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Maximizing the Performance of Students With Disabilities

From a little spark may burst a mighty flame.

—Dante

An accountability system is needed for all students and at the broadest level should apply to all students regardless of their characteristics.

—Jim Ysseldyke

Hot-Button Issues

- Whatever happened to "educate the best, forget about the rest"?
- Are we not kidding ourselves when we say that all students can learn?
- All of this is more work than it is worth, right?

Is your school a *needs-improvement* school? Have you met your adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals? What subgroup did not make AYP? These are the types of questions that are probably swirling around your current career as an educator—questions that just a few years ago would not have emerged from anyone's lips. They are questions about how well students are performing in school. Behind each of these questions is another question about what is to be done when accountability goals are not met. And, more to the point, how are certain groups of students, such as those with disabilities, ever going to show the performance that is needed for schools to be successful?

You have probably heard the phrase "all students can learn." Many schools, districts, and states have this phrase as part of their mission statements. More and more often, this phrase is now being followed by the phrase "all means all." Also, federal law and state and district policies are clarifying that the *all* in "all means all" includes students who have disabilities, as well as students who are English language learners. For some time, both of these groups were excluded from assessments and accountability systems—but no longer.

Federal and state laws now make it quite clear that all students—and that *all* includes students with disabilities—must be able to reap the benefits of a standards-based education. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997 (IDEA 97), it became clear that students who have disabilities are to be included in state and districtwide assessments and that their performance is to be reported in a public way for all to see. The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, supported these requirements and went a step further. NCLB placed the words *accountability* and *adequate yearly performance* on the lips of educators everywhere and on the lips of the public as well. This law requires not only that students participate in assessment systems but also that their scores be included in the NCLB accountability system, which produces AYP benchmarks for students overall and for each subgroup of students. The group of students with disabilities is one of those subgroups. The reauthorization of IDEA 97 in 2004, called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), confirmed the participation of students with disabilities in the AYP accountability requirements.

The key elements of IDEA 97 and NCLB have created a whirlwind of activities in schools, districts, and states. To a large extent, the whirlwind reflects a need to respond to some very new and innovative requirements—access to the general curriculum, participation in state and district assessments, public reporting of disaggregated results of students with disabilities, development of alternate assessments for those students unable to participate in regular assessments, accountability that requires targeting AYP toward a goal of 100% of students proficient by 2014 (all students and each subgroup), and a cap on the percentage of students in an alternate assessment who can demonstrate proficiency based on alternate achievement standards. A pending regulation at the time this book was written would allow for alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards. Both IDEA and NCLB had dramatic effects in their own ways for students with disabilities—essentially putting them on the educational radar of all! Box 1.1 provides more details on some of the critical assessment and accountability features of IDEA and NCLB.

An unintended consequence of the federal laws in some locations has been a jump to "game" the system. Can we move students with disabilities from one school to another so that there are not enough to count toward (or against) AYP goals? Why don't we encourage a few really poorly performing students to stay home from school because we still have enough flexibility in the 95% participation requirement to not have them participate? Questions about changing standards or assessments have been seriously discussed at the state level. In some places, there was successful avoidance for a long time of what needed to

Box 1.1

Key Elements of IDEA 97, NCLB, and IDEA 2004

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 97)

Access to General Curriculum—Students with disabilities must have access to, participate in, and make progress in the general education curriculum; they also must receive the services, supports, accommodations, and adaptations to ensure their participation and progress.

Participation in State and Districtwide Assessments—Students with disabilities are to participate in state and districtwide general assessments, with appropriate accommodations where needed.

Develop Alternate Assessments—States are to develop alternate assessments for those students who cannot participate in general assessments given by states or districts.

Public Reporting of Results—Whenever the state publicly reports data on students without disabilities, it is required to also report disaggregated data on students with disabilities, including the number participating in the general assessment and their performance and the number participating in the alternate assessment and their performance.

No Child Left Behind Act

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—Each state is to define the annual progress targets and benchmarks that indicate adequate yearly progress to move all students from their performance levels in 2001–2002 to 100% proficient in the year 2014. These targets must be met by all students overall, as well as by each subgroup of students.

Subgroups—Groups of students targeted for attention in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability system include ethnic and minority groups, low socioeconomic groups, English language learners (students with limited English proficiency), and students with disabilities.

95% Participation—Schools and districts must demonstrate that 95% of their student population and each subgroup participated in the assessment to meet AYP, regardless of performance levels. Low participation rates automatically throw schools into the "needs-improvement" or "not meeting AYP" category. Participation rates may be averaged across two or three years to obtain the 95% (the current year and one or two previous years). In addition, students who were unable to take an assessment during the testing window because of a significant medical emergency (such as a car accident) do not have to be counted against the participation rate.

