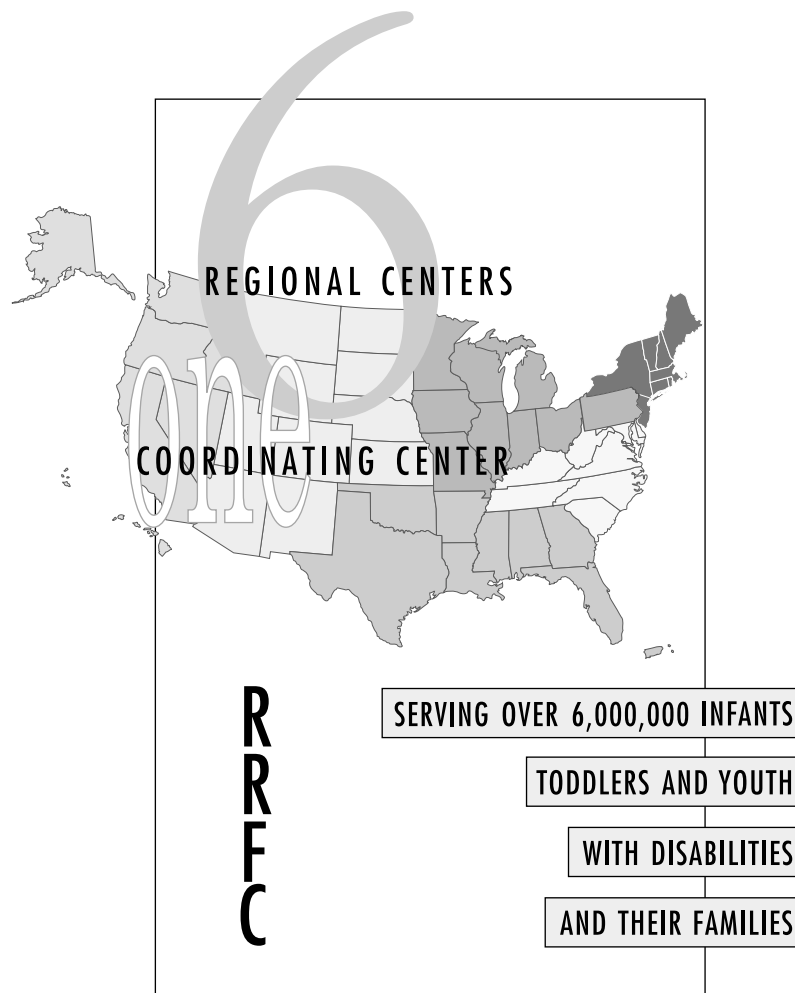


Special Education in an Era of School Reform

Accountability, Standards, and Assessment
by Ronald Erickson, Ph.D.



A Product of the
Federal and Regional
Resource Centers Network

*Special Education
in an Era of School Reform*

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AND ASSESSMENT**

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January 1998

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An Overview by Margaret McLaughlin, Ph.D.

Special Education Finance by Thomas B. Parrish, Ed.D.

Accountability, Standards, & Assessment by Ronald Erickson, Ph.D.

Preparing Special Education Teachers by Michael L. Hardman, Ph.D.,
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PREFACE

This report is part of a series on contemporary school reform and special education. Schools are under increasing pressure to change, and the push is coming from many sources. Governments and citizens want more accountability, higher standards, and better use of tax dollars. Businesses want a more educated and skilled workforce. And a growing population of students with special needs requires more and better services. Current federal, state, and local reform touches all areas of education—curriculum, teaching, standards, assessment, finance, professional development, governance, and more. This series discusses the elements of school reform and shows how special education is involved and affected. The more special educators, advocates, and decision-makers know about reform, the more effective they will be at ensuring all students have the services and opportunities they need.

The reports available in this series are:

- Special Education in an Era of School Reform: An Overview by Margaret McLaughlin, Ph.D.;
- Special Education in an Era of School Reform: Special Education Finance by Thomas B. Parrish, Ed.D.;
- Special Education in an Era of School Reform: Accountability, Standards, and Assessment by Ronald Erickson, Ph.D.; and
- Special Education in an Era of School Reform: Preparing Special Education Teachers by Michael L. Hardman, Ph.D., John McDonnell, Ph.D., and Marshall Welch, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1990s have been a period of dramatic change in our country's system of elementary and secondary education. In fact, change may be the only constant in our current efforts to reform our public schools. Numerous federal education initiatives (*Goals 2000, Improving Americas Schools Act, School-to-Work Act*) coupled with growing public dissatisfaction over our present system of schooling have fueled an insurrection against our traditional notions of educational policies and practices. Communities of educational stakeholders at all levels are being challenged to think differently about virtually every aspect of K-12 education.

New challenges create new questions, and our efforts to reform education have created a host of questions about the implications of this rapid change for the over 5 million students with disabilities being served in our nations elementary and secondary schools. The purpose of this document is to frame some of the critical questions being asked by educational stakeholders at both the state and local levels, to provide evidence of what we know, and to shed light on what we still need to know. The critical questions addressed in this report are clustered into three major areas: *accountability systems, standards,* and *assessments.*

PART I RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

What is accountability?

Despite different approaches to reinvent public education, states with reform efforts underway have at least one common factor: their focus on *accountability*. Accountability is one of the most commonly-used terms in educational reform, yet it defies a concise definition. Broadly defined, “accountability” in education denotes a *system* for informing those inside and outside the educational arena of the direction in which schools are moving (Westat, 1994). An educational accountability system is built around policies and strategies that assign expectations to certain individuals, groups, or organizations at varying levels of the educational enterprise. Educational accountability asks the multi-faceted question, “Who must answer to whom, for what, and with what consequences?”

Why did results-based accountability systems emerge?

Accountability systems are the result of a tradeoff between control and responsibility. Believing our students were becoming increasingly less capable of competing in the global classroom and marketplace, legislatures and other policymakers at state and federal levels came to recognize in recent years that greater regulatory control of local school *processes* was not the answer. Years of process monitoring by state and federal education agencies had not ensured excellence. Thus, attention began to focus on the *results* of our educational endeavors, rather than on the specific *inputs* or *processes* used to meet our goals. With the advent of new governing structures like site-based management and charter schools, schools have been given increasingly more autonomy in developing specific curricula, programs and instructional approaches. But this autonomy has come at a price—namely, the expectation that school systems, schools and students will now be held accountable for meeting certain articulated results. This political tradeoff has led to an increase in locally-controlled operations and externally-imposed expectations.

What is the purpose of an accountability system?

