP teams must make.

## **How Adequate Is The Research Knowledge Base?**

Considerable knowledge has been gathered about what tests are being used in high-stakes assessments, what their purposes are, and who has been included in them in the past. Information on accommodation and reporting

policies is also available. However, information regarding the impact and validity of specific accommodations is still limited.

With support from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and other agencies, studies are now being conducted on the effects of accommodations. Current research is of all types—descriptive (to identify what accommodations students are using and how they perform when using them), correlational, and experimental. These efforts are showing that conducting accommodations research is very complicated, as is interpreting what the results mean. For example, the researcher cannot simply lump all students with disabilities together (not even all students with LD) because the need for specific accommodations is individual—what one student may need, another may not. Since accommodations are designed to address individual needs, and research findings may be confounded if the effect of an accommodation is evaluated when it was provided both to students who needed it and to students who did not. Also, many students with disabilities use more than one accommodation, making the effects of the target accommodation difficult to distinguish from the effects of other accommodations that are also used. These are just a few examples of the complexities of accommodations research.

As the issues involved in accommodations research become better understood, the need to make good decisions about the particular accommodations individual students will use during high-stakes testing will become more critical. For example, preliminary findings indicate that “over-accommodating” students is not helpful, because this may actually depress their performance rather than improve it.

## **How Practical Is It?**

While there continues to be some resistance to including students with LD in high-stakes assessments, there has been considerable movement toward understanding why student participation is important. Much of this understanding comes from hearing the stories of students who have benefited because expectations for them were raised and because instruction provided to them was improved.

Despite these positive results, the inclusion of students with disabilities in assessments remains a source of confusion and controversy. Mainstream educators often do not understand the purpose of, and need for accommodations. IEP teams

often do not know how to make good decisions about accommodations. Assessment coordinators do not know how to handle the logistics of actually making sure that all students receive the accommodations that they need during assessments. Measurement experts are undecided about how to treat scores earned with accommodations.

These very important practical issues; however, are solvable in principle. Many have already been successfully addressed. For example, in one state, scores that students earn with non-approved accommodations are considered one piece of evidence along with other information that students must provide (e.g., grades, portfolios, sample performances) to show their mastery of the knowledge and skills tested. While there remains the need for empirical support for these solutions, they are being implemented and studied.

## How Effective Is It?

Data are just now being gathered on the effects of including students with LD in high-stakes assessments. Some emerging longitudinal data on students' performances are now available. Most of these data are from students with disabilities as a group, not disaggregated for students with LD. Data from Kentucky (Trimble, 1998), for example, show a narrowing of the gap between the performance of students with disabilities and other students, particularly in the elementary grades. Data from other states analyzed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes have shown increases across grades and a narrowing of the gap when the pool of students with disabilities is held constant (Bielinski & Ysseldyke, 2000). Unintended consequences, such as students dropping out of school or not receiving a high school diploma, also must be monitored. These effects must be recognized and dealt with as federal law continues to push the field forward toward the full participation of students with disabilities in assessment and accountability systems.

## What Questions Remain?

Many questions remain. Most of them relate to the identification of ways to make sure that the participation of students with disabilities in high-stakes assessments fosters positive results for all. Some of the questions are:

- How should IEP teams identify needed accommodations?
- What are the effects of specific accommodations?

- What should be done with scores if the student uses non-approved accommodations?

These questions are the tip of the iceberg. Next come the tougher questions.

- How should people be trained so that decisions are individualized yet made consistently across students?
- What strategies should be used to improve test performance, but not to detract from needed instruction?
- Should there be different diplomas to indicate different levels of skills demonstrated on assessments?

Unfortunately, answers to these questions based on careful research are not yet available. However, some general guidelines are available from the resources cited in the next section.

## How Do I Learn More?

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) is a good source of information about students with disabilities in state and district assessments, as well as about related topics, such as accommodations, alternate assessments, reporting, and accountability. All of NCEO's reports are available on its web site at [www.coled.umn.edu/nceo](http://www.coled.umn.edu/nceo). Additional valuable information and guidance regarding accommodations can be found in a recent report coming out of an accommodations lawsuit in Oregon (Disabilities Rights Advocates, 2001).

## References

Among the numerous resources that address the participation of students with disabilities in assessments are the following:

- Bielinski, J., & Ysseldyke, J. (2000). *Interpreting trends in the performance of special education students* (Technical Report 27). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, NCEO.
- Disability Rights Advocates (2001). *Do No Harm—High Stakes Testing and students with learning disabilities*. Oakland, CA: Author. Available in pdf format at [www.dralegal.org](http://www.dralegal.org).
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- Fuchs, L.S., Fuchs, D., Eaton, S.B., Hamlett, C., Binkley, E., & Crouch, R. (2000). Using objective data sources to enhance teacher judgments about test accommodations. *Exceptional Children*, 67 (1), 67-81.

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## About the Alert Series

Current Practice Alerts is a joint publication of the Division for Learning Disabilities and the Division for Research within the Council for Exceptional Children. The series is intended to provide an authoritative resource concerning the effectiveness of current practices intended for individuals with specific learning disabilities. Each Alerts issue will focus on a single practice or family of practices that is widely used or discussed in the LD field. The Alerts will describe the target practice and provide a critical overview of the existing data regarding its effectiveness for individuals with learning disabilities. Practices judged by the Alerts Editorial Committee to be well validated and reliably used are featured under the rubric of Go For It. Those practices judged to have insufficient evidence of effectiveness are featured as Use Caution. For more information about the Alerts series and a cumulative list of past Alerts topics, visit the Alerts page on the CEC/DLD website: <http://www.cec.sped.org/dv-menu.htm>

Target practices for future issues: Mnemonic Instruction, Class-wide Peer Tutoring, Co-teaching, Social Skills Training.