

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Standardized Testing and Students with Disabilities

Does Inclusion in Testing Mean Inclusion in Meaningful Learning?

- 1) **Federal law requires 95% test participation, including for the vast majority of students with disabilities.** (One percent of all students may be assessed to alternative standards with alternative assessments. Federal law leaves it up to each state to decide what to do if a school or district does not test 95%.) The theory is that full inclusion *in testing* will drive full inclusion *in learning* the “standard” academic curriculum. But for some students with significant disabilities, state standardized tests are cognitively inappropriate. They may become a grueling and traumatic exercise, wasting time that could be spent working to make progress on their individual learning goals. For some, the testing borders on (or crosses the line) into abuse. For example, the mother of a profoundly disabled Florida student described how her son got pressure sores and developed respiratory infections after long test sessions in his wheelchair.
- 2) **A focus on including Students with Disabilities (SWDs) in standardized testing puts the cart of testing before the horse of delivering appropriate instruction, services and supports.** Special educators and advocates note that access to the latter is increasingly limited by budget and staffing cuts, especially in high-poverty districts, while investments in test development and administration, and associated technology, continue to grow.
- 3) **Barriers to success on standardized exams for SWDs include lack of access to learning the material on the tests.** This sometimes results from “restrictive” placements, in which children with disabilities are separated from other students, then not given full access to the mainstream curriculum. Research indicates that states with high school graduation tests are *more likely* to place SWDs in more restrictive settings. This runs counter to a pillar of special education law, which calls for students to be placed in the “least restrictive environment” possible. Students often do not receive services during test time because teachers are supervising the testing. Other barriers to success include lack of access to accommodations that are sometimes helpful. These include extra time, text-to-speech tools and Braille (see more below).

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- 4) **Another problem for students with disabilities is the overreliance on standardized test scores to make important decisions about student placement, advancement from grade to grade and graduation.** All these policies have been shown to have negative consequences for students in general. However, the harms tend to be greatest for this student subgroup, including an extreme narrowing of curriculum to little more than test preparation. SWDs and English Language Learners are the groups most likely to be denied high school diplomas as a result of failing high school graduation tests.
- 5) **Many commonly used test accommodations, such as extra time, can be a double-edged sword.** Extra time may help some SWDs do better. Often, however, it leads to such students spending many hours working to complete a flawed standardized exam instead of focusing on their individual learning goals, without any score gain. Updated accommodations developed for Common Core tests like SBAC have not fulfilled their promise of giving SWDs better access to the tested material. For example, teachers described a dictation tool for SBAC testing that read the text rapidly in a robotic voice, leaving students baffled and unable to answer test questions.
- 6) **Computer-adaptive testing (CAT) can create added hurdles for SWDs.** CAT adjusts the level of difficulty up or down, depending on whether or not students answer correctly. But special educators warn that a SWD who is “rewarded” for getting the right answer with a more difficult test question could become overwhelmed by the increased difficulty and shut down, or stop trying. On the other hand, students who recognize that they are being given easier and easier questions may internalize the message that they are not “smart,” or not capable learners.
- 7) **When students with disabilities are subject to high-stakes decisions based on standardized test results, they are at higher risk of negative consequences** such as repeating a grade, dropping out, or completing school with something other than a full-fledged high school diploma, such as a certificate of completion. The latter has little value in terms of the opportunities to pursue higher education or obtain employment.
- 8) **Multiple measures of student knowledge and skills are the best,** most fair and accurate approach to assessment for all students, especially for students with disabilities. The priority should be on [high-quality, teacher-led classroom assessments](#) that provide multiple ways and opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

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