TOPICAL REVIEW THREE

Reporting on the State Assessment Performance of Students with Disabilities

December, 2001

The Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth

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Funding for this research work was provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Grant # H324P000004). Opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education or the Office of Special Education Programs.

EPRRI, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, investigates the impact of new educational accountability systems on students with disabilities and on special education. EPRRI addresses the research needs of policy-makers and other key stakeholders by identifying critical gaps in current knowledge, seeking promising strategies, and publishing Topical Reviews, Policy Updates, and Issue Briefs. The Institute is a joint venture of the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland, the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota, and the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

Table of Contents

Topical Review Highlights 4

1. Introduction 5

2. Overview of Reporting on State Assessment Performance 7

Literature on Assessment Performance Reporting 8

3. Laws Governing Reporting of Assessment Results for Students with Disabilities 9

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 9

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 9

4. Levels of Reports 13

Individual Student Level Reports 13

School Level Reports 13

District Level Reports 14

State Level Reports 14

5. Audiences for State Assessment Reports 15

Internal Audiences 15

A. Teachers, Administrators, and Other School Staff 15

B. School Boards 16

External Audiences 16

A. Parents 16

B. Policymakers 16

C. Media 17

D. Other Audiences 17

6. Current Reporting Practices 19

Reporting Practices in Four States 19

A. Texas 20

B. New York 20

C. Maryland 21

D. California 21

7. Issues in Reporting State Assessment Performance of Students with Disabilities 23

Whose Data Still Are Not Reported? 23

Reporting Alternate Assessment Data 23

Reporting on One Year's Performance Versus Trends in Performance 24

8. Frameworks for Evaluating Reporting Practices 25

Early Principles to Guide Reporting Practices 25

Updated Principles to Guide Reporting Practices 26

Criteria for Good Reports 27

Summary 29

References 30

Public reporting of state assessment results - for all students - is a fundamental element of accountability and education reform. Stakeholders (including school staff, school boards, parents, policymakers, and the media) need accessible data in order to improve instruction and document how well students are doing. Reporting of results for students with disabilities is particularly important because it helps ensure that these students are included in accountability systems.

Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act mandate reporting on the performance of students with disabilities. However, the form and content of reports vary widely among states and also within states, where reports are also published at the school and district levels.

According to the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO's) ongoing analysis of 1999-2000 state assessment reports for students with disabilities:

- *States are moving toward, but have not yet fully complied with the IDEA directive to report on the participation and performance of students with disabilities with the same frequency and in the same detail as for other students; and*
- *Only one state, Kentucky, has so far included any information on alternate assessments for students with disabilities.*

To illustrate the variations in assessment reports, this Topical Review examines in detail the reporting practices of Texas, New York, Maryland, and California. These states differ in assessments, standards, the grades at which students are tested, and the ways test results are used.

This review also identifies several important issues in the reporting of assessment data for students with disabilities:

- *Assessment results for many students are still not reported, including data for some students using non-approved accommodations, using alternate assessments, or taking tests designed for lower grade levels. The states that do report these data often report them separately from scores of students without disabilities.*
- *Alternate assessments are new, and states must face the technical challenge of aggregating these results with regular scores in a way that is statistically sound. States must also decide on the purpose and focus of alternate assessments.*
- *As states track performance results over time, they need to document and account for changes in students' special education status. States need to find ways to report on the performance of all students with disabilities, while also following the longitudinal performance of clearly defined target groups of these students.*

In 1997, NCEO developed a framework for states to use when developing reporting policies and practices. The guiding principles included providing data from all test takers, giving the rates of (as well as the reasons for) the exclusion of students with disabilities, keeping records of accommodations used, and informing parents about the reporting policy for their child's data. NCEO's newly updated framework calls for reporting the scores of all students with disabilities, whether they participate with or without accommodations or use an alternate assessment. Students whose scores are not aggregated with others, or who are not in the assessment system in any way should still be accounted for .

The reports to stakeholders must be readily available, clear, comprehensive, and concise. They should provide comparative information about schools, districts, states, regions, or standards, including changes over time. In addition, they should maintain confidentiality and offer cautions against misinterpretation.

Reporting assessment performance data is a critical step in education reform. The next important step is to use the information to improve outcomes and achievement levels for all students.

1. Introduction

Public reporting of state assessment results is the most basic form of accountability. It has become an important tool for holding public schools accountable for student attainment of higher educational standards. In the past, educators often made decisions based on "gut instincts" about how students were doing. In today's complex world, instincts no longer are a reliable method of decision-making. Educators and other stakeholders want to use data as a basis for making sound decisions about student achievement and for holding schools accountable. Technology has enabled schools to collect huge amounts of data that need to be organized into a format that is accessible and understandable (Kongshem, 1999).

Public reporting on the assessment performance of students serves several purposes (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995). One major purpose is to improve instruction. Both educators and the public want to verify, with solid data, their instincts about what works in education. Data need to be reported in accessible formats so that all stakeholders can gain valuable knowledge about best practices that boost student achievement and school effectiveness. Another major purpose of public reporting is to document how well students are doing. An effective reporting system must provide assessment performance information to both educators and the public. Further, public reporting is a way to share information for accountability purposes. Brown (1999) also lists the purposes of public reporting, but they are slightly different: informing the public; allowing district leadership to monitor progress toward goals; and giving individual schools a chance to highlight accomplishments.

One of the most difficult reporting decisions is "what" to report. Kernan-Schloss (1999) says that most states and districts "typically report what *they* think is important for the public to know" (p. 46). He suggests that rather than using a "top-down, here's-what-we're-going-to-tell-you" approach, stakeholders need to be asked some simple questions like, "What counts? What do you need to see to be persuaded that schools are improving? What measures should we use to measure progress and hold schools accountable?" (p. 46).

Almost all states now publish at least one statewide educational accountability report on the condition of public education (Bielinski, Thurlow, & Callender, 2001). Some states have five or six reports. The reports vary widely in their format and the types of information they contain. Some feature achievement test results for schools or districts, in addition to overall state-level results. Many states also include non-test performance measures, such as attendance (39 states), dropout rates (37 states), graduation rates (27 states), and enrollment (38 states) (Goertz, Duffy, & LeFloch, 2001). Other states expand their reporting to include measures of educational inputs and processes, such as per-pupil expenditures, student-teacher ratios, and other indicators believed to have a direct impact on student outcomes (Barber, Paris, Evans, & Gadsden, 1992; Erickson, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Elliott, 1997). According to Cibulka and Derlin (1995):

> *Wide variation can be found in the stated purpose of reporting, the information included, the unit of analysis (state, districts, or schools), comparisons made (against state verages, against peers, against past performance), information distributed, and the uses to which it is put by state and local policymakers (p. 13).*

The Study Group on Education Accountability, organized by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE, 1998), developed a framework of ten standards for guiding discussion, design, and evaluation of state and local education accountability systems. The fifth standard refers specifically to reporting assessment performance information: "Those responsible for governing accountability regularly report student and school performance information in useful terms and on a timely basis to school staff, students and their families, state and local policymakers, and the news media" (p. 7). NASBE identified six indicators that demonstrate progress toward this standard:

1. School wide scores for student performance are analyzed in several ways, including absolute performance in relation to standards, degree of improvement over previous performance, and in comparison with predicted scores based on contextual conditions.

