

Alternate Assessment:

Teacher and State Experiences

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Alternate Assessment: Teacher and State Experiences

Abstract

Has alternate assessment helped revamp special education services and practice for students with significant cognitive impairments? The following paper includes true stories from teachers and state level staff who have seen improvements in both the education system and lives of individuals with significant cognitive impairments. While challenges exist with alternate assessment, these stories support emerging research in demonstrating the positive effects it can have on attitudes, practices and student outcomes.

With the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) came a new challenge for educators, administrators, children and parents. For the first time, all school districts were being held accountable for special education practices and for the learning of all students within each state's large scale assessment program. Among the most challenging requirements was the expectation that by July of 2000, students with the most significant disabilities would be assessed with some form of state-wide alternate assessment and that the results would be made available and reported to the public. Subsequently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) strengthened those requirements by demanding that the results of alternate assessments using alternate achievement standards be included in calculations of each school's and district's "Adequate Yearly Progress" (i.e., if a threshold number of students was assessed). Most states had some form of an alternate assessment in operation by the July 2000 deadline. Because of the diversity of characteristics within the eligible student population many states opted for portfolios or "bodies of evidence" (Quenemoen, Thompson & Thurlow, 2003).

The Challenges

Educators have expressed concerns about the increased paperwork and documentation from alternate assessment (Kleinert & Kearns, 2001). Some are concerned that incorporating alternate assessment within the general education system of accountability assumes a uniformity that ignores the unique needs of students who, by definition, need special education and related services. As one teacher stated,

"I was hesitant to accept that any system or program could be flexible enough to address the many learning outcomes these students exhibited on their Individualized Education Plans."

Portfolios and bodies of evidence require extensive amounts of work on the part of the teacher and usually incorporate a specific approach to documenting the teaching-learning process. As one alternate assessment coordinator recognized, "Alternate assessment adds more paperwork and data records for teachers." Some teachers and parents question whether the results obtained are in balance with the amount of time spent (i.e., the time to document, report and score the information takes too much time away from instruction). Additionally, others are concerned that, in the end, the documentation reflects more on the ability of the teacher to produce a good document than on whether a student is receiving a quality education.

Considering all the criticism, the key question is whether there is sufficient benefit from alternate assessment. While hard evidence is still emerging and multiple studies of effects have not been conducted nationwide, we are learning that there can be significant benefits for students, teachers and schools as well as at district, state and national levels, when alternate assessment is implemented well. We have gathered a number of reports from teachers and state level staff regarding some of those benefits. We found that before these respondents seriously tried to implement an alternate assessment as part of their institutional system, few believed that alternate assessment would be worth the effort. After implementing alternate assessment programs, however, all respondents had positive experiences to share.

We begin with stories from teachers about seven students who have benefited from alternate assessment practices. Following the teacher stories, four state stories about system-wide effects are illustrated. We close with some conclusions about the possible impact of alternate assessment.

The reader is free to use this document in its entirety or any part of it in a training, sharing or policy development effort. Some suggested uses:

- Select a few stories to include in a training manual or to share during a training session,
- Share a few stories as examples and ask participants to write their own story using the same format,

Use some of the stories to stimulate discussion about the intended and unintended effects of alternate assessment,

Put the quotes from the teacher stories in a list and use the list in an orientation (e.g., by asking, “Which of these are real quotes from teachers?” and then debriefing about what is possible),

Provide all eleven stories to an alternate assessment development team to read and have them draw their own conclusions about how best to approach the work,

Share the stories with the state large scale assessment technical advisory committee, or

Use a few stories to bolster a request to the state legislature when asking for an increase in funding for alternate assessment.

We make no apology for the fact that these are not randomly selected stories, because our question was not about averages or norms, but about what can be accomplished with the best aspects of alternate assessment with alternate achievement standards. However, we think that these stories are not unique. We believe that there are hundreds of these scenarios emerging across the United States and we encourage readers to look for and share others. Throughout this paper we maintain the anonymity of the systems and individuals involved because our respondents’ descriptions of the “Background” do not always reflect well on the teacher, the school, the district or the state. In contrast, the good news can be found in the “Effects” sections.



Teacher Stories

“He is doing things I didn’t realize he could do!”