Critical to any endeavor to create a results-based accountability system is a common vision concerning its purpose. In recent years, ideas have begun to emerge about what an effective system of accountability should look like. McConnell and Oakes (as cited in National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988) suggest that an

effective accountability system should be built with the following purposes in mind:

- To maintain consistency with the state educational mission;
- To stimulate school improvement by being linked to areas needing improvement;
- To create and sustain public support for its schools by informing the public through clear and consistent reporting; and
- To create and maintain educational equity.

Observers of this shift toward results-based accountability are cautiously optimistic about the eventual positive impact on the lives of American youth. Schorr (1994) has identified a set of hopes and fears over the rising interest in accountability. She identifies a pervasive hope that accountability could lead to (a) freeing schools and other human service agencies from rules that prevent them from operating flexibly and responsively to the needs of those they serve; (b) restoring the public's faith that public and private institutions can accomplish their intended purpose; and (c) encouraging communities to more carefully plan how they support children and families. On the other hand, she has a forboding sense that such systems may bring about (a) the abandonment of attempts to better the conditions of disadvantaged children if the effects are difficult to measure or to change quickly; (b) the erosion of essential procedural protections and the neglect of equity; (c) a "smokescreen" behind which further funding cutbacks will be made; and (d) the penalizing of professionals, institutions or agencies that may not be meeting expectations, but are doing all they can.

What roles do standards and assessment play in accountability?

A system of educational accountability depends upon three essential components: (a) expectations for which specific parties will be held responsible; (b) measures of actual results against these expectations; and (c) consequences that can be administered to those held responsible. For state educational agencies, expectations and the measurement of actual results against them are addressed through content standards and assessment programs aligned to such standards. Indeed, the development and implementation of content standards and assessments has been the predominant response to the call for greater accountability by states and the federal government. The states common approach to

constructing accountability has been to first establish frameworks of expected outcomes or content standards, and to subsequently align new or existing assessment programs with these frameworks.

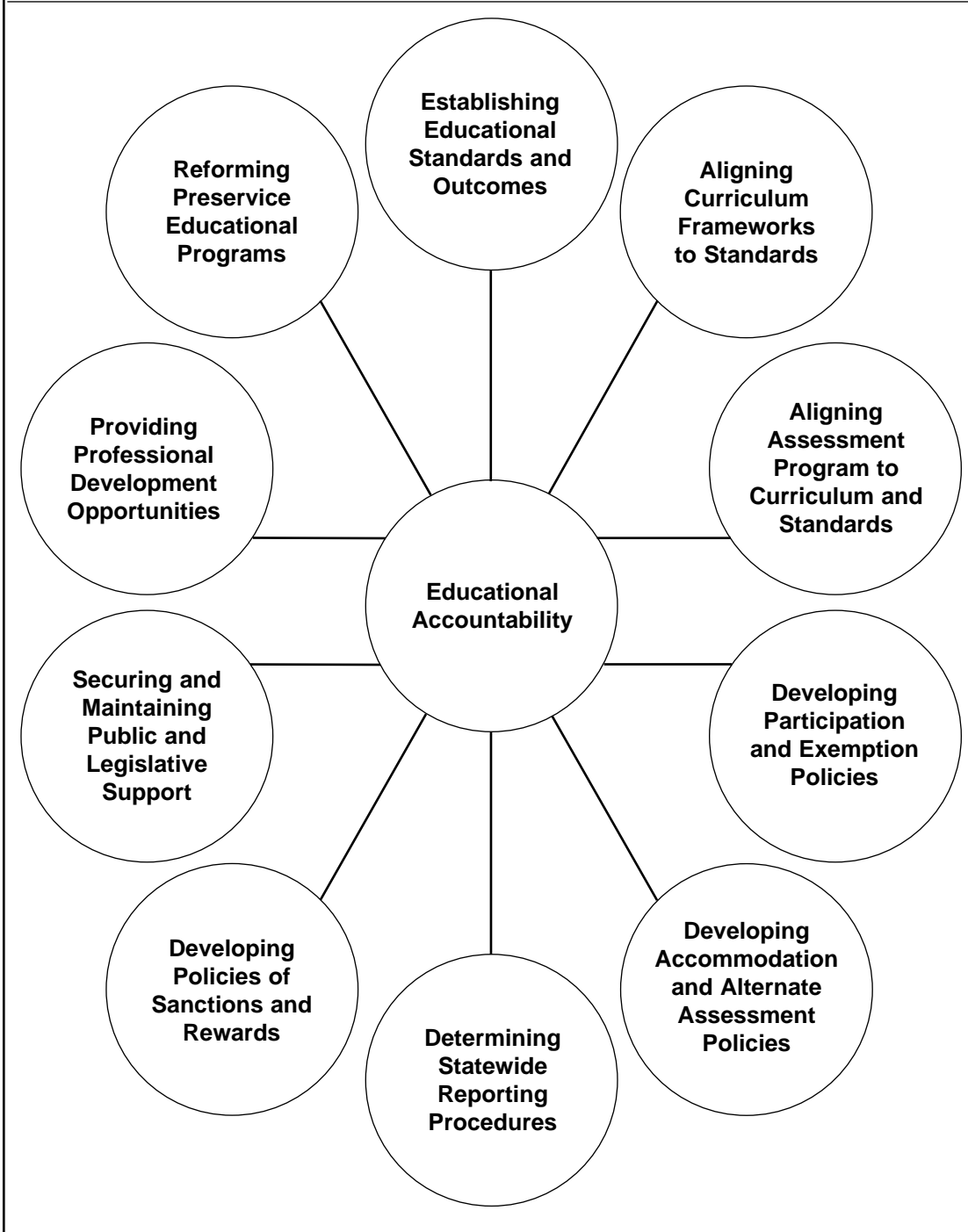
This emphasis on content standards and assessment has led some to suggest that states have approached accountability too narrowly. Critics argue that if systemic reform is to occur, states will need to pay increasing attention to the related issues of teaching, learning, professional development, pre-service education and governance. In a recent review of state standard-setting activities (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), local implementation was cited as a common challenge faced by many states. Others included gaining the necessary legislative support to sustain the reform and budgetary restraints that threatened to either slow down or halt progress. Figure 1 illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of accountability, and the numerous related activities presently being addressed by states in the midst of educational reform.

Are students with disabilities being considered in results-based accountability systems?

Recent federal legislation has emphasized an inclusive approach toward holding our schools accountable for the results of *all* children. Section 3(1) of Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Pub. L. 103-227) states, "The terms 'all students' and 'all children' mean students or children from a broad range of backgrounds and circumstances, including ... students or children with disabilities."

