

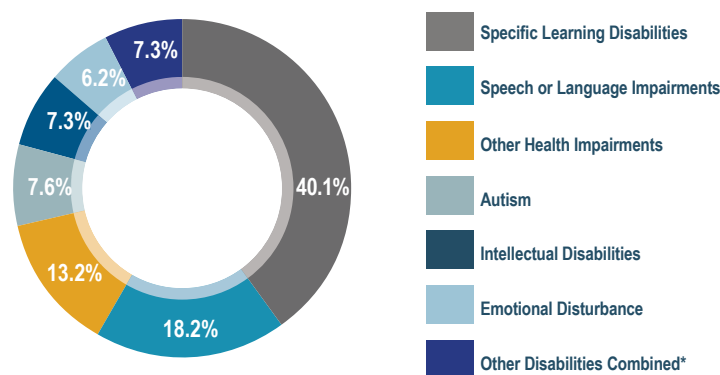
# Considerations for Special Education Assessment Systems

As school district leaders take steps to address concerns about the volume of student testing through an assessment inventory process, they should anticipate that families, teachers, and other important stakeholders will raise particular concerns about the testing associated with special education and related services.<sup>1</sup> Students receiving special education services are a group for whom a special set of assessments may be used. Understanding who students with disabilities are and the assessments that are required for these students is important when addressing questions about the volume of testing. With this foundation, it is possible to address the “too much testing” issue for these students at the same time that the issue is being addressed for students without disabilities.

This paper was developed to provide guidance and recommendations about how to include special education in a comprehensive assessment system and avoid concerns about too much testing for students with disabilities who receive special education services. First, it provides a summary of the foundational information about students with disabilities and the assessment requirements for them. This summary is followed by guidance for including special education in a comprehensive assessment system.

intellectual disabilities, autism, blindness and other visual impairments, and deafness and other hearing impairments, to name just a few of the categories of disabilities (see Figure 1 for the distribution of disability categories in 2012). Some students with disabilities are also English language learners. Only about 10 percent of all students with disabilities have significant cognitive impairments.<sup>2</sup> Students covered by IDEA have an individualized education program (IEP). Not all students with disabilities have IEPs. Some are covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and have 504 plans that identify needed accommodations.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Students Ages 6-21 Served Under IDEA, Part B, by Disability Category, Fall 2012**



\*“Other disabilities combined” includes deaf-blindness (less than 0.03 percent), developmental delay (2.1 percent), hearing impairments (1.2 percent), multiple disabilities (2.2 percent), orthopedic impairments (0.9 percent), traumatic brain injury (0.4 percent), and visual impairments (0.4 percent).

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *36th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014*. Washington DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

## Students with Disabilities Who Receive Special Education Services

The nearly 6 million children and youth with disabilities who receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are a heterogeneous group. They primarily include students with learning disabilities and speech-language disabilities but also include students with

Students with disabilities receive instruction in several types of settings. Most students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and spend most of their time in school in the same classes as their peers without disabilities. More than 60 percent of students with disabilities spend at least 80 percent of their time in a regular school in a general classroom.<sup>3</sup> Most of their instruction is provided by general education teachers. About 20 percent of students with disabilities spend 40–79 percent of their time in a general classroom. Some schools use a co-teaching model in which classes are taught jointly by special and general education teachers.

## Federal and State Requirements for Special Education Testing

Federal requirements that address the testing of special education students focus on both assessments used for special education evaluation and state and district assessments, including those used for accountability.<sup>4,5</sup> For special education evaluation, IDEA addresses procedural safeguards for evaluation. These safeguards include ensuring that students who might be eligible for special education services are found and evaluated for services. IDEA specifies that there must be parental consent before an initial evaluation, before the provision of services, and before a re-evaluation of the student's need for continued services. It defines the time periods within which these must occur.

