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Cross-agency Collaboration to Improve Assessments and Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

NCEO
National Center on Educational Outcomes

For many years state education agencies (SEAs) have sought to create assessment systems that include all students, including students with disabilities. This is supported by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), commonly known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires that all students, including those with disabilities, be included in state assessments used for accountability. Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires

states to ensure that all students with disabilities are included in all state and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations and alternate assessments, if necessary. However, many students with disabilities are not proficient on statewide assessments (Wu et al., 2023).

In order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, there is an urgent need for cross-agency collaboration. Several offices need to collaborate to facilitate the development and implementation of assessments that are accessible to students with disabilities, and to compile and analyze assessment data for these students. Collaboration can lead to cross-fertilization of ideas across the agencies which can encourage the emergence of innovative approaches to addressing thorny issues and challenges. Collaboration also can reduce duplication of efforts as well as support more efficient use of resources (OSEP & Head Start, 2022).

This Brief focuses on collaboration between special education and assessment offices, but other offices (e.g., curriculum and instruction, accountability) may also need to be involved. Collaboration can also help ensure that everyone feels a shared responsibility for students with disabilities. For English learners with disabilities, the office responsible for English learners needs to be involved.

Collaboration across state agencies also serves as a model for local education agencies (LEAs). By showcasing successful collaboration strategies, state offices can provide LEAs with practical examples and guidance on how to enhance their own collaborative efforts. This approach not only fosters a culture of cooperation but also helps ensure that LEAs are equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to implement best practices in their operations.

Many SEA staff are eager to develop a culture of collaboration across offices that will allow them to better accomplish their work activities. However, barriers may exist that make this goal difficult to realize. Staff have many tasks that they must do, and it can be difficult to have time for collaboration. Sometimes different agencies within the SEA are located on different floors, or sometimes even in different buildings. Agencies may face frequent turnover in staff and new staff may feel like they do not have the knowledge needed to collaborate.

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration may be described as people or organizations working together to complete a task or to achieve a common goal. Collaboration can help a group achieve a better result than could be achieved separately.

The purpose of this Brief is to shine a light on various aspects of cross-agency collaboration with a goal of helping SEAs initiate or improve their collaborative processes. The Brief describes the reasons for collaboration and its benefits, provides suggestions for who needs to be involved, and provides specific examples of successful collaboration.

Reasons for Collaboration

There are several reasons that special education and assessment offices may benefit from collaboration.

Sharing the unique knowledge of special education and assessment offices to support more appropriate inclusion of students with disabilities in assessments. Each office has a deep understanding of some of the information that is vital for ensuring that students with disabilities have appropriate access to assessments. The staff in the special education office understands the needs and characteristics of students with disabilities, and how to make assessment more accessible. They also know the IDEA requirements. Staff in the assessment office are knowledgeable about the assessment and accountability requirements of ESSA. They also have a deep knowledge of the processes involved in developing and implementing assessments.

Reporting data to meet federal requirements. A positive working relationship between the special education office and assessment office will smooth the way so that accurate data are available for those who use it as soon as it is available. State assessment offices collect and compile assessment data and use it for reporting purposes. State special education office staff also need assessment data for reporting on the proficiency and participation of students with disabilities, specifically math and reading proficiency for Indicator 3a - d of the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR).

In many states, the special education offices also use data from the statewide assessment to report the progress of their State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) and report data related to the Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Academic Achievement (AA-AAAS) participation requirements. The timely reporting of accurate assessment data is vital to meeting these federal reporting requirements. If state special education staff do not have access to the assessment data in a timely manner their ability to ensure that data reported are accurate is hindered.

Likewise, the assessment office often needs data from the special education office about the characteristics of students with disabilities (e.g., students' disability categories, what accommodations are on students' Individualized Education Programs [IEPs], etc.).

