THE MIDAS PROJECT

Teachers' Perspectives on Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement to Inform Instruction of Students on the Cusp Between the AA-AAAS and the General Assessment

MIDAS Report 103

Teachers' Perspectives on Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement to Inform Instruction of Students on the Cusp Between the AA-AAAS and the General Assessment

Linda Goldstone, Sheryl S. Lazarus, and Maci Law

July 2024

All rights reserved. Any or all portions of this document may be reproduced and distributed without prior permission, provided the source is cited as:

Goldstone, L., Lazarus, S. S., & Law, M. (2024). *Teachers' perspectives on using multiple measures of academic achievement to inform instruction of students on the cusp between the AA-AAAS and the general assessment* (MIDAS Report 103). Making Improved Decisions for Students on the Cusp of Alternate Assessment Participation Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement from Multiple Sources (MIDAS).

The Making Improved Decisions for Students on the Cusp of Alternate Assessment Participation Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement from Multiple Sources (MIDAS) project is supported by a contract (state of Arkansas Award #CON000000099314) based on a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (Award #S368A220001). Collaborating states include North Carolina and West Virginia. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Arkansas Department of Education, collaborating states, or the U.S. Department of Education (or Offices within it). Readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

MIDAS Staff

Sheryl S. Lazarus, Director
Linda Goldstone, Co-director
Andrew R. Hinkle, Co-director
Jessica Bowman
Gail Ghere
Michael L. Moore
Darrell Peterson
Mari Quanbeck
Christopher M. Rogers
Yi-Chen Wu

The MIDAS Project
National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO)
University of Minnesota
2025 East River Parkway, Room 1-330 • Minneapolis, MN 55414
Phone 612/626-1530
http://www.themidasproject.org

The University of Minnesota shall provide equal access to and opportunity in its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

This document is available in alternative formats upon request.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of online focus groups conducted with teachers to learn more about their experiences using multiple measures to inform instructional decision making for students on the cusp between the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) and the general state assessment used for accountability. Specifically, the aim was to identify teachers' successes and challenges related to the instruction of this group of students and to identify resources (e.g., training, tools) that would assist teachers in using a data-informed approach to instructional decision making for them.

Gathering this information was one goal of the Making Improved Decisions for Students on the Cusp of Alternate Assessment Participation Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement from Multiple Sources (MIDAS) project, a collaboration between three states (Arkansas, North Carolina, and West Virginia) and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). NCEO conducted two asynchronous online focus groups with special education teachers and general education teachers in MIDAS states. A qualitative cross-case analysis of the teacher's responses to discussion questions posted on a focus group platform was conducted. Findings from the analysis indicated three main themes:

Theme 1. Teachers' expectations for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment affected how they instructed them. Some teachers participating in the focus groups had high expectations for students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment, while others had low expectations. Teachers with high expectations believed these students could learn grade-level content with the same rigor as other students taking the general assessment. Many of these teachers reported that pacing their instruction was important in successfully instructing all students, including those who shifted between the assessments. Students of teachers with low expectations tended to get less access to grade-level content.

Theme 2. Teachers' beliefs and previous experiences affected educational settings, instructional support, and peer mentoring for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. The focus group findings suggested that students in inclusive general education settings typically had more access to rigorous grade-level content than those students who remained in more segregated settings. Co-teaching collaboration between general education and special education teachers provided an opportunity to share knowledge and integrate their expertise about students to plan meaningful instruction. As co-teachers in the general education classroom these teachers needed competence in classroom management and shared responsibility.

Theme 3. Teachers and educational teams, such as IEP teams and professional learning communities (PLCs), used data from various sources to inform instructional decision making for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Teachers noted that data helped them know how to adjust their instruction. Some teachers also used data

to measure progress. The teachers used a variety of forms of data that ranged from informal data sources, formative assessment practices, observations, and work samples to commercial assessments.

The report concluded with three recommendations for states and districts:

- Provide clear guidance about state content standards, including information about how to use them to guide the instruction of students who move from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.
- Provide professional development and materials on creating and sustaining inclusive classrooms.
- Provide professional development and materials on using data from multiple measures of academic achievement to make instructional decision making.

Table of Contents

Overview

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997 prompted the development of alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. In 2015, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is commonly referred to as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), placed a 1% cap on student participation in the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS). At the time of the 2015 ESEA reauthorization, many states exceeded the cap. States engaged in various activities to address this issue, such as refining their participation guidelines, creating a definition of students with the "most significant cognitive disabilities," and providing training and technical assistance on participation decision-making, resulting in Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams making more appropriate assessment participation decisions. As a result, some students shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment (Hinkle et al., 2022; Thurlow, Lazarus et al., 2019). However, many states still surpass the 1% cap (Thurlow & Lazarus, 2017; Wu et al., 2023).

