

The Relationship between Student Placement and AA-AAAS Participation Rates

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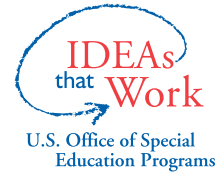
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Executive Summary

The alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) is designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), placed a 1% cap for states on student participation in the AA-AAAS. This meant that states, districts, and individualized education program (IEP) teams needed to carefully consider which students should be included in these assessments. When ESSA was enacted, about two-thirds of the states had more than 1% of their students in the AA-AAAS (Thurlow & Wu, 2018).

In recent years, states have made substantive progress in reducing participation rates (Wu et al., 2023) through efforts such as revising participation guidelines and accessibility policies, providing professional development on making participation decisions, and monitoring participation decisions. Students who were easily recognized as being inappropriately in the AA-AAAS were transitioned to the general assessment, but many states are still above the 1% cap and continue to struggle to reduce participation rates.

This report presents the findings of a study that looked at the relationship between states' percentage of students participating in the AA-AAAS and the percentage of students in more restrictive learning environments. Pearson correlations were conducted to determine the nature of relationships. Data used in this analysis were for 2018-19. The percentage of students participating in the AA-AAAS in each state was calculated by using EdFacts and Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) data for 2018-19. The source for data on student placement was 618 data that states are required to submit to show compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements. In this analysis more restrictive environment was computed by summing the percentage of students in the following educational environment placement categories: (1) inside the regular class less than 40% of the day; (2) separate school, residential facility; (3) homebound/hospital; (4) correctional facility; and (5) parentally placed in private school.

This study found that states with higher percentages of students in more restrictive environments tended to have higher percentages of students participating in the AA-AAAS for both mathematics and reading. This suggests that in states where a higher percentage of students with disabilities were taught in inclusive settings, the students may have had access to more rigorous academic standards-based content, and thus IEP teams in those states may have been more likely to decide that a student with disabilities on the border between the alternate assessment and the general assessment met participation guidelines for the general assessment.

It is important to remember that the results do not suggest a causal relationship, but rather indicate that there was a correlation between the percentage of students in more restrictive environments

in a state and the percentage of students participating in the AA-AAAS. A limitation of this study is that the EdFacts and OSEP data for student placement included data for all students with disabilities, not just those who participated in the AA-AAAS.

States and their districts may want to consider ways to create more inclusive learning environments. The report concluded with a discussion of several components identified in Lazarus et al. (2019) as important drivers in creating and sustaining systems change efforts that support more inclusive educational practices: (a) a common vision; (b) a common understanding of and a commitment to the change process; (c) effective formalized structures for top-down, bottom up, and sideways communications; (d) meaningful data; and (e) coordinated efforts at multiple levels.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	iii
Overview.....	1
Purpose.....	2
Methods.....	2
Data Sources	2
Procedures.....	2
Results.....	3
Discussion.....	4
References.....	6

Overview

Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) are designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to participate in the general assessment even with accommodations. In 2003, regulations were added to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that allowed states to count students with significant cognitive disabilities as proficient who took an AA-AAAS. The regulations also indicated that no more than 1% of students in a state would be counted as proficient using an AA-AAAS. The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), changed the requirement. ESSA reaffirmed that the AA-AAAS is appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, but instead of placing a cap on accountability proficiency rates, it put a state-level 1% cap on participation in the AA-AAAS (Thurlow et al., 2017).

This meant that states, districts, and individualized education program (IEP) teams needed to carefully consider which students should be included in these assessments (Thurlow et al., 2021; Thurlow & Lazarus, 2017). When ESSA was enacted, about two-thirds of the states had more than 1% of their students in the AA-AAAS (Wu & Thurlow, 2017). In recent years, states have made substantive progress in reducing participation rates through efforts such as revising participation guidelines and accessibility policies, providing professional development on making participation decisions, and monitoring participation decisions (Hinkle et al., 2022; Quanbeck et al., 2023). Students who were easily recognized as being inappropriately in the AA-AAAS were transitioned to the general assessment, but many states are still above the 1% cap and continue to struggle to reduce participation rates (Hinkle et al.).

