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Special Issue: Leading Special Education as it Transitions to Next Generation Assessments

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Leading the Transition From the Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Achievement Standards to the General Assessment

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- Most students who currently participate in the alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) will soon transition to the regular test.
- Special education leaders play a critical role in ensuring that educators (and students) are prepared for this transition.
- Educators, including both special and general teachers, may need training so that they can confidently instruct all students, including low-performing students with disabilities who previously participated in the AA-MAS.

Schools are facing many changes in the ways that teaching, learning, and assessment take place. Most states are moving from individual state standards to the new Common Core State Standards, which will be fewer, higher, and more rigorous than most current state standards. As the next generation of assessments used for accountability are rolled out, many students will be transitioned to new assessments. One of the greatest challenges will be for those students with disabilities who are currently participating in an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) who will need to be transitioned to the regular assessment.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that all students, including students with disabilities, participate in state assessments. Most students with disabilities participate in the regular test, with or without accommodations; a few students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). In 2007, federal regulations allowed states to offer another option: the AA-MAS. States could count up to 2% of students proficient using the AA-MAS. States were not required to offer an AA-MAS.

Students eligible for the AA-MAS were required to have an individualized education program (IEP) and could be from any disability category. The students were required to have access to grade-level content but be considered unlikely to reach grade-level proficiency within the time period covered by their IEPs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). By 4 years after the implementation of the 2007 AA-MAS regulation, 17 states had developed an assessment they considered to be an AA-MAS (Price, Hodgson, Lazarus, & Thurlow, 2011). Now, federal policies are changing in regard to this assessment option, and some states are phasing it out. For example, states with an AA-MAS that applied for an ESEA flexibility waiver needed to include a transition plan for phasing out the use of the AA-MAS for accountability purposes (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This can present a challenge for special education leaders because almost all students who currently participate in this assessment option will need to be transitioned to the regular test, with or without accommodations.

Most states are moving from individual state standards to the new Common Core State Standards, which will be fewer, higher, and more rigorous than most current state standards.

Despite challenges, special education leaders can take important steps that will help facilitate the
smooth transition of students who formerly participated in the AA-MAS option to the regular test. Furthermore, by implementing these things, all low-performing students, including those who do not currently participate in an AA-MAS or do not receive special education services, are likely to have improved outcomes. This paper provides an overview of six things that can ease the transition: (a) looking at the data, (b) ensuring that students are in the appropriate assessment, (c) using IEPs with measurable goals, (d) ensuring that students have access to grade-level content, (e) considering students’ access needs, and (f) providing professional development for teachers.

**Look at the Data to Learn More About Students**

Although this test is being phased out in some states, the students are not going away. There will continue to be low-performing students (in states with and without the AA-MAS option), and there is a need to understand who these students are, what characteristics they have, and how they may differ from other students so that sound decisions are made about how to best instruct and assess these children.

Past studies found that low-performing students who could be candidates for an AA-MAS were more likely than the overall population of students to be boys, from a racial or ethnic minority, and have a low-socioeconomic background (Lazarus, Wu, Altman, & Thurlow, 2010; Perie, Fincher, Payne, & Swaffield, 2013; Shaftel & Rutt, 2012). For example, Shaftel and Rutt (2012) found that in one state, “AA-MAS test-takers included a higher proportion of males than were recorded for the general test, and they were more likely than other students with disabilities to be of minority ethnicity, to be English language learners, and to experience poverty. AA-MAS participants were representative of groups who are more likely than average to drop out of school due to these risk factors” (p. 156).

Another study by Lazarus et al. (2010) analyzed 3 years of data from four states (Alabama, Hawaii, South Dakota, Wisconsin) for Grade 5 and Grade 8 students in reading/English language arts. The purpose of this analysis was to learn more about the demographic characteristics of low-performing students. Low-performing students were defined as students who scored at the 10th percentile or below on the statewide assessment in any 1 of the 3 years. Persistently low-performing (PLP) students were defined as students who scored at the 10th percentile or below for all 3 years.