Background

Ms. R, a veteran educator, completed her first year with alternate assessment during the 2003-2004 academic year. She teaches in a public school for students with special needs between the ages of 3 to 21. One of her students, whom we will call Allen, was a 12 year old boy who exhibited low cognitive functioning, limited physical movement and limited verbal abilities as a result of his cerebral palsy. Allen communicated with simple sounds that served as “codes” for certain answers. Prior to alternate assessment, Ms. R remembers feeling a little uneasy about the complexity of the alternate assessment portfolio system. She stated that she was worried about the amount of support she would need in order to accomplish the expectations her school and district placed on her. Another area of concern was the time and effort needed to put together quality lessons in order to challenge her students.

Actions

Ms. R used several different techniques to help Allen master objectives and goals and to become successful on the alternate assessment. She and the IEP team had to think more creatively about how to assess goals, but they found ways to help students like Allen master tasks. They arranged for Allen to be fitted with a head switch to communicate and make choices as part of his objectives and used a clock scanner with which his head switch can determine time by the movement of his head. They also began to teach literacy skills such as the number of syllables in a word by having Allen say “uh” to indicate one syllable, say “Uh, uh” for two syllables and so on. Also, in order to determine if objects are heavy or light, Allen would move his head according to the weight of different objects. Using a scanning talker, they taught Allen to make choices and identify points in a story by punching words that had been pre-recorded on the device.

Effect

The results for Allen and even for Ms. R herself were amazing. Ms. R believes that her first year using the alternate assessment portfolio system was great! She enthusiastically discusses the changes that she has made as an educator as well as the advancements she has seen her students make.

Ms. R found that Allen consistently began to give correct answers and really grasped the concepts. Allen has also found success in reading, correctly determining the number of syllables in words by making voice approximations for every syllable, including the number of syllables in words when stories are read to him. Allen found delight with music, attending a music class with his peers and loving the attention he received from them. The children in his class were eager to sit by him and help him with his paper and Ms. R recalls watching Allen one day in music class happily singing with the group. She stated that students like Allen were successfully completing tasks that she did not realize they were capable of doing.

The effects don’t stop with Allen and the students themselves. Now that alternate assessment has been in place for a year, Ms. R says that she now receives significant support from her school principal, and has been allowed extra time to work on goal writing and classroom modifications for activities for her students. Ms. R seemed to feel that this support is one key to the success she has seen in alternate assessment. Teachers in the middle school adjacent to her also support her students. She stated that her school is a great environment for supporting learning of all students.

Finally, Ms. R also believes that alternate assessment has changed the way she runs her classroom. It has allowed her to become a more creative teacher and led her to reorganize her classroom. She now puts together monthly sets of lesson plans, which helped her have a more structured school year. She stated that with the alternate assessment portfolio system, writing report cards and Individualized Education Plans (IEP) is much easier because she now has concrete evidence of acquired skills.

“Now I look at the possibilities instead of the limitations!”

Background

Ms. F runs a district program for children with severe disabilities. She was the lead teacher for a student, whom we will call Dwayne, a 14 year old adolescent with cerebral palsy. Dwayne weighed approximately 45 pounds, had no verbal communication skills, used a wheelchair and needed one-to-one personal care for everything from eating to bathing and toileting. Ms. F stated that when Dwayne first came to her classroom, she thought to herself, “What can he really do?” She was concerned that his limitations would make it very difficult to show change; however, Ms. F was excited about the alternate assessment process. She realized that her state was headed in a direction that seemed like a natural fit to assess Dwayne and her other students. Ms. F acknowledged that many of her colleagues thought that alternate assessment would be a short-lived ideal and that it would disappear like so many other programs. Most teachers were concerned that alternate assessment involved a lot of extra work and would consume more of their limited time without significant benefit.

Actions

Ms. F reported that she met with a physical therapist, a speech therapist and para-educators each week to review Dwayne’s progress and areas for additional work. Alternate assessment was addressed as a team. The team designed Dwayne’s academic program around the extended standards outlined in the alternate assessment system. She reported that they used a computerized communication board to teach Dwayne to communicate simple statements such as, “hello” or “goodbye.” Even though Dwayne is in a self-contained classroom, alternate assessment led the team to provide him with more opportunities to socialize with his general education peers, such as having lunch in the cafeteria. The team took Dwayne to the YMCA four times per week for physical therapy via swimming.

Effect

Ms. F reported that Dwayne became more social than he ever was before. He greeted the employees of the YMCA when he entered. She referred to him as the “jock of the class” stating that he cruised the cafeteria each day after finishing his lunch to socialize with students in his school. She stated that they all said “hi” to him and knew who he was. Ms. F reported that as a result of the focus in alternate assessment, Dwayne became a happier student who communicated with students at his school and even folks in the community. She stated that he had been able to generalize skills learned in the classroom.