2. Student performance data are reported in aggregated school-wide averages and in disaggregated form to draw attention to defined subpopulations whose performance merits particular attention, such as students with disabilities, students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and students with special language needs.

3. Student scores are provided to teachers for their individual students within the same academic year in which the student takes the assessment and are used to improve classroom practice.

4. Performance reports are produced using language and format appropriate to various intended audiences. Reports include thorough explanations of the meaning of the results, the limitations of the data, and important student and school contextual factors that may affect student achievement.

5. Education decision makers use student performance results as guides for improving policy and practice.

6. Operation of the accountability system maintains the confidentiality of individual students.

Ultimately, according to the Education Commission of the States (1998), an accountability system has four elements:

1. *Measurement* of student success at state standards;

2. *Reporting* to inform districts, schools, parents and neighborhoods;

3. *Labeling* to designate schools for rewards, assistance, or dramatic remedial action; and

4. *Remedies* to help children in low-performing schools by supporting teachers and principals who know how to improve, providing guidance and help when schools flounder, and replacing schools that cannot improve. The accountability system also includes review of assistance measures to be sure they are working (p. 3).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive account of reporting the performance of students with disabilities on state assessments. Following an overview of issues, this paper provides an explanation of the laws that specifically govern the reporting of assessment results (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994). Next it explores the levels and audiences of reports that are traditionally used in education. Current reporting practices across all states are described generally, and the practices in four states are examined in greater depth. After discussing several issues related to reporting assessment performance, the paper concludes with an exploration of frameworks and implications for reporting on the state assessment performance of students with disabilities.

2. Overview of Reporting on State Assessment Performance

Reporting information on the state assessment performance of students with disabilities is important because it ensures that they are included in the accountability system. Failure to report assessment results is one of the most common ways in which students with disabilities have been excluded from educational accountability (Erickson et al., 1997). Exclusion from reports sends the message that these students are not important – that they do not count, which is an inappropriate message at a time when it is extremely important to document the performance of all students and to emphasize accountability for learning. The way in which data are reported can affect the way students are perceived. Students with disabilities are part of the total student body and should be treated as such. In the same way, their data must be treated as part of the data from the total student body. Performance reports provide concrete evidence of student achievement, so it is vital that reports include information that demonstrates that all students, including those with disabilities, are receiving a standards-based, rigorous academic education.

Accountability for the educational performance of students with disabilities who receive special education services is evolving from compliance with input and process requirements to responsibility for student outcomes. One of the primary ways that students with disabilities have been included in general education accountability systems is through the inclusion of their test scores in state and district assessment performance reports (Roach, Daily, & Goertz, 1997). Although education statistics have been reported in the United States since the 19th century (with reports on national and state-level education indicators reported since the mid-1980s) (Blank, 1993), few states publicly reported the educational assessment performance results of students with disabilities until recently. In fact, most state agencies did not even keep track of the rate at which these students participated in testing or were included in any state or local accountability indices. Low rates of assessment participation and variability from one place to the next prevented policy-relevant conclusions from being drawn about the extent to which students with disabilities benefited from their educational experiences (Erickson et al., 1997; Roach & Raber, 1997).

States have faced both technical and political challenges as they work toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in state assessment and accountability systems (Goertz et al., 2001). These challenges underlie decisions policymakers must make about who gets tested, whose test scores are reported, and whose scores are included in accountability measures. One of the greatest technical challenges is reporting accurate and reliable information on student mastery of state standards under nonstandard assessment conditions, often produced by the use of some accommodations and participation in alternate assessments (Goertz et al., 2001).

There are several issues involved in reporting the performance of students with disabilities on state assessments. A focus group held in Texas identified these seven issues (Texas Education Agency, 1995):

- There are concerns about students whose assessment results are reported but not included in the accountability system.
- Some believe that the data for students with disabilities should be reported separately from the data for other students.
- Categorical reporting of results by disability is desired by some but not others, and is seen as raising issues of confidentiality.
- There are concerns related to reporting results of students who are not attending their home campus.
- There are questions about whether results, particularly regarding students with disabilities, are communicated in a way that is clear and easily understood. There is disagreement about whether data obtained when students use accommodations or alternate assessments should be reported separately from data obtained under standard assessment procedures.
- There is a question about the kinds of scores (e.g., absolute scores or change in performance over time) that should be reported for students with disabilities.

Literature on Assessment Performance Reporting

Information on assessment performance reporting is almost always buried within literature focused on other topics. In searching the literature, we found that simply using the search word "reporting" produced very few documents. Thus, we searched more broadly - in the areas of "accountability" and "school improvement" - where we found a large body of literature that included sections on assessment reporting.

A massive volume of literature exists on the need for schools to use assessment performance information in the decision making process. Much of this literature falls under the general category of school improvement. For example, an ERIC data-base search, conducted in September 2001 using the term "school improvement," retrieved 32,238 citations. An advanced search using both the terms "school improvement" and "performance reporting" resulted in 1,905 citations. School improvement literature often discusses how schools can use data-driven leadership to increase and hold schools accountable for student achievement. It also frequently mentions how various stakeholders can use performance reports, but seldom provides much information about what should be included in the reports.

A body of literature also exists that discusses the content of performance reports. Since the final authority for educational policy lies at the state level, much of this literature is published by state agencies. These publications explain what types of performance data are required to be reported by state law (Holcomb, 1999). Associations within a state then often publish materials to help their members comply with the law. For example, the Minnesota School Board Association published S*chool District Accountability: Using Data to Make Decisions* (2000). Since there are 50 states, a huge volume of state-specific technical assistance literature has been published.

There is a dearth of research-based literature, however, that is national in scope and that examines the ways in which information can be contained in performance reports for all students, regardless of whether they have disabilities. Even though states are required to report the performance of students with disabilities on state assessments, there is very little published about how performance reports should include information about these students. Thus, though federal laws require state assessment results of students with disabilities to be disaggregated and publicly reported, several states continue to struggle in their efforts to do so.

3. Laws Governing Reporting of Assessment Results for Students with Disabilities

Public reporting of state assessment results is becoming an increasingly important tool for ensuring that public schools are accountable for helping students meet higher educational standards. There are two primary federal mandates that emphasize the importance of establishing on-going assessment reporting systems that include all students. These are the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which provides for special education and related services, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act , which provides for Title I and other programs.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

In 1997, the IDEA was reauthorized, with amendments directed at reporting the performance of students with disabilities in state and district assessments. The new assessment reporting requirements are reflected in two parts of the amended law: (1) in the specific requirements for participation in general assessments and in newly developed alternate assessments, and (2) in the requirements for performance goals and indicators.