There is a need to get a better understanding of why so many students are still participating in the AA-AAAS in many states. Little is known about whether the learning environment of a student affects assessment participation decisions despite research showing that students with significant cognitive disabilities have improved outcomes when taught in inclusive settings (e.g., Gee et al., 2020; Ryndak et al., 2012). Research has also shown that placement in inclusive settings increases student access to the general education curriculum (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; Quirk et al., 2017; Soukup et al., 2007). However, there is wide variation across states in terms of the rates of placement in inclusive settings (White et al., 2018), with the percentage of students with disabilities who spend less than 40% of their school day in the general education classroom ranging from 8.1% to 30.1 % across states in 2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Purpose

In order to learn more about the relationship between student placement and participation in the AA-AAAS, we conducted an analysis that examined the relationship between states' participation rates for the AA-AAAS and the percentage of students in more segregated educational environments in the state. We hypothesized that a reason some states are still exceeding the 1% cap is that many students with disabilities in those states were taught in more segregated learning settings and thus were not getting access to the rigorous standards-based content that might increase that likelihood that IEP teams would decide a student should participate in the general assessment.

Methods

Data Sources

The percentage of students participating in the AA-AAAS in each state was calculated by using EdFacts and Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) data for 2018-19. The source for data on student placement was 618 data that states are required to submit to show compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, nd). The percentage of students with disabilities in each state in segregated settings, which we refer to as a *more restrictive environment (MRE)*, was computed by summing the percentage of students in the following educational environment placement categories: (1) inside the regular class less than 40% of the day; (2) separate school, residential facility; (3) homebound/hospital; (4) correctional facility; and (5) parentally placed in private school. For the purposes of this study, students who spent 80% or more of the school day or 40-79% of the school day inside the regular classroom were considered to be in more inclusive settings. The placement categories are the ones used for IDEA reporting.

The source of the data for states' 2018-19 AA-AAAS participation rates was Wu et al. (2022). Wu et al. calculated the percentages for reading and math based on the states' total tested population in each subject, as required by ESSA.