As shown in Figure 1, Lazarus et al. (2010) found that boys were more likely to be persistently low performing in reading/English language arts than the overall population (PLP = 60–77%; overall population = 51–52%) in all four states and in both grades. According to Figure 2, in three states (Alabama, South Dakota, Wisconsin), students who were PLP were more likely to be from an ethnic or racial minority than the overall student population (PLP = 43–58%; overall population = 14–35%). In Hawaii, PLP students were somewhat less likely than the overall population to be from an ethnic or racial minority (PLP = 13–15%; overall population = 16–17%); however, the group considered to be the majority in that state would be considered a minority in the other three states. According to Figure 3, students who were living in poverty (i.e., qualified for a free/reduced price lunch) were more likely to be
Figure 2. Percentage of minority students: all students and persistently low-performing (PLP) students, reading, Grades 5 and 8. Adapted from Lazarus et al., 2010.

Figure 4. Percentage of special education students (SPED): all students and persistently low-performing (PLP) students, reading, Grades 5 and 8. Adapted from Lazarus et al., 2010.

PLP than the overall population (PLP = 48–71%; overall population = 29–44%) in the three states with data available on free/reduced price lunch status. Figure 4 shows that 9–13% of all students have an IEP, but that more than half (i.e., 55–77%) of the students who are PLP had IEPs.

When it is phased out, it might be easy to lose track of what is happening with the students who previously participated in the AA-MAS.

Figure 3. Percentage of free-reduced lunch (FRL) students: all students and persistently low-performing (PLP) students, reading, Grades 5 and 8. Adapted from Lazarus et al., 2010.

One important thing that the AA-MAS did was that it focused attention on a group of struggling learners. When it is phased out, it might be easy to lose track of what is happening with the students who previously participated in the AA-MAS. It is important to continue to (or begin to) analyze data for low-performing students to learn more about their characteristics and to ensure that they have appropriate access to instruction and assessments. Some questions that special education leaders may want to explore are the following:

- Are the demographic characteristics of low-performing students in special education different from the characteristics of low-performing students who are not in special education?
- Are low-performing special education students in some demographic subgroups more likely to move out of the low-performing group than students from other subgroups?
- Have low-performing students had sufficient opportunity to learn the grade-level standards-based content that is measured on the state test?
- For the lowest performing students on the state assessment, how well are their curricula aligned with grade-level standards? (Wu et al., 2012).

Ensure That Students Are in the Appropriate Assessment

As use of the AA-MAS is phased out in some states, IEP teams face decisions about which state
assessments are most appropriate for students who had previously participated in the AA-MAS. States will revise their participation guidelines to reflect the changing assessment options. Decision makers will need to use the new criteria in state participation guidelines when making decisions about assessment participation. Special education leaders can help to ensure that district policies and procedures are aligned to state participation guidelines and that IEP team members receive training to ensure that they have a clear understanding of how to appropriately use the guidelines for decision making. As the AA-MAS is phased out, there is a risk that some participation decisions could be made that do not adhere to state guidelines. Previous studies (see, for example, Altman, Cormier, Lazarus, & Thurlow, 2012) suggested that some special education teachers may not always follow state participation guidelines when making participation decisions for low-performing students with disabilities. Special education leaders will need to monitor IEP team decisions. Almost all students who currently participate in an AA-MAS should be transitioned to the regular test. Given that students who take the AA-MAS generally do not have significant cognitive disabilities, it would be extremely rare for a student to transition to the AA-AAS.

**Use IEPs With Measurable Goals**

IEPs play an important role as students are transitioned away from the AA-MAS. IEPs based on knowledge of content standards and which include measurable goals for students that encourage high expectations will help ensure that students have meaningful access to rigorous academic content. IEPs with measurable goals also can help bridge the gap between writing the IEP and carrying it out in the classroom. This, in turn, will lead to improved access to academic content and instruction and can be used as the basis for conversations between special educators and general educators (Lazarus, Thurlow, Altman, & Rieke, 2012).