As states lowered their AA-AAAS participation rates, some students moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment, introducing a new challenge. Many teachers needed to learn how to make instructional decisions for students who made this shift confidently. Students who participate in the AA-AAAS learn the same grade-level content as their peers who participate in the general assessment, but they learn the content at less breadth, depth, and complexity (Hinkle et al., 2021). Once students move to the general assessment, however, they need to learn content at the same level of rigor as other students who participate in the general assessment. Some teachers may find it challenging to instruct these students, who now need to learn at a higher level of rigor than before. Data from multiple measures of academic achievement can inform instructional decision making.

The purpose of this report is to describe the findings of an asynchronous online focus group activity called the Making Improved Decisions for Students on the Cusp of Alternate Assessment Participation Using Multiple Measures of Academic Achievement from Multiple Sources (MIDAS) project. MIDAS is a collaborative effort between three states (Arkansas, North Carolina, and West Virginia) and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). NCEO conducted two asynchronous online focus groups with special education teachers and general education teachers in MIDAS states (Arkansas and North Carolina). The focus groups were conducted to gather in-depth information about teachers' experiences using multiple measures of academic achievement from multiple sources for students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment and to learn more about the teachers' needs.

Methods

In the spring of 2023, NCEO staff conducted online asynchronous focus groups. The asynchronous online format allowed teachers geographically dispersed in urban, suburban, and rural locales to participate. The asynchronous format also allowed teachers to respond to focus group questions and prompts at their convenience.

Participants

NCEO provided state educational agency (SEA) staff with focus group invitations to distribute to special education, general education, and English language teachers in their educator networks. The criterion for participation was that the teacher served students on the cusp between the AA-AAAS and the general assessment. NCEO staff followed up with educators who indicated an interest in participating and invited those teachers who met the criteria to participate, ensuring a diverse and qualified group of participants.

Two focus groups were held—one for teachers from Arkansas and the other for teachers from North Carolina. There were fourteen participants with eight of whom were in the Arkansas focus group and six in the North Carolina group. As indicated in Table 1, 13 were special education teachers, and one was a general education teacher. One of the special education teachers served as an instructional coach for special education teachers. Two participants indicated they had experience with English learners; one was licensed in English as a second language. Both elementary and secondary teachers participated. The participants were from a variety of setting, with most teaching in rural or suburban settings, and the school district size ranged from less than 2,000 students to more than 10,0000 students.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants' Demographic Characteristics (n=14)

Role	Grade Level	Years Experience	School Locale	District Size
General Education (n=1)	Elementary K-7 (n=7)	<10 (n=5)	Urban (n=2)	<2,000 (n=5)
Special Education (n=13)	Secondary 8-12 (n=7)	10-20 (n=3)	Suburban (n=5)	2,000-4,999 (n=1)
		>20+ (n=6)	Rural (n=7)	5,000-9,999 (n=3)
				10,000+ (n=5)

Procedures

The research design employed a qualitative method using focus groups, which is well suited for investigating an unexplored topic when at least five participants are in the group (Krueger &

Casey, 2014). An NCEO staff member moderated the online focus groups. The focus groups were conducted asynchronously on a website designed specifically for this study. The asynchronous format allowed the forum to be available to participants twenty-four hours daily.

A separate focus group was held for participants in each state. Teachers were notified of selected dates for the focus group in their state and confirmed their participation availability. Before the start of each focus group, information was sent to each teacher with the web link to the online platform, log-in name, password, and a personal pseudonym. Participating teachers were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities throughout this research activity. Before beginning the focus group, each teacher completed a demographic questionnaire and provided their mailing address so that they could receive a stipend of $300 following their participation. Each focus group was conducted over one week.

For the focus group discussion, the MIDAS team developed six questions. The questions were progressively narrower in topic (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The moderator posted two questions in the forum Monday through Thursday by 7:00 a.m. Each morning, the moderator emailed the participants to say that the questions had been posted and were ready for discussion. Teachers could then post comments and engage in an asynchronous discussion with one another. Friday was available for teachers to add any additional comments. Data were obtained from participants' typed responses to questions guided by the moderator's interview question protocol. The moderator monitored the focus group discussion and asked follow-up questions to encourage group interaction and clarification. See Appendix A for the interview protocol.