At the community level, Ms. F reported that Dwayne’s mother took him to the grocery store with her. Only in the last year or two did Dwayne’s mother notice that people in the community all knew him. Ms. F stated that his mother was happy that people knew who he was and recognized him from places in the community. Before alternate assessment, few people knew Dwayne because of his lack of contact with the community.

Ms. F stated that her relationship with general education teachers was different after alternate assessment started. General education teachers are more interested in her students and the alternate assessment methods. Also, teachers are becoming more aware of the differences in their student performance as a result of the alternate assessment portfolio system. She stated that when her students’ scores began being used along with general education scores, the administrators paid closer attention to her classroom needs in order to help students with special needs acquire the skills outlined on their alternate assessment portfolios. For example, she indicated that she now has access to a greater range of materials that she can use to address specific needs.

Ms. F stated that the emphasis on alternate assessment has helped her become more optimistic. She is much more likely to look at all of the possibilities instead of all of the barriers and limitations. Also, other teachers of students with severe disabilities, who originally thought that alternate assessment might be a passing fad, are beginning to accept its reality, seeing the benefits for the students and for the system and are increasingly making changes to better address their students’ needs.

“All Students are Academic Students!”

Background

Ms. A worked with a nine year old girl who functioned at a twelve month level or below. The girl, whom we will call Gail, had no functional vision, no controlled use of her limbs or body and no speech. However, she could move her head back and forth, cry or laugh and put a pacifier in her mouth. Gail has been a student in Ms. A's class for three years. Before alternate assessment, Gail was not mainstreamed in any general education classrooms and teachers mostly worked on sensory activities. Academics were important, but were taught at the student's ability level instead of being tied to the district standard benchmarks for the student's grade level.

When alternate assessment was first introduced, Ms. A was scared about assessing a child with such profound disabilities. She had experience with the portfolio system, but Gail's lack of vision and lack of verbal communication were more of a challenge. Ms. A was concerned that Gail's limited communication skills would make it harder to access her skill acquisition.

Actions

With the requirement of alternate assessment before her, Ms. A knew she needed to make changes. While she still worked with Gail on sensory activities, she learned to integrate other academic skills. In order to foster greater communication skills, Gail was introduced to Braille. Using the sensory stimulus of sound, Ms. A actively engaged Gail by having her press Braille symbols by tone. Ms. A also increased her range of modifications in order to help Gail and other students learn. She modified materials from the general education curriculum and used them in order to enhance Gail's learning. For instance, Ms. A glued feathers onto a puzzle to help Gail identify the needed puzzle piece. The puzzle piece focused on a particular skill, while feather still provided the sensory stimulus. Gail also was given the opportunity to interact more with her peers. In the 2003-2004 school year she attended reading in a general education classroom each day for ½ hour. The general education students took turns reading to her. Finally, Ms. A involved more specialists in creating lessons and worked to expand their expectations. Once, when a teacher said to Ms. A that a student that the teacher was working with "...was not an academic student," Ms. A retorted, "ALL students are academic students!"

Effect

Ms. A attributes a number of positive changes directly to the advent of alternate assessment. Not only did Gail improve, but she has seen positive changes in herself as an educator and in others throughout the school. Most importantly, Gail blossomed. As a result of alternate assessment, she was more social and happier - interacting more with her peers. After becoming integrated into a regular education classroom, Gail showed preference towards certain students who read to her. She showed her preference by laughing or acting "giddy" towards the students when they read. Her favorite student reader was not a strong reader, but he read enthusiastically and she reacted to the different tones in his voice when he read. The requirements for alternate assessment also provided Gail with the opportunity to be introduced to more challenging academic activities. While at the time of this writing Gail had not yet mastered Braille, she had responded positively to the modifications made by Ms. A and her team (i.e., adding noises to certain symbols, etc.). Therefore, the team now knew that Gail was able to distinguish among the different symbols and had high hopes for additional breakthroughs.

After seeing how Gail grew as a student, Ms. A was more willing to attempt more challenging activities from the general education curriculum with modifications as needed. Ms. A stated that she and Gail worked together to achieve success with alternate assessment and that she feels like a better teacher because of it.

Before alternate assessment, teachers were reluctant about inclusion and now they want to involve students with disabilities in their regular classes, perhaps because they know they will get help from Ms. A. She provides the support that teachers need and she feels comfortable asking teachers to help mainstream students. She said that there is definitely more acceptance with children in special education classes than before alternate assessment. Also, people in the community, including substitute teachers who come into the schools, have given Ms. A positive feedback about having special education students in general education classrooms.