When developing standards-based IEPs, it is important to look at classroom and student data to identify individual student strengths and needs in relation to the general curriculum. This requires that IEP team members be familiar with state academic content standards and have an understanding of how to enable low performing students with disabilities to meaningfully access the grade-level content (Holbrook, 2007).

**Ensure Students Have Access to Grade-level Content**

Federal regulations require that students with disabilities have the opportunity to learn grade-level content. It is vital, as students transition back to the regular assessment, that they have access to grade-level content so they have the opportunity to learn what will be on the test. Some students who participated in the AA-MAS may not have been given this opportunity (Altman et al., 2012; Lazarus, Hodgson, Price, & Thurlow, 2011). For example, several years ago one state that was considering the development of an AA-MAS decided not to move ahead with its development in part because unexpected results from a preliminary focus group study with students indicated that, from the students’ perspective, modified items did not make a difference for them because they had not been exposed to that type of problem during instruction. The state decided that instead of an assessment issue, it had an instructional issue (Lazarus et al., 2011). Similarly, as students who currently are taking the AA-MAS are transitioned back to the regular test, it becomes vital that they have access to grade-level content.

**Consider Students’ Access Needs**

Some students who participated in the AA-MAS will need to use accommodations to meaningfully access instruction and assessments. *Instructional accommodations* are changes and supports that help the student access the content. *Assessment accommodations* are changes in procedures and materials that enable a student’s “true knowledge and skills to be assessed rather than the student’s disabilities” (Thurlow, Lazarus, & Christensen, 2008, p. 17). Instruction and assessment accommodations are closely related, and students often require an accommodation for both instruction and assessment, though some instructional accommodations are not appropriate to use for an assessment.
It is vital, as students transition back to the regular assessment, that they have access to grade-level content so they have the opportunity to learn what will be on the test.

Teachers’ knowledge and beliefs set the tone for how students use accommodations to access the instruction and assessment content. Educators often find it difficult to select appropriate accommodations and then to implement those accommodations decisions. It can be particularly challenging when making decisions for low-performing students with disabilities, and educators need a deep understanding of the relationship between content and instruction. As stated by Nolet and McLaughlin (2005), “deciding on accommodations requires that teachers have a sound knowledge of key constructs—the facts, skills and concepts—embedded in a specific lesson or instructional unit” (p. 85). Leaders can help ensure that special educators receive the same training as other teachers and that they receive additional supports to ensure they understand the relationships among content, instruction, and accommodations.

Provide Professional Development for Teachers

Improving student outcomes requires a sustained focus on developing educators who use sound practices to meet the needs of all learners. Professional development should focus on helping educators develop the knowledge and skills that will improve their instructional practices and improve student learning for all students, including low-performing students with disabilities. An extensive range of pedagogical skills is critical to the successful instruction of struggling learners. Educators may need training on how to develop IEPs with measurable goals. Professional development on differentiating instruction, accommodations, supports, and scaffolding also may be needed. Additionally, educators may need training on how to use data well. They need to learn how to become an active participant in teacher-led teams that discuss and analyze data. The data can then help inform instructional decisions that are made on the basis of the data (Lazarus et al., 2012; Telfer, 2011).

Conclusions and Implications

School leaders can help create a culture that values the achievement of all students. As students are transitioned from the AA-MAS, teachers and other IEP team members need to understand the relationship between instruction and assessment, and the role of IEPs in enabling these students to successfully participate in the regular test, with or without accommodations. It may sometimes be challenging to transition students from the AA-MAS to the regular test, but it also is an opportunity. The transitioning of students from the AA-MAS can fit within broader school improvement efforts. Even though only low-performing students with disabilities qualified to participate in the AA-MAS, there are students without IEPs who are also low performing. Working with general education leaders can help ensure that the needs of all low-performing students are met.

Special education leaders can help support educators as they implement focused instructional strategies that provide multiple ways for students to learn important content. Educators may need ongoing support as they refine their instructional skills. The AA-MAS identified a group of low-performing students. As they are transitioned back into the regular assessment, educators have a chance to really think about how to best instruct struggling learners—and then change practices to bring about real change that will improve student outcomes.

References


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