The focus group discussions addressed: (1) types of data needed for instructional decision making for students with disabilities, (2) teachers' involvement in and understanding of the use of measures of academic achievement for instructional decision making, (3) teachers' comfort and familiarity with the use of instructional accommodations and supports to meet both a child's disability-related needs and possible English language development needs, (4) teachers' efforts to collaborate across general education and special education to support students with disabilities, and (5) teachers' confidence in instructing students transitioning from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

Methods Used for Analysis

A cross-case qualitative analysis (Miles et al., 2019) was conducted using the transcripts of the focus group discussions. Data from the focus group discussions were organized into themes based on the topics generated in the teachers' discussion. The findings were also organized by teacher demographics. An inductive iterative process was used to analyze data (Saldaña, 2021). The analysis included extracting, coding, and noticing patterns in the data to identify salient categories. Interrater reliability was used to validate data analysis (Miles et al., 2019). A team

of two researchers independently read through the data, coded responses, and discussed results together. When disagreement occurred, discrepancies were discussed until a 90% coding agreement was reached. To facilitate this process, MS Office Word was used to organize and narrow the codes into categories and further refine them into broader themes to answer two research questions:

1. What factors influence teachers' instruction of students who transition from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment?

2. What types of materials are needed to support teachers in taking a data-informed approach to instruction for students who transition from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment?

Findings

The analysis of the focus group data revealed that access to the general education content by students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment was the central overarching frame of the discussions. Two aspects of this overarching frame emerged:

1. Factors that influenced teachers' instruction of students on the cusp who transitioned from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

2. Types of materials teachers used and needed to instruct these students.

Three main themes undergird the overarching frame, and themes in this section organize the findings.

Theme 1. Teachers' expectations for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment affected how they instructed them.

Some teachers participating in the focus groups had high expectations for students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment and believed they could learn grade-level content while others had low expectations and believed that these students could not learn grade-level content. The perceptions of each group of participants will be described next.

Teachers with High Expectations. Some teachers participating in the focus groups believed their students who shifted assessments had the capacity to learn grade-level content of the same rigor as that learned by other students taking the general assessment. Many of these teachers reported pacing their instruction as an important factor. One teacher said:

> Slow down! Just be mindful of the student's processing ability. The student is capable of doing the work; just be patient. I see a lot of general education teachers just keeping

> going. For example, when they are reviewing a worksheet on the projector. There are a lot of things happening really fast and it typically takes my students with an IEP longer to process those directions. Even copying items from the board puts them behind.

Another factor that a few teachers identified was the importance of high expectations for all students, including those who transitioned from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment, even if they appeared to be struggling. These teachers emphasized that teachers should operate under the assumption that students are capable learners. A teacher said:

> Do not underestimate these students' ability level. Do not coddle them and offer them more support than they need at the beginning ... or you may never see what they are capable of doing independently.

However, a few noted that such assumptions could potentially overwhelm students if there were no routines or classroom structure supporting student learning. Providing routine structure and organization can help students understand the expectations in the general education classroom. One teacher said:

> The students have shown they have the skill set to be in the general educational setting, but the pace and the assumptions of the student may be too much for them. If there is structure and organization, I feel it will help the students to be more successful. For example, have daily classroom routines within the classroom so the students know what things are expected of them when they walk in the classroom and only the content is changing.

Teachers holding asset-based assumptions of students' capabilities paralleled the alignment of their instruction with rigorous grade-level content. There was only a singular explicit mention of grade-level content standards in the focus group transcripts. One teacher indicated that in preparation for "the push for full inclusion next year, all students outside of the self-contained classroom, will be in a general education classroom." The teacher then described how, through collaborative team efforts, the instructional team breaks down each standard to facilitate students' acquisition of grade-level skills:

> I am blessed to work with an amazing team. We look at the general education curriculum and are in the process of breaking down each standard into what is essential and what are foundational/background skills…. [We] build a checklist to help us with monitoring progress of student mastery toward building foundational skills and helping to bridge gaps to help a student be successful toward mastery of grade level skills.

The recognition of students' capabilities to learn content was parallel with teachers' abilities to instruct students on general education content. Teachers' instructional approaches reflected their expectations of students to learn grade-level content.

Teachers with Low Expectations. In contrast to teachers with high expectations of students on the cusp, another group of participants held low expectations. These focus group participants did not believe that students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment could successfully learn the content in their state's grade-level content standards. One teacher stated "the general assessment is very much not appropriate because these students are working 2-3 grade levels below."

Many participating teachers believed that students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment needed more knowledge and skills to take the general assessment and to prepare to learn general education content that would enable them to participate successfully in the general assessment. Some teachers stated that it was necessary to provide remedial instruction to teach prerequisite skills that students had yet to learn before transitioning to the general assessment. For example, one teacher said:

> I use the algebra and geometry curriculum but find I have to do a lot of remediation of precursor skills. This is even more true with those students who have transitioned from the alternative assessment. Typically, they also do very poorly on the general assessments.