Now, for this school, all students really are academic students. Ms. A has modeled this belief by addressing her students' specific needs while providing enriching academic activities. Ms. A described how her attitude and the attitudes of her colleagues have changed. Instead of limiting exposure of student learning, now they say, "Let's try it!"

“I feared I would have to lower my standards!”

Background

Ms. C taught a young man whom we will call Mark. She described him as eleven years old, tactile defensive, blind and with autistic-like behaviors. Mark could use his hands to twirl objects like bottle caps but would not use a spoon to feed himself. Ms. C worked with Mark for nine years and by the end of a recent school year, he was eating independently by scooping food without any assistance. The school is a center-based program for students who have disabilities. Prior to alternate assessment, Ms. C said that her classroom instruction focused on such functional and self-help skills. Ms. C reflected on her thoughts about alternate assessment in the beginning. She stated that she was concerned that alternate assessment would force her to lower her standards in order to meet the expectations of the alternate assessment.

Actions

During the first year of alternate assessment, learning all the new paperwork and data collection was a challenge for Ms. C. The second year of alternate assessment, she integrated her teaching style with the data collection procedures to work with her students on domains including personal home management, communication and vocational training. When the alternate assessment was shifted to focus on more academic tasks, Ms. C and her fellow teachers were concerned about the challenge of shifting from teaching functional life skills to incorporating literacy, math and writing skills as a primary focus.

Effect

Ms. C stated that she has been able to integrate her teaching style and philosophy with the demands and rigors of alternate assessment. She stated that now she is more cautious when writing goals and objectives for her students. She stated that she strives to challenge her students, but also allows for some flexibility for her students to achieve success and attain goals. In fact, she related that Mark was now meeting goals that she would have otherwise not attempted with him. She attributes this change to alternate assessment. Mark has since moved on to a high school level class, but Ms. C still tracks his improvements. She stated that his new teacher has continued to work on functional life skills while incorporating academic tasks including put together books related to class activities for Mark using a Braille labeler. Also, since Mark liked to twirl bottle tops and milk caps, his new teacher also used puff paint to make letters in Braille on Mark's caps.

Ms. C feels that alternate assessment has made her a more organized teacher. Now, she is able to put together measurable objectives for students as well as collect data on their progress. Since alternate assessment, she has learned to create and maintain data collection systems in a more consistent manner. She has support via teacher's aides who help her carry out goals and collect data on students. Also, high school student interns work in her classroom and serve as additional supports to teachers and teacher's aides. She said that before alternate assessment, she had high expectations, but there was little enforcement on data collection for student progress. Ms. C believes that alternate assessment provides teachers with the procedures and motivation to create measurable goals and collect data in a simple, yet effective manner. Alternate assessment helped Ms. C and her aides consistently use prompts and cues for students like Mark. She stated that state data collection methods are simple enough that even a substitute teacher can easily replicate them with little direction. The procedures remain consistent among all special educators in the state which, in turn, creates a better system of evidence-based skill acquisition.

Ms. C believes that many variables contribute to a good alternate assessment system. Support is a key concept in her school. Her principal recognizes the challenges that teachers face working with the alternate assessment portfolio system and offers special incentives to teachers who work with portfolios. She stated that the teachers and teacher aides in her school also offer support to each other. Alternate assessment has challenged Ms. C as an educator without forcing her to compromise her values and teaching style.

“My attitude was denying her the opportunity to succeed”

Background

Ms. D had her students engaged in the alternate assessment process, but confessed that she did not internalize the process meaningfully. She stated that she believed that alternate assessment was just another directive that dominated her teaching style.

Ms. D worked with a fourth grade student with multiple disabilities including visual, speech, physical and cognitive impairments. This student, whom we will call Janet, was home schooled by her mother up until fourth grade. Her mother decided that she could not continue to educate her daughter in a home school setting and placed her in the public school system. Janet had a really hard time in school the first month or two. Ms. D reported that she cried everyday. Coming to school was a big adjustment for her.

Actions

Since Janet had never been in school, she had not been involved in the alternate assessment system. One of the domains of the alternate assessment portfolio system was self-determination which involved student planning, monitoring and evaluation of their performance. The student records this process. Janet used a sheet with large graphics as a tool to guide her through this process. In Janet’s case, the identified goal was to utilize her notion to accomplish a task. One activity designed to help reach this goal was an assignment to deliver the school newspaper to teachers and classrooms each week with the help of a peer mentor. In order to monitor her progress, Ms. D put together a visual aid for her which was a sheet composed of graphics that were large enough that she could use a bingo stamp to mark areas she succeeded in accomplishing her goal. Ms. D reported that it was Janet’s responsibility to identify areas she needed to work on.