*IDEA does not identify the specific assessments or even the types of assessments that must be used for determining eligibility for services. Rather, it indicates that a variety of assessment tools and strategies should be used to gather functional, developmental, and academic information that may help in determining whether a child has a disability that requires educational services. Under 34 CFR §300.304(b) (2), no single measure or assessment can be the sole criterion for determining eligibility or for identifying needed*

educational services.<sup>6</sup> This guideline gives districts and schools a great deal of flexibility. They do not need to use any one specific commercial product and in some cases can use assessments that are already administered for other purposes as some of the measures.

### Participation and Accommodations

IDEA requires that students receiving special education services participate in all statewide and districtwide assessments. A few students with the most significant cognitive disabilities take alternate assessments. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) confirms that all students, including those receiving special education services, must be included in assessments used for Title I accountability. On large-scale assessments used for Title I accountability purposes (i.e., state tests), most students with disabilities participate in the general assessment, with or without accommodations. Federal requirements allow up to 1 percent of all students to be counted as proficient using an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS).

## More About Assessments in Special Education

IDEA includes several requirements for the assessment and evaluation of children. These assessments should be considered within the district assessment context when an inventory of student assessments is undertaken.

***Child Find, Referral, and Evaluation.*** Children must be evaluated before they can be determined to be eligible for special education services. A referral from educators or parents is often the first step in requesting that an evaluation be conducted. In addition, states and districts are charged

with locating children who might have disabilities. Child Find activities may also result in referrals for evaluation. These activities typically involve conducting public surveys, distributing brochures, obtaining physician referrals, and contacting day cares and private schools.

Evaluation for special education typically relies on results from standardized assessments and information from other sources. IDEA requires the evaluation to provide relevant academic, functional, and developmental information about the areas in which a child is suspected to have a disability and that any decision about a disability not be based on a single measure. In addition, any assessments used must be valid and reliable, be administered by trained personnel, be conducted in the language or form (including braille or sign language) used by the student, and not discriminate on a racial or cultural basis. Early research indicated that an average of 11 instruments was used in reaching decisions about special education services.<sup>7</sup>

Literally hundreds of possible evaluation methods can be used in determining eligibility for special education services. Targeted areas of assessment include intellectual abilities, academic achievement, sensory acuity, adaptive behavior, language development, psychological development, and perceptual-motor development. The actual procedures and instruments that are used in schools tend to be selected at the district level.

**Response to Intervention (RTI).** Consistent with a Child Find approach, new attention has been given to the process of RTI. IDEA encourages the use of an RTI process to determine whether students respond to interventions. Though embedded in a general education approach to identifying and supporting the needs of all struggling students, the assessments used for RTI often are associated with special education. RTI is typically defined as a process for integrating “assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems.”<sup>8</sup>

RTI generally involves the administration of a screening instrument to all students or to all struggling students, followed by tiers of increasingly targeted and intensive interventions and repeated assessments of each student’s progress when interventions are provided to the student. Data-based decisionmaking is considered essential to the RTI process, including deciding whether to move to the identification of a disability. States generally determine whether the disability identification phase relies heavily on progress-monitoring data collected through RTI or reverts to a more traditional set of evaluation approaches.

Assessment is not “one size fits all.” Over-assessment can occur when all students take all assessments. For example, when assessments are used for RTI, all students in the early grades may take the screener in the fall, but little additional information may be gained by giving additional administrations later in the year to students who are obviously not candidates for additional interventions.

The repeated RTI assessments often are in the form of brief tests of basic skills not necessarily aligned to state standards. Many commercial screeners focus on foundational or precursor skills. This type of testing may provide useful information in the early grades, but the gap between the standards and the skills assessed by these assessments increases as the grades increase — and there is a need for a standards focus. If the focus is on content not being taught, there is a validity issue. All students need foundational skills, but at the upper grades remedial instruction should be embedded into standards-based content. Once students are past the primary grades, other assessments, such as state assessments, may provide similar information about which students need additional interventions.

Some districts use the same assessments that are used for RTI for teacher evaluation purposes. Using them for teacher evaluation if they are not aligned to standards is not appropriate because they do not measure the content that is being taught.