There generally seemed to be some confusion about the difference between the grade-level content standards that define the instruction for all students and alternate academic achievement standards, which indicate how students who take the AA-AAAS may learn grade-level content at less depth, breadth, and complexity. Most teachers in the focus groups did not explicitly refer to their state's content standards. Instead, they described how they struggled to bridge the gap for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment and indirectly described how it was challenging for a student to shift from the learning content at the reduced breadth, depth, and complexity required by the alternate academic achievement standards associated with the AA-AAAS to learning content at the same level of rigor as other students taking the general assessment.

Additionally, the focus group findings indicated that teachers may need additional resources that help them gain more insight into what to teach next and provide a better understanding of how to teach foundational skills that enable students to access the grade-level curriculum. One teacher said:

> Those students will often be missing a lot of precursor skills needed to understand the concepts in the general education grade level curriculum. If your curriculum does not

> provide access to previous grade level materials to use to help remediate these knowledge gaps you will need to cultivate resources to help.

Some teachers mentioned the importance of accommodations in providing access to instruction and assessments but did not believe that accessibility alone would enable a student to be proficient on the general assessment. In other words, if the student did not know the content, students would not do well on the assessment even if it were accessible. For example, a teacher said:

> Accommodations do play a big role in the students' success in the general education classroom. However, I can give my students that have transitioned to the general assessment all the accommodations available to them and they will still struggle when taking the general assessment as they cannot access the material. I have kindergarten-level readers being assessed on a third and fourth grade-level assessment. They can read a few words of the text, but they are in no way able to comprehend what the text is saying.

The low expectations of many teachers participating in the focus groups highlighted that they often focused their instruction on the perceived need to reteach below grade-level content and skills rather than providing access to grade-level content.

Theme 2. Teachers' beliefs and previous experiences affected educational setting, instructional support, and peer mentoring for students who move from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

Even though students transitioned from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment, their exposure to grade-level content instruction varied depending upon their placement (e.g., inclusive general education classroom, segregated setting). The second main theme that emerged from the focus group results was where students received their instruction and how it was provided.

Inclusive Settings. Some teachers participating in the online focus groups reported benefits when students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment were included in the general education classroom. One special education teacher attributed notable gains in student performances to her district's change to an inclusion approach that incorporated collaboration through co-teaching with the general education teacher:

> Our district moved to a more inclusive approach last year. I currently only serve students K-4th grade so the learning gap is not huge yet. We have seen great gains in our students that are placed in the general education with co-taught math and literacy.

When asked about the primary reasons why students were making great gains, she credited the positive outcomes to the general education teacher's inclusive approach in addition to the

close proximity of the special and general education teacher, which enabled them to frequently collaborate throughout the day:

> The open-mindedness of the general education teacher played a major role in the move to a more inclusive setting for these particular students…Our classrooms are right next to each other, so we communicate/collaborate multiple times a day.

Another teacher described how co-teachers need to have competence in managing a general education classroom while considering each other's teaching style for it to be successful:

> It takes a lot of prep. In larger classes… it is hard to manage, even with a co-teacher, especially if that co-teacher isn't good with classroom management in large groups or doesn't have the confidence to take initiative or make decisions in the gen ed teacher's classroom. I was spoiled for 10 years with the same co-teacher who understood my style, was dynamic, and jumped in to modify or lead without encouragement.

Similarly, the sole general education teacher in the focus groups stated that effective co-teaching required both the general education and the special education teacher to be responsible and included in teaching and making decisions:

> Need more co-taught training modeled…and scheduled planning time…For co-teaching to be beneficial, we need both teachers to be respected and take ownership in the room. The general ed teacher should bring the content knowledge and the sped teacher should bring the methodology. They should both be teaching everyone on a regular basis regardless of identification. The moment any divisions happen of students or the sped teacher doesn't have the opportunity to make educational decisions, it's not co-teaching.

Collaboration between general and special education teachers allowed for teachers to communicate and share knowledge about students to plan meaningful instruction. For students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment, co-teaching integrated the knowledge and skills of both teachers to help identify how best to provide students with access to the general education content and make progress in academic achievement.

More Restrictive Environment. In some cases, students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment remained in a segregated setting or received extensive pull-out resource services. In a few cases, even though the students were placed in the general education classroom, the general education teacher only had a supporting role in providing instruction, and the special education teacher was the primary instructional provider. For example, one teacher stated:

> Most of the students moved to the general assessment are still in a separate setting. Four of the students who were moved to general assessment were also moved to a general

> education setting with maximum resource pull out services. The general ed teachers are very willing to support in any way they can. These four students require a lot more assistance from their teacher and peers.