Effect

Ms. D’s attitude change about alternate assessment occurred when Janet came to class one morning. Her peer mentor came into class to help Janet with their weekly routine of passing out the school newspapers. Her peer mentor went to get her progress monitoring and evaluation sheet to go over the areas that Janet needed to work on to reach her goal. Ms. D stated that before she was given any instruction, Janet looked at her peer mentor and stated, “I am working on *looking!*” Ms. D stated that this completely surprised her as she never would have expected Janet to be able to recall her goal without any prompts or even see this as important to her activity.

The alternate assessment process allowed Janet to focus on self-determination. While not a completely academic task, it allowed Janet many other opportunities including working with a peer and being allowed the autonomy to carry out the steps to monitor her progress on self-identified goals.

Ms. D stated, “as a teacher, I thought I was setting high expectations.” After seeing Janet’s success, she changed her opinion of the alternate assessment process. She described it as a changing moment for her as a teacher. Ms. D added that it was her attitude that denied Janet the opportunity to succeed. She stated that mentally, she did not believe in Janet’s ability. If alternate assessment had not demanded as much from her students, Ms. D was sure that she would not have tried to challenge them in the same ways. From her experience with Janet, Ms. D decided that she would be more cognizant of her opinions of people’s abilities. She stated that her job is to find a different way to teach a child in order to achieve goals, not to attribute the learning challenges to the child’s disability.

“I am important enough for them to know what I can do!”

Background

Ms. T worked with a ten year old boy who was in the fifth grade. The boy, whom we will call Alex, was diagnosed as having multiple learning disabilities as well as language delays and impeded speech. Ms. T described him as having low self-esteem and lack of motivation to complete tasks prior to alternate assessment. She stated that he would see other students taking tests around him and seemed to feel a little removed.

Actions

When introducing the alternate assessment accountability process to Alex, she decided to talk to him one to one about the expectations related to this type of testing. Ms. T believed that Alex did not really comprehend the concept of testing, but could relate testing to performance and knew to work hard and do his best. She stated that his reaction was as if he was thinking, “I am important enough for them to know what I can do!” Ms. T was able to create a motivational setting by giving him constant reminders of his test and how each lesson was related to his portfolio. She tried to keep lessons life-based and functional as much as possible.

Effect

In Alex’s case, this philosophy helped him shine! Alex was able to find success on both an academic and personal level. On an academic level, Alex learned opposites by identification of words and he could appropriately identify the opposite in a set of three cards. He also was able to learn how to count money using variations of coins to purchase items from the school store.

Ms. T believes that the overall effects of alternate assessment have been positive for her students. Although the portfolios are time consuming and labor intensive, she stated that it is worth the effort to be able to see the progress of each student. Also, she believes that her students are now more appreciated by the general education community because the annual yearly progress reports include alternate assessment scores with general assessment scores. Ms. T stated, “Just like in the election, their votes count!” and her students are part of the school as a whole.

“Before alternate assessment, we sat in the back of the regular education classroom on the special education rug!”

Background

Justin was taught only functional life skills in his elementary school. When he came to Mr. H’s middle school class, he had no reading skills and few math skills. Mr. H described Justin as an auditory learner who could recall and compose information but the lack of prior instruction created barriers for reading. Mr. H described the school environment as non-supportive. His students were not mainstreamed into general education classes. The principal told him that he did not want to see or hear his students. Before alternate assessment, students would go into the community and do mindless activities. Mr. H recalled being placed in a classroom in the back part of the school. One veteran language arts teacher would invite his class to visit her class, but, as Mr. H stated, “we were included, but it was not inclusion.” He stated that when his class visited, they were seated on a rug in the back of the classroom behind the students.

Actions

One day they were sitting on what he later called “the special education island” and the language arts teacher was reading *The Red Badge of Courage* to her students. Mr. H remembered thinking Justin was not paying attention but when asked, Justin stated that he was listening to the story. Mr. H asked him questions and Justin was able to recall the characters and the plot of the story.

After this interaction, Mr. H decided that his students needed to be more a part of the general education school curriculum and environment. Mr. H adjusted Justin’s alternate assessment portfolio to reflect goals in reading and math. Systematic instruction allowed Justin to read sight words on flash cards with a time delay. They also paired writing with symbols paired with written text.

