

**Notes on Implications of National Assessment
for Special Populations**

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Special populations might be defined as including the following students:

- A. those who are classified by states as qualifying for special education services;
- B. those who were born outside of the United States or whose native language is not English;
- C. those who come from an environment where a language other than English is dominant;
- D. those who are American Indian or Alaskan Native and come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on his/her level of English language proficiency;
- E. those who come from an environment where a non-mainstream variety of English (e.g., African-American English, Hawaiian Pidgin English) is dominant.

To this list, one might consider adding a group that combine characteristics of groups A and C, i.e., students who are deaf and are members of the American Sign Language speech community. There is also a growing number of children who present particular challenges to the schools, but who are not currently (in most states) classified as being eligible for special education services, such as crack babies and students with special problems.

There are three major common concerns with national assessment of this otherwise heterogeneous collection of special needs:

- (1) **UNIVERSAL ASSESSMENT.** Unless these students take part universally in the assessment process, they will not be in a position to benefit from the impact of assessment on instruction, accountability, and the allocation of resources. Historically, both special education and LEP students have been excluded from state-level as well as from NAEP; this practice would not be acceptable especially in an assessment system that is openly designed to influence school practice.

- (2) **APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT.** If there is universal assessment, the instruments must be designed to be appropriate for the special needs of the population. The technical obstacles facing this design task is not an acceptable reason for the exclusion of students from assessment. Further, the assessment process should be aligned with the curriculum for the special population, which may or may not be consonant with their mainstream peers.

Following are particular concerns with respect to the different subgroups outlined above.

A. Students classified by states as qualifying for special education services.

- **Varied approaches to accommodation:** Some special education students such as those with hearing, speech/language, visual or physical impairments will need accommodation in the testing environment and in the procedures employed. To some extent, students with learning disabilities fall into this group. The designers of tests have had considerable experience in accommodating these needs. There are other groups, however, who have largely been exempt from the testing programs or whose academic performance has been tested primarily through informal methods. This group includes students who perform academically significantly below age peers, but whose learning difficulties are cognitive or emotional and not sensorially or physically based. Many in this group are students with mental retardation or other conditions which inhibit academic performance. It is essential that this group be included and that investment be made in the development of more appropriate assessment strategies for this group. This is not to suggest that we should have levels of standards with special education students being asked to achieve lower levels. Others perform well, but their performance is not easily measured. There is, however, a significant group who will not achieve at a level acceptable as evidence of achieving national standards if the standards are absolute levels of

achievement.

- **Level of assessment:** Since the passage of PL-94-142 there has been a steady increase in the proportion of special students being placed in regular classes. This presents problems for a national assessment program targeted at specific grades. In contrast to the typical practice, whereby students are placed in grade levels on the presumption of their academic performance and continued progress, special education students are placed in regular classes for a combination of reasons and they seldom perform at the grade level of their placement. Furthermore, they are not taught academically at the level of their placement. The decision to place a special education student in a regular fourth grade class may be due more to social than to academic reasons. It is essential that the special education student be tested and that the testing be at the level of instruction the special education student is receiving. This means that a determination of the instructional level will need to be made in advance of determining which test the student should take.
- **Testing the severely and multiply handicapped student:** The severely and multiply handicapped student is typically taught through separate classes, although some integration is occurring. Functionally, however, wherever this student is taught the curriculum does differ. It is not a matter of merely allowing more time to learn skills. These students should have the benefit of national standards and national testing, but neither the goals to be developed by the subject matter field nor the

anticipated assessment will be appropriate unless a special effort is made to address their needs.

B-C-D. Students who were born outside of the United States or whose native language is not English, who come from an environment where a language other than English is dominant, or who are American Indian or Alaskan Native and come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on his/her level of English language proficiency.

These are students who are all classified by states and districts as Limited-English-Proficient (LEP), although the classification process varies considerably from state to state (ref: CCSSO, Summary of State Practices Concerning the Assessment of and the Data Collection about Limited English Proficiency Students, July, 1991).

- **English proficiency:** The key focus of assessment efforts for LEP students has been on English proficiency, primarily due to the press for accountability of bilingual education programs. However, assessment practices have typically been separated from content and classroom practice, and there is little acknowledgement of the view that language proficiency is multifaceted and task-dependent. More authentic assessment of English proficiency especially as related to classroom practice needs to be developed. Further, because it may take anywhere between 5-7 years for students to develop their full repertory of skills in English, it is advisable to continue their English proficiency

assessments independent of their classification as "LEP" or enrollment in bilingual education programs. This consideration is important because the overall level of English proficiency required to be reclassified from "LEP" to "FEP" (fluent English proficient) is quite low.

- **Implications of language proficiency for higher order skills and alternative assessments:** It is not entirely clear that the movement towards more authentic assessment and emphasis on higher order skills would diminish the testing handicap when LEP students are assessed in English. Indeed, it may well be the case that increased involvement of more cognitively demanding aspects of language would tax the English proficiency of LEP students even more than assessments of lower order skills. Thus, alternative assessments must be developed from the very beginning with the goal of eliminating the language gap.
- **Language of assessment:** Several possibilities exist with respect to content area assessment. One approach would be to assess in English only, with special provisions made to minimize the effect of the student's English proficiency, for example through the use of a bilingual evaluator who provides translation and explanations as needed. Innovations and experimentation in assessment that employs simultaneous use of both languages are needed. Another approach would be to assess in the native language. However, this approach would only be appropriate for students actually receiving instruction in the content area through the native language; because of the predominant emphasis of bilingual education programs on English proficiency development, this

would represent a fraction of LEP students, but for these students, native language assessment should be developed. Alternative assessments that do not take an "either-or" approach to the language of testing, i.e., bilingual testing procedures, might be a viable alternative.

- **Student mobility:** In many parts of the country, especially among LEP students who are recent arrivals (group B), there is extremely high mobility. Thus, from a school, district, or even state perspective, it is very unlikely that today's fourth graders will be the eighth graders of four years hence. Assessment at any aggregated level will thus have to take mobility into account, and adequate background information on mobility must be collected for individual students.
- **Native language proficiency assessment:** Although foreign language is not currently highlighted among the areas to be assessed, this is one area where LEP students can demonstrate a high standard of achievement. However, in the absence of support for the continued maintenance of their native language, many language minority students will not develop full efficacy in their home language. Especially for languages that are commonly taught as a foreign language, it would be highly desirable to develop assessments that could be used for both groups of students, i.e., for assessing the native language proficiency of language minority students, and the foreign language proficiency of English-background students.

- E. Students who come from an environment where a non-standard variety of English (e.g., African-American English, Hawaiian Pidgin English) is dominant.

Although students from speech communities of African-American English or other non-mainstream varieties are not considered LEP, the social aspects of their language deserve similar concerns as those of LEP students. Specifically, language serves as a marker of social group membership as much as it does as a vehicle of instruction. The move towards authentic assessment will mean a strong need to take into account the fact that assessors will be influenced by these linguistic markers of ethnicity that are unrelated to the educational goals in question in evaluating and interpreting performance.

ALL OF THE ABOVE

There will be students who intersect the special concerns noted above, such as a language minority student with physical handicaps. The assessment issues surrounding these special combination of cases need to be highlighted as premier challenges to the assessment system.