1% Cap on Proficient Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards—Although as many students as appropriate may participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (for students with significant cognitive disabilities), only up to 1% of the scores that are proficient or above will count toward AYP accountability measures; the remainder will fold into the below basic or equivalent category.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004)

Accommodations—Guidelines are to be developed for the provision of appropriate guidelines by the state (or for districtwide assessments, by the local educational agency). The state

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(or district, for district assessments) must report to the public the number of children with disabilities who were provided accommodations in order to participate in regular assessments.

Alternate Assessments—Requirements for these assessments include that they are (1) aligned with the state's challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards, and (2) measure the achievement of students with disabilities against alternate academic achievement standards if the state has adopted them. A pending NCLB regulation at the time this book was written that would allow for alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards is not addressed in IDEA 2004.

Universal Design—States and districts shall use universal design principles to the extent feasible in developing and administering any assessments.

be discussed—where the rubber hits the road— that is, the alignment of the curriculum and instruction with the standards and the assessments. Are students being taught what they need to be taught? Are students being prepared for the test? This book is about where the rubber meets the road.

The assumptions on which IDEA and NCLB are based are clear and sound. Even if we do not agree with exactly how the laws are being carried out, the assumptions ring loud and clear and are ones that underlie the contents of this book. Box 1.2 summarizes the assumptions and gives a brief explanation of each. It is well worth taking the time to read these and to challenge yourself about your beliefs and your practices. Do they align with the assumptions in Box 1.2?

This chapter is a preview of the chapters in this book—each of which is devoted to ways to improve the achievement and test performance of students who have disabilities. The tests that are the focus here are those that are used by states and districts to report on what students know and can do and, increasingly, to determine significant consequences for schools (such as school awards, school accreditation, and other NCLB-related sanctions) and for students (such as promotion from one grade to another and graduation from high school). Because students who have disabilities generally were not included in these kinds of assessments in the past, we have not necessarily examined how to make sure that when they sit down for a test or when they engage in a performance event—or when they put together a portfolio—that they will perform their best, or that their performance will be an accurate reflection of what they know and what they can do.

The goal of this book is to help you, as an educator, improve the achievement and test performance of each and every student who has a disability. We are confident that the suggestions in this book also can be of benefit to other students, but we suspect that many of the things that we suggest are already being used by other students—either because someone has already implemented them or because the students themselves have picked them up on their own.

Box 1.2

Assumptions About Including Students With Disabilities

Assumption 1: All children can learn.

This seemingly simple statement is at the core of the concept of including all students in educational accountability systems. It contains a recognition that all learning is important. It also encompasses an understanding of the dramatic effects that expectations can have on the learning of individuals and the need to be aware of a tendency to hold inappropriate expectations for individual children, particularly those who are performing below the level of other children who are the same as them in one way or another.

Assumption 2: Schools are responsible for the learning of all children.

A strong premise underlying American public education is that schools are a mechanism to bring equality to all children, regardless of background. Over time, policymakers have recognized that individuals who have disabilities are people first, and have the same rights as other citizens. Although it has taken some strong public laws to ensure that these rights are recognized and upheld, these rights remain an integral part of the assumptions underlying an inclusive accountability system.

Assumption 3: Whenever children are counted, all children must count.

To have an inclusive educational accountability system, students who have disabilities must count in the same way as other children. Not all students have to take the same test to be counted, but they must count. Special approaches may have to be taken to ensure that scores are comparable in agreed-upon ways, and these approaches must be decided on up-front with stakeholders talking to each other. But the bottom line is that all students must count—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Resources on the Assumptions for Including Students With Disabilities in Accountability

McDonnell, L. M., McLaughlin, M. J., & Morison, P. (1997) (Eds.). *Educating one & all: Students with disabilities and standards-based reform.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
Heubert, J., & Hauser, R. (1999) (Eds.). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
Thurlow, M. L., Elliott, J. L., & Ysseldyke, J. E. (2003). *Testing students with disabilities: Practical strategies for complying with district and state requirements.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
Elmore, R., & Rothman, R. (1999). *Testing, teaching, and learning: A guide for states and school districts.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

INCORPORATING STANDARDS INTO ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTION

A critical sequence must be followed if the achievement of students who have disabilities is to improve. The first and most basic step is to know the standards the student is supposed to be working toward and the nature of the assessment

for these standards. This process involves doing some background work to really understand what is expected of students in the educational system.

