ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY:
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES & THE AA-AAS

NCLD believes in high standards for all students with disabilities. The overwhelming majority of students with disabilities can take the general assessment with accommodations. Therefore, administration of the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) needs to be appropriately limited to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in order to prevent misuse and overuse.

By The Numbers

- 5.8 million students with disabilities
- 12% of all students have disabilities such as dyslexia and dyscalculia
- Almost 75% of students with disabilities are diagnosed with a learning disability, a speech/language issue, or another issue such as ADHD
- In 2011, 68% of students with learning disabilities (LD) received a regular high school diploma compared to just 57% a decade ago (State of LD, 2014)
- In 2011, only 19% of students with LD dropped out of school versus 35% in 2002 (State of LD, 2014)

Nearly 6 million students with disabilities are educated in our nation’s classrooms – most of whom spend their day learning alongside students without disabilities. With the right supports, students with disabilities can – and do – succeed in school and life.

Unfortunately, outdated stereotypes continue to cast a shadow on education policy and practice – often focusing on a student’s “limitations” rather than their strengths. This is especially present when considering how to include students with disabilities in the school assessment and accountability system.

Do students with disabilities participate in assessment and accountability system now?
Yes. Federal laws – NCLB and IDEA – require that students with disabilities take an annual assessment. Under NCLB, students are tested annually in reading and math in grades 3-8 and once again during high school. Every school, school district and state must report on and be held accountable for the number of students scoring proficiently on these yearly tests. Specifically, states report disaggregated data so that we can see how certain subgroups compare on these tests. For example, we can see how students with disabilities are performing compared to their non-disabled peers.

What has been the impact of including students with disabilities in accountability systems?
Including students with disabilities in the assessment and accountability systems has allowed parents, teachers and school leaders to better understand the potential of students with disabilities. It has increased knowledge about how they fare academically compared to their grade-level peers, improved access to the general education curriculum, and increased inclusion in general education classrooms throughout the country. Specifically, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):
Between 1996 and 2013, 8th grade students with disabilities made an 18-point gain in math scores (from 231 to 249), which is two points more than the gain made by students without disabilities (from 273 to 289).\(^1\)

Similarly, between 1998 and 2013, 8th grade students with disabilities made an 8-point gain in reading scores (from 224 to 232), which is two points more than the gain made by students without disabilities (from 266 to 272).\(^2\)

While improvements must continue, these gains provide actionable data to move forward.

**What assessments are given to students with disabilities?**

There are two different ways students with a disabilities may be included in state assessments:

1. Take the same assessment taken by all students, with appropriate accommodations that may be needed;
2. Take an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS)

**How are these assessments different?**

These assessments are dramatically different from each other in what they measure and which students they are designed for.

- **General assessments** (This is the assessment that all students take). Some students with disabilities might use accommodations just as they do during instruction, such as extra time.\(^3\) This assessment is based on achievement standards aligned with academic content standards for the student’s enrolled grade.

- **Alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS).** This assessment is designed to assess a very small number of students with disabilities – those with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Unlike the general assessment, this assessment may include a more targeted sample of priority grade-level content standards and may include substantially simplified content. It is based on alternate achievement standards that differ in complexity from the grade-level achievement standards. This assessment typically requires a familiar examiner to assist the child in accessing the test.

**Why does the type of assessment matter?**

The AA-AAS is not appropriate for students without the most significant cognitive disabilities, which make up the majority of all students with disabilities. Students who can and should be meeting grade-level standards must be taking the general assessment in order to improve their chances of earning a regular high school diploma and reaching their future college or career goals. If students are not given the chance to achieve on grade level, they fall further behind, are more likely to dropout, and are sentenced to subpar preparation for life after school.

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What is meant by the 1% cap?
As a requirement of NCLB, states must report on and be held accountable for how students are performing on their annual tests. Specifically, they need to report how many students are “proficient.” The more students that are proficient, the closer the state and school are to meeting their annual goals.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations limiting how many students taking the AA-AAS could be counted toward the state’s proficiency goal. The regulation states that only 1% of all students may be counted as proficient or advanced based on the AA-AAS.

Did you know.....
1% of all students equals approximately 10% of students with disabilities?

WHAT WE KNOW

• Erasing stereotypes. Nationally, 60% of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their school day in the general education classroom. Many of these students have learning disabilities like dyslexia, ADHD, or challenges with speech. With the right services and support, they can and do thrive, succeed, and learn alongside their peers.

• Lasting consequences for taking alternate assessments. Students who take an alternate assessment face serious consequences, including getting off track for earning a regular high school diploma which threatens a student’s future college or career goals. This can happen as early as elementary school. If students are not given the chance to achieve on grade level, they fall further behind, are more likely to dropout, and are sentenced to subpar preparation for life after school.

• Teaching to the test. It is true that what is measured drives what is taught. A systemic effort to exclude students with disabilities from the general assessment will lead to exclusion from general education classrooms and grade-level curriculum.

• Expecting less will result in less - a destructive self-fulfilling prophecy. When we systemically marginalize a group of students, we tell educators, families, society – and most importantly the child – that they are not capable. Further, it is a violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to exclude a certain group of students with disabilities from the general assessment.

• Students with disabilities benefit from learning alongside their peers. Research has shown that students with disabilities benefit academically, socially and emotionally when they are provided meaningful access to general education. The reverse is true as well, that students without disabilities also benefit from an inclusive environment.

• It can be done. We can close the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities – in school districts big and small – with a shift in educational practices and high-expectations.  

4 For more information and examples of school districts that have been successful in closing the achievement gap, see Moving Your Numbers, from the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) (movingyournumbers.org).