Reporting requirements: The state educational agency makes available to the public, and reports to the public with the same frequency and in the same detail as it reports on the assessment of nondisabled children, the following:

(1) The number of children with disabilities participating in regular assessments.

(2) The number of those children participating in alternate assessments.

(3) (I) The performance of those children on regular assessments (beginning not later than July 1, 1998) and on alternate assessments (not later than July 1, 2000), if doing so would be statistically sound and would not result in the disclosure of performance results identifiable to individual children.
(II) Data relating to the performance of children described under subclause I shall be disaggregated
(aa)for assessments conducted after July 1, 1998; and
(bb)for assessments conducted before July 1, 1998, if the State is required to disaggregate such data prior to July 1, 1998. [PL 105-17, Section 612 (a)(17)]

Performance goals and indicators: States must define performance goals and indicators for themselves, and then present data for these to the Secretary of Education and the public every two years. Then, based on an assessment of progress, the state may need to revise its' State Improvement Plan. One of the required indicators is the performance of students with disabilities on state and district assessments. Others are high school graduation rates and dropout rates (612)(a)(16).

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994

This law was amended in 1994 in response to concerns about the impact of Title I over the previous 25 years: low expectations for educationally disadvantaged students, an instructional emphasis on basic skills, isolation from the regular curriculum, and a focus on procedural compliance rather than academic outcomes (Goertz et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Among its other reporting requirements, Title I now includes the requirement that programs report student performance on the state assessment, and that the performance of students with disabilities be disaggregated. Jaeger and Tucker (1998) state:

When the United States Congress passed the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, it created an obligation and an opportunity for states, local educational agencies, and schools to disaggregate and analyze data resulting from assessments of their students' achievement in ways that would be useful and illuminating. (p. 1).

According to Title I, in the 2000-01 school year, "each State must have in place a Statewide assessment system that serves as the primary means for determining whether schools and districts receiving Title I funds are making adequate yearly progress toward educating all students to high standards" (Summary Guidance on the Inclusion Requirements for Title I Final Assessments, April 4, 2000).Title I requires school district or school-level performance reports to contain the scores of students with disabilities for purposes of public reporting and school and district accountability. Table 1 contains the Title I assessment reporting requirements.

Table 1. Title I Assessment Reporting Requirements
Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994, P.L. 103-382 (1994)

Each state plan shall demonstrate that the State has developed or adopted a set of high quality, yearly student assessments in at least mathematics and reading or language arts, that will be used as the primary means of determining the yearly performance of each local educational agency and school served under this part...Such assessments shall...enable results to be disaggregated within each State, local educational agency, and school by gender, by each major racial and ethnic group, by English proficiency status, by migrant status, by students with disabilities as compared to nondisabled students, and by economically disadvantaged students as compared to students who are not economically disadvantaged.
[Sec. 1111 (b) (3) (I) (A)]

Each local educational agency receiving funds under this part shall—...publicize and disseminate to teachers and other staff, parents, students, and the community, the results of the annual review under paragraph (2) of all schools served under this part in individual school performance profiles that include statistically sound disaggregated results as required by section 1111 (b) (3) (I) [which specifies students with disabilities]; and provide the results of the local annual review to schools so that the schools can continually refine the program of instruction to help all children served under this part in those schools meet the State's student performance standards.
[Sec. 1116 (a) (3) (4)]

The explicit purpose of the ESEA is to support the broad-based reforms occurring in states and localities and to extend high educational expectations to students served by Title I and other ESEA programs (Guidance on Standards, Assessments and Accountability, 2000). Rather than a separate Title I system, the standards and assessments employed for Title I are the same as those developed by the state and local districts for all children. Because adequate yearly progress is based primarily on the state's final assessments, the universe of students includes those in the grades assessed.

The state is responsible for determining the methods and procedures for measuring adequate yearly progress. Adequate yearly progress as defined by a state describes the amount of yearly improvement each Title I school and district is expected to make in order to enable low-achieving children to meet high performance levels expected of all children. Each state's definition of adequate progress must be based primarily on its final assessment system included in the state's plan. The concept of adequate yearly progress under the 1994 reauthorization of Title I includes (1) an emphasis on accountability of schools and LEAs receiving Title I funds (i.e., whether they are making adequate progress toward enabling their children to meet the state's standards) rather than emphasizing the Title I program itself or even the yearly performance gains of participating children; and (2) a definition that holds LEAs and schools accountable for the amount of improvement they make each year (Guidance on Standards, Assessments and Accountability, 2000).

According to a 50-state survey of state assessment and accountability systems conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) between February and June 2000, 39 of the 48 states with statewide assessment systems disaggregate test data by race/ethnicity and gender, with 35 states disaggregating data by socio-economic status (Goertz et al., 2001). The CPRE study found that states disaggregate and report scores of students with disabilities in one of five ways:

1. The states neither disaggregate nor report these scores;
2. The states disaggregate but do not publicly report the scores;
3. The states do not disaggregate but include the scores in aggregate score reports;
4. The states report the scores of tests taken under standard conditions or under conditions that do not interfere with the comparability of scores of students tested under regular conditions; or
5. The states disaggregate and report all scores. These results may or may not be reported to the public.

A detailed analysis of the ways in which students with disabilities are reflected in reports has been conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO); the results of this analysis are presented later.

Many types of performance reports are published, often created at different levels of the public education system. States, school districts, and schools all create public reports. Currently, all but 13 states produce annual school "report cards" or school profiles (Center for Community Change, 2001). These report cards provide their audiences with a range of data on schools. Some districts add local data to state reports (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995). States that take this approach are more likely to incorporate the data into their on-going planning and decision processes.

Most report cards are published on the state education agency website, and many states require them to be sent home to parents or printed in local newspapers (Center for Community Change, 2001). Some states continue to exclude students with disabilities from their accountability reports, while others exclude students who take tests with accommodations, or students who have used specific types of accommodations (Bielinski et al., 2001). Among the more common levels at which public reports are produced are: (1) individual student reports, (2) school reports, (3) district reports, and (4) state reports. Each of these is addressed here.

Individual Student Level Reports

Performance reports at the individual student level are typically used by districts and states to certify students for promotion or graduation, to inform families of their child's progress, to guide student achievement, and to assist with school and classroom improvement (NASBE, 1998). Performance reports containing information on individual students are extremely useful for teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and parents in diagnosing areas of relative strengths and weaknesses. The information can be used to develop instructional strategies that will benefit all students. However, as stated by Jaeger and Tucker (1998), "the test scores of individual students are the business of the student, the student's parents, and the student's teacher, and should not be reported in any way that identifies the student" (p. 22). For obvious ethical and legal reasons, data on individual students is confidential and private, so the information contained in individual student reports must be aggregated before being presented to a larger audience. A generally accepted rule is to refrain from reporting statistics for small groups of students (Jaeger & Tucker).