Entitlement programs for specific populations of students have aligned themselves with this emphasis on including all students in systemic reform efforts. The *Improving America's School Act* (IASA) requires programs to adopt standards and assessments for all students in schoolwide Title I programs, including students with disabilities. In addition, provisions found within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA) require states and local districts to include students with disabilities in general state and district-wide assessment programs with appropriate accommodations where necessary, along with their non-disabled peers. As appropriate, the SEA or LEA must develop guidelines for the participation in alternate assessments for students who cannot participate in state and district-wide assessment programs. These SEAs or LEAs must then develop these alternate assessments and, beginning no later than July 1, in the year 2000, conduct them. From a federal perspective, the message is unmistakable: educational reform at *all* levels should include *all* students, including students with disabilities.

FIGURE 1. REFORM ACTIVITIES RELATED TO EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY



Regrettably, the same cannot be said of every state-level reform effort. Students with disabilities have been historically overlooked in state efforts to define educational standards and develop assessment programs (Ysseldyke, Thurlow & Shriner, 1994). As we shall see in later sections of this report, states that have not considered the participation of students with special needs in their efforts to establish standards or to design new assessment programs are now struggling with the best ways to make their accountability systems more fully inclusive.

What is meant by “high stakes” and “low stakes” accountability?

Many would argue that a system of results-based accountability cannot be sustained without clear consequences for results—that those being held accountable will be more motivated to change if something of value is placed at risk. This notion of enforcing consequences based on results has led many states to build sanctions or rewards into their accountability systems. These consequences are often described as “stakes” when directed toward schools, districts or individual students. The terms “low stakes” and “high stakes” describe the varying levels of risk within these consequential policies. Although no standard definition exists for these terms, they are generally used to express the level of risk being placed on those responsible for the expected results. Examples of “high stakes” would include the threat of school reconstitution, or inversely, the opportunity to receive financial rewards; a “low stakes” accountability system might only enforce the public reporting of results with no further consequences mandated.

At an increasing rate, states have mandated positive and negative consequences for school or district results (Bond, Braskamp, & van der Ploeg, 1996). Several of the widely-adopted measures are listed below in order of their prevalence. They include:

- Probations or watch lists (15 states). Schools or districts that are not making progress at a predetermined rate are given cautionary notice that improvements must be made within a certain time frame to avoid harsher consequences. Watch lists are usually made available to the public.
- Warnings (12 states). Schools or districts are issued official warnings from state educational agencies informing local officials of inadequate performance or progress.

- Accreditation loss (11 states). A lack of adequate performance or progress in meeting goals leads to losing status granted through state accreditation agencies.
- Takeover by state agencies (9 states). This very high-stakes consequence often involves removal of the local school board and top district administrators, with intermediate governance provided by State Education Agency (SEA) officials.
- Funding gains (8 states). A “positive stakes” condition whereby monies are distributed to local districts, principals or school staff as the result of meeting or exceeding expected student performance goals.
- Regulatory waivers (8 states). Another “positive stakes” condition where state educational agencies relieve local districts or schools from certain regulatory requirements in response to positive gains in student performance.
- Funding loss (6 states). This negative high stakes consequences for low-performing schools and districts involves the loss of state financial aid.
- Dissolution (4 states). This highly negative consequence leads to the entire dissolution of the school or district under the supervision of the state’s educational agency.

While these positive and negative consequences are predominantly focused on schools or districts, 19 states currently reward diplomas to individual students based on their successful performance in high school graduation exams. Such policies create “high stakes” for students, and indirectly place considerable pressure on the schools and districts responsible for their educational success.

What happens to students with disabilities in accountability systems with “high stakes” testing for schools or districts?

When state accountability systems place “high stakes” on schools and districts for showing improvement in the academic achievement of students, the participation of students with disabilities in assessment is sometimes actively avoided (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992). This has led states such as Kentucky and Maryland to disallow outright exclusion of students from assessment without clear justification, and to require districts to publicly report their assessment exemption rates.

The differential rate among schools and districts in their inclusion of students with disabilities in results-based accountability systems has serious implications, both for the students and the public's ability to draw conclusion about results. If the performance of certain students is only partially reported, or is excluded outright, then the resulting information gathered through such a system is not a valid representation of the performance of *all* students. Comparisons between schools or districts having different participation rates become suspect (Zlatos, 1994). The implications for students appear even more serious: they face the prospect of lessened expectations and fewer opportunities to reach higher levels of performance. For results-based accountability systems, the maxim "out of sight, out of mind" has a ring of truth to it.

Fortunately, states seem to be moving toward greater inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide assessment programs. In a recent review of state level policies on testing participation (Thurlow, Scott & Ysseldyke, 1995a) researchers found that almost all states with such policies have revised them within the past two years. With state initiatives focused on measuring the success of *all* students, states are looking at a variety of options for assessing students with disabilities. Prevalent among these are practices that allow for the use of testing accommodations and alternate assessments for those students who cannot meaningfully participate in the regular assessments due to the nature or severity of their disabilities. In an atmosphere of "high stakes" attached to test results, school officials are challenged to merge the results gathered through the use of accommodated tests or alternate assessments with other performance data to provide a true picture of achievement for individual schools or districts.

What happens when there is "high stakes" testing for students?

There are currently 19 states in which receiving a high school diploma is dependent in part upon a student's performance on certain tests, generally called *graduation*, *proficiency*, or *exit exams*. These include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. In each of these states, the decision about how a student with a disability should participate in the graduation exam program is placed in the hands of the interdisciplinary team overseeing each student's individualized education plan (IEP). However, these committees are held to certain policies or regulatory guidelines established by the state or local educational agencies when making their decisions. These guidelines vary widely among the states currently using graduation

tests. Generally speaking, there are two ways in which students with disabilities are allowed to participate in “high stakes” graduation tests: either through the standard administration provided to general education students, or through testing accommodations or modifications. In the case of five “exit exam” states (New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas and Minnesota), standard diplomas can still be granted to students with disabilities even when exempted from all or part of the exams (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995). Under such circumstances, the diploma is typically awarded through the successful completion of the student’s individualized goals. In other cases, students with disabilities who are exempted from participating receive modified diplomas or certificates of completion.

How are results-based accountability systems evaluated?

States in the midst of educational reform are trying to evaluate their efforts by asking a two-fold question: Are we progressing toward meeting our goals, and what can we change in order to improve? States have begun to wrestle with constructing systems of information gathering, analysis and reporting that can help answer these two critical questions. Such systems depend upon the identification of key statistics, commonly called “performance indicators,” to assist in evaluating success and informing systemic improvement efforts. Performance indicators can reflect educational inputs, processes or outcomes, and are generally stated in terms of percentages, frequencies, averages or rates. David (1987) defines these indicators as “single or composite statistics reflecting the health of an educational system.” Kaagan and Smith (1985) recommend that performance indicators should have at least two characteristics: (a) they should measure something that is related to the health of the educational system; and (b) they must be able to be placed in a particular context in order to have an impact on educational policy or practice.

