

Implications of High-Stakes Testing for Students with Learning Disabilities

Over the past decade, states have been engaged in a variety of education reform efforts designed to improve the quality of public education. One highly visible reform is "high-stakes" testing. The purpose of such tests is to improve student achievement. While students with learning disabilities have a lot to gain from increased focus on student achievement, high-stakes standardized testing can also pose serious obstacles and consequences. This article examines the current state of high-stakes testing and its implications for students with learning disabilities (LD).

Q: What exactly is meant by "high-stakes" standardized testing?

A: The term "high-stakes" is used to describe tests that have high stakes for individual students, such as grade promotion or a standard high school diploma. Thus, high-stakes testing is designed to hold **individual students** accountable for their own test performance, unlike "system accountability," which is aimed at the providers of education, such as states, school districts, and schools.

Q: How many states currently have high-stakes testing in place?

A: According to recent data collected by the Center on Education Policy, 20 states are currently using **exit exams** as a condition of getting a standard high school diploma. That number is expected to rise to 25 by 2009. Some states have postponed or are considering postponing the dates by which their graduation test requirement would go into effect. These postponements have resulted from public pressure and lack of adequate phase-in time.

The use of testing to make **promotion decisions** is also on the rise, with about 17 states now requiring students to pass standardized tests as a condition of grade-to-grade promotion. In some states, school districts have adopted such policies even though the state has no such policy.

Q: Do states have the right to impose such tests on students with disabilities?

A: Yes. There is no federal law that restricts states from imposing high-stakes testing and its consequences on individual students, including students with disabilities covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504). In fact, to date, lawsuits challenging the applicability of graduation exams to students with disabilities have not been successful. Legal challenges alleging lack of access to accommodations and lack of opportunity to learn the academic content measured by the tests have met with more success, and, in some cases, have resulted in significant changes to state policies. Still, far more states sanction individual students for poor test performance than impose sanctions on the education system.

Q: Are students with disabilities required to participate in high-stakes tests?

A: The Federal special education law, IDEA, requires states and school districts to include students with disabilities in large-scale assessments. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools to include students with disabilities in several assessments of student performance and to disaggregate (separate out) the performance data into several subgroups, including special education students, so that the public will know if schools are providing adequate progress to historically low performing groups of students. It is important to note that the testing requirements of NCLB do not involve stakes for students. Many states, however, are using statewide assessments that carry high stakes for students to also fulfill the NCLB testing requirements.

Q: What are some of the most significant risks posed by high-stakes tests for students with learning disabilities?

A: Some of the most significant risks include:

- **Increased grade retention**

We know that large performance gaps exist between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. We also know that students with disabilities continue to be retained much more often than the general population — more than one-third are retained at grade level at least once, usually in elementary school. Promotion tests — the fastest growing area of high-stakes testing — will most likely contribute to even more retention of students with learning disabilities, despite the fact that retention has been shown to be an ineffective intervention to improving academic achievement. More importantly, students who are retained are much more likely to drop out later in school, and those retained more than once are **dramatically** more likely to drop out. Research on retention shows that grade repeaters as adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade.

- **Increased possibility of dropping out**

Data show that students with disabilities fail large-scale tests at higher rates than other students, especially in the years immediately following the introduction of such tests. One important reason for this is their lack of access to the curriculum on which the tests are based. Failing a high-stakes test, such as a test required for graduation with a standard diploma, can increase the likelihood that low achievers will drop out of school. We already know that nearly 30 percent of students with learning disabilities drop out of school (compared to 11% of the general student population), and we know that dropping out of school is associated with poor life outcomes in regard to postsecondary education and employment.

Some students with disabilities may even be encouraged to leave school and pursue alternative routes such as the General Educational Development (GED) exam. Such students are known as "push outs." Fortunately, the No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to show improved high school graduation rates, a requirement that will help to prevent such activity.

- **Awarding of alternative high school diplomas or certificates**

To compensate students with disabilities who fail high school graduation tests, many states are developing one or more alternative diplomas and certificates. These include nonstandard diplomas such as IEP diplomas, certificates of completion, certificates of attendance, and modified diplomas. There is little research on the value of such alternative diplomas and certificates. Many may not be accepted by colleges and universities. Meanwhile, the existence of such alternatives provides the opportunity for students with learning disabilities to be "tracked" into high school course work that will not provide the necessary credits for a standard diploma, nor provide the student access to the subject matter of graduation tests. Parents need to be well informed regarding the implications of any nonstandard diplomas and should be sure that they are involved in decisions regarding the high school diploma track of their student with LD.

Q: What are the barriers to success on high-stakes tests for students with LD?

A: The greatest barriers include:

- **Inadequate opportunity to learn**

Undoubtedly the largest barrier to success is the lack of exposure to the subject matter and skills tested by large scale assessments. While every state is required to have high academic standards that are the same for every student, we know that many students with disabilities are not yet being taught to those standards. In fact, in a recent survey only 57 percent of special education teachers said they are "very" familiar with their state's academic content for the subjects they teach. The survey also found that only seven states require that the IEPs of students with disabilities address state content standards. Yet another study found that it does not appear that IEP teams "ensure that the curriculum and instruction received by the student through the individual education program (IEP) is aligned with test content and that the student has had adequate opportunity to learn the material covered by the test."