In contrast, a few other participants indicated that placing students in the general education classroom was not well-received by some general education teachers. The only general education teacher in the focus groups stated:

> It is a form of academic negligence to place a student who struggles to even converse with their peers inside the mainstream classroom. I will go above what their IEP states to provide them the opportunity to learn, but this year, that isn't enough for several of my students…

Some special education teachers participating in the focus groups anticipated challenges when students were moved from a separate setting to a general education classroom. One teacher said:

> [A] lot of these kids have spent a majority of their academic career in a separate setting on the adapted curriculum… we have moved a large group of students into general education that have no experience with expectations [based on grade-level content standards].
>
> What is asked of students in the general assessment is not always information they are exposed to when they are mostly in a self-contained environment. So, I feel that is a disadvantage. Also, students who may need to be assessed with the general assessment often still have very low IQs and do not understand the questions that are asked on this assessment.

A few teachers needed clarification about the placement options for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. For instance, one teacher expressed the need for district- and state-level guidelines for making placement decisions.

> To start, districts need clear guidelines defined to assist IEP teams with explaining different options of placement. At the state level, we need to look at our standardized testing and our standard expectations for students.

The setting, whether in the general education class or a more restricted environment, where students received instruction influenced teachers' instruction of grade-level content to students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Regardless of the setting, teachers stated the need for instructional support.

Instructional Support Needs. Some teachers wanted more how-to materials to teach the skills students needed to access the instructional content. Teachers indicated the need for resources on:

> How to increase background knowledge on a subject for students, including how to implement the reteaching of essential skills from earlier grades that may have been missed and are needed as foundational pieces for new instruction
>
> How to chunk assignments to ensure that students have time to process and reflect on new learning, with checkpoints for understanding

Teachers also made suggestions for resources that would be helpful, such as hands-on, interactive online games, decision-making templates, and examples of work assignments that would be appropriate for struggling learners. For example, one teacher said:

> Hands-on refers to manipulatives like hundreds boards, multiplication flash cards/games, fraction cubes, geometric figures/nets, etc... interactive resources such as online educational learning games and/or programs and worksheets that students can actively participate in with the teacher as well as independently
>
> I think having a template/map to follow would help us make better decisions when looking at students….More informal assessments to better compare kids.

A special education teacher suggested that support for general education teachers on "how to use accommodations" might be helpful. The single general education teacher in the focus groups identified several items that would be helpful. This teacher also indicated that the items should be readily accessible during the busy school schedule:

> I would love to see more samples of modified lesson plans, videos of teachers doing these things and modeling how it should look, and flow charts of how to proceed when encountering some of these learning barriers, gaps, or deficiencies…linked to resources…. If I could have a progression map of different options, that would be a game changer and help me target the deficiency and not just provide supports that work around it….. And these things need to be packaged well and simply in a singular location that is easy to navigate, so I can utilize these resources during the busy school year.

One teacher stated that in concert with students' need for extended processing time of information, additional teaching time is required for this group of students to access academic content:

> What we don't seem to want to acknowledge is that they also need more time in the teaching part. That they need more dedicated time for additional teaching on the same concepts that most students are able to comprehend within the set pacing for the curriculum.

On the other hand, a few teachers stated that specialized materials were not needed for students who transitioned from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. One teacher indicated that it was very challenging to instruct these students when they remained in a separate setting and suggested a need for support from the district:

> I don't think we need materials for kids who have moved out because I am assuming they are receiving resources and services to follow the continuum of services. I think more materials and assessments need to be created at the district level for the adapted curriculum to support separate-setting teachers.

Teachers indicated that there needed to be more available instructional resources. They suggested several types of materials (e.g., lesson plans, videos, decision-making flow chart) that would be helpful and the need for districts to create instructional resources that meet the needs of all students, including those who move the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

Peer Mentoring Support Needs. Focus group participants noted that interactions with peers without disabilities in the general education classroom can also be a valuable resource to help students who shifted between the state assessments to integrate and participate in the classroom. For students to fully integrate and access the general education class, one teacher recommended "teach[ing] other students how to help and mentor without doing the work for them," which requires "supports on helping educators teach students how to be peer mentors or work effectively in cooperative groups."

Teachers also noted that there could sometimes be challenges with peer relationships and mentoring. One teacher said that after the assessment shift, students who moved to a more inclusive learning environment "not only have to worry about the work but also about getting along with the other students in the class and building relationships with them." In at least one case, inclusion in the general education classroom did not necessarily indicate the students would participate in or receive general education content instruction. A teacher said:

> My students do spend some time in the regular classroom, but they do not get any kind of work in this classroom. This is for them to have "social time." So, they do not actually get any instruction from these classes and most of them have a one-on-one aide with them while they are sitting in the room.

Overall, teachers stated the need for instructional resources and student peer mentoring support, regardless of the instructional setting for students.