School Level Reports

Most districts and some states use the school as the primary reporting unit (NASBE, 1998). According to *Education Week's* report "Quality Counts," 36 states produced school-level report cards in 1999; this number has grown to 45 states in 2001 (Quality Counts, 2001). The Center for Community Change (2001) identified a number of specific indicators that should be required on individual school report cards in all states:

- Assessment scores, fully disaggregated as required by current Title I law;
- Information about the quality of a school's teaching staff, as measured (at least) by average years of experience, levels of degree attainment, numbers of inadequately licensed teachers, and measures of out-of-field teaching;
- Average class size by grade;
- Four-year graduation rates;
- Disaggregated information on student suspensions and expulsions;
- Indicators of overcrowding; and
- Notification of whether the school has been identified as "low-performing."

Brickell and Paul (1999) argue that performance reports need to be accompanied by information about how performance has changed over time, how the performance compares with that of other similar organizations, and how the performance stacks up against absolute standards. Performance reports should enable stakeholders to measure student performance against benchmarked targets. Comparisons can be made to show progress toward standards at the school level. Sometimes these results are used in decisions about school accreditation (NASBE, 1998).

The assessment performance of all students must be reported because the success of all students is a vital component of a standards based accountability system. In order to ascertain whether assessment performance of all students is reported, it is important to know the percentage of students who participated in the assessment. Assessment rates are calculated by dividing the number of students assessed by the number of students enrolled at the grade level tested.

Individual schools provide assessment performance information, but it may not pertain to all of the individual students who are enrolled. For example, the presence of a special reading program at a school does not mean that every student in the school benefits from it. Many of the students may have no contact at all with the special program. Thus, an analysis based on achievement of all the students in schools with the reading program may not reflect its actual impact on students, because participating students will be grouped together with students on which the program can have no direct effect. Similarly, a predominance of teachers with few years of experience and a low mean achievement test score does not necessarily point to a cause and effect relationship between the two factors. It is unclear from the aggregate data whether the low achievers whose scores bring the mean down are actually in classrooms with inexperienced teachers (Hanson, Gardner, & McNamara, 1986, p. 67). According to the Education Commission of the States (1998):

> *Information about schools must be simple and easy to understand. School profiles should include student proficiency in reading, math and other subjects, as well as comparison with average scores of similar schools. Absolute score levels, however, should not be obscured by complex weighting schemes (p. 2).*

District Level Reports

Performance reports at the district level may be used by some states in the same ways that school level reports are used by other states. The disadvantage of district level reporting is that schools within a district may vary a great deal in performance, and most educational programs are delivered at the school, rather than at the district level (NASBE, 1998). Performance at the district level is often used to compare districts. For example:

> *The mean score for all fifth graders in one district can easily be compared with the mean score for all fifth graders in another district and the superintendent will be hailed with either bouquets or brickbats depending on the standing of his or her district (Hanson et al., 1986, p. 64).*

Often, however, districts hailed with "brickbats" claim that they were at an unfair disadvantage – too many economically disadvantaged, at-risk, limited English proficient students, or students with disabilities and inadequate resources (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995). Grouping districts with similar characteristics has been criticized because of lowered expectations or justification for existing performance differences.

State Level Reports

Studies on state level reporting at the National Center on Education Outcomes have found tremendous variability between states (Krentz, Thurlow, & Callender, 2000). Some states produce five or six 500-page volumes annually, while others produce a two- to three-page report. A few states report state level data; others give school, district, and state level data annually. Accountability documents also vary in their focus. The indicators used in accountability reporting cover a wide spectrum, from detailed financial information to student mobility rates, and from staffing information to minutes spent in math and reading. Almost all states report at least on assessment performance indicators for students in general education, and increasing numbers disaggregate and report these data for students with disabilities. Many states use assessment performance data for accreditation purposes while others use them for technical assistance, diplomas, compliance with state requirements, or to generate local, district, and national comparisons. Many states use tables or spreadsheets, and some use the Internet to communicate their educational results (Ysseldyke & Nelson, 1998).

Reporting state assessment performance can be complex and controversial, making the job of communicating test results in an understandable and clear way very difficult (Horowitz, 1998). However, everyone from parents to policymakers now is demanding more accountability from schools. According to Henry (1996), an important ingredient of accountability is "widespread reporting of the performance information that can stimulate enlightened action both inside and outside the education system" (p. 88). Henry identified several audiences for information on school performance, including teachers, principals, and district-level administrators; citizens; members of the business community; students; parents; members of school boards; journalists; state department of education staff members; college of education faculty members; legislators; real estate sales personnel; and local government officials.

The credibility of school, district, and state accountability efforts is largely dependent on the quality and accuracy of data gathering, data analysis and interpretation, and performance reporting. Unfortunately, too often "a single report is presented to an audience possessing widely varied concerns and interests, thus treating the public as an aggregate" (Hanson et al., 1986, p. 80). In addition, the cost of distributing reports is an issue that sometimes limits audiences.

NASBE (1998) argues that, "An accountability system will serve little purpose if data are not reported in terms which policymakers, parents, educators, and the public find useful" (p. 32). There are many opinions about what reports should be like. For example, Burger (1998) suggests that reports must contain different levels of aggregation and detail to provide credible evidence of student performance to different audiences. The reporting format should reflect the needs of the intended audience. Reports should contain user-friendly text and graphics that provide important information to stakeholders. NASBE suggests that, to be useful, "information must be reported in formats and languages appropriate to any given audience. Plain language - not jargon - should be used whenever possible" (p. 32). Reports need to use consistent terms and define any terms that might be unfamiliar to the intended audience. Graphs and charts, supplemented by concise narrative text, can clearly explain the data and analysis. In addition, Holcomb (1999) argues that benchmarks should be included so that the reader can easily compare the information with a meaningful standard. Information should be disaggregated in different ways in different reports depending upon the interests and needs of the intended audience.

Audiences for performance reports are frequently divided into two groups: (a) internal audiences, including teachers, school and district administrators, other school staff, school accreditation agencies, and school board members, and (b) external audiences, including policymakers, the business community, parents, the media, and other stakeholders.

Internal Audiences

Internal audiences need detailed information about school performance so they can make informed decisions about students and schools. Performance reports also enable educators to see what they have accomplished. Some internal users need comprehensive reports; however, many internal users are very busy and have little experience using data to make decisions. Holcomb (1999) argues that the K-I-S-S principle (Keep It Simple and Succinct) is often an appropriate approach for reports. This approach makes the data easily accessible to educators. At the same time, it is important to have more detailed reports with varying levels of disaggregation available for those internal users who need additional information.

A. Teachers, Administrators, and Other School Staff

School staff use performance reports to guide their decision making and school improvement efforts. They need detailed but readily consumable reports that are available to all professional staff members, since educators are in the best positions to act on the information (Henry, 1996). According to both Holcomb (1999) and Thomson (1993), expanded data gathering and reporting enable educators to:

- Track school and student progress toward priority goals beyond minimum state requirements;
- Use objective evidence to take responsibility for their own improvement;
- Keep schools from wasting time and money on curricula and programs that do not work;
- Keep schools focused on student achievement and results;

- Ensure that all subgroups of students are receiving a rigorous, academically challenging education;
- Drive positive change efforts using solid data;
- Develop strategies to improve the overall operation of the school; and
- Collegially share information between school staff about practices that are working.