Consider, for example, selecting the *length of school year* as a performance indicator. To meet the first criterion above, the relationship between this indicator and an agreed-upon outcome (such as academic achievement) should be empirically established. To meet the second criterion, the performance level of the indicator must be placed in contrast to some external standard of performance, often defined as a “benchmark.” This benchmark level of performance might be (a) a criterion based on research; (b) a baseline that allows progress to be tracked over time; or (c) the performance of other schools, districts, states or even countries.

If differences in the length of a school year relate to differences in academic achievement, the indicator meets the first criterion. School year length must then be compared to a benchmark level of performance. For example, if a states school year averages 180 days the questions become: Is that good?, Compared to what? To what the research tells us it should be? To our past performance? To other states or countries? Such benchmarking of performance is a critical component of any effective performance indicator system. Without this step, decisionmakers cannot determine which aspects of their system should be targeted for improvement.

Which performance indicators are most important to collect?

The State Education Improvement Partnership, a consortium of five state-based organizations dealing with educational issues, has developed recommendations for states interested in selecting performance indicators for use in evaluating their systemic reform efforts (State Education Improvement Partnership, 1996). The Partnership encourages states to select indicators that will focus attention on four different areas of a states educational system. These areas, and a sample of suggested indicators that could be collected, are shown below.

<u>Indicator Area</u>	<u>Examples of Indicators</u>
Indicators of Students' Performance in the K-12 System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Percentage of students meeting state and local performance standards •Gain scores on student assessments, reported by schools, districts and special populations •Percentage of students earning a high school diploma or certificate of final achievement
Indicators of Capacity of Schools to Improve Student Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Percentage of employed teachers and administrators who meet or exceed desired credentials for their grade, subject area, or administrative responsibilities •Percentage of classrooms where teacher/student ratios meet policy guidelines

<p>Indicators of Students' Performance After High School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Percentage of students enrolled in post-secondary education immediately after high school graduation and again within two years of graduation •Percentage of students employed within a year after high school graduation
<p>Indicators of Family and Community Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Percentage of districts in which early childhood education services are available for all identified "high risk" preschoolers •Percentage of parents/guardians who report that their school treats them as partners in helping their child succeed

The Partnership recognizes that some performance indicators may be available from existing data sources, while many others will require new approaches in data collection. It suggests that reports should be tailored to different audiences (e.g., parents, schools, and decisionmakers) and that the assembled information should be disaggregated and reported separately for: (a) each gender group; (b) students with disabilities; (c) economically disadvantaged students; (c) students from different ethnic groups; and (e) students with limited English proficiency.

How is the performance of students with disabilities reported to the public?

The practice of public reporting has become increasingly more important for communicating the status of our educational progress to various public and policy making audiences. In a recent national survey of state educational agencies, 45 states reported having at least one annual accountability report, with 41 of those publishing at least one report providing statistics at the district level, and 35 offering data at the individual school level (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1995). Our nations system of public education has never been so publicized.

A content analysis of state accountability reports by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Shin, & Coleman, in press) has revealed that relatively few states report the performance data of students with disabilities in separate public reports (Kansas, Hawaii and Louisiana currently have such reports). The performance of students with disabilities is sometimes disaggregated and reported within a state's overall accountability report; however, this is the case in very few states. It is far more common for states to report on the percentage of students in special education being served within schools or districts than it is for the academic performance of such students to be disaggregated and analyzed separately.

How should we define accountability for students with disabilities?

Any special educator or program administrator will tell you that being held accountable is nothing new. Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, special educators and administrators at local and state levels have been accountable for complying with many state and federal regulations overseeing the delivery of services to students with disabilities. Emphasis has centered on monitoring information on the numbers of students with disabilities served in various educational settings, adherence to due process and eligibility requirements, and the proper implementation of programs to meet individualized student goals. Unfortunately, this focus on educational *inputs* and *processes* has drawn the field's attention away from expectations of *results* for students with disabilities. There are some notable exceptions: the National Longitudinal Transition Study (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) provided one of our first views into the post-school lives of students with disabilities on a national basis. While its results on the transition of students with disabilities to adult life have led to federal and state policies overseeing transition from school to work, the findings were not intended to assist individual schools or school systems in pinpointing areas for improvement.

On the other hand, the considerable attention being given to measures of student academic performance within state accountability systems has led some to believe that we may be moving toward a narrow and restricted definition of our expectations for public education. The National Center on Educational Outcomes (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1993) has constructed a model of educational outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities, that suggests the expectations of our schools should include outcomes in eight life domains, including physical health, social adjustment, emotional

well-being, and citizenship. Such comprehensive models support the argument that the current content standards of many states should be broadened to include non-academic goals as well.

Special educators hold a unique perspective in regard to defining student success in broader terms than academic achievement. Individual transition plans for secondary students with disabilities oversee interdisciplinary planning for students to reach desirable life outcomes in the areas of post-secondary education, employment and community living. This planning forms a foundation of accountability for all professionals involved with such students, and may also aid in a consideration of what the most important outcomes of our efforts as general and special educators should be.

Special education has arrived at a crossroads. Having established and carried out policies and procedures to promote meaningful life outcomes for students with disabilities, we now find our path intersecting with the rapid expansion of statewide accountability systems constructed from standards, assessments, and significant consequences for students and schools. To determine our future as special educators and as members of the larger educational community, we need to bring our perspective to the discussion table.

PART 2 STANDARDS

If there is a common activity to be found among the many state-level efforts to reform public education, it is undoubtedly the construction of *standards*: the knowledge and skills we expect our students to have. Many would argue all other aspects of establishing accountability—reforming curriculum or instruction, developing meaningful assessment systems, evaluating our preservice or professional development efforts—cannot advance without first specifically defining our expectations for learners.

In this section we examine the diversity and complexity of state standard-setting activities, and focus on special considerations for students with disabilities in these efforts. Unquestionably, the extent to which students with disabilities are included in statewide accountability systems is largely dependent upon how well these students are considered in the establishment of standards for student achievement.

What do we mean by standards?

The extensive use of the word *standard* in educational circles has led to multiple definitions for the word. In their overview of standards, Shriner, Ysseldyke and Thurlow (1994) reflect that the term has become “nebulous, with many different interpretations and applications” (p. 1). Among educational reformers, two different types of standards are most commonly discussed: (a) *content* standards, statements that articulate and define the knowledge and skills that students are expected to know in different content areas, and (b) *performance* standards, established benchmarks of student performance linked to assessments of the content standards. Content standards answer the question, “What is it we want our students to know and to do?” Performance standards address the issue of “How well do we expect them to know it or do it?”