Mr. H described how Justin’s mother reacted when he was given homework for the first time. She came to school and told Mr. H, “Justin doesn’t do homework!” Justin’s mother saw homework as punishment for him. Mr. H had to describe to Justin’s mother that in order for Justin to succeed in his goals on his alternate assessment portfolio, he needed to do homework to enhance his skills.

Effect

Once Justin’s mother saw alternate assessment in a more meaningful manner, she was more supportive of his needs and by the end of his second year in Mr. H’s class, he was reading at a 1st or 2nd grade level. Over the course of the school year, Justin’s motivation levels grew. He expected homework at least one time per week. He also expected to be mainstreamed so that he could interact more with peers. Mr. H recalled how happy Justin was when he was given a report card just like all the other students. Mr. H stated that in elementary school, Justin’s attendance was considered borderline truant. In middle school, he had perfect attendance one year and rarely missed school the three years he was in his class. Mr. H described Justin’s personality as “blossoming” from social interactions and being included in general education academic classes.

In Justin’s school, Mr. H described how the atmosphere changed when the assistant principal encouraged more inclusion in general education classes. Mr. H gave several presentations to the faculty and staff at his school entitled, *All means All*. Some teachers were reluctant to have children from special needs classes mixed with their students, but he said for the most part, teachers were supportive. Planning time was created between general and special education teachers. Shared planning allowed the students to become a part of the school environment.

Mr. H also mentioned the importance of the alternate assessment scores for school accountability. He stated that seven students had alternate assessment portfolios reviewed in one year and all seven received the highest level scores. His students’ scores put their school into a state level rewards program.

At the community level, students in Mr. H’s class were given community based instruction that was no longer “mindless”. The standards required a more academic/vocational focus. Eventually, his students were afforded opportunities to work in businesses as student job shadows. A local bank established a welcome desk at the front of the building. His students went through a cycle as greeters at the bank. Not only were these students placed in settings which allowed for greater socialization, they were being seen in the community as valuable people.

Overall, Mr. H said alternate assessment has placed value on the child and his or her abilities. Justin found success with alternate assessment. Mr. H suggested that Justin, “got to be a kid,” just like all his other general education peers. He received a report card, he was assigned homework, and he could have friends outside of the special education setting. Motivational changes also occurred at the level of instruction. Mr. H was always an advocate for his students. However, once he was supported by the school administration, he shined as an educator because of the value placed on all students’ learning.



State System Stories

From isolation to integration

Background

For many years, state A's Special Education Division functioned autonomously with little to no communication with other divisions within the state Department of Education. Essentially, special education in state A was isolated from general education curriculum and standards. No state policies or guidelines existed for assessing or reporting student progress. Through the early 1990's, state assessment staff seemed to perceive students with significant cognitive disabilities as the responsibility of the Special Education Division.

In general, special education programs were not as valued as general education programs. Students with significant cognitive disabilities were taught functional life skills, standard academic curriculum was not required. Students in special education were isolated in special schools with little to no contact with general education curricula or peers. Little funding and few tools were provided to special education teachers and staff to help meet student educational needs.

The State Approach

After the passage of IDEA '97, state A reevaluated its approach to special education, recognizing that all students were to be included in statewide assessment programs. Development began in 1997 with full implementation in 2001 and revisions each year. An IEP team annually determines participation in the assessment by reviewing the student's profile, the state's guidelines for inclusion, and the specific participation guidelines for the alternate portfolio. The alternate assessment portfolio includes student work, parent/peer letters, videotapes and teacher data sheets. Content areas required by this state as of 2005 include English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science. The content areas studied vary by grade.

Effect

Our respondents indicate that state A made a philosophical shift in how students with significant cognitive disabilities are viewed within the state Department of Education. The alternate assessment system has evolved significantly over the last decade. The assessment system is constantly transitioning to create a more equal assessment program for students with significant disabilities. With alternate assessment and accountability for all in state A, individuals with significant cognitive disabilities and their families now have a more meaningful educational experience. The state has gone:

FROM:	TO:
No large scale assessment policies for students with significant cognitive disabilities other than exemption;	alternate assessment policies that ensure inclusion;
Limited collaboration between the exceptional children workgroup and assessment workgroup;	increased integration of staff and collaboration between Special Education Division and Assessment Division across numerous topics;
Alternate assessment scores not included in state-wide testing;	accountability for ALL students and schools;
Academic standards not used for students with significant cognitive disabilities;	all students in the state assessed through the same challenging academic content standards;
Professional development for special education teachers, para-professionals, and other staff serving students with significant cognitive disabilities inconsistent and limited in the state;	professional development for special educators more focused on academic standards and more consistent state-wide;
Limited transportation opportunities to the community for students with significant cognitive disabilities;	funding more readily available and increased for transportation into the community;
Many educators believing that students should be taught at a developmentally appropriate level with discrete skill training.	educators understanding the need for age-appropriate activities and teaching skills through activities that have meaning to the student.

