

Assessments and “High Stakes” Accountability Part I

What do These Reforms Mean
for Students with Disabilities and
Learning Difficulties?

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The Issue

- Worldwide movement to create “standards-driven” education
 - Driven by demands for both greater efficiency and equity
- Movement is characterized by content and performance standards; large-scale assessments of student attainment; accountability based on student performance

Define the Terms

- **Standards** define subject matter *content*, including pedagogy as well as defined levels of student *performance* of that content
- **Assessments** of student cohorts and benchmarking or setting cut scores
- **Accountability** at the system and/or student-level including consequences based on student performance on assessments (e.g., “high” to “low” stakes)

Effects of “Standards-driven” Education

- Centralized control over curriculum
- Narrowed the curriculum subject matter – (*countries vary as to breadth within a content area*)
- Focus on educational outcomes and not inputs or processes
- Greater transparency
- Consequences for poor performance cause schools to focus on test results

“Standards-driven” Education & Students with Learning Difficulties

- US provides special education services to about 12% of its school-age population: (*3% have specific learning disabilities and speech/language difficulties*)
- Australia provides special education to about 3% of its school age population.
- US laws (IDEA, Sec 504, and ADA) require that all students with disabilities access the same curriculum, participate in assessments and are included in one accountability system
- 2004 Disability Standards for Education speak to providing “access” to curriculum and instruction
- Individual departments define curriculum and assessments and accountability but with national benchmarks
- No Child Left Behind requires all students be held to same content standards, be assessed annually, consequences for schools
- Individual states differ with respect to content standards, assessments and additional accountability

What are we learning about implementation of “Standards-driven” Education?

Sources of Information:

- Analyzed information obtained over 12 years
- Qualitative study – case studies, interviews
- Quantitative analyses
- Elementary and middle schools in 8 states and 13 districts have been intensively studied

Implementation: The Early Years 1988-1993

- Curriculum was very uneven across schools and loosely linked to any standards
- Focus was on helping students participate/move along in the curriculum not necessarily achieve specific levels of performance
- Participation in curriculum and assessments among students with disabilities was not supported and these students were exempted
- Accountability for performance was very “low stakes”. For students with IEPs it was non-existent

Implementation: *The Middle Years* 1994-2000

- Accountability “hit” schools and classrooms and general education teachers lost control over curriculum
- Assessment results became the driving force in schools, but teacher believed that...
- “We can’t expect ‘those’ students to learn this material.”; “This is not what they need to learn.”
- The goal for students with disabilities was to participate in general education classrooms
- Assessment participation increased
- Accountability for performance of students with IEPs was uneven

Implementation: *The Latest Years* 2000-present

- Accountability “hits” special education
- Assessment results drive all school decisions
- All teachers talk about all students needing to be prepared to take the assessments
- All students have instruction in academic content based on the standards
- Special education teachers have competing priorities: “We can’t expect ‘those’ students to learn this material.”; “This is not what they need to learn.”
- All students take the assessments and are included in accountability system

What do we know about implementation with students with learning difficulties?

- Assessment participation has increased dramatically
- Performance is increasing, particularly at lower grade levels, but the achievement gap has not narrowed
- Assessment design & administration procedures impede performance of students with learning difficulties
- Some schools are reporting consistently better than expected results for students with disabilities; others are “hit or miss”; for many we have no data at the school level.

What Have We Learned?

- Some schools are *consistently* achieving better than expected results for all students – *even after controlling for poverty level in the school*
- “A rising tide raises all boats.” School-level performance of students with learning disabilities mirrors that of other sub-groups.
- Some teachers/classrooms consistently achieve better results for all students

What Are We Learning About the “Good” Schools?

- Curriculum is linked to standards and all teachers deeply understand the curriculum
- All teachers know how to match their instruction to the demands of the curriculum
- Strong sense of collective responsibility in the school – shared expectations for improving performance of students
- Strong communication and collaboration among all staff
- Flexible instructional settings/groups

What Are We Learning About the “Good” Schools?

- Shared language based on standards – reflected in the way teachers talk about students with IEPs as learners: *“He is just about at the [standard] so we are really focusing on developing his writing processes this year.”*
- Teachers share responsibility for designing instruction around the curriculum
- Teacher communication is focused on problem solving around the curriculum: *“He has difficulties with [specific components] so I pull him out to work on [these skills]”*

What Are We Learning About the “Good” Schools?

- All students are increasingly given access to challenging curriculum
- The focus on student achievement is raising expectations for students with disabilities and those with learning difficulties
- Transparency and public accountability is an important policy tool that is opening opportunities for all students

and...

- Performance among persistent low achievers and students with disabilities is increasing