What are states doing to establish standards?

The short answer is ... a lot. In its second annual review of state standard-setting activities, the American Federation of Teachers (1996) reported that 48 states (with the exception of Iowa and Wyoming) are either developing or implementing a system of academic standards for students, and that 38 of these have developed new standards or revised their current ones *within the past year*. In almost all cases, states have focused on developing content standards in the four curricular content areas of language arts, mathematics, science and social studies through extensive input from various constituencies representing students,

parents, teachers, school administrators, post-secondary institutions, businesses, and other community agencies. The AFT report used several guiding questions to evaluate the quality of the states' efforts. These included:

- Does the state have or is it in the process of developing standards in the four core academic areas?
- Are the standards clear and specific enough to provide the basis for a common core curriculum?
- Are the standards benchmarked to world-class levels?
- Does or will the state have an assessment system linked to the standards? And if so, will the state assess students in all four core subjects?
- Does or will the state require and fund extra help for students not meeting the standards?
- Does or will the state require districts and schools to make student promotion decisions based in part on state assessment results?
- Does the state have graduation exams or a system of differential diplomas linked to the standards?

When evaluated against these criteria, the collective efforts of states were given less than flattering marks in the report. Among its conclusions:

- Only 15 states had clear, specific, well-grounded standards in the four content areas;
- Only 12 states have looked at student expectations in other countries while developing their own standards;
- Only 34 states will assess student achievement of their state standards in all four core subject areas;
- Only 10 states require and fund intervention programs to help low-performing students reach the state standards;

- Only 3 states will hold students accountable for meeting standards in the years prior to high school;
- Only 10 states currently require students to pass graduation exams linked to the standards; however 20 states will make this a requirement in the future; and
- Only 8 states will offer “differentiated diplomas” as a way of motivating students to reach high standards.

Should students with disabilities be asked to achieve the same standards as all other students?

In an informal survey of state special education directors (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1996a), almost a third of the responding directors (11 out of 35) reported that their offices were *not involved* in the creation of academic content standards. This finding suggests that in many states, the unique needs and learning styles of students receiving special education may not have been fully taken into account when the standards were constructed. The effects of this noticeable absence may be even greater in the future, as states begin to wrestle with how curriculum, assessment, and professional development can be retrofitted to match our new expectations for learners.

Does “all” really mean “all”? If statewide accountability frameworks are truly dedicated to considering how all students can achieve the expectations articulated in higher standards, they face the challenge of applying such new standards to students in special education. What should be different for students with disabilities, and what should be kept the same? Shriner et al. (1994) examined the idea of establishing separate content standards for students with disabilities and highlighted the following arguments both for and against such an approach:

Arguments for Establishing Separate Content Standards	Arguments Against Establishing Separate Content Standards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate standards may better express the expectations held for students with disabilities in the areas of communication, functional literacy and employability skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards may be deemed necessary for separate disability categories or levels of severity creating even less consensus over our educational expectations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less content-specific standards may be better aligned with individualized education programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate content standards may narrow the curricular options of students with disabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate content standards may lead to better assessment of student performance and progress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate content standards promote the myth of inherent differences between regular and special education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate content standards may lessen the resistance by parents, educators and students toward assessment practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate content standards may lower our expectations for students with disabilities.

The fact that only two states have reportedly developed separate standards for students with disabilities (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1996a) seems to indicate that the disincentives of developing such systems outweigh any perceived advantages. The inclusive requirements of recent federal legislation like *Goals 2000* and the *Improving America's Schools Act* also help explain states hesitancy to move in this direction. But some of the decision to establish separate standards could rest on the nature of the standards themselves. The level of specificity among the various state frameworks varies greatly, and their relevance to students with disabilities may be greatly dependent on how prescriptive the learner expectations are. For example, a language arts standard suggesting students should “write a descriptive essay” may not seem readily applicable to a student with severe multiple disabilities. However, the more generalized learning outcome of “communicating effectively” could be expected of almost any student, regardless of the challenges posed by his or her disabilities.

If states consider content standards to be applicable to all students, what about performance standards? The Center for Policy Options (Westat, 1994) identified several options and implications for policy-makers facing the challenge of establishing performance standards. Included in the discussion were several implications, both positive and negative, for using separate performance standards when assessing students with disabilities:

Arguments for Using Separate Performance Standards	Arguments Against Using Separate Performance Standards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different performance standards will increase opportunities for all students to be part of an overall accountability system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differing performance standards may perpetuate lower expectations and achievement for students with disabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different performance standards are more compatible with the use of individual goals and objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less attention may be paid to the results gathered from students meeting modified performance standards.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different performance standards will lessen pressures on students to achieve beyond their functional abilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-school or cross-group comparisons are more difficult when different performance standards are being used.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different performance standards may enable students with disabilities to take the same tests their non-disabled peers take. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different performance standards may lead to different exit documents for students with disabilities.

The issues surrounding “same or different” performance standards have yet to be fully resolved by states in the midst of constructing new forms of assessments that align to equally new standards and curriculum frameworks.

One possible alternative to these options involves the measurement of *progress* toward performance standards, rather than simply focusing on those students who *achieve* certain levels. Using such an approach, attention would be paid not only to those students who meet set levels of achievement, but also to those students who show movement toward them. In this way, assessment systems would examine

improvement across all ranges of student performance while keeping performance standards constant for all children.

What is the relationship between the IEP and high standards?

The individualized education program (IEP) for students with disabilities represents an educational accountability system in miniature—an outline of learner goals, assessment strategies, and performance standards established through consensus among different stakeholders. Its uniqueness lies in its focus on the needs of an individual student, instead of entire student populations. Required by federal law long before most of the current reform activities ever began, IEP planning teams now find themselves in a rapidly changing environment, one with new expectations and requirements. Policies surrounding new systems of content standards and assessments are requiring IEP teams to determine how well content standards, assessment programs, and performance standards “fit” students with disabilities. Many states have begun to require teams to establish linkages between individual goals and objectives and state-approved content standards. In almost all existing state policies, decisions about students’ participation in statewide assessments are left in the hands of IEP teams (Erickson, Thurlow, Seyfarth & Thor, 1996). These deliberations may lead teams to more closely scrutinize students’ access to the general curriculum and could promote greater collaboration between special and general educators at all levels.

In the future, IEP teams will need a great deal of information about standard-setting efforts within their local or state school systems. Policy expectations will need to be clearly articulated to students, parents, and both general and special educators. Decisionmaking guidelines and training will be needed by IEP committees to assist them in making their choices. In particular, students with disabilities and their families must know whether modifications to either content or performance standards will lead to diminished expectations, a narrowing of curricular offerings, or a different graduation status.

