

Standardized testing and assessment for special education students

Problem: Students with disabilities are provided with individualized education programs (IEPs). But our accountability system is based on one-size-fits-all standardized tests.



WHAT WE HAVE NOW

Federal law requires states to administer annual reading and math testing of all students in grades 3-8 and once in high school, plus a science test in three grades. IL uses PARCC in 3-8 and the college admissions SAT in high school. States may administer an alternative assessment (DLM) to a maximum of 1% of the student population, those with the most severe cognitive disabilities.

Schools must report results for their enrollment as a whole, but also for particular subgroups, including students with IEPs. About 80 percent of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are tested with PARCC or SAT; [fewer than 1 in 10 take the DLM](#) (Illinois' alternative assessment.)

State law requires teachers' evaluation to include student test scores. In CPS, teacher evaluation depends in part on in-house created REACH exams and, in some cases, NWEA MAP or other nationally-administered standardized tests.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) also uses NWEA MAP scores in elementary school to rate schools. And MAP scores are used for promotion in grades 3, 6 and 8. The [official promotion policy](#) says students with IEPs "are expected to meet the same promotion criteria as their same age, same grade, non-disabled peers unless the IEP modifies the promotion criteria in whole or in part." However, CPS officials discourage IEP teams from modifying promotion criteria.

These district and state tests are administered at a student's age-determined grade level, not their ability level. So, a student with a 1st grade reading level enrolled as a 5th grader will be required to take a 5th grade PARCC test or a 2nd-5th grade MAP test. Testing at an inappropriate level can be extremely stressful for a student. When a test is far beyond the student's ability level, it is also a complete waste of time and resources because it provides no useful information for or about a student's learning.

Students with IEPs have accommodations for learning and assessment legally stipulated in their IEP (e.g., additional time to test, use of a human reader or scribe, use of a handheld calculator). Computer-administered tests may provide accommodations via technology that are inadequate compared to their low-tech equivalents (e.g. text-to-speech reading functions; built-in, screen-based calculators). When tested at a grossly inappropriate level, however, neither set of accommodations help.

Still worse, test companies and districts have begun to allow only accommodations the companies provide, denying students some permissible options. In CPS, the software for documenting an IEP provided by the district office for special education, known as the Office of Diverse Learners Supports and Services (ODLSS), now makes it impossible for IEP teams to specify accommodations other than those which the testmaker includes. So for example, students are no longer allowed readers for paper-pencil PARCC tests. In addition, the SAT used as the state-mandated high school level exam severely limits accommodations or the

test-takers' scores are flagged when sent to colleges.

Standardized testing has an even greater impact on special education students than on general education students. Many students with disabilities are more vulnerable to the emotional pressure associated with testing. Accommodations increase testing time, which further cuts into teaching time and can be very exhausting to students. When their teachers are pulled away to administer tests in other classes, as often happens, special education students lose even more instructional time.

Schools with large special education populations are penalized by having their ratings depend heavily on assessments that may be grossly inappropriate for their students. The concentration of special education students in [under-resourced neighborhood high schools](#) results from the policies of charter expansion and student-based budgeting. District-run schools serve [disproportionately more higher need special education students in particular](#). The impact of these policies is compounded when schools are deprived of the resources needed for the services special education students require.

Parents who wish to opt students out of inappropriate testing are stymied by state-level policy. The IL State Board of Education does not acknowledge parental opt out rights and tells districts that students must refuse state-mandated testing themselves. This policy is particularly problematic for those special needs students who have limited or no capability to refuse testing, including, for example, students with intellectual disabilities, students with anxiety, or students who are non-verbal.

WHAT COULD BE

Formal assessment of learning for special education students—as for all students—should be authentic. Ideally, it should not detract from the learning experience and should have inherent meaning and value for the student. It should document student learning over time rather than be a one-shot affair. For the most part, student classroom work, guided by the IEP, can and should be the basis for evaluating individual student progress.

Most of the justification for administering standardized testing to students with disabilities is based on a desire to assess *schools* on whether they are successfully educating students with disabilities. This is an important issue given the history of neglect and exclusion of students with disabilities and the current state of our system where students and families are still struggling to obtain the resources needed to provide SWDs with the free, appropriate public education mandated by law.

The most important goals of the accountability system are to ensure that students who need IEPs receive them, that students with IEPs receive all the services specified in their IEPs, and that a range of evidence gathered over time is used to evaluate whether goals in student IEPs are met at the individual and school levels. Standardized tests should have a limited and subordinate role in meeting any of these three goals. The burden to evaluate and document whether schools and districts are doing right by their special education students *should not* fall on the students. Any negative impact from accountability policy on their educational experience should be mitigated or removed entirely.

To assess students:

- “For learning”: Teachers assess students formally and informally based on actual instruction.
- “Of learning”: Teachers (and others), with the use of an IEP, plan, track and document progress towards a student’s individual goals.

- Any standardized testing should be minimal and should:
 - be administered at the student's developmental and intellectual level, to be determined during development of the IEP, not at age-based grade level;
 - require parent/guardian's consent;
 - not be administered annually; and
 - if intended for school evaluation, then only be administered to a statistical sample of population.

To assess schools:

- District administration and state agencies will audit schools for legal compliance with requirements like Least Restrictive Environment, provision of services included in IEPs, class size.
- Parents will be provided with the resources, both information and support, needed to ensure their child is being provided with a free, appropriate public education.
- States and districts provide a meaningful report, including both qualitative and quantitative information, on district and school *need* for special education resources and *provision* of such resources:
 - How many students are identified as having a disability, broken out by type of disability and by demographic subgroups (race/ethnicity, ELL, gender, poverty status)?
 - What is the frequency of categories of disability?
 - How does rate of SWDs compare to other schools with similar level of poverty, segregation, community health indices (e.g. blood lead level, low birth weight, Adverse Childhood Experiences surveys), etc. as well as schools overall.
 - How much money does a district spend on identifying SWDs?
 - How difficult is it to request an evaluation? How many evaluations take place compared to requests?
 - How many special education-certified teachers, aides, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, nurses, social workers are there relative to the SPED population?
 - What is the policy on Least Restrictive Environment, inclusion and integration in general education classes?
 - What percentage of students are receiving instruction at age-grade level as compared with general education students, disaggregated by type of disability, and compared with similar schools and schools in general.
- Use assessment information gathered over time, primarily from ongoing classwork, as the main source of evidence as to whether students are making sufficient progress toward their IEP goals. The assessment information should include academic and other forms of learning, growth and development evidence.
- The academic outcomes should be compared with outcomes for all students. Audits can be used, in conjunction with classroom evidence and limited standardized testing, to ascertain whether students with IEPs are provided with an appropriately challenging education instead of held to inappropriate low-level expectations.