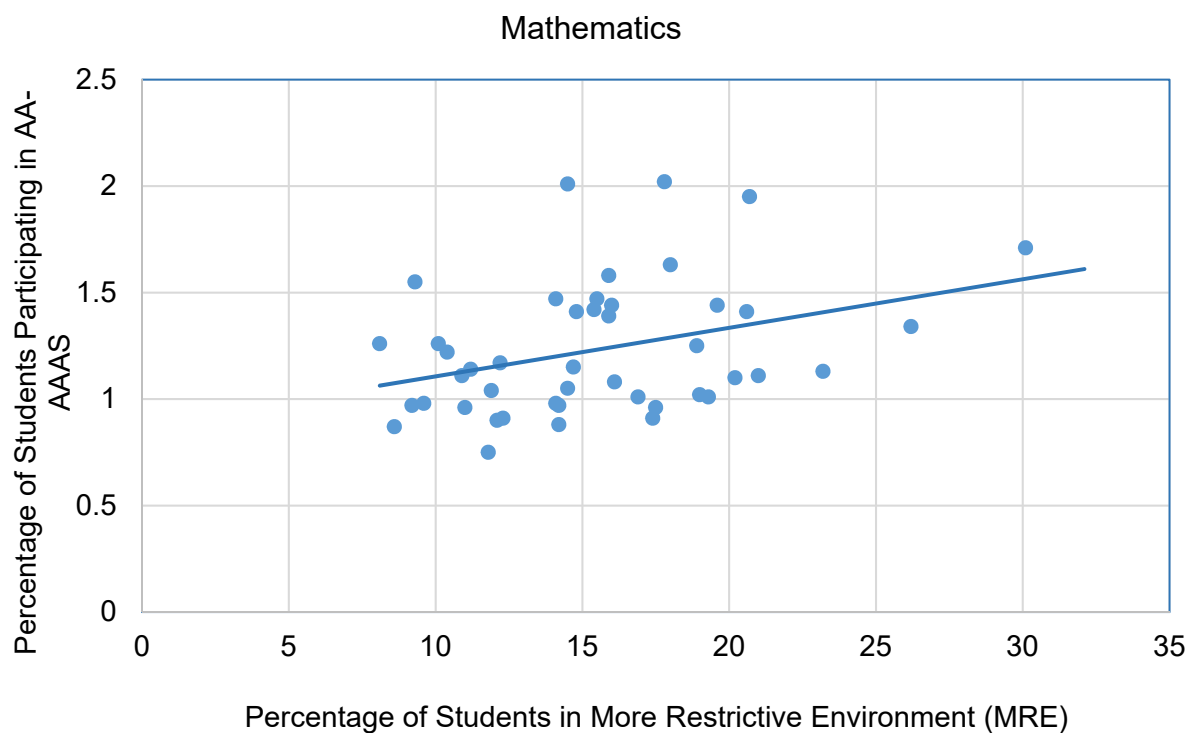
Procedures

Pearson correlations were conducted to determine the nature of any relationship between the percentage of students with disabilities MREs participating in the AA-AAAS across states.

Results

Mathematics. As shown in Figure 1, Pearson correlations suggest a moderate positive correlation between the percentage of students in MREs and the percentage of students participating in the mathematics AA-AAAS ($r = 0.346$). States with higher percentages of students in MREs were more likely to have higher percentages of students participating in the mathematics AA-AAAS.

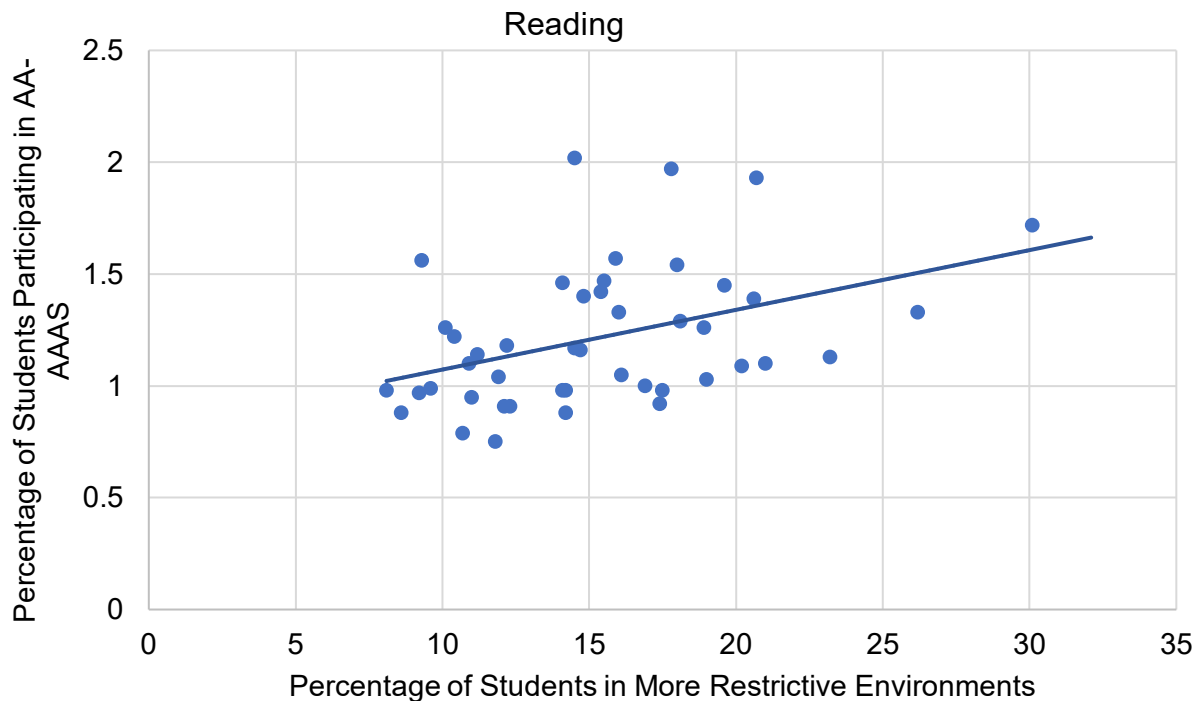
Figure 1. Correlation Between States' Percent Placement in MREs and Math AA-AAAS Participation Rates