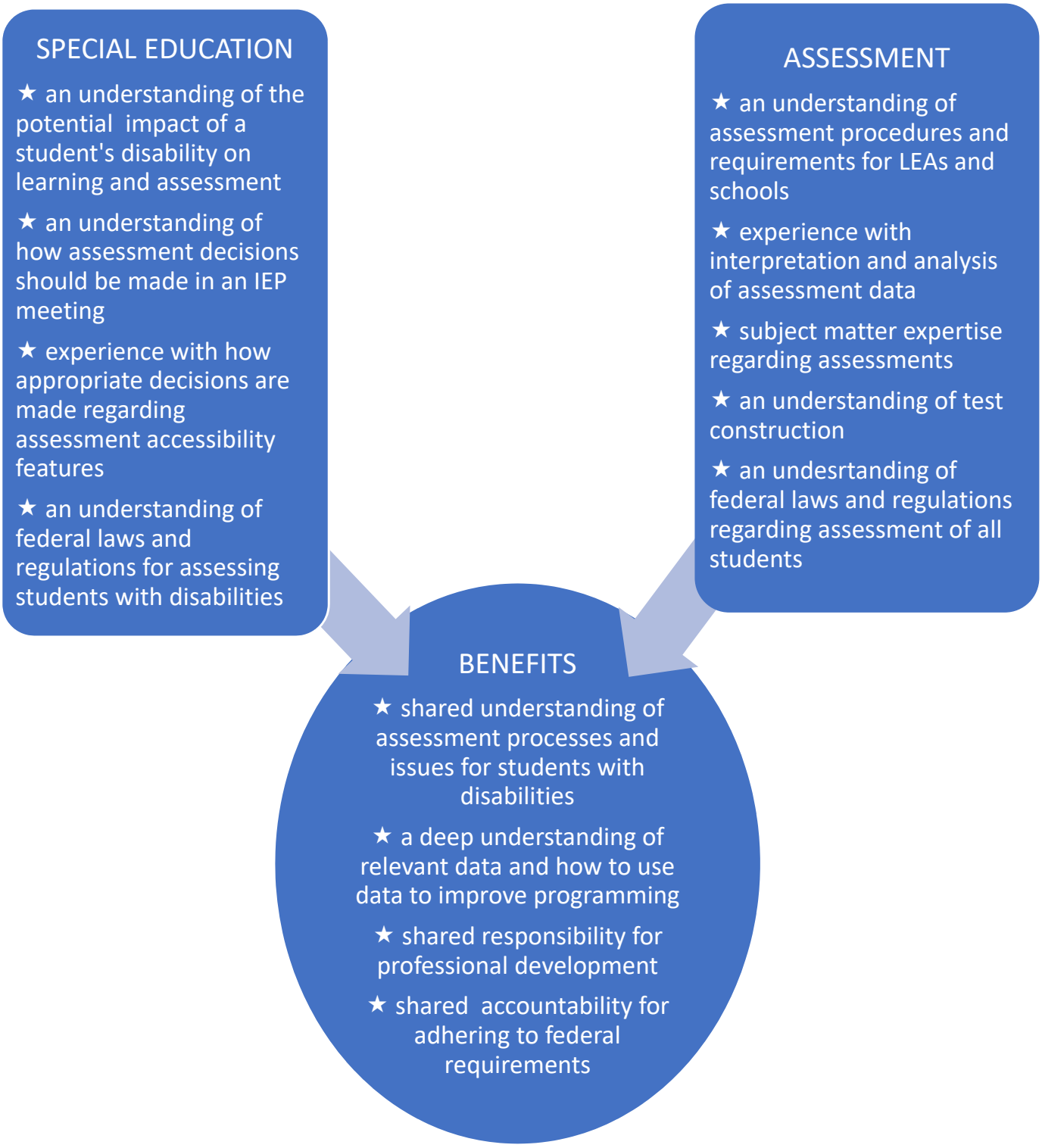
Analyzing assessment data. Collaboratively special education and assessment offices can conduct deep analyses of data to look for trends and anomalies, or learn how to solve problems that are occurring. This can benefit multiple initiatives. An example is working collaboratively to address the 1% cap on participation in the AA-AAAS. ESSA requires that states assess no more than 1.0% of all tested students in all tested subjects (e.g., reading, math, and science) at the state level with the AA-AAAS. Students who are eligible for the AA-AAAS are determined by IEP teams, using the state's AA-AAAS participation guidelines. If a state anticipates that it will exceed the 1% cap participation requirement, it may submit a waiver or waiver extension request to the U.S. Department of Education. These requests must include information from many activities the SEA implements throughout the year in order to meet ESSA 1% cap requirements. Implementation of these activities and the submission of the wavier/waiver extension request becomes much less of a burden when the special education office and assessment office collaborate. The two offices also may want to collaborate to monitor IEP team assessment participation decisions. Additionally, the results of data analyses that were collaboratively conducted can be shared with LEAs so they can make important decisions that will improve the learning of students. This supports consistent messaging to the field from both state offices.

Providing coordinated professional development to LEAs. Sharing responsibility for providing professional development on the assessment of students with disabilities helps to ensure common and consistent messaging from the SEA. It also utilizes the knowledge and strengths of both the special education and assessment offices, and supports the development of professional staff who have a well-rounded knowledge of how to instruct and assess these students. Coordinated professional development from the SEA also models collaboration for LEAs.

Benefits of Collaboration

Collaboration between special education offices and assessment offices allows for a mutually beneficial relationship. Staff from each office bring their unique skills, expertise, and experience to the table (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Benefits of Special Education and Assessment Office Collaboration



Note: This figure is formatted based on the assumption that special education staff are in a separate office from assessment staff. If a special education assessment specialist is on the assessment team, or an assessment specialist is on the special education team, there would be less differentiation between the two offices.