PART 3 ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

Including students with disabilities in results-based accountability systems demands that we examine their participation in assessment systems measuring the performance of our nation's schools. It is here that our commitment to their participation in reform faces numerous critical issues in the areas of measurement, curriculum, and the reporting of results, all of which are in the midst of significant change. All but two states recently reported having a statewide assessment either in use, under development, or under revision (Bond et al., 1996). The participation of students with disabilities in such assessments is considered critical to their overall participation in educational reform efforts. This section of the report examines some of the major questions being raised as state educational agencies examine the implications of measuring results for *all* students, including those with disabilities.

How can assessment systems include all students?

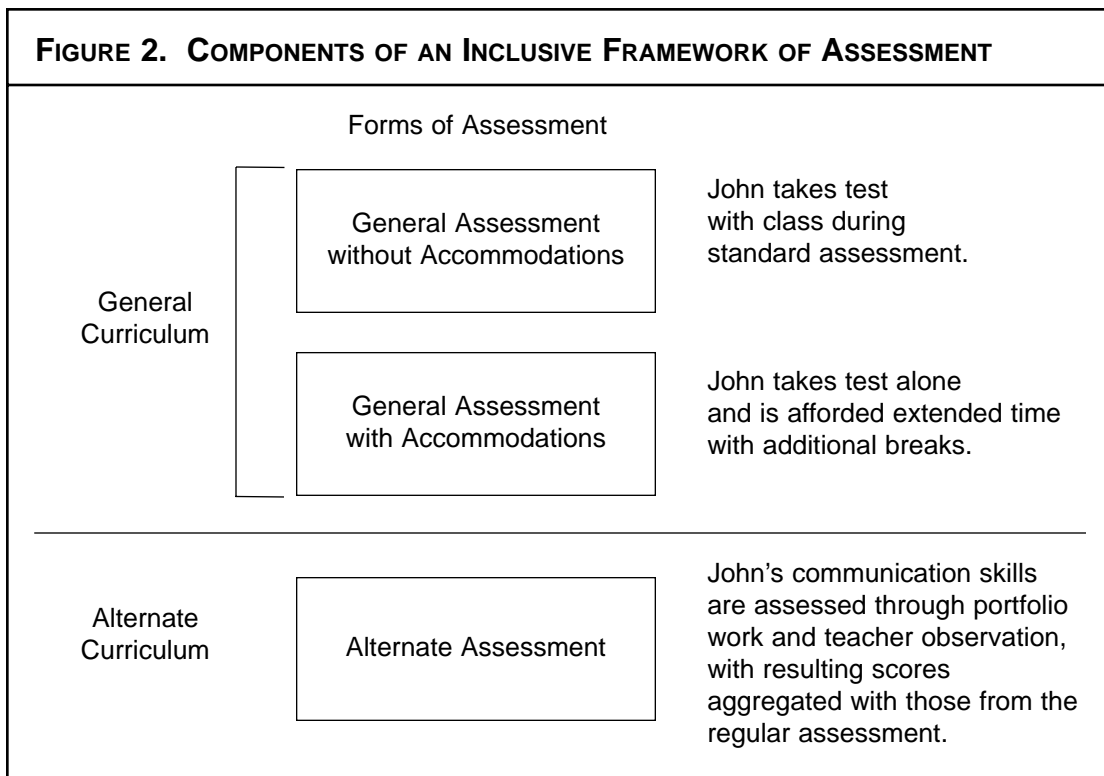
Educators focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide assessment programs have begun to face this challenge in a variety of ways. Generally speaking, students receiving special education services are participating in testing programs in one of three ways: (a) through the standard administration provided to all other students; (b) through participation with the assistance of certain specified accommodations or modifications; or (c) through participation in an *alternate* assessment designed to measure the progress of students who cannot meaningfully participate in the regular assessment program. The distinction between *assessment* and *accountability* is an important one to remember here. Accountability for all students does not mean that all students must participate in the same assessment program. It does suggest, however, that the progress of all students must be accounted for.

What is an alternate assessment?

A relatively new development in educational testing is the concept of *alternate* assessment systems for students whose participation in regular assessment programs is deemed inappropriate. To date only three states (Kentucky, Maryland and Texas) have either developed, or taken steps to develop such alternative means of reporting on the performance of students whose educational programming calls for an alternative approach (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1996). Students considered eligible for participation in such systems are typically challenged by very severe disabilities, and have individualized educational programs that

emphasize non-academic goals in areas such as communication and functional living skills. Alternate assessments are likely to include less traditional forms of assessment, such as performance tasks and portfolio development, and may include information gathered through videotape, interviews, or direct observation.

Development of these assessments has been driven by a commitment to build statewide assessment programs that can accommodate and include virtually all students. Figure 2 illustrates the various avenues students may follow when participating in such a system.



Numerous issues have yet to be resolved as states begin measuring the performance of some students with disabilities through alternate assessments. Some of these include:

- What criteria should be used to determine student eligibility for participation in an alternate assessment?
- How can such performance-based assessments be constructed to reflect a common core of learning when the learning goals of students with very severe disabilities can be so individualized?