B. School Boards

School boards govern schools through the development of guidelines, policies, and regulations that provide direction for school staff. The most important function of the school board is to ensure that desired student learning is occurring. The school board sets the tone and direction for a district. Board members need performance reports that provide information about what is happening within their district currently and over time. They also need to be able to compare their district with other similar districts and understand the standards they are using to make comparisons. According to Brickell and Paul (1999), many board members lack expertise in analyzing data, so performance reports need to be presented in a format that provides easily accessible, yet detailed information.

External Audiences

Performance reports give external audiences the information that they need to make informed decisions about schools and districts, but they run the risk of encouraging stakeholders to evaluate schools on the results of just a few high-stake measures. Heubert and Hauser (1999) suggest that performance reports intended for external audiences include:

- Test purpose;
- How test results will be used;
- Whether additional information will be considered for a particular decision;
- Consequences of the test for individual students;
- Whether the test has been validated and by whom;
- How the test and the curriculum are aligned; and
- Whom to contact for additional information (pp. 261-262).

A. Parents.

Parents want information that helps them understand what their children are learning and how it relates to what their children should know. Reports for parents should be jargon-free and available in a variety of formats (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Unfortunately, educators often consider parents as the least important consumers of performance reports and may provide them with only limited information (Barber et al., 1992), such as media reports of test scores. Recently, the Center for Community Change (2001) charged:

> *Though much of this year's Congressional debate on education policy has focused on the need for accountability, little attention has been paid to the rights of parents to be presented with the information they need to evaluate what's going well – or poorly – in their children's schools. The collection and dissemination of school performance data to parents and the public is perhaps the single most important accountability measure that local school districts can implement. After all, parents and students are the ultimate consumers of our public education system. If anyone has the ability to hold schools accountable, it ought to be them. (p. 1).*

Barber et al. (1992) support the importance of informing parents: "If parents do not understand measures of student achievement, then they may not provide appropriate support for learning and motivation....Parental attitudes and expectations influence children's choices of academic courses and expectations for success" (p.16).

B. Policymakers

Policymakers need policy-relevant information that enables them to develop a thorough grounding in an issue. Dunn (1994) argues that the policymaking process can be viewed as a cycle with a number of phases: 1) agenda setting, 2) policy formulation, 3) policy adoption, 4) policy implementation, and 5) policy assessment. Information is needed that is applicable to one or more phases of this cycle.

According to Cibulka and Derlin (1995), performance reports are used by policymakers to strengthen arguments for further reforms in order to drive continued improvement of

public education. For example, legislators might want to know whether the state is making progress in increasing the number of students whose school achievement is "proficient" (Jaeger & Tucker, 1998). Reports to policymakers need to:

- Prioritize the points presented;
- Use simple graphics to convey the data;
- Focus on conclusions;
- Anticipate negative reactions; and
- Be timely and sensitive to time constraints faced by policymakers (Dunn, 1994).

C. Media

The media often shape the public's perception of education in the United States. The United States is a democratic society where the business community, philanthropic organizations, policymakers, and the general public all rely on the print and broadcast media to provide coverage of educational issues. Well-informed stakeholders are better able to engage in a knowledgeable debate about student achievement that will lead to improved schools.

According to Henry (1996), the media are "primary conduits of school performance information to audiences outside the education system" (p. 88). Whether the information that is presented by the media is in the best format is a question. Often journalists are untrained in data analysis and interpretation and need briefings so that they can ask questions and get clear and accurate answers (Henry). According to Horowitz (1998):

> *The news media tend to oversimplify the topic. Some reporters don't fully understand the issues. On top of that, they have to convey what they do know in a very small amount of space or time, and they have to do it in a way that can be easily understood by the average reader or viewer (p. 13).*

According to Thomson (1994), reports and press releases prepared for the media should:

- Focus attention on instructional improvement;
- Stimulate interest in organizational responses that will enrich learning opportunities for all students;
- Provide clear explanations of key concepts and provide supporting empirical evidence;
- Put the most important information at the beginning of the report; and
- Avoid the use of educational jargon.

D. Other Audiences

There are several additional audiences for reports on educational performance. These audiences need access to forums to discuss the use of information for improvement, to register their concerns and to contribute their support to schools (Henry, 1996). Business audiences, concerned about the cost of education, want impartial evidence of school performance. They also want to see evidence that public schools are educating students who will be prepared to work and live in a rapidly changing, technologically advanced society (Minnesota Planning, 2000). Members of the business community routinely use data to make decisions, so they want reports that contain objective cost-benefit analyses. The reports should enable them to spot trends and identify best practices (Wall Street Journal, 2001).

Realtors represent another important audience. According to Cibulka and Derlin (1995), "Realtors provide a continuing, although usually unintended, additional means of distributing public information about the schools. The impact of this expanded access to information about school performance contributes to continuing pressure to improve the public schools in local communities" (p.13).

NCEO has conducted four analyses to determine what types of information are provided on students with disabilities in state education reports to the public (Bielinski et al., 2001; Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Shin, & Coleman, 1998; Thurlow, Nelson, Teelucksingh, & Ysseldyke, 2000; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Teelucksingh, & Seyfarth, 1998). Only the last two analyses of state reports include results following the IDEA requirements for public reporting.

In its first analysis of state reports, which included those collected between the fall of 1995 and spring of 1997, only 11 states had included test-based performance data on students with disabilities (Thurlow et al., 1998). In contrast, 30 states had included data on students with disabilities that reflected process indicators (e.g., enrollment, attendance).

In a second analysis, which collected data through the summer of 1998, 13 states included test performance results for students with disabilities, an increase of just two states (Ysseldyke et al., 1998). It was in this report that a discrepancy between the number of states reporting performance data and the number reporting participation data was first noted – while 13 states reported on test performance, only 12 states reported on participation of students with disabilities in assessments.

The third NCEO analysis was conducted in 1999, with the collection of reports produced between March 1998 and March 1999 (Thurlow et al., 2000). This analysis found a total of 17 states publicly reporting test performance results for students with disabilities, just up 4 from the previous year. A total of 14 states, up 2 from the previous year, reported data on the participation of students with disabilities in assessments. The third analysis of state reports also examined the other types of outcome data available in public reports that were disaggregated for students with disabilities: dropout data (8 states), graduation/exit data (9 states). Still, the number of states reporting any type of outcome data was not close to the number of states reporting on the enrollment of students with disabilities (38 states). Further, Thurlow et al. (2000) found that more than two-thirds of the documents that did not include data on students with disabilities did include data on the performance of other students.

