



Colorado
Legislative
Council
Staff

ISSUE BRIEF

Number 04 - 05

A Legislative Council Publication

June 23, 2004

SPECIAL EDUCATION: FOCUS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

by Cathy Eslinger

The national reform movement toward standards-based education is shaping a new context for special education. In conjunction with the federal "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" (IDEA), the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" presents new accountability challenges for educators and policymakers across the country. This issue brief, the second in a two-part series on special education, looks at federal accountability standards for special education and discusses Colorado's approach to providing a standards-based education for students with disabilities.

Federal Accountability Requirements

The past decade has ushered in a new era for special education across the country, as states include students with disabilities in their accountability plans and assessment requirements. The diversity of the population of special education students provides one of the many challenges states face in meeting new accountability requirements. Approximately two-thirds of students receiving special education services across the country have either speech impairments or specific learning disabilities. According to *Education Week's* annual education report, "Quality Counts 2004," only about 10 percent of special education students have significant cognitive impairments, such as mental retardation.

Federal law requires state policymakers and local educators to accurately assess the individual needs of special education students through an Individual Education Plan (IEP), while at the same time ensuring that they are included in broader requirements for standards-based education.

Specifically, the most recent reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 requires the participation of students with disabilities in state and local district-wide assessments, with appropriate accommodations if necessary. The law also requires states to offer alternate assessments for students unable to participate in general assessment programs.

"No Child Left Behind Act of 2001"

In addition to guidelines in IDEA, the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" provides wide-ranging accountability standards that apply to special education students. Under this law, states must ensure a 95 percent student participation rate on required math and reading assessments, a participation rate that also must be met by specified subgroups such as students with disabilities. The "No Child Left Behind Act" also sets forth reporting requirements for the "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) of state subgroups. "Adequate yearly progress" provisions require states to set annual progress goals so that all students reach proficiency in math and reading by the 2013-14 school year.

Wide-ranging discussions and feedback on progress requirements in the "No Child Left Behind Act" have shaped recent federal regulations concerning assessment of students with disabilities. New federal regulations promulgated at the end of last year give states additional guidance for reporting the test scores of special education students. The final rules allow states, not the federal government, to define and determine whom to count as "students with the most significant cognitive disabilities," and to assess these students at a standard other than a grade-level standard. A maximum of one percent of students tested at a

standard other than grade level may have their scores counted as "proficient" or "advanced" for purposes of requirements for adequate yearly progress.

Colorado Assessments and Students with Disabilities

Colorado meets federal assessment requirements through the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). The CSAP program provides for the participation of almost all special education students by allowing accommodations to the test administration. According to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the IEP process for each student results in determinations about whether the student requires testing accommodations. Accommodations are meant to give special education students an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, while retaining the integrity of the assessment.

Students who are unable to participate in the general assessments may be assessed on literacy, math, and science skills through the CSAP alternate, or CSAP-A. As a performance-based assessment, the CSAP-A allows students to demonstrate their skills, which are observed by the test administrator. For example, a student participating in the CSAP-A may listen to a story and be asked to respond to reading comprehension questions. According to the CDE, performance indicators for the CSAP-A are intended to measure how independently a student is able to perform each activity.

Reporting of CSAP and CSAP-A Results

Reporting of assessment results for the state's special education students takes place in several ways that reflect Colorado's overall accountability plan. Data from the CSAP and CSAP-A are used and publicly reported through:

- state, school district, and school summary reports for CSAP and CSAP-A results;
- school accountability reports (SARs); and
- state, district, and school AYP reports.

Table 1 indicates how results of the CSAP and CSAP-A are reported.

Table 1: Reporting of State Assessment Results for Special Education Students

Special Education Student Participation	How Reported on State, District, and School Summaries	How Reported on School Accountability Reports
Students taking the CSAP	Included in CSAP performance results	Included in CSAP performance results
Students taking the CSAP-A	Included in CSAP-A performance results	Indicated as percentage
Students who do not take the CSAP or CSAP-A*	Reported in CSAP performance results as "no score"	Reported in CSAP performance results as "no score"

* Students who do not take an assessment because of an absence or specific exemption.

In compliance with federally mandated reporting of AYP, Colorado provides calculations and reporting of both performance results and participation rates for all students, including special education students who take the CSAP or the CSAP-A. For purposes of the "No Child Left Behind Act," the reporting of CSAP results defines proficiency as achievement of a score of "partially proficient," "proficient," or "advanced." The results of the CSAP-A are reported under categories of "inconclusive," "exploring," "emerging," "developing," or "novice," of which "emerging," "developing," or "novice" may be counted as proficiency.

The reporting of participation rates that accompanies performance results shows improvement in participation by students with disabilities. While the CDE's target for these students is 100 percent participation in the CSAP or CSAP-A assessments, in 2002, the participation rate was approximately 95 percent. Last year, participation by students with disabilities in the 2003 math assessments grew to 98.6 percent, while participation in the reading assessments increased to 98.5 percent.