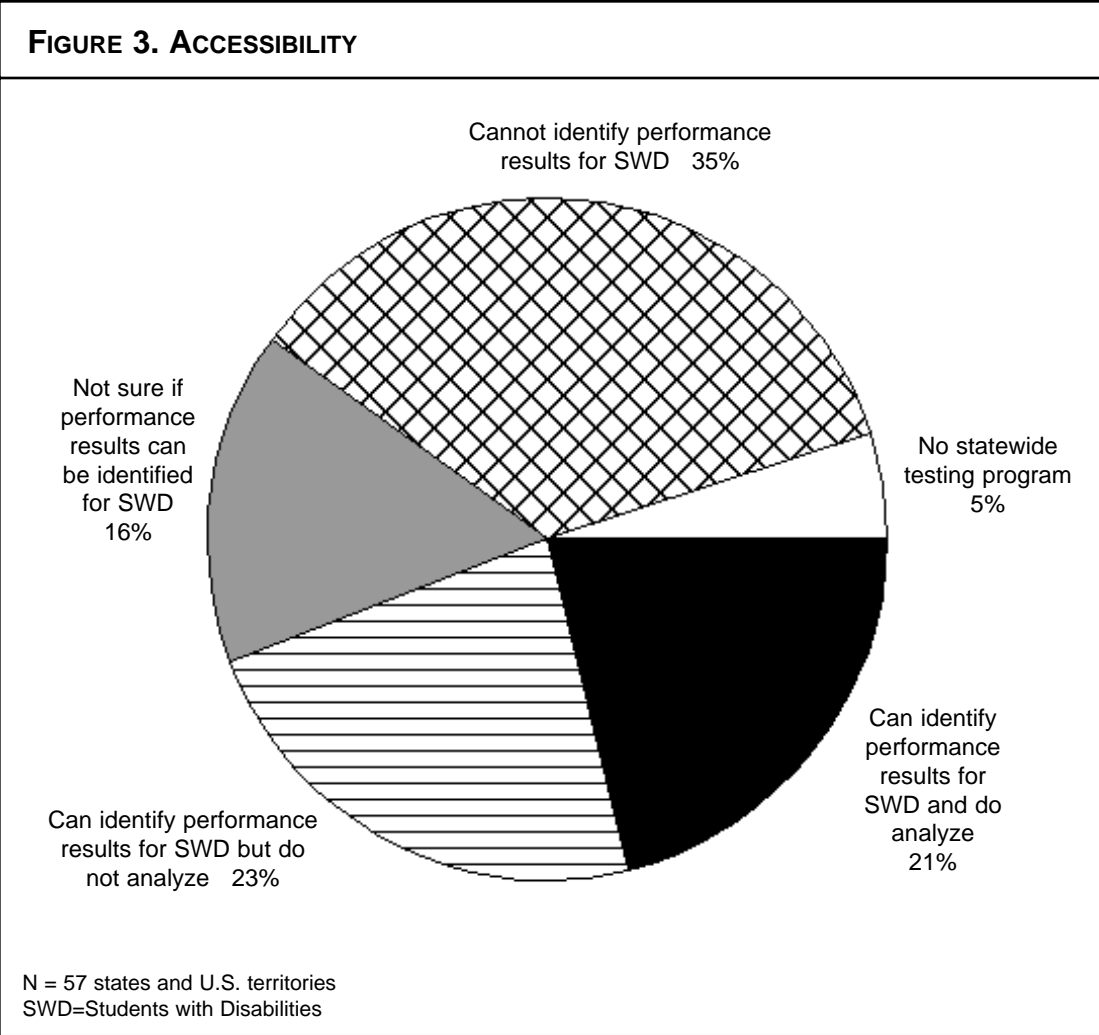
- How can the results of alternate assessments be aggregated and combined with the results of students in the general assessment program to allow schools and districts to report on the learning of all students?

What do we know about the participation of students with disabilities(SWD) in national or state-level assessments?

The practice of assessing the academic progress of students with disabilities has an unflattering history. An early analysis of nine major national data collection programs (McGrew, Thurlow, Shriner & Spiegel, 1992) revealed that between 40 and 50% of school-aged students with disabilities were being excluded from these nationwide efforts. Even our nations report card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, is no exception. In a follow-up study to the 1994 Trial State Assessment of fourth grade reading, researchers using other measures of reading proficiency identified a full 70% of excluded special education students as actually being assessable (Stancavage, McLaughlin, Vergun, Godlewski, & Allen, 1996). Such gaps in participation prevent the formation of a comprehensive picture of how well our nations students are really doing.

Efforts are equally spotty when considering state-level assessment programs. In its 1994 survey of state assessment practices for students with disabilities, the National Center on Educational Outcomes found that state special education directors could estimate participation rates for students with disabilities in only 49 of the 133 statewide assessments being used during that year, less that 37% of the total number of tests in use (Erickson et al., 1995). This lack of available assessment information on special education students leads to the conclusion that there is little demand for this information for programmatic or accountability purposes.

A 1995 national survey of state special education directors revealed that even in those cases where performance data may be available, it often goes unused (Erickson et al., 1996). The following chart provides a profile of the availability and use of assessment data for students with disabilities across the United States and U.S. territories. The paucity of performance data on students with disabilities should be improved by provisions in the Individuals with Disabilities



Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997. The Act specifically mandates the inclusion of students with disabilities in general state and district-wide assessment programs, either through the regular assessment programs with appropriate accommodations where necessary, or through the use of alternate assessments for those students who cannot participate in the regular assessment program. Other provisions within Part B of the Act stipulate that state educational agencies will make available certain information to the public, and report this information to the public with the same frequency and in the same detail as they report on the assessment of students who do not have disabilities. The information SEAs must make available and report to the public includes: the number of children with disabilities participating in regular assessments; the number of those children participating in alternate assessments; the performance of those children on regular assessments (beginning no later than July 1, 1998) and on alternate assessments (beginning no later than July 1, 2000), if doing so would

be statistically sound and would not result in the disclosure of performance results identifiable to individual children. Other requirements exist as well [See Section 612 (a)(17)(B)(iii)](IDEA).

What do we know about state assessment policies and students with disabilities?

In their 1995 review of assessment policies from the 43 states that had active assessment programs during that year, Thurlow et al. (1995a) reported a great deal of variability among the states in their approach to the participation of students with disabilities. Their analysis identified the following important factors that affect the rate at which special education students participate in assessment programs:

Reliance on the IEP team. Thirty-two state policies specifically identified the IEP team as holding the decision making authority in determining whether a special education student should participate in district or state-level assessment activities. Out of these, 25 policies also mandate that such decisions be stipulated within the IEP itself.

Parental approval. While it can be assumed that parents hold a critical role in any student's IEP team, the policies of 16 states specifically refer to the need for parental approval in allowing students with disabilities access to assessment activities. In four of these states, receipt of a regular diploma is partially dependent upon successfully passing one or more graduation exams. In each of these four cases, policies stipulate that parents must be informed that non-participation will lead to the loss of a regular diploma.

Partial participation in testing. Seven states policies specifically permit a student with disabilities to take only portions of the assessment battery offered to the general student population. Criteria for waiving specific content areas from the assessment vary from state to state. Some suggest excusing students with disabilities only from those tests that would not provide a valid measure of their abilities, while others waive testing in those content areas that are taught exclusively in special education settings.

Categorical or placement criteria. The policies of fifteen states stipulate that participation in assessment be based, at least in part, on the disability category assigned to the student, or on his or her educational placement. However, the policies are strikingly dissimilar in terms of the number of disability categories exempted and in specifying the types of educational placement that would

automatically excuse students with disabilities from participating in the regular assessment program (e.g., 12 or more hours weekly of special education instruction; less than three regular education courses).

Curricular alignment. Ten states policies specifically stipulate that attention must be paid to the academic content of the assessments and how well it reflects what students with disabilities have had the opportunity to learn. In four of these states, out-of-level testing is allowed in those cases where it is believed that the students instructional level is significantly different than his or her grade placement.

Provisions for alternate assessment procedures. States with accountability systems that focus on educational results for all students realize that some students with disabilities simply cannot participate in the general assessment program, even with the use of testing accommodations. For this small population of students, estimated to be less than 2% of the total K-12 student population, states need to consider alternative approaches to assessment. The policies of six states mention the use of alternative testing approaches in their policies, though this may range from state-developed portfolio or performance assessments designed to measure state-articulated standards (as in Kentucky or Maryland) to policies that allow local districts to select assessments that measure progress toward IEP goals (as in Illinois).