From disconnect to communication

Background

For many years, state B unintentionally limited educational opportunities and involvement of students with significant cognitive disabilities within the larger educational system. State staff had little communication or collaboration between divisions and the offices of curriculum and instruction focused their energies only on general education. The state education agency offered few professional development opportunities to local districts specifically focused on special education issues. No consistent curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities existed. IEP's were the only vehicle to show student achievement, but for students with significant cognitive disabilities they mostly focused on a life-skills approach to learning with little attention to academics. Local administrators appeared to focus their energy on general education and tended to ignore teachers in special education.

The State Approach

With the advent of IDEA and NCLB accountability requirements, state B started to make changes. Staff convened a large stakeholder group to define the philosophy and parameters for an alternate assessment approach. They used internal state staff with experience developing and judging portfolios to create an alternate assessment portfolio approach for students with serious cognitive disabilities.

State B's alternate assessment portfolio involves a yearlong process that includes student work measuring ability and progress levels. The original state alternate assessment portfolio focused on functional life skills and in 2003-2004, shifted to a more academic focus. Areas of student performance measured in the current alternate assessment include: (1) Reading, (2) Writing, and (3) Mathematics. A student's IEP team or the section 504 committee determine if the student has a serious cognitive deficit and qualifies to participate in the system.

Effect

Staff in state B who were directly involved in the evolution of the system report positive changes to special education and creation of a system of inclusion and accountability for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The following changes were reported:

FROM:	TO:
Inconsistent curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities;	consistent and challenging curriculum where students do more than thought possible;
No state-wide assessment or accountability system for students with significant cognitive disabilities;	a state-wide system that includes all students;
Little collaboration among state divisions;	Exceptional Children, Testing & Accountability, and (middle and high school) Curriculum collaborating to refine essences to link them to grade level content standards in Math, science, English/Language Arts and Social studies;
Little or no awareness of special education services on the part of general education administration;	increased knowledge of classroom activities of students and teachers in special education;
Insufficient funding/tools needed to support educational needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities;	more academic resources and professional development available for teachers working with those students;
Limited expectations for students with significant cognitive impairments.	higher expectations, with students achieving more than thought possible.

“Now, the light is shining brighter on special education!”

Background

State C had not involved students with significant cognitive disabilities in standards-based reforms accountability systems, although the students did participate in an alternate assessment. Collaboration among state divisions was sporadic. Communication about special education at the state level was limited. Special education assessment policies and procedures did not reflect evidence of academic instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Inclusive settings were limited for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

The State Approach

Long before the passage of NCLB, state C recognized the need for state-wide information on the progress and success of students with significant cognitive disabilities. In the early 1990's, a task force was convened to identify the domains to be assessed and the issues to be addressed. A combination assessment system emerged in a pilot-test mode that included a portfolio, performance tasks and a parent checklist. The original alternate assessment focused on a life-skills curriculum including: (1) personal management, (2) career/vocational, and (3) community, (4) recreation/leisure, and (5) communication and decision making skills.

The current assessment system has shifted to assess reading and math objectives. The alternate assessment portfolio is a collection of student artifacts that demonstrate the student's attainment of the objectives. Student and parent involvement in the portfolio process are encouraged to help with student support and generalization of skills from school to home and the community.

Effect

As one of our respondents indicated, “The light is shining brighter on special education!” Students with significant cognitive disabilities are increasingly attended to as part of the overall system. Among the changes in the system of services:

FROM:

States objectives for alternate assessment based on a life skills curriculum;

Professional development activities for special educators focused on life skills;

Limited collaboration between state level offices regarding special education;

Focus on special education at superintendent meetings tending to be legalistic and negative;

Limited resource allocations.

TO:

state objectives for alternate assessment based on reading and math content standards;

professional development activities for educators focusing on understanding content standards, writing mastery objectives, and teaching reading and math to students;

extensive collaboration between Divisions of Accountability & Assessment and Curriculum & Instruction and Special Education;

state superintendent meeting with local superintendents to discuss alternate assessment;

more resource allocations to purchase instructional materials to support reading and math instruction and for professional development of special educators in these content areas.