Theme 3. Teachers and groups of educational teams, such as IEP teams, professional learning communities (PLCs), use data from a variety of sources to inform instructional decision making for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

The third prominent theme that emerged from the focus groups was a discussion of the different data sources that influenced teachers' instructional decisions for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Data collection was a key factor for teachers. Teachers noted that data helped them know how to adjust their instruction. Some teachers also used data to measure students' progress. The teachers participating in the focus groups shared various data they used, ranging from informal formative assessment practices (e.g., exit tickets), teacher-developed assessments, observations, and work samples to using data from commercial assessments. Teachers used data from many assessments and other sources to make instructional decisions (see Table 2).

Lack of data was not an issue for many of the teachers; instead, the challenge was how to make sense of the data they had. The data that teachers collected were used for a variety of purposes. Focus group participants mentioned using data to create and monitor progress towards goals, inform instruction, create targeted interventions, and identify areas of student need. Teachers also stated that getting input from IEP team members and PLCs was important.

Data Use and Demographic Characteristics. A comparison of the data sources used by focus group participants with various demographic characteristics found that:

- Elementary teachers mentioned more assessments and more types of assessments (e.g., formative assessment practices, interim assessments, diagnostic assessments, etc.).
- Both rural and suburban teachers reported numerous data sources that they used when making instructional decisions for students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Very few teachers from urban settings were in this sample.
- Teachers working in smaller schools tended to use more informal measures, whereas teachers from larger schools were likelier to use more formal, commercial products.
- Teachers with more years of teaching experience discussed specific measures and data sources used to inform instruction of students who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment more than teachers with less experience, who often gave more general descriptions.

For a comparison summary between data sources and teacher demographic characteristics, see Appendix B.

Table 2. Data Sources Used by Teachers Participating in the Focus Groups to Make Instructional Decisions for Students Who Moved from the AA-AAAS to the General Assessment

Commercial products:
- ClassBridge
- DIBELS
- easyCBM
- FastBridge
- i-Ready
- Interim assessments (specific products not listed)
- Istation
- IXL
- Maze
- mClass
- NWEA
- Quill
- Star
- Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children- 5th Edition (WISC-V)
- Woodcock-Johnson- 4th Edition (WJ-IV)

State tests
- AA-AAAS testlets

Formative assessment practices:
- Bell ringers
- BOY (beginning of the year)/MOY (middle of the year)/EOY (end of the year) screeners
- Classwork
- Dyslexia intervention
- Exit tickets
- formative.com (GoFormative)
- Individualized assessments
- Informal teacher assessments
- Observations
- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Work samples

Other:
- Checklist of foundational skills
- Comprehensive evaluation data
- Parent/guardian input
- Paraprofessional/aide input
- Related services input

Use of Data by Educator Teams. Teachers indicated that data was provided by various teams. The data were then used for instructional decision making. The IEP team is one such team. One teacher stated:

> I try to meet the students where they are in their skills and use their prior knowledge to build toward acquiring the new concepts required by our [state's grade-level content] standards and their IEP.

One special education teacher indicated that they no longer worked with a student once the student moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. It is unclear whether the student continued to receive special education services:

> For all the students that I have worked with that have moved to the general assessment, I have had to provide little to no instruction to the student or guidance to the teacher (other than about behavioral support). I have not worked with the students on an instructional level once they have switched to the general assessment (not that I would not work with them, they just get moved from my caseload).

Two teachers stated that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were a valuable resource for teachers to share and exchange data information about students. For example, teachers said:

> Each math team contains the general education teachers for that grade level and one special education teacher who also teaches math for that grade level. We meet weekly as a math PLC team…with communication among grade levels and with vertical alignment.

> Without a supportive PLC where we could share materials and bounce ideas, I would be drowning in just meeting the bare minimum.

Teachers across disciplines, including special education and general education teachers, each have their respective student data sources and preferences that can shared and used to inform instructional decisions jointly. One teacher reported an improvement in the performance of some of her students after other teachers shared their data and integrated it into the general education classroom:

> Share that data with your general education teachers and realize that you may have to use different terminology than what we use in the special education world. I have also come to realize that a lot of general education teachers don't always understand the difference between intervention, modification, and accommodation. I would challenge both your students and your special ed teachers to be more involved in the gen ed classroom, I can really see a difference this year in some of my students' performances.

In sum, teachers reported multiple data sources they used for varied purposes. Teachers indicated that additional data gathered and shared from other educators and teams, such as IEP teams and PLCs, informed their instructional decision making for students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.

Conclusions

The findings of the online focus groups described in this report were conducted to gain insight into the successes and challenges teachers experienced instructing students who have transitioned from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Findings suggest that students who made this transition sometimes lacked access to grade-level academic content. Factors that influenced access to grade-level content were teachers' high or low expectations of students' ability to learn, inclusive or more restrictive settings where students received instruction, and the types of data sources used by teachers.

