

Theme Editors' Summary

MEANINGFUL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

by Candace Cortiella and Rachel Quenemoen

This issue of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy* examines the meaningful accountability for students with dyslexia in the context of federal education laws—both the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004).

A gradual yet consistent shift has been occurring in special education since the passage of NCLB in 2001. Because of the strong accountability mechanisms put into place by NCLB, schools, districts, and States have been forced to focus attention on specific subpopulations of students within the overall school enrollment. These populations (see box) comprise groups of students considered to historically under-perform academically yet whose difficulties were frequently ignored because overall school, district, or State performance appeared acceptable.

NCLB STUDENT SUBGROUP REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Schools, school districts, and States must report both test participation and performance for all students tested, as well as separately for the following groups of students:

- Students who are economically disadvantaged
- Students from major racial/ethnic groups
- Students with limited English proficiency
- Students with disabilities (students with IEPs)

Note: Students count in all applicable subgroups.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997 and 2004) requires that all students with disabilities be included in district and statewide assessment systems, it is NCLB that has placed the performance of these students inside the standards-based accountability system. In fact, despite IDEA's requirement for the inclusion of all students with disabilities in State assessments, many States continued to systematically exclude such students until enactment of NCLB. Alternatively, many States had administered "out of level" tests to students with disabilities, that is, the practice of testing students on content typically taught in a grade below that of the student's enrolled grade. Out of level testing is a practice now used only for purposes other than system accountability by NCLB because of the law's standards-based requirements.

States and districts may make use of more than one type of large-scale assessment for purposes beyond system accountability (e.g., assessments designed to yield data on performance that compare students to national norms; or for placement in particular programs; or for student stakes, such as earning a regular high school diploma). In this issue, we focus only on those large-scale assessments used for system accountability in a standards-based system. Most adults today grew up participating in norm-referenced assessments (NRTs, e.g., Iowa Test of Basic Skills; Stanford Achievement Tests), tests designed to distribute all students along a normal curve, with half of students

falling above and half below "average." These assessments compare students to one another, and are not considered to be "standards-based."

By contrast, the assessments used for "standards-based" accountability compare student performance on the assessments to State specified criteria, specifically content knowledge and skills along with defined expectations for achievement on the content at each grade. Thus, all students who have been taught well can do well on the tests based on the criteria (academic content and achievement standards) that are defined by the State. These tests are called criterion-referenced tests (CRTs), or standards-based assessments. Unlike an NRT, there is no need to distribute scores along a normal curve, and thus there is no "average" on these tests—only distance from the expected standards. It is important to keep these distinctions in mind as you read the articles, because this entire issue is related to these "standards-based" assessments for system

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accountability. As such, the articles reference the nature of State academic content and achievement standards to frame the issues to consider for students with dyslexia.

The shift to standards-based reform and accountability over the past two decades means that State academic standards permeate special education practices today. Although this issue addresses primarily large-scale assessments for system accountability, it is important for anyone concerned with the appropriate education of students with dyslexia to be aware of the impact of standards-based reform on other practices. Of particular importance is the newly revised language in IDEA 2004 federal regulations concerning the procedures for the identification of students as having a specific learning disability (SLD), such as dyslexia. As States move away from the "severe discrepancy" approach to the use of a "response to intervention" approach, State standards play an increasingly important role. Determining the need for an evaluation for and, ultimately, the existence of a SLD is now hinged to a student's performance relative to *State-approved grade-level standards*. Further, upon issuing the final federal IDEA 2004 regulations in 2006, the U.S. Department of Education reminded us that "(a)ccelerated growth toward, and mastery of State-approved grade-level standards are goals of special education." (U.S. Department of Education, *71 Federal Register*, 46,653)

These provisions work to ensure that the individualized determination of the need for special education services, as well as the effectiveness of such services, are defined in the

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context of high expectations in a standards-based system that includes all students (e.g., see Quenemoen, Thurlow, Moen, Thompson, & Morse, 2004). To be meaningful, accountability for students with dyslexia must be woven into the fabric of the larger accountability system required by NCLB. That system rests on a set of requirements laid out in NCLB but still very much controlled by each State.

The articles in this issue have been contributed by experts in disability and education rights as well as in accommodations and test accessibility. Their perspectives not only provide a framework for understanding the larger accountability system but also how students with dyslexia fit into that framework.

This issue begins and ends with articles written by Kathleen Boundy and Joanne Karger of the Center for Law and Education. Both are longtime disability rights attorneys. The first article provides the groundwork for the discussion that follows, laying out the basic legal framework created by NCLB and IDEA.

Martha Thurlow, Sheryl Lazarus, and Laurene Christensen at the National Center on Educational Outcomes acquaint us with the responsible use of test accommodations and the critical role they play in the accurate assessment of students with dyslexia. Their article also discusses the issues raised by accommodations that many States consider to be nonstandard. As they point out, State accommodation policies—as well as the underlying State content and achievement standards—vary greatly, posing particularly thorny issues for students with dyslexia in some states.

David H. Rose, Tracey E. Hall, and Elizabeth Murray of CAST provide a thought-provoking look at the limitations found in today's large-scale assessments despite advances in our understanding about the lack of accessibility of print-based assessments. They explain how the next stage of test accessibility will utilize the power of universal design for learning to generate assessments that transcend the limitations of print entirely.

Cara Cahalan Laitusis, a researcher at the Educational Testing Service, summarizes the test accommodations policies of three states: Maryland, Texas, and Massachusetts. The policy makers in these states have worked to develop innovative ways to include students with reading-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, in their accountability systems while maintaining the validity of the test results. The nature of each State's standards are specifically referenced, showing how states vary in what options are available to students with dyslexia depending on the definitions of State academic standards. The article also includes a brief discussion of ongoing research by the National Accessible Reading Assessment projects, efforts funded by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Special Education Research.

The issue concludes with an examination of the special issues affecting the inclusion of students with dyslexia in statewide assessment systems. While some might feel that including students who have severe reading disabilities and receive special education services because of the impact of those difficulties should not be included in accountability systems, Boundy and Karger remind us that it is unlawful to deny

a student—on the basis of disability—inclusion in any indicator of program effectiveness, such as the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) indicator required by NCLB. Looking forward, the authors anticipate some likely changes to NCLB and IDEA in forthcoming reauthorizations.

We are most grateful for the generous contributions of our authors for this issue. We hope that it, along with the winter 2007 issue, *Educational Policy: Practical Implementation of Education Legislation*, provides a wealth of information on the role that federal education law plays in the appropriate instruction and meaningful accountability for students with dyslexia. Your informed advocacy will be critical in the coming years as both the NCLB and IDEA undergo yet another round of Congressional reauthorizations.

Resources

- National Center on Educational Outcomes <http://nceo.info>
- National Center for Learning Disabilities <http://www.LD.org>
- Universal Design for Learning <http://cast.org/>
- U.S. Department of Education. Toolkit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities <http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/>

References

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- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. (2006). IDEA Regulations identification of specific learning disabilities. Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CTopicalBrief%2C23%2C>

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