NCEO is currently completing its fourth analysis of state reports, which is examining reports of data for the 1999-2000 school year (Bielinski et al., 2001). This analysis found that 37 states publicly reported performance data for some or all of their tests; only 20 of these reported on all of their tests. A total of 33 states reported data on participation in assessments for some or all of their tests; only 14 of these reported participation data for all of their tests. However, the ratio of tests for which disaggregated data were reported seemed to be increasing. Of the 66 tests reflected in the state reports, disaggregated performance data were reported for 65 of them, and disaggregated participation data were reported for 54 of them.

NCEO's fourth analysis also examined the extent to which states included data from alternate assessments. Of course, the implementation of and reporting on these assessments was not required until July 2000, so their analysis was ahead of the requirement. Indeed, only one state had any information on its alternate assessment (Kentucky), and this state reported only participation data.

Thus, as the most recent analyses indicate, states are still moving toward the IDEA directive to report on the participation and performance of students with disabilities with the same frequency and in the same detail as for other students. While there have definitely been increases in the reporting of performance data for students with disabilities, it has not been to the extent that might be expected given the timelines in IDEA 97.

Reporting Practices in Four States

The differences among states in their reporting practices and assessment processes are clearly illustrated through the example of four states: Texas, New York, Maryland, and California. The practices are described here, both in general and as they relate to students with disabilities. These states have different assessments, different content and performance standards, test at different grade levels, and use results for different purposes.

A. Texas

Texas issues an Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Report to each school district. The report includes these student performance indicators:

- Percentage passing the TAAS, a criterion-referenced assessment designed to measure competency in the Texas Essential elements curriculum;
- Progress of prior year TAAS failers;
- TAAS participation, performance on end-of-course exams;
- Attendance rate;
- Dropout rate;
- Percent completing advanced courses;
- Completion rate/student status;
- Percentage of graduates completing the recommended high school program;
- AP/IB (Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate) results; and
- College admissions tests results.

Passing rates for the four end-of-course examinations will be reported beginning in 2003, with the first test administration disaggregated by student group.

TAAS results from students receiving special education services are included in the Academic Excellence Indicator System that is used to create a portrait of academic progress. Students can take TAAS or a state developed alternative assessment, based on the level of the curriculum at which the student is receiving the majority of his or her instruction and the use of accommodations and/or modifications.

In the 2000 review of Texas' assessment system under Title I requirements, Texas was working on a plan to increase the number of students with disabilities included in the TAAS assessments, since in 1999-2000 approximately 50% of students with disabilities were exempt from TAAS for grades 3-8 and 10. The state also explained how the results from alternative and alternate assessments will be reported and included in the standards-based measures for school accountability, and confirmed that the results for all students, including those students taking the alternate assessments, will be publicly reported and included in measures of school progress.

B. New York

Previously, students who successfully passed Regents exams in eight subjects received a Regents (State) diploma. For many years, this assessment was thought to be appropriate only for college-bound students. Non-college bound students would take a local exam, and receive a local diploma. Thus there was diploma choice. Beginning with the class of 2000, new "high-stakes" Regents exam requirements are being phased in. All students who graduated in 2000 took a Regents English exam and had to pass it at the 55% level to receive a diploma. The class of 2001 also has to pass exams in algebra and geometry; the class of 2002 must pass additional exams in global studies and American history, and in 2003, laboratory science exams will be required, for a total of five exams. All students will be required to pass these exams in order to receive a high school diploma. A local diploma will not be available to any student.

Data are used for student, school and district accountability systems (district accountability only under Title I). Schools and districts also use data in improvement planning. Policies concerning rewards for high achieving schools or systems are currently under development.

The performance of all continuously enrolled students, both general education students and students with disabilities, is included in the calculations used to determine whether a district is required to develop a Local Assistance Plan for a school; to identify which schools are farthest from state standards; and, for schools receiving Title I funding, to determine which schools are making adequate yearly progress. On the school report card, the performance of all students tested (including students with disabilities) will be aggregated. On the 5th grade writing test, the performance of general education students will be reported separately from that of students with disabilities receiving supplemental services. For all measures, except attendance, dropout, and suspension rates, the performance of students with disabilities will be displayed separately as well as aggregated.

For each assessment, the school is to report the number of students tested, the number of students scoring at each performance level, and the number of students who were exempted by their IEP teams. This is a period of transition in the state, and the implementation of these new assessments will be at issue for the next few years. Also at issue are the accommodations and modifications for students with special needs and the challenge of addressing those needs across the state while providing valid and reliable assessments.

In the 2000 review of New York's assessment system under Title I requirements, New York is modifying existing school report materials to include all disaggregated data and performance comparisons as required by Title I and providing assurance of local distribution of individual student reports.

C. Maryland

The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) has long been the established testing system in the state. Students in grades 3, 5, and 8 are tested in reading, math, writing, language usage, science, and social studies. The Maryland School Performance Report is released in two parts: state and school districts (published by the state education department) and school systems and schools (published by local education agencies). Data include MSPAP results, attendance, dropout rate, enrollment, students receiving special services, student mobility, high school program completion, other factors, and gifted and talented student information.

State policy is to include all students to the fullest extent possible. Maryland was fully approved in the 2000 Title I review of their assessment system, under the assumption that they would not only report the results of their alternate assessment, but also use those results for accountability purposes.

D. California

The Academic Performance Index (API) is the cornerstone of the 1999 Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) in California. It measures the academic performance and progress of schools. School districts are required to administer the Stanford 9 to all students in grades 2 through 11, except for those students whose IEPs explicitly exempt them, or students whose parent or guardian submits a written request to exempt the student. Beginning in 2004, students in California public schools will have to pass the High School Exit Exam to receive a high school diploma.

The IEP team can exempt "individuals with special needs" from all or part of California's assessment program. Severely disabled students whose instructional program includes functional, non-academic content and for whom there are no appropriate testing accommodations can be exempt and participate in an alternate assessment. Student scores are excluded if: (a) the pupil first attended the district in the current year as indicated on the STAR answer document, (b) the test administration accommodation for the pupil is more than one grade out of level, or (c) any of the following four test administration accommodations are marked "yes" for all content areas: Braille, flexible scheduling, revised test format, or use of aides.

The 2001 Title I review of California's assessment system found that California needed to align its state assessments with its content and performance standards, and to reduce the high rate of exclusion of students from school accountability.

7. Issues in Reporting State Assessment Performance of Students with Disabilities

Several issues arise in reporting the state assessment performance of students with disabilities. First, for several reasons, assessment results of many students with disabilities are still not reported. Second, alternate assessments are so new that many states have not yet figured out how to aggregate results with those of general assessments. Finally, caution needs to be taken when looking at the performance results of students with disabilities over time to make sure that the same group of students is being compared each year.

Whose Data Still Are Not Reported?

In a survey of state directors of special education, NCEO found that almost all states reported the performance of students using approved accommodations, but just over half reported the scores of students who used non-approved accommodations (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). About the same number of states reported scores of alternate assessment participants; however, about one third of states had not yet made a decision about how to report these scores. Of the 17 states that used out-of-level tests at the time of the survey, 13 reported the scores of students who took tests designed for a lower grade level. Some states gave a score of "1" or "0" to students who were not tested (e.g., students who were absent on test days were counted and given the lowest possible score).