“Think differently! Push the limit”

Background

At one time, State D focused more on where students with significant cognitive disabilities were placed than on what they learned. State level special education staffs were isolated from other state units. Stakeholder groups had little diverse representation from parties outside of special education. Students with significant cognitive disabilities were not held to the same standards as students who participated in general education curriculum. Special education leaders did not encourage students with significant cognitive disabilities to focus their curriculum on academics. Frequently, special educators in state D were left out of the discussions on state standards. Training, support and professional development in content areas were very limited.

The State Approach

Developed in response to the Reform Act of 1993, state D’s alternate assessment program was designed to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities were included in statewide assessment. IEP team decisions have led to approximately 1% of students in state D’s public school system participating in the alternate assessment.

State D’s current alternate assessment system consists of an annual portfolio of materials including student work, instructional data, videotapes, and other information which supports student performance in a particular subject. Portfolios are scored with criteria including: (1) completeness of portfolio; (2) level of complexity in relation to the curriculum framework standards; (3) accuracy of student response/performance; (4) student independence in tasks; (5) frequency of self-evaluation; and (6) number of instructional approaches and contexts in which the student demonstrates knowledge and skills. Statewide advisors who developed the alternate assessment portfolio for state D include special educators, content specialists, assessment experts, administrators/principals, higher education faculty, and advocates.

Effect

As one respondent indicated, “there was always a desire to include all students, but no one ever thought to use curriculum as a means to obtain full inclusion.” Now, with inclusive accountability and a restructuring of the academic system in special education, children with significant cognitive impairments are contributing to the education system, and more importantly, they are learning! When the state challenged themselves to think differently and push the limit, they went:

FROM:

Communication gaps among education divisions at the state level;

Stakeholder groups with little diversity;

Minimal state level teaching resources for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities;

Lack of training, support and professional development for special educators;

Focus on student placement, not what they learned;

Special education exempt from content and achievement standards.

TO:

alternate assessment initiative from Instruction and Curriculum division bridged to assessment and special education units;

strong & diverse stakeholder groups with both general educators and special educators represented;

high quality teaching resources;

increased opportunities for professional development & building teacher network (promote leadership, train specialists, assist and advise department);

using curriculum and instruction, focusing on what students with significant cognitive impairments learn;

accountability for ALL students.

Conclusions

These eleven stories make it clear that, given the right conditions, alternate assessment with high standards can lead to positive change in the lives of children with significant cognitive disabilities and those who serve them. While there is no doubt that the alternate assessment process has created challenges for educators and schools, benefits are now starting to be recognized. Consistent with the teacher and system level stories we have reported, Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers and Karvonen (2003) recognize the promises of alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Promises identified for students who participate in the alternate assessment process include: (1) greater consideration in school and state policy decisions; (2) increased expectations; (3) improved access to the same curriculum and assessment on the same standards; and (4) use of alternate assessment outcomes to improve instructional programs at the teacher and classroom level. These promises will help students who participate in the alternate assessment system become a valuable, included part of the school system, not the invisible students from the past. Equally important, their teachers are increasingly seen as key players in the overall system.

Research addressing changes in the alternate assessment process include Thompson and Thurlow's (2003) survey of state emerging issues, trends, and accomplishments related to alternate assessment and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 adds evidence of positive change. Participants included state directors of special education and other state officials who represent special education, standards, assessment, and accountability. Results suggest: (1) states increasingly identifying positive consequences of student participation in standards, assessments and accountability; (2) more states studying achievement trends for students with disabilities; (3) increasing focus on achievement level descriptors for all students, (4) special education directors more directly involved in their state's development of Adequate Yearly Progress Reports required by NCLB; and (5) increased attention to access to assessment through elements of universal design and accessible computer based tests (2003).

As the systems change and adapt, the challenge is to take the lessons of these positive stories and this emerging research and make them the standard throughout the nation. We encourage the reader to seek out and share similar stories in your own schools, districts, and states. Let's continue to learn together what is really possible.

We would like to give a special thanks to those teachers and state level staff who shared their stories without which we would not have been able to write this document. We would also like to acknowledge the guidance provided by the members of the Special Education State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards regarding the content and tone of this final version. Finally, thanks go to Judy Johns of the ASC/MSRRC team for her artful assistance with format.

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This document was developed pursuant to cooperative agreement # H326R040004, CFDA 84.326R between the Alliance for Systems Change/Mid-South Regional Resource Center, Interdisciplinary Human Development Institute, University of Kentucky and the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs and no endorsement by that office should be inferred.