Another critical step is ensuring that the student's instruction is directed toward those standards. This alignment must be addressed in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). No longer can IEPs be devoted only to what special education or related services will provide to the student. Instead, the IEP must address access to the general education curriculum and clarify how this is to occur.

Understanding what is needed to ensure that IEPs address standards is the focus of Chapter 2. Beyond this topic, the chapter clarifies how the IEP can be related to standards and instruction and how standards can be backmapped to the IEP. Then, all of this material is linked to what happens in the classroom, the home, and the community.

USING DATA TO DRIVE ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTION

There are many decisions that are made in attempts to improve students' achievement and performance on assessments. It is no longer reasonable for educators to make these decisions in the absence of data. In fact, it is essential to examine large-scale assessment data and other progress-monitoring data to make decisions about instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. Chapter 3 addresses several ways in which educators can collect and disaggregate (separate out) data to inform the instructional and assessment decision-making processes for students with disabilities.

MAKING GOOD DECISIONS ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS

We know that many students with disabilities use accommodations when they participate in assessments. The right for students to have needed accommodations is guaranteed by law. Making good decisions about what accommodations are needed is an important part of ensuring that students really demonstrate knowledge and skills.

Many kinds of accommodations exist, and many specific accommodations might be selected for an individual student. We know that it is easy to overaccommodate students who have disabilities (i.e., identifying more than they need or will use). This situation is not helpful. Accommodations are not best selected by knowing the category of the student's disability. Making decisions in the past has often been no more than guesswork.

Student learning can be improved by making good decisions about needed accommodations. How this task can be done is the focus of Chapter 4. Decision-making tools are provided, in addition to ways to help students identify the accommodations that they will need in various instructional and assessment situations.

HELPING THE STUDENT PREPARE FOR TESTING

Test preparation is an overlooked aspect of improving test performance of students with disabilities. Many test-preparation skills are not even identified as

critical, because they come naturally to students who do not have disabilities. These skills are test-taking strategies that are beneficial for all students; however, many of these strategies do not appear in typical test-preparation books. These strategies and other helpful hints are the focus of Chapter 5.

As with accommodations, the ultimate goal is to have the students eventually take over responsibility for test preparation. Thus, Chapter 5 also addresses how to help the students know what they must do to be prepared for a test and perform well on the test. These strategies will not be the same for every student. Therefore, educators must learn what specific strategies will be useful for individual students who have disabilities.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF IEP/ELLs

Students with disabilities are students just like all other students. They are rich and poor, they come from many different ethnic groups, and they also may be English language learners (ELLs). As we continue to emphasize that we are talking about improving the achievement and test performance of all students with disabilities, we may have to give special consideration to students with disabilities who are ELLs. Increasingly, schools are faced with the reality of a rapidly changing clientele. More and more often, educators are working with students who might speak a different language, who might or might not be literate in their first language, who might or might not have ever been exposed to a written language, and who might or might not ever have been in an educational setting before. The special considerations that are to be given to these students are discussed in Chapter 6. They do not involve excluding these students from assessment and accountability systems, but instead involve thinking specifically about how we can best meet their instructional and assessment needs. We should be making decisions about their access to the general education curriculum, the accommodations that they receive, and how best to assess them in ways that do not simply give us a measure of their disability or their limited English skills.

IMPROVING TEST PERFORMANCE ON
THE GENERAL ASSESSMENT THROUGH INSTRUCTION

We can do many surface-level things to improve the test performance of students with disabilities—we have been talking about some of these when we address test preparation, and to some extent when we discuss accommodations. There is a much deeper issue that needs to be addressed whenever we talk about improving achievement and performance on an assessment. In the same way that we addressed improved performance on the alternate assessment, we can only address improved performance on the general assessment by stepping back and talking about (and doing something about) instruction. Chapter 7 digs into instruction, highlighting what needs to be done to ensure that instruction is on target for improved performance. In addition, in this chapter there are ideas about how to deal with a thorny issue—what about those students who do not seem to fit into the instructional or assessment system well—the *gray area students?* Is instruction the solution for these students who so challenge the assessment system?

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE ON
ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS THROUGH INSTRUCTION

A small percentage of all students will participate in alternate assessments, based on alternate achievement standards—that is, assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The development of alternate assessments was a new requirement when IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, so these assessments are still evolving. Nevertheless, students with disabilities with significant cognitive disabilities are required to participate in them, and their performance is included in NCLB measures of AYP for accountability purposes. As we think about improving the achievement and test performance of students with disabilities, we must realize that we also have to pay attention to improving the performance of students with disabilities who participate in alternate assessments. This is new thinking—first recognizing that these children can learn, then determining how to best ensure that they are learning, and finally ensuring that the expectations held for them are appropriately high. Chapter 8 looks at those students who participate appropriately in the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, providing both a brief explanation of the nature of the assessment system and their inclusion in accountability and strategies for ensuring that the best decisions are made for these students to show improved performance on alternate assessments.