When students were instructed in inclusive, general education classrooms, and their teachers had high expectations for them, students could successfully access rigorous grade-level content. These teachers typically held an asset-based assumption of students' capabilities. Collaboration, mainly through co-teaching between special and general education teachers, helped ensure that the students could access rigorous grade-level content.

Additionally, the findings indicated that the teachers who participated in the focus groups used a wide range of data sources, such as formative assessment practices, commercially produced assessments, and teacher-developed assessments, as well as data and other input from IEP team members and PLCs. It appeared that there was no lack of data; but rather that there was a need for teachers to understand how to make sense of the plethora of data they had.

The teachers participating in the online focus groups indicated a need for professional development on various topics (e.g., state content standards, co-teaching, student peer mentors), as well as a need for materials (e.g., lesson plans, videos, decision-making flow charts), that could help them make informed instructional decisions for students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the state general assessment used for accountability.

Based on the findings of the online focus groups, the following recommendations are made to states and districts:

- **Provide clear guidance about state content standards, including information about how to use them to guide the instruction of students who move from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment.** All students' instruction must be based on state grade-level content standards. However, students who take the AA-AAAS are held to alternate academic achievement standards that may have allowed them to learn the content standards at less depth, breadth, and complexity. When students shift to the general assessment, they need access to the full rigor of the state content standards to be prepared for the general assessment. Based on the findings of the focus groups, it appears that many teachers do not understand the differences between state academic content standards and alternate academic achievement standards for students taking the AA-AAAS. They also often do not know how to instruct

and support students who shifted from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment access to rigorous grade-level instruction using the content standards.

- **Provide professional development and materials on creating and sustaining inclusive classrooms.** Students who move from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment are much more likely to have access to grade-level content if they are in inclusive classrooms. Teachers need to learn how to successfully instruct all students in an inclusive classroom, including those who moved from the AA-AAAS to the general assessment. Both special education and general education teachers need professional development and materials to help them develop the skills required (e.g., collaborative co-teaching, use of supports and accommodations).

- **Provide professional development and materials on how to use data from multiple measures of academic achievement for instructional decision-making.** Teachers currently get data from many assessments and other sources. They often need using valid data from multiple sources for instructional decision-making and need training and materials to support their learning how to use these data effectively.

References

Hinkle, A. R., Lazarus, S. S., Hall, S., Warren, S., Thurlow, M. L., & Liu, K. K. (2021). *Understanding the consequences of assessment participation decisions for students with disabilities* (School Leaders Series #2). Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) & National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/SchoolLeaderResourcesBrief2.pdf

Hinkle, A. R., Thurlow, M. L., Lazarus, S. S., & Strunk, K. (2022). *State approaches to monitoring AA-AAAS participation decisions* (NCEO Report #432). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOReport432.pdf

Kleinert, H., Towles-Reeves, E., Quenemoen, R., Thurlow, M. L., Fluegge, L., Weseman, L., & Kerbel, A. (2015). Where students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are taught: Implications for general curriculum access. *Exceptional Children, 81*(3), 312-328. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402914563697

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. SAGE.

Lazarus, S. S., Hinkle, A. R., Liu, K. K., Thurlow, M. L., & Ressa, V. A. (2021). *Using interim assessments to appropriately measure what students with disabilities know and can do: Advisory panel takeaways and NCEO recommendations* (NCEO Report #427). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOReport427.pdf

Miles, M., Huberman, A., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook.* Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* SAGE

Thurlow, M. L., & Lazarus, S. (2017). *Strategies for meeting the state-level 1% cap on participation in the alternate assessment* (NCEO Brief #12). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBrief12OnePercentCap.pdf

Thurlow, M. L., Lazarus, S. S., Albus, D. A., Larson, E. D., & Liu, K. K. (2019). *2018-19 participation guidelines and definitions for alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards* (NCEO Report #415). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOReport415.pdf

Wu, Y.-C., Lazarus, S. S., & Liu, K. K. (2022). *2018-2019 AA-AAAS participation and performance* (APR snapshot #27). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/APRsnapshot/brief27

Wu, Y.-C., Lazarus, S. S., & Thurlow, M. L. (2023). *Meeting the 1% AA-AAAS participation requirement* (NCEO Brief #29). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/APRsnapshot/brief29

Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol Questions

Day 1

1. What is your experience with students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, who have moved from the alternate assessment to the general assessment?

2. Describe the decision-making process to move students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, from the alternate assessment to the general assessment? What are the implications of this decision for other factors, such as student placement, curriculum, and IEP goals?

Day 2

3. What factors influence your instructional decisions for students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, who have moved from the alternate assessment to the general assessment?

4. What data do you collect to know whether your instruction is effective? How does this help you to make future instructional decisions?

Day 3

5. Your state department of education is participating in developing resources (e.g., customizable templates, professional development modules) to support educators in using data to make appropriate and effective instructional decisions for students who moved from the alternate assessment to the general assessment. What types of resources would be useful? Are there already resources you have found helpful?

