



Including Students with Disabilities in K-2 Academic Assessments

State academic assessments are required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) starting in grade 3.¹ Academic assessments administered in earlier grades (kindergarten through grade 2) often are used to measure progress or growth, for instructional decision making, to predict grade 3 summative assessment performance, and for tracking literacy for reading guarantees. These assessments are also used as part of the Office of

¹ESEA also requires that states administer an English language proficiency (ELP) assessment to students who are English learners in grades K-12. Although ELP assessments are not addressed in this Brief, many of the suggested considerations apply to those assessments. Liu et al. (2021) is a helpful resource for making decisions about participation in an alternate ELP assessment.

Special Education Programs' (OSEP) Results Driven Accountability (RDA) system in some State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs), as either the State-Identified Measurable Result (SIMR) or as a measure of progress in a state's evaluation plan for its SSIP.

More than half of the states have K-2 academic assessments that are either required or recommended. Data from those assessments may be used for state-level accountability or decision making. Many of these states allow districts to use one of several assessments, often providing them with a list of approved assessments. In some states, districts only report information on students as "on-track" or "not on-track," and the state may have little information about what is actually occurring. In addition to K-2 assessments that a state may recommend or require, many districts administer assessments that are used to obtain data used for instructional decision making or to measure progress.

K-2 assessments have a variety of formats (e.g., selected response items, performance tasks). A few contain a combination of item-based and observational assessments that are scored using rubrics or checklists. The observational components of these assessments are similar to many preschool assessments, which are largely observational.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, participate in all state and district-wide assessment programs. This includes assessments administered in grades other than those used for ESEA accountability (e.g., K-2, high school grades not used for ESEA accountability).

Even though it is required that students with disabilities participate in state and district-wide assessments admin-

istered before grade 3, these students have sometimes been excluded. The purpose of this Brief is to provide an overview of issues related to the inclusion of students with disabilities and English learners with disabilities in early grade (i.e., K-2) assessments, and suggest strategies for improved practices.

Accessibility and Accommodations

Some academic assessments administered in grades K-2 may not provide accessibility features and accommodations needed by some students to participate in the assessments. Depending on the construct assessed (e.g., decoding, phonemic awareness), some accommodations may not be appropriate (e.g., text to speech) because they may change what the assessment is measuring. Still, there should be accessibility features and accommodations that allow students, including English learners with disabilities, to meaningfully access the assessment and show what they know and can do.

The lack of appropriate accessibility features and accommodations has been an especially challenging issue for students with sensory disabilities and for English learners with disabilities. For example, an early literacy or math skills assessment for K-2 students that has no way to present items to students who are blind or have low vision, may not produce valid scores or support valid interpretations because they violate the test construct of decoding print or identifying numbers.

Often K-2 assessments do not have braille or sign language interpretation accommodations. An added issue is that, even if these accommodations are available, many children do not know braille or American sign language (ASL) when they enter the school system. Those students in grades K-2 who do know braille have generally learned uncontracted braille, so it is important that the braille accommodation be provided using uncontracted braille.

English learners with disabilities, including those with sensory disabilities, face additional accessibility issues, even if they have mastered some braille or sign language in their native language. Having both disability and language-related accessibility needs complicates technically adequate measurement of these students.

Alternate Assessments

Alternate assessments are required by IDEA for all state and district-wide K-2 assessment administrations for those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to participate in the general assessment even with accommodations. This means that

IDEA Regulations on Participation in State and District-wide Assessment Programs

- (a) A State must ensure that all children with disabilities are included in all general State and district-wide assessment programs, including assessments described under section 1111 of the ESEA, 20 U.S.C. 6311, with appropriate accommodations and alternate assessments, if necessary, as indicated in their respective IEPs.

Sec. 300.160

it is critical to evaluate each assessment administered in grades K-2 to determine whether: (a) it was designed with all students in mind, including those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities; (b) created to include a broad array of accessibility supports and accommodations; (c) pilot tested and field tested with students with the most significant cognitive disabilities included in those efforts;² and, (d) checked to ensure that the results of the assessment provide meaningful results for these students for the intended purpose (e.g., instructional planning).

States that have implemented alternate assessments in grades K-2 have identified a need for them. This need may be determined by first administering the general assessment to the child and identifying ways in which it is not accessible. For example, Iowa's decision flowchart indicates that if its Early Literacy assessment is not accessible for an individual child, it should be administered with alternate procedures (such as eye gaze, use of picture choices). Only when the student is not able to respond in a meaningful or timely manner is the State of Iowa's Early Literacy Alternate Assessment to be administered.³

The decision about participation in a K-2 alternate assessment is difficult because criteria for participation in alternate assessments may only exist for alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) that are used for state ESEA accountability starting in grade 3. When they do exist for earlier grade assessments, they often look similar to those for assessments starting in grade 3.⁴

²Because of small numbers, it may be appropriate to use cognitive laboratory procedures with these students.

³See Iowa's [Early Literacy Assessment Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Flowchart of Options](#) for details.

⁴For examples of participation guidelines, see Kansas's guidelines for its [Alternate Early Literacy Screener](#) and Utah's guidelines for its [Kindergarten Entry and Exit Alternate Assessment](#).

Implications for Special Education Identification

The use of tests administered before grade 3 can have implications for special education identification. There is a risk of misidentifying children who do not have disabilities as students with disabilities. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are generally identified prior to kindergarten, but many students with disabilities and English learners with disabilities are not yet identified in the early grades. Early assessment of students may lead to some students being inappropriately identified for special education services who may not have disabilities.