Most states aggregate the scores of assessment participants using accommodations that the states view as not changing the test (i.e., approved accommodations) with those of all other assessment participants. Only half of the states that report the scores of students using non-approved accommodations aggregate those scores; other states report scores of these students separately or at the lowest score level. Of the states that have scoring systems in place for alternate assessments, most report scores separately from those of general assessment participants. States reporting scores of out-of-level test participants are split in their decisions to aggregate or report scores separately.

Reporting Alternate Assessment Data

A student who is not able to participate at all in general state assessments, even with accommodations, needs an opportunity to show what he or she knows through an alternate assessment. There are several strategies that can be used to show progress toward state or local content standards through alternate assessments. Each state has selected its own approach (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Most states compile data at multiple points over an extended period of time -– usually most of a school year – using a variety of assessment strategies (Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, and Ysseldyke, 2001). Over half of the states organize the data collected for a student's alternate assessment into some type of portfolio, while others summarize the results on a checklist or rating scale.

It is important for the general public, news media, and other educators to receive good information about what alternate assessment scores mean. However, there are a number of challenges in reporting the scores of alternate assessment participants, including concerns about statistical soundness and the purposes and focuses states have chosen for their alternate assessments. States are currently deciding how their alternate assessments will be scored and reported. Bechard (2001) identified six models for reporting the results of alternate assessments that states are using or considering:

Model 1: Same proficiency levels for general assessment and alternate assessment.

Model 2: Different proficiency levels for general and alternate assessments treated as the same.

Model 3: Different proficiency levels for general assessment and alternate assessment.

Model 4: Overlapped proficiency levels for general assessment and alternate assessment.

Model 5: Lowest possible proficiency level for alternate assessment.

Model 6: No alternate assessment proficiency levels.

According to Bechard (2001), "The variety of methods created to report the results of alternate assessments demonstrate the struggle of states to incorporate these new assessments into an existing structure – one that previously did not have to address the achievement of students with significant needs, or in many cases, even their presence" (p. 14).

Reporting on One Year's Performance Versus Trends in Performance

It is difficult to find large-scale performance trend data for students with disabilities, and the few results that have been reported show an achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers that grows steadily across grades (Thurlow et al., 2000). In Kentucky, Trimble (1998) found that the gap between students with and without disabilities on the 1996 reading test was less than .25 in 4th grade, almost .70 in 8th grade, and over .80 in 11th grade. The question considered by Bielinski and Ysseldyke (2000) in their study of performance trends was, "Can disaggregated test results for students with disabilities be used to make valid inferences about whether students with disabilities are benefiting from education to the same degree as their non-disabled peers?"

Using a large longitudinal database, Bielinski and Ysseldyke (2000) examined assessment performance trends for students receiving special education services. There were two particularly important results in this study. First, in each year, the average test score for the students leaving special education was much higher than it was for those who remained in special education. The other important result was that the students leaving special education were replaced by a much lower achieving group of regular education students. They found that special education services were terminated for the highest performers and initiated for low performers who had been referred to and found eligible for services. The result was a substantial increase in the performance gap over time between students receiving and not receiving special education services. They also found that the reduction in exemption rates from testing that has occurred over time added to the size of the gap. Results suggested that the students from the special education group who were exempt from testing in the earlier grades were lower achievers compared to those who were tested every year. When the same group of students (who received special education services at least initially) was tracked over time, the performance gap actually decreased slightly.

These findings have significant implications for states as they begin to publicly report disaggregated data on students with disabilities, particularly if attempts are made to track performance across time. Failure to document and account for changes in students' special education status and previous exemption rates from testing could result in misinterpretations about the effectiveness of special education services. By restricting the group of students for longitudinal analysis to those who received special education services during the first year of analysis (and following their performance regardless of whether they continued to receive special education services), a more accurate indication of progress over time will be obtained. Thus, states should consider ways to both report on the performance of all students with disabilities and the longitudinal performance of clearly defined targeted groups of these students.

In 1997 the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) developed a set of principles for states to consider in the development of policies and practices for reporting assessment data for students with disabilities (Erickson et al., 1997). NCEO is currently working on an updated set of principles and characteristics of inclusive assessment and accountability systems (Thurlow, Quenemoen, Thompson, & Lehr, 2001). At this time, six core principles of assessment and accountability systems have been identified that include all students, specifically students with disabilities. Both the early set of principles and those recently developed are described here. We also include guidelines for desirable characteristics in reporting that state department personnel could use to improve their accountability reports. These were developed in 1998 by NCEO through a study to identify stakeholders' views of desirable characteristics of reports (Nelson, Ysseldyke, & Thurlow, 1998).

Early Principles to Guide Reporting Practices

These principles were based on an NCEO analysis of state practices in 1997.

Include data from all test takers in performance reports. Even with the active participation of students with disabilities in assessment programs, exclusion can still occur at the stages of data aggregation and analysis. In the past, some states were found to remove the scores of students with disabilities from their testing database before further analyses were conducted. Others removed the scores of those students who took the tests under accommodated conditions, even if the accommodations had no impact on the test's validity.

NCEO recommended that accountability reports include testing information on all students who took the test, either with or without accommodations. If particular accommodations have the potential of invalidating test scores, such scores could be reported separately until research is conducted to support or discourage this separation.

How performance on alternate assessments should be reported was still under debate in the late 1990s. Some states devised ways to merge data from alternate assessments with data from regular assessments by using a common scoring rubric (Bechard, 2001). Other states planned to report data from their alternate assessments separately from regular assessment data.

Include rates of exclusion that are specific to students with disabilities and the reasons for the exclusion. In states with assessments that have high stakes for teachers, schools, or administrators, students with disabilities were encouraged not to participate in testing or to participate in the alternate assessment, due to fears that their scores would lower overall school or district averages. NCEO recommended that these practices be curtailed by requiring that exclusion rates be included in any public reporting of test results.

Reporting rates of exclusion, however, should not be limited to those situations in which there are high stakes. It is always important to report on exclusion so that comparability of results can be assessed. Federal law now supports this by requiring that the number of students with disabilities taking the statewide assessment be reported along with performance results.

Although not required by IDEA, reporting the reason for exclusion can assist in pinpointing ways to increase participation of students with disabilities in assessments. For example, high rates of exclusion due to absenteeism suggest a different issue from high rates of exclusion due to IEP team decisions that students are unable to participate due to emotional distress. Making this information public through reporting can drive changes in inappropriate practices.

Calculate participation or exclusion rates using consistent written guidelines. In order to better ascertain how students with disabilities are being included in statewide assessment programs, states need to provide schools and districts better direction about how participation rates should be determined. In the past, students with disabilities at the age or grade level being tested often were considered ineligible for testing, and were systematically excluded from testing populations because of their program setting or type of disability. This form of exclusion led to inflating the reported rates of test participation because those excluded were not even considered eligible. While this type of exclusion should be a thing of the past, keeping track of any exclusions that occur is an important step in knowing that the intent of the law is followed.