- **More restrictive placements**

Research on state accountability systems indicates that states with high school graduation tests tend to place students with disabilities in more restrictive settings. The opportunity to learn the subject matter and skills that are aligned to state- and district-wide assessments can be further compromised when students are placed in more restrictive classroom settings, where they will invariably have less access to both the general curriculum and to the general education teachers who are most qualified to teach that curriculum.

- **Lack of reasonable accommodations**

Federal laws require that students with learning disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations and auxiliary aids and services in order to participate fully in state- and district-wide assessment programs. The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) says this about accommodations: "Accommodations are changes in testing materials or procedures that enable students to participate in assessments in a way that allows abilities to be assessed rather than disabilities. They are provided to level the playing field.'Without accommodations, the assessment may not accurately measure the student's knowledge and skills."

The accommodations that a student will need to participate in a state- or district-wide assessment should be determined by the student's IEP team (or Section 504 team) and clearly detailed within the IEP document. Parents should understand the implications of each accommodation, being sure that an accommodation will not invalidate the purpose of the assessment.

Students should have access to the same accommodations on high-stakes tests that they routinely use in classroom instruction and testing. States should not limit accommodations to some predetermined "list." In fact, research shows that increasing unrestricted accommodations increases students with disabilities' participation in state reading and math tests. Still, accommodations for students with learning disabilities continue to be a source of both confusion and contention. Development of policies and procedures regarding accommodations is uneven across states, and legal challenges continue to be brought on behalf of students who are being denied reasonable accommodations on high-stakes tests.

- **Inadequate access to remediation**

Students who do not pass a high-stakes test should be provided meaningful opportunities for remediation. According to one recent study, the economic costs of helping students with disabilities pass exit exams are typically underestimated and overlooked. Remediation should be targeted to the knowledge and skill deficit reflected in the test performance, not merely on test-taking techniques, since it is well known that scores on a test can increase as students become familiar with the test format without any real improvement in mastery of the subject matter. Students should have adequate opportunities to retake tests once remediation has occurred.

- **Over-reliance on a single test score**

There is no single measure that can accurately reflect the knowledge and skills of a student. Moreover, students with disabilities perform more poorly on standardized tests than their non-disabled peers, so over-reliance on such test scores has a disproportionately negative impact on students with LD, as well as minority students. While there is evidence that course grades frequently have little correlation to real academic performance, a variety of measures need to be considered when making high-stakes decisions. The testing profession's Joint Standards state that "in elementary and secondary education, a decision or characterization that will have a major impact on a test taker should not automatically be made on the basis of a single test score."

Q: Are there certain questions that parents of students with LD should ask regarding their state's high-stakes assessment system?

A: Yes! Parents in several states have mobilized in opposition to poorly implemented high-stakes testing systems, resulting in critical changes that will benefit students with LD. Given the enormous impact that these assessments can have on a student's life, parents need to fully understand their state's system and its implications.

Parents can use this checklist of essential elements of a fair and nondiscriminatory assessment system as a way to determine if their state's system needs improvement:

LEAD TIME: Has the assessment system and its "stakes" been phased in over a sufficient period of time so that students with LD (who often have not had full access to the curriculum) will not be negatively impacted? Adequate time is generally considered to be 4-6 years.

VALIDITY: Has the assessment system been developed and validated for use with students with disabilities? Frequently, the sample population that is used by test developers to set the average scores does not include students with disabilities nor take into account the use of

accommodations.

ALIGNMENT: Has the assessment system been aligned with the state content standards? Are students actually being taught the material they are being tested on?

ACCOMMODATIONS: Do students with disabilities have access to all accommodations that have been used during instruction and testing and are listed in the student's IEP or Section 504 Plan?

RETEST OPPORTUNITIES: Are there multiple opportunities to retake a test?

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: Are parents fully included in the decision-making about a student's participation and the accommodations that will be allowed? Are parents fully informed about the implications of certain accommodations? Are parents fully informed about the implications of any alternative nonstandard diplomas and certificates that the state has developed?

MULTIPLE MEASURES: Are multiple measures of student performance used in the high-stakes decision-making process? Is student performance on course work and course grades, as well as other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills, taken into consideration?

APPEALS PROCEDURES: Are there procedural safeguards in place to ensure that students are able to contest decisions about accommodations, scores, and decisions made regarding assessments?

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Other Resources

Books

Do No Harm: High Stakes Testing And Students With Learning Disabilities
http://www.dralegal.org/publications/do_no_harm.php
By Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

Websites

International Dyslexia Association
13 Core Principles to Ensure Fair Treatment of All Students Re: High Stakes Assessments
http://www.interdys.org/servlet/compose?section_id=1!!page_id=146

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities
State and District-Wide Assessments and Students with LD: A Guide for States and School Districts
<http://www.nclld.org/index.php?option=content!!task=view!!id=550>

National Center on Educational Outcomes
Accommodations for Students with Disabilities
http://education.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/Accommodations/Accom_topic.htm

LD Online
High School Graduation Requirements and Students with Disabilities
<http://www.ldonline.org/article/12056>