

Why Assessment Matters for Students with Labels of Significant Cognitive Disabilities



Position Statement

Educators are responsible for the high quality education of all students in public school. This is the mandate that Congress established when it reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002 (NCLB). For the first time, schools were held accountable for the progress of all students, including students in subgroups that have been historically vulnerable to poor educational outcomes, such as students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities. That progress is measured by their performance on standardized assessments and, for students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities, the alternate assessments.

Some groups have expressed concern about the content, format, and even importance of alternate assessments for students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities. Pushback against assessment has become more pronounced resulting in several states trying to sidestep accountability systems for this population of students. Some states have done so by withdrawing from the alternate assessment consortia without having a strong plan in place to support these students' instruction and assessments. Such a move would be especially irresponsible. While teaching and assessing students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities may be challenging, these students have repeatedly demonstrated that they can and do learn academic content when they are provided with high expectations, effective instruction, and meaningful, individualized support.

Alternate assessments are part of a system of instruction, assessment, and curriculum; they do not stand alone. These assessments matter because they yield important data that educators can use to improve instruction so the performance levels of ALL students increase. It is important that students with significant disabilities are included in assessments so that their instruction is also targeted for improvement.

A good system uses the information learned from the assessment to make changes to instruction and support, curriculum, and the assessments themselves. One part of this system should be an "optimal testing conditions policy" which includes instructions about how to handle student illness, hospitalization, homebound instruction, and even test anxiety.

Students with disabilities are not the only students who may experience challenges during testing time. Optimal testing conditions also outline procedures for ensuring that the testing experience is managed well in order to get the most valid information from students. Children should not be

assessed if they are too sick or anxious to perform at their best whether they are participating in the alternate assessment or the general assessment. The bottom line is this: students who have medical clearance to attend school should not experience difficulty if the procedures of optimal testing are implemented.

States should also have procedures for addressing the needs of students who do not demonstrate the communication, writing, or reading skills necessary to provide responses. Those students should be targeted to receive communication and instruction intervention as well as professional development for the team of teachers serving the student. Students who do not use oral speech to communicate present assessment and instructional challenges; however, twenty-five years of data suggest that high quality communication intervention can improve communication functioning and symbolic language¹. If the test is the ONLY time that teams look for communicative responses, then at least those procedures may help a team determine the next logical step in developing communication for a student such as a request for communication intervention or professional development. If the assessment does that then it has served an important purpose for that student. Communication services are essential for students who are not able to express themselves in ways easily understood by others, not only to achieve academic outcomes but also to help keep them safe and healthy, develop social relationships, social skills, and achieve positive post-school college and career outcomes.

The expectation of academic achievement of all students is not new. Thirty years of research have unequivocally demonstrated both the social and academic benefits of students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities being educated using the general curriculum in general education settings. More recently, a growing body of research reveals that students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities can learn grade-level academic content^{2,3,4}. Hudson, Browder, & Wood (2013) further show that these students learn grade-level academic content in general education classrooms.

Legislation supports both instruction and assessment in the general curriculum. Accessing general curriculum was first emphasized in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997. In 2002, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required that students—including those with labels of the most significant cognitive disabilities—be included in state assessment systems and that those assessments be aligned with a state's content standards. IDEA of 2004 went further in mandating that students with disabilities be involved in the general curriculum as a

¹Snell, M.E., Brady, N., McLean, L., Ogletree, B.T., Siegel, E., Sylvester, L., Mineo, B., Ronski, M.A., & Sevcik, R. (2010). Twenty years of communication intervention research with individuals who have severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 115 (5), 364–380.

²Browder, D. M., Spooner, F., Ahlgrim-Delzell, L., Harris, A. A., & Wakeman, S. "A meta-analysis of teaching mathematics to students with significant cognitive disabilities" *Exceptional Children*, 74(4), (2008): 407-432.

³Browder, D. M., Wakeman, S. Y., Spooner, F., Ahlgrim-Delzell, L., & Algozzine, B. (2006). Research on reading instruction for individuals with significant cognitive disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 72(4), 392-408.

⁴Spooner, F., Knight, V., Browder, D., Jimenez, B. A., & DiBiase, W. (2011). Evaluating evidence-based practices in teaching science content to students with severe developmental disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 36, 62–75.

means to leading productive and independent lives.

Any student—regardless if they have been identified as having a disability or not—who has not received instruction on the skills and concepts in the assessment is likely to be anxious and show frustration when confronted with “the test.” It is the school’s responsibility to ensure that all students are—through the classroom experience—as prepared as possible to show what they know and can do academically. While this focus on academics for students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities is often viewed as taking time away from teaching more traditional “functional” skills, it is not incompatible with this instructional content^{5,6,7,8}. Teachers and education leaders have many tools to draw from to address these concerns. Proven models exist showing how both academic content and functional skills can be taught simultaneously and even be complementary. Furthermore, strategies for increasing access to academic standards have helped special education teachers develop more effective skills in supporting instruction based upon the general curriculum. Most importantly, students with labels of significant cognitive and communication disabilities have shown they can learn grade-level academic content.

It would be a disservice to turn back accountability for students with disabilities. Now, in addition to special education teachers’ improved instructional skills focused on standards-based learning, many states have developed their own resources designed to further improve the academic performance of students with disabilities. The two alternate assessment consortia—Dynamic Learning Maps and the National Center and State Collaborative—have developed a wide array of instructional resources to assist all educators in ensuring that students with disabilities continue their surprisingly speedy progress toward higher academic achievement. Both the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals have extensive lists focused on these resources available to teachers at http://www.ccsso.org/documents/2012/common_core_resources.pdf and <http://www.naesp.org/common-core-state-standards-resources>, respectively.

The least dangerous assumption is to teach ALL students, teach them well, with the assumption and expectation that learning is occurring. Even if we don’t know or aren’t sure what students are in fact learning, if we don’t teach and don’t assess, then we won’t develop interventions, implement services, or provide the supports that these students desperately need to, at a minimum, just be safe—and hopefully have a chance to thrive—in their current educational and future career and college environments. They deserve no less.

⁵Ruppar, A.L. & Gaffney, J.S. (2011). Individualized education program team decisions: A preliminary investigation of conversations, negotiations, and power. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 36, 11-22.

⁶Ayres, K. M., Lowrey, K. A., Douglas, K. A., & Sievers, C. (2011). I can identify Saturn but I can’t brush my teeth: What happens when the curricular focus for students with severe disabilities shifts. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 46, 11-21.

⁷McDonnell, J., Hunt, P., Jackson, L., & Ryndak, D., (in press). Educational standards for students with significant intellectual disabilities: A response to Lou Brown. *Connections*. Washington, D.C. TASH.

⁸Agran, M., Alper, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (2002). Access to the general curriculum for students with significant disabilities. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*. 37, 123-133.