6. How could your school, district, or state department of education support you so that you can make the best possible instructional decisions for these students?

Day 4

7. If you were to advise teachers who are new to teaching students who moved from the alternate assessment to the general assessment in their classroom, what suggestions would you make?

8. Is there anything else you would like to say related to students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, who have moved from the alternate assessment to the general assessment, including a question or topic we did not cover or ask?

Appendix B

Crosstab Analyses

Appendix B includes a comparison of the data sources used by the focus group participants and participant characteristics: grade level (elementary/secondary), locale (rural/suburban/urban), district size, and years of experience.

Table B1. Comparison of Data Sources Between Elementary and Secondary Teachers

Elementary (grades K-6) (n=9)	Secondary (grades 7-12) (n=5)
Checklist for foundational skills	AA-AAAS testlets
ClassBridge	Bell ringers
Classwork	DIBELS
Comprehensive evaluation	EasyCBM
Dyslexia intervention	Exit tickets
FastBridge	formative.com (GoFormative)
Interim Assessments (not specified)	i-Ready
i-Ready	iSTEEP
Istation	IXL
mCLASS	Maze
Observations	NWEA
Paraprofessional/aide input	Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 5th Edition (WISC-V)
Parent input	Quill
Related services input	Woodcock-Johnson-4th Edition (WJ-IV)
Response-to-Intervention (RTI)	Writing samples
Star Reading and Math	
Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 5th Edition (WISC-V)	
Woodcock-Johnson-4th Edition (WJ-IV)	
Work samples	

Table B2. Comparison of Data Sources Across Locales

Rural (n=7)	Suburban (n=5)	Urban (n=2)
AA-AAAS testlets	Checklist for foundational skills	EasyCBM
Bell ringers	DIBELS	iSTEEP
Beginning of the year (BOY)/ Middle of the year (MOY)/End of the year (EOY) screeners	FastBridge	IXL
ClassBridge	formative.com (GoFormative)	Quill

Rural (n=7)	Suburban (n=5)	Urban (n=2)
Classwork	Interim assessments (products not specified	Writing samples
Comprehensive evaluation	Maze	
Dyslexia intervention	mCLASS	
Exit tickets	NWEA	
Informal teacher assessments	Observations	
i-Ready		
Istation		
Observations		
Paraprofessional/aide input		
Parent/guardian input		
Related services input		
Response-to-Intervention (RTI)		
STAR Reading and Math		
WISC-V		
Woodcock Johnson-4th Edition		
Work samples		

Table B3. Comparison of Data Sources by District Size

<2,000students (n=5)	2,000-4,999 students (n=1)	5,000-9,999 students (n=3)	10,000+ students (n=5)
AA-AAAS testlets	i-Ready	Beginning of year (BOY)/Middle of year (MOY)/End of year (EOY) screeners	DIBELS
Bell ringers	Woodcock Johnson-4th Edition (WJ-IV)	Checklist for foundational skills	EasyCBM
ClassBridge	Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 5th Edition (WISC-V)	FastBridge	formative.com (Go-Formative)
Classwork		Informal teacher assessments	i-STEEP
Comprehensive evaluation		Interim Assessments (products not specified)	IXL
Dyslexia intervention data		mCLASS	Maze
Exit tickets			NWEA
Istation			Observations
Observations			Quill
Paraprofessional/aide input			Writing samples

<2,000students (n=5)	2,000-4,999 students (n=1)	5,000-9,999 students (n=3)	10,000+ students (n=5)
Parent input			
Related services input			
Response-to-Intervention (RTI)			
Star Reading and Math			
Work samples			

Table B4. Comparison of Data Sources Between Teachers' Years of Experience

Less than 10 years experiences (n=5)	10-20 years' experience (n=3)	20+ years' experience (n=6)
AA-AAAS testlets	ClassBridge	Bell ringers
Beginning of the year (BOY)/Middle of the year (MOY)/End of the year (EOY) screeners	Classwork	Checklist for foundational skills
Paraprofessional/aide input	Comprehensive evaluation	EasyCBMs
EasyCBM	DIBELS	Exit tickets
	Dyslexia intervention	FastBridge
Informal teacher assessments	formative.com (GoFormative)	Interim assessments (products not specified)
IXL	Istation	I-Ready
Observations	Maze	iSTEEPS
Work samples	NWEA	IXL
	Observations	mCLASS
	Parent input	Quill
	Related services input	Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – 5th Edition (WISC-V)
	Response-to-Intervention (RTI)	Woodcock-Johnson-4th Edition
	STAR Reading and Math	Writing samples

INSTITUTE on COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

NCEO is an affiliated center of the Institute on Community Integration