GENERATING PARENT/GUARDIAN
SUPPORT—AND THE SUPPORT OF OTHERS, TOO

"It takes a village to raise a child," said former First Lady, and current Senator, Hillary Rodham Clinton, quoting an African proverb. Likewise, more than a single teacher is needed to improve the test performance of students—particularly students who have disabilities. We all know that the support of parents is important in efforts to improve students' test performance. Of course, if parental support cannot be obtained, we can still do much more. We believe, however, that there are many ways to gain parental support that take a minimal amount of effort but are tremendously helpful.

When we talk about parent/guardian support, we really should take a broad view and talk about family support. Siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents—whoever might be available—can contribute to efforts to improve the test performance of students who have disabilities. Generating support among a larger group of people is helpful as well, including other individuals in the school (e.g., the office secretary, school nurse, or counselor) and people and resources in the community.

Critical steps in gaining parental and family support for improving the achievement and test performance of students who have disabilities are provided in Chapter 9. In addition, the chapter gives the educator and family ideas about additional resources that are available to help in the effort to improve test performance.

SUMMARY

Each of the chapters in this book provides a discussion and lots of resources for you to take into your school. To help you be sure that you are taking away the important points from the chapter, we provide a set of "Hot-Button Issues" at the start of each chapter and a "Test Your Knowledge" set of questions at the end.

After every few chapters, we present a personal survey to use to determine where you stand in relation to the information that has been presented thus far in the book. At the end of this book are Appendix A, "Reflections on Change," and Appendix B, "Technical Assistance and Dissemination Networks," which contains technical assistance networks to support you as you work to improve achievement and test performance.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Just to be sure that you have a general idea of what we hope to achieve in this book, complete the following fill-in-the-blank statements. Do not hesitate to reread parts of this chapter if the words that go in the blanks do not jump immediately into your head.

1. The phrases "all students can learn" and "all means all" include students who have _____ and students who are _____ language learners.

2. Federal laws require students who have disabilities to be included in state and districtwide assessments and require their performance to be _____.

3. The chapters in this book are devoted to ways to _____ the achievement and test performance of students who have disabilities.

4. IEPs must address _____.

5. It is essential to examine large-scale assessment and other progress monitoring _____ to make decisions about instruction and assessment for students with disabilities.

6. Student performance can be improved by making good decisions about needed _____.

7. One goal is to have the students take over responsibility for test _____.

8. We have to pay attention to improving the _____ of students with disabilities who participate in alternate assessments.

9. We can only address improved performance on the general assessment by talking about (and doing something about) _____.

10. When we talk about parental support, we really should be broader and talk about _____ support.

Box 1.3

While we will not repeat this material in each chapter, you might want to apply a scoring rubric each time you test your knowledge. Something like the following scoring guide would work.

How Did You Do? Use the Scoring Guide Below:

- 8–10 Way to go!
- 6–7 Getting there.
- 5–6 Moving in the right direction.
- 4–5 Reread the chapter again.
- 2–3 Uh-oh.
- 1–2 Not Yet!

ANSWERS

1. disabilities; English (p. 2)

2. reported (p. 2)

3. improve (p. 4)

4. standards (p. 6)

5. data (p. 6)

6. accommodations (p. 6)

7. preparation (p. 7)

8. performance (p. 8)

9. instruction (p. 8)

10. family (p. 8)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

McDonnell, L. M., McLaughlin, M. J., & Morison, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Educating one & all: Students with disabilities and standards-based reform.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Thurlow, M., Elliott, J., & Ysseldyke, J. (2003). *Testing students with disabilities: Practical strategies for complying with district and state requirements (2nd ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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U.S. Department of Education. (2004, rev.). *No Child Left Behind: A toolkit for teachers.* Washington, DC: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (available at www.ed.gov/NCLB)

U.S. House Committee on Education & the Workforce. (2004). *Frequently asked questions about No Child Left Behind* (updated April 1, 2004). Washington, DC: Author.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Council for Exceptional Children: www.cec.sped.org/

National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing: cresst96 .cse.ucla.edu/index.html

National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO): www.nceo.info

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY): www.nichcy. org

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE): www.ed.gov/oese