$r = 0.346$

Reading. As shown in Figure 2, Pearson correlations suggest a moderate positive correlation between the percentage of students in MREs and the percentage of students participating in the reading AA-AAAS ($r = 0.411$). States with higher percentages of students in MREs were more likely to have higher percentages of students participating in the reading AA-AAAS.

Figure 2: Correlation between States' Percent Placement in MREs and Reading AA-AAAS Participation Rates



$r = 0.411$

Discussion

States with higher percentages of students in MREs tended to have higher percentages of students participating in the AA-AAAS for both mathematics and reading. This suggests that in states where a higher percentage of students with disabilities were taught in inclusive settings, the students may have had access to more rigorous academic standards-based content, and that IEP teams in those states may have been more likely to decide that a student with disabilities on the border between the AA-AAAS and general assessment met participation guidelines for the general assessment.

It is important to remember that the results do not suggest a causal relationship, but rather indicate that there was a correlation between the percentage of students in MREs in a state and the percentage of students participating in the AA-AAAS. This correlation suggests a need for additional research to get a better understanding of the relationship.

A limitation of this study is that the EdFacts and OSEP data for student placement included data for all students with disabilities, not just those who participated in the AA-AAAS. Specifically, placement data are not reported separately for students who participate in the AA-AAAS (i.e.,

students with the most significant cognitive disabilities). Actual placement data may be different for students who participate in the AA-AAAS which would affect the correlations.

States have worked hard to reduce the percentage of students with disabilities in AA-AAAS, but the findings of this study suggest that the percentage might be further reduced if more students with disabilities were taught in more inclusive settings. Some states have long histories of providing instruction for many students with disabilities in more segregated settings (Wakeman et al., 2022), and it can be challenging to bring about and sustain the systems change needed to support more inclusive educational practices—and ultimately improve instruction and outcomes for all students, including students on the border between the AA-AAAS and the general assessment. Lazarus et al. (2019) identified several components associated with effective and sustainable efforts related to implementation of inclusive practices:

- **A Common Vision** needs to exist or be developed that provides a common understanding of the desired systemic changes. This common vision is vital for creating organizational ownership of desired changes, and provides the underpinnings for personnel to work together to create more inclusive learning environments.
- **A Common Understanding of and Commitment to the Change Process** also needs to exist or be developed to sustain the hard work that is required to create more inclusive schools. Without this, there can be wide variation in the efforts of staff. For example, sometimes personnel use terms and descriptions of various strategies in different ways, which can lead to confusion and inconsistent implementation of practices.
- **Effective Formalized Structures for Top-Down, Bottom-Up, and Sideways Communications** help ensure that all personnel and other stakeholders at every level of the system—state, district, school, and classroom—are informed and understand the desired changes and the activities that are occurring. Formalized structures can help support desired changes toward more inclusive learning environments.
- **Meaningful Data** provide personnel and other stakeholders with needed information that can guide change efforts. Without data, planning, implementation, and monitoring efforts could be misguided. Data can also be used to celebrate successes.
- **Coordinated Efforts at Multiple Levels** are needed to bring about systemic change. Educational organizations are complex with many individuals who have different roles, skills, experiences, and knowledge. To create more inclusive learning environments that are sustainable many things will need to be addressed ranging from policy to administrative procedures, instructional practices, and provision of services.

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