Reporting results. Twenty-four states have policies that address the use of assessment data on students with disabilities. These data typically include performance results from standard administrations, administrations with the use of accommodations, alternative assessment results, and information on exclusion rates. Perspectives on the use and reporting of these data differ greatly from state to state. In over half the cases, performance data from students with disabilities are not to be aggregated with those of the general student population for public reporting purposes.

What issues surround test accommodations for students with disabilities?

One of the significant issues that states face when implementing inclusive assessment programs concerns the use of testing accommodations for students with disabilities. Students with certain physical or cognitive limitations may require the use of specific

Timing	Setting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extending time allotted to complete the test • Altering time of day test is administered • Administering test in several sessions over course of day • Administering test in several sessions over several days • Allowing frequent breaks during testing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group administration • Hospital administration • Administration using study carrel • Separate room administration • Homebound administration • Homeschool administration
Presentation	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio cassette • Reading test aloud • Large print • Repeating directions • Sign language assistance • Braille version • Magnification devices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictating to scribe • Sign language assistance • Braille writer • Answers recorded • Word processor • Transferring answers from booklet

accommodations in order to allow them to participate in the assessment experience. Testing accommodations can be categorized as falling into one of the following categories: (a) presentation, (b) response, (c) setting, or (d) timing. A listing of possible accommodations is included in the table above.

Questions have emerged about the impact of these accommodations on the psychometric integrity of the assessments themselves. In other words, can the scores gathered on the performance of students using accommodations be compared to those not provided with such assistance? In order to answer this fundamental question, the impact of an accommodation on at least four different aspects of an assessment needs to be considered:

- Construct validity. Are the resulting scores of accommodated and non-accommodated tests measuring the same underlying abilities or constructs?
- Criterion validity. Do scores gathered through the use of accommodations correlate as well as non-accommodated scores to any established outcome or criteria?

- Reliability. Are scores gained through accommodated test administration as reliable as those gathered through standardized means?
- Differential item functioning. Can accommodated and non-accommodated items be placed on the same measurement scale?

At present, 12 different federally-funded projects are investigating the impact of accommodations on these dimensions. Until more is known, results gathered through the use of accommodations will need careful interpretation, and in some cases, may need to be disaggregated from those of the general testing population. The need for accommodations should not, however, be used as a rationale for excluding students with disabilities from large-scale assessment.

What are the legal issues related to testing accommodations?

Decisions about assessment accommodations must consider the competing viewpoints of two different parties: those who wish to see the full inclusion of students with disabilities in assessment and accountability systems, and those who wish to protect the technical integrity of scores derived from these assessments. Finding the balance between these two perspectives can be difficult. Even though federal disability law such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 specifically prohibits handicapped individuals from being excluded from any program or activity receiving federal funding, the courts have tended to judge in favor of preserving the psychometric integrity of testing instruments as long as procedural safeguards have been followed.

Despite the considerable amounts of attention and money that have gone into developing new statewide achievement testing programs, relatively little research has focused on the issue of testing accommodations and their impact on test validity and reliability. Until we have better information upon which to base our conclusions, legal expert S.E. Phillips suggests decisionmakers consider the purpose of the test, the skills to be measured, and the inferences to be made from the test score. Before departing from standardized testing conditions, she recommends reflecting on the following questions (Phillips, 1993, 1994):

1. Will format changes or alterations in testing conditions change the skill being measured?

2. Will the scores of examinees tested under standard conditions have a different meaning than scores for examinees tested with the requested accommodation?
3. Would non-disabled examinees benefit if allowed the same accommodation?
4. Does the disabled examinee have any capability for adapting to standard test administration conditions?
5. Is the disability evidence or testing accommodations policy based on procedures with doubtful validity or reliability?

What criteria should be followed in establishing policies for participation and accommodations in testing?

While most states have policies overseeing the participation of students in statewide assessment systems, these policies vary widely in their inclusiveness. The National Center on Educational Outcomes has developed a set of policy guidelines addressing the participation of special education students in large-scale assessments, the provision of testing accommodations, and the reporting of assessment results (Elliott, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996). The guidelines are listed in the following table.

An essential step in the reform process will be using such guidelines to develop state policy on assessment participation, test accommodations and the reporting of test results for all students with disabilities.

Participation	Accommodations	Reporting of Results
<p>1. Guidelines should include a premise that all students are to participate in large-scale assessment.</p>	<p>1. Decisions about appropriate accommodations are made by a person or persons who know(s) the student well.</p>	<p>1. A written policy exists concerning who is included when determining participation or exclusion rates in assessment programs.</p>
<p>2. Decisions about participation are made by a person or persons who know(s) the student well.</p>	<p>2. Decisions about accommodations are based on the student's current level of functioning and learning characteristics.</p>	<p>2. Rates of exclusion specific to students with disabilities, and the reasons for exclusion, are reported whenever assessment results are reported.</p>
<p>3. Decisions are based on the student's current level of functioning and learning characteristics.</p>	<p>3. A form is used that lists the variables to consider in making accommodation decisions, and documents the decisions made.</p>	<p>3. Performance reports include information from all test takers.</p>
<p>4. A written form is used that lists the variables to consider in making participation decisions.</p>	<p>4. Accommodation guidelines require alignment between instructional and assessment accommodations.</p>	<p>4. Assessment data are maintained in ways that allow performance data on students with disabilities to be reported separately for evaluation purposes.</p>
<p>5. Reasons for exclusion are documented.</p>	<p>5. Accommodation decisions are not based on program setting, category of disability, or percentage of time in mainstreamed classes.</p>	<p>5. Assessment data include information on the types of accommodations provided to students with disabilities.</p>

Participation	Accommodations	Reporting of Results
<p>6. Students participate in an assessment regardless of where instruction on the assessed content has occurred.</p>	<p>6. Accommodation decisions are fully documented on the student's IEP.</p>	<p>6. Parents are fully informed about the reporting policies for student's performance data.</p>
<p>7. Participation decisions are not based on the program setting, category of disability, or percentage of time in mainstreamed classes.</p>	<p>7. Parents are fully informed about accommodation options and the implications of not participating.</p>	
<p>8. Assessment options include participation in an alternate assessment or, whenever appropriate, a portion of the regular assessment battery. These options are restricted to a small percentage of students with disabilities.</p>		
<p>9. Parents are fully informed about participation options and the implications of not participating.</p>		
<p>10. Participation decisions are fully documented on the student's IEP.</p>		

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