Maintain records in such a way that data for students with disabilities can be reported separately, overall, or by other breakdowns. To investigate whether new programs, methods of instruction, or curricula are affecting student performance, schools and districts may find it useful to break out performance data not just between special and regular education, but also by different service delivery models, disability categories, or types of accommodations requested. The question of aggregating or disaggregating test scores for students with disabilities rests on the purposes underlying the assessment. If used for holding schools and districts accountable for the success of *all* students, then aggregating the scores from all students is an equitable approach to reporting. However, if test results are intended to assist in making programmatic improvements and curricular evaluation, then disaggregation became equally important.

Keep records of the use of accommodations according to the type of accommodation. Testing accommodations are needed to allow some students with disabilities to participate fully in assessment programs. An accommodation can take different forms, from providing extended time to a student, to offering a scribe to record the student's responses. Documenting the use of accommodations offers several benefits: (a) It gives testing administrators the opportunity to enforce policies that limit accommodations to those that the student uses during instruction, and (b) it provides information for further research about their use in testing.

Inform parents about the reporting policy for their child's data. Parents of students with disabilities need to be aware of how their children's scores will be used in the public reporting of results. Parents should be given notification as to whether test scores for their students will be aggregated along with those of students who do not receive special education services. They also should understand any implications of using accommodations during testing, such as the removal of accommodated test scores from overall analysis or reporting. And they should be shown how participation in testing programs can ultimately improve the educational opportunities provided to their children.

Updated Principles to Guide Reporting Practices

These principles, recently completed by NCEO (Thurlow et al., 2001), are consistent with the requirements of current federal laws governing special education and Title I services, but they go beyond the letter of the law where research and practice have suggested benefits of specific approaches. The purpose of these principles is to focus and clarify stakeholder discussion on essential components of inclusive systems and to provide an impetus for revisiting basic assumptions and beliefs about emerging state and district systems. One of these principles (Principle 3), with its supporting characteristics, provides the first level of accountability for the scores of students with disabilities:

Principle 3. All students with disabilities are included when student scores are publicly reported, in the same frequency and format as all other students, whether they participate with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment.

- **Characteristic 3.1.** All students in all placement settings who receive educational services are accounted for in the reporting system. Every student must be counted and count. This includes students in traditional public school placements, but also includes the participation and performance of students who change schools or placements. All students receiving federally funded educational services in non-traditional settings should be included and reported as well, such as students in home schools, private schools, charter schools, state-operated programs, and in the juvenile justice system. The challenge of counting every student, and ensuring each student's progress counts is fundamental to the success of standards-based reform. There is a national consensus that all students are to be held to high standards, and all schools are to fully support all student's efforts to reach those standards, regardless of the setting. If some students are excluded or set aside in reporting, the public has no way of knowing how all students or all schools are doing.

- **Characteristic 3.2**. The number and percentage of students not in the assessment system in any way (with or without accommodations, or via an alternate assessment) are reported and an explanation given for their nonparticipation. At a minimum, every student who does not participate actively in the assessment system must be detectable when scores are reported. Typically, this is done by reporting the number of students not participating in the assessment system. Even if a state or district factors students who do not take the assessment into the reported scores (e.g., by giving them a score of zero), the number of students excluded should still be reported. In addition, the reasons for exclusion (e.g., parent request, absenteeism, noncompliance, invalid test protocol) should be reported by subpopulation.

- **Characteristic 3.3**. Scores are reported for those students who take the assessment in a way that produces scores that are not being aggregated with other scores. Scores of students who take assessments with accommodations that are considered to reduce the validity of the score should still be reported, with an explanation of why they are separated from the scores of other students, if they are. Similarly, the performance of alternate assessment participants should be reported, with an explanation of why they are separated from the scores of other students, if they are.

- **Characteristic 3.4.** Reports are provided to educators, parents, students, policymakers, and journalists, with a clear explanation of results and implications. State and district staff have a responsibility to ensure that data are used in ways that are consistent with the purpose of each assessment. Reports should be readily available and accessible, and should include cautions about misinterpretation of data. Data should be suppressed when low numbers may compromise student privacy. Consideration should be given to having community information sessions or special outreach to the media to help people use the reports responsibly. Finally, for students in placements other than the "neighborhood" school, students should be included in reports that will most directly affect the student's education – where his or her performance counts, and where public reporting can make a difference. For example, if a student with disabilities is being served in a specialized setting outside of his or her home district (or school), the progress of that student should be reported in the context where responsibility and concern for that student most directly lies.

Criteria for Good Reports

In 1998, NCEO conducted a study to identify stakeholders' views of desirable characteristics of reports, and to provide guidelines for desirable characteristics in reporting that state department personnel could use to improve their accountability reports (Nelson et al., 1998). A descriptive study showed that none of the states' accountability reports that were examined met all of the desired characteristics. In a related report, Ysseldyke and Nelson (1998) identified necessary, desirable, and succinct characteristics of good state and district educational accountability reports:

- Be *clear* about who the report is directed to, the intended purposes of the report, and the state's conceptual model for its accountability system.

- Be *comprehensive* yet concise in the reporting of inputs, processes, and results for students, especially students with disabilities.

- Provide *comparative* information with changes over time between schools, districts, states, regions, or standards.

- Be *concise* and use carefully chosen indicators so that no more information is given than is necessary. A multi-layered approach may be appropriate.

- Include *cautions* against misinterpretations of the data or against any unintended consequences.

- Maintain *confidentiality* and avoid the possibility of identifying individual students.

- Use *good formats* so that reports are well organized, readable, and interesting.

- Use *catchy titles* , pictures, or other visual aids to capture and hold the audience's attention.

Summary

This paper has presented several important issues relating to reporting the performance of all students, including students with disabilities. As shown in the four states described earlier, assessments and reports vary tremendously from state to state. States need to report the academic performance of students with disabilities with the same regularity as they do for students without disabilities. Such reporting has benefits beyond meeting federal mandates. Including students with disabilities in educational accountability systems and reporting assessment results helps ensure that they do not fall through the cracks of educational systems (Erickson et al., 1997).

There are several criteria that can be used to guide both reporting practices and the production of good reports. As seen in this report, these criteria have been refined recently, moving from basic processes to actual principles and characteristics to guide fundamental reporting decisions.

Reporting assessment performance data is a critical step in improving educational services for all students. It is not, however, the final step. Performance information must be used to improve student outcomes, and students with disabilities must be included in data-driven efforts to make improvements in the achievement levels of all students. Law and practice in most states require that in every district or school, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners sit down together, look at the achievement data of all their children, and determine how to help all children succeed (Thompson et al., 2001). This typically is called the "school improvement planning process," and most states provide a framework to help districts and schools use data based decision making to make year-by-year progress in increasing achievement levels. In order to be effective, these processes must include every child, and must focus on raising the achievement levels of all children.

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