Where Are We Now? Issues and Options Related to the AA-MAS, and Accommodations Decision Making

Introduction:

State large-scale assessment systems must be both inclusive and fair to all populations, including students with a variety of disabilities. States are struggling with how to instruct and assess students who historically are poor performers on statewide assessments.

States are moving at different paces in making decisions about the Alternate Assessment based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards (AA-MAS), an optional flexibility option allowed in accountability testing. Some have already made this test operational and are currently collecting data. However, little research exists to aid policymakers, state department of education staff members, and others in making appropriate decisions about changes to testing systems or test participation guidelines.

Two states are highlighted here that are conducting exploratory inquiries and analyzing data as they develop or consider an AA-MAS.

Method:

Alabama collected survey data in Spring 2009 to seek input from special education teachers about decision-making processes for selecting and implementing instructional and assessment accommodations for special education students. Results led the state to diagnose a training need related to accommodations decision-making. Online training will be created using the survey results to structure and drive home main points. This state has decided not to develop an AA-MAS at this time.

Tennessee also conducted a survey of special educators in Spring 2009. It occurred simultaneously with the pilot test of its AA-MAS. The survey collected information on student characteristics such as attendance, socioeconomic factors, specific disabilities, student motivation, student attitudes, and specific abilities related to participation and performance on the pilot test. This information was then crossed with student data obtained from IEPs for full analysis. Survey respondents described the mental health, attentiveness and attitude towards school of the student who participated in the AA-MAS pilot.

• Just one in two respondents marked that the student appeared to be emotionally well-adjusted.
• One in five respondents marked that the student appeared to have anger issues.
• Six in ten respondents marked that the student is easily distracted.
• Respondents from the middle part of the state more frequently marked most of the mental health or attitude behaviors listed.

Survey respondents also marked an answer choice about their awareness of the TCAP-MAAS assessment:

• Nearly three in four respondents marked that they knew little or nothing about the TCAP-MAAS, even though the respondent had a student participate in the pilot test.
• Most frequently respondents said they knew little about the assessment but also didn’t need training on standards-based IEPs.
• Respondents from the west of the state marked the “know of” option more than responders from other regions.

Responses differed for student characteristics for those identified as having specific disabilities (note the difference below in teacher knows and can do).