Staff Involved in Collaboration

Staff members involved in a collaborative team between special education and assessment offices will depend on the specific context of the SEA. Potential collaborators include:

- Special Education Office
  - Special education director
  - Part B data manager
  - Program specialist responsible for overseeing general or AA-AAAS
  - Program specialist who leads the development and provision of professional learning
  - SPP/APR Indicator 3 lead
  - Other special education staff as needed
- Assessment Office
  - Assessment director
  - Program specialist who leads and manages the AA-AAAS
  - Program specialists responsible for test development (general assessment and AA-AAAS)
  - Subject matter leads (math, language arts, science, etc.)
  - Psychometricians

In some cases, only a few people need to be involved in the collaboration. For example, data managers may need to collaborate to make sure that key data sets are complete (e.g., the assessment office may need data from the special education office regarding which accommodations are assigned on students' IEPs; the special education office may need data from the assessment office on the participation and performance of students with disabilities on state assessments in order to submit Indicator 3 data for the SPP/APR).

Organization of Collaboration Meetings

Preparing for collaboration meetings will set the team up for success. Here are some tips for how to prepare:

- Before collaboration meetings
  - Ensure the right people are invited
  - Verify that action items from previous meeting are completed
  - Develop the meeting agenda
  - Prepare information and resources that will be helpful for the next meeting
  - Notify group members as far in advance as possible regarding changes in schedule
- During collaboration meetings
  - Set and follow meeting norms, expectations, and ground rules
    - Do
      - Keep your focus on the goal
      - Focus on things that can be controlled
      - Be solution oriented
      - Listen to and respect everyone's perspective
      - Assume good intentions
      - Think creatively about how to accomplish goals
    - Don't
      - Have a fixed mindset
      - Make negative assumptions
      - Be unwilling to compromise
      - Dominate the discussion
  - Follow the meeting agenda
  - Take meeting minutes
- At end of collaboration meetings
  - Identify what needs to be done, who will do it, and when it will be done
  - Identify what worked well during the meeting and what did not
- After collaboration meetings
  - Distribute meeting minutes
  - Follow up with group members as needed
  - Complete any action items (Adapted from NCEO, in press, p. 5)

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Collaboration Example

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) uses a framework to guide their collaboration efforts that includes mindset concepts such as "put people over systems," "embrace co-creation in selecting strategic actions and directions," and "support adaptive change all along the way to promote sustainability." This department-wide framework sets the tone and is very important for cross-agency collaboration.

DPI has an Education Consultant position that is funded jointly by both the special education office and the assessment office. A role of this individual is to facilitate the sharing of information across the two offices. Iris Jacobson currently fills this role. In an interview with Ms. Jacobson she noted that it is important to actively build relationships. Starting with work activities that are already in place provides an "on ramp" for staff to begin communicating, coordinating, and collaborating. She feels fortunate to work across agencies and as a result enjoys observing other teams shift their mindset and actions toward including ALL students in the development of policies and procedures.

Collaboration activities between the special education and assessment offices included:

- Discussing how to interpret AA-AAAS participation data in order to implement the 1.0% cap requirements for participation in the AA-AAAS
- Working to ensure that students have accessibility to instruction and assessments. For example, discussing the request from a LEA for a unique accessibility feature to understand the specific needs related to the request.
- Writing a request for proposals (RFP) for a new assessment and related contracted assessment services that encompass the needs of students with disabilities and the requirements of the IDEA.
- Updating the state's academic content and alternate academic achievement standards so that the specific needs and characteristics of students with disabilities are considered.
- Supporting students with disabilities and their families during remote learning, including when students need certain types of assistive technology to use at home.

Data Meeting Questions

Preparing for a meeting involves preparing materials for the meeting. For example, if the special education and assessment offices held a meeting to jointly analyze assessment data, questions that might be considered include:

What are the assessment data telling us?

- Do we believe the data are high quality?
- Do we understand all of the data sets?

Have we analyzed the data to support appropriate data use?

- By disability area?
- By race/ethnicity?
- By socio-economic status?
- By region of the state?
- A gap analysis? Children with disabilities and all children? Children with disabilities and children without disabilities?

How can we communicate with others about the data?

- What is the common message that our offices want to share?
- How will we talk about the data?
- How will we ensure consistency in the communication of the data?
- To whom, how, and when will assessment data be shared?
- Are we using "plain language" that stakeholders and others not in the field of education can understand?
- How can we encourage LEAs to analyze and use their assessment data?

Conclusions

Finding ways to establish, build, and sustain a culture of collaboration between the SEA special education and assessment offices provides many benefits. It offers staff an opportunity to experience their collective impact and to solve complex problems, leverage human and resource capacity, and attain results greater than individuals can achieve.

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