All children in grades K-2 are still learning language. Early language development is affected by life experiences. There is wide variation in baseline vocabulary levels. It is also common for young children to still be learning some speech sounds. If students are English learners, they may continue to develop English language skills for a longer period of time than their fluent-English speaking peers. Due to these issues, it can be difficult to interpret test findings, and a child may need good instructional interventions rather than special education services.

Children need to develop the skills they will use to become successful readers, and there is a need to identify possible skills deficits. Universal screener assessments are administered widely in grades K-2 to identify possible skills deficits. For those students identified as having a possible skill deficit there may be a need for a follow-up assessment to obtain more detailed data that can be used to guide decisions about the need for possible interventions. Unfortunately, many educators do not know how to use data from the assessments to identify needed interventions, and may start the special education identification process rather than identifying interventions that will improve literacy.

Caution

When a child is in grades K-2, IEP teams often do not know whether a student will need to take an AA-AAAS in grade 3. There is a risk that identification for a K-2 alternate assessment could lead to a misidentification for grade 3 AA-AAAS participation. Assessment participation decisions should be made very carefully because of the substantive potential negative consequences of misidentification. For example, if a child is inappropriately assigned to an AA-AAAS, which has different performance expectations from the general assessment, the child may not receive instruction at the appropriate depth, breadth, and complexity. Although not appropriate, assessment participation decisions may have implications for decisions about student placement and the learning environment where instruction will occur (Sabia & Thurlow, 2019). Inappropriate placement in an alternate assessment can also have long-term consequences that could affect course assignments and eventual high school graduation. It could determine whether the child is able to receive a high school diploma, and affect post-secondary training and employment opportunities (Hinkle et al., 2021).

Language learning challenges are compounded for English learners who may have disabilities. Some students may be misclassified, which could result in invalid results if students are provided accommodations they should not have received. These issues have the potential to carry-over to other K-2 assessments.

Considerations

States may want to consider several strategies that will improve the use of K-2 academic assessments for students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, as well as for students suspected as having a disability.

- **Ensure that assessment items are developed using universal design principles and that a broad range of accessibility features and accommodations are available.** K-2 assessments need a broad range of accessibility features and accommodations, including those for English learners, so that students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, as well as students suspected of having a disability can meaningfully participate in these assessments and show what they know and can do. In particular, there is a need to have accommodations that address the needs of students with sensory disabilities. Braille should be provided in a form that students in the early elementary grades know (e.g., uncontracted braille).
- **Ensure that the assessment is accessible to all students, and that it has an alternate assessment for students who need one.** In addition to the provision of needed accessibility features and accommodations, flexible administration procedures (e.g., adjust wording) and ways of responding (e.g., saying, pointing), as well as the use of early stopping rules for students who do not answer a certain number of items, can increase the accessibility of an assessment for some students in grades K-2. An alternate assessment for some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities should be available for all state and district administrations of K-2 assessments, if the state's or district's evaluation of the assessment to be used does not meet the qualities of a well-developed accessible assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. If an alternate assessment is used, there should be appropriate cautions in determining that a child should take an alternate assessment. Because participation in the AA-AAAS may have negative long-term implications (e.g., for instruction, placement, graduation, post-secondary and career options), it is important that students are appropriately identified when there is an alternate assessment.
- **Ensure that requests for information (RFIs) and requests for proposals (RFPs) address students with disabilities.** Implicit bias can occur when students with disabilities are excluded from test development processes (e.g., item tryouts, piloting) that results in tests not designed for them. Bias also can occur when the number of students participating in the studies is so small as to not provide information about the technical adequacy of these assessments. In RFIs/RFPs, require the provision of:
 - Description of how the development process includes the consideration of all students in the state or district, including those with disabilities, English learners, English learners with disabilities, and students with the most significant cognitive disabilities
 - Specification of an item development process that includes how universal design principles will be implemented
 - Clear evidence that a wide range of accessibility features and accommodations will be available
 - Information about how the general assessment and alternate assessment, if available, map onto general academic content standards
 - Information about how students with disabilities will be included in studies that provide technical information about the assessment even if their numbers are small
 - Documentation of a transparent test development process that will include publicly available validity evidence for the test overall and for provided accommodations
- **Provide professional development on how to include students with disabilities in K-2 academic assessments, as well as training and guides that help increase understanding of the assessment results, and how to use the data.** IEP team members need to know how to confidently make participation and accessibility and accommodations decisions for K-2 assessments. Educators also need support on how to use the data from the assessments to identify needed interventions. Overall, training for educators should focus on:
 - Assessment participation decisions
 - Selection of accessibility features and accommodations for students with disabilities and those suspected of having a disability, including English learners with disabilities who may need accommodations for both disability and language learning

- o Administration of accommodated tests
- o Interpretation of data
- o Identification of additional assessments that may be needed to provide additional diagnostic information
- o Implementation of interventions and instruction that will support student learning and improved outcomes

Conclusions

Several unique issues should be addressed when considering the inclusion of students with disabilities in K-2 academic assessments. The strategies in this Brief can be used to help ensure all students, including students with disabilities, English learners with disabilities, and students suspected as having disabilities, are appropriately included in these assessments.

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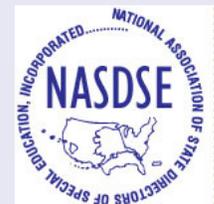
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