**Triennial Evaluation.** IDEA requires that at least once every three years, an evaluation is conducted to determine students' need for continued special education services. Although progress toward goals specified in a student's IEP is the primary focus of these evaluations, they may also involve the administration of some of the same assessments used to determine eligibility for special education services. In many cases, data from assessments that are routinely administered provide critical information for the triennial evaluation. If it is decided that additional assessment data are needed for a given student, the parent or guardian is informed and asked to give consent to administer the additional assessments. The additional assessments may be the same or similar to the ones that were administered during the original identification process.

**Transition Services Assessments.** With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, states and districts were required to identify for each student at age 16 receiving special education services *measurable* postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, further education, employment, and independent living skills. Further, before eligibility for special education is terminated at graduation or due to reaching the maximum age for special education services, districts must provide a summary of the student's academic achievement and functional performance. This summary is to include recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting measurable postsecondary goals.

Transition assessment can be formal (e.g., standardized tests of basic skills, career interests, and vocational aptitudes) or informal (e.g., checklists, student surveys and questionnaires, summaries of student course-taking performance, and functional skill inventories). The determination of the specific assessments to be used is left up to states. There is little professional consensus on what constitutes "best practice" in conducting age-appropriate transition assessments, although at a minimum they must focus on determining students' strengths, preferences, interests, and needs in relation to future work, further education, and possible living environments.

## Guidance for Including Special Education in a Comprehensive Assessment System

Special education is often viewed as a non-negotiable set of requirements for assessment, and as a result, it is left out of efforts to create a comprehensive assessment system. This perception of special education is not the case. It is important to devote time and effort to addressing special education within efforts to develop comprehensive assessment systems. Five approaches can help ensure that consideration is given to special education assessments when working toward a comprehensive assessment system.

### 1. INCLUDE SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM.

Depending on the district context, districts will carry out the various stages of the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* in different ways.<sup>9</sup> Some districts will conduct initial planning and information collection within the central office and then involve a broader stakeholder team to analyze the information and make recommendations, while others may begin the initial planning with the broader team.

Regardless of the approach taken, it is vital that individuals with expertise in special education and with the assessments that special education students take (e.g., special education directors or coordinators, lead special education teachers, etc.) be included in the process from the very beginning. If no one with special education expertise is included in the initial planning, key information about some aspects of a district's assessment program will likely be missed, which will make it impossible to conduct a thorough analysis of the assessment system.



The individuals on the team who have special education expertise should either individually or collectively be knowledgeable of both the laws and the regulations that apply to special education and the assessments that students with disabilities take. They should also understand how assessments that are administered to all students may be used for RTI and for other identification and evaluation purposes. These individuals can help districts think strategically about which assessments are useful and which may be duplicative. By being at the table, they can ensure that important information is not missed and that their perspectives are heard.

An activity like this was undertaken in District A. The district assembled a broad-based team very early in the process. The team included individuals with a wide range of knowledge and perspectives, representing various stakeholder groups. The district's special education coordinator was part of the team. He had a deep knowledge of special education requirements and the assessments taken by students who receive special education services. Many of the other team members had little awareness of the special education assessments and the role they play in the identification and evaluation of students. Some team members were surprised when the coordinator told them about the many assessments special education students typically take.

By including someone with special education expertise on the planning team right from the beginning, the district was able to begin to comprehend and grapple with some of the thorniest and most complex assessment issues facing the district. Having all perspectives represented helped the district make sound decisions and contributed to a sustained commitment to keeping the standards high with a focus on all students being successful.

## 2. INCLUDE SPECIAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENTS IN THE DISTRICT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY.

When the assessment inventory is conducted, information should also be collected for assessments used for special education purposes. Many different assessments are used to identify students for special education services, and identifying all of the assessments that might potentially be used can seem overwhelming. For this inventory, the focus should be on identifying assessments that are taken by a relatively large number of students who receive special education services in the district. The following questions can be incorporated by districts examining assessments for students with disabilities.

1. What assessments, if any, are used for Child Find by the district?
2. Does the district use an RTI process? If so, what assessments are used? Are the assessments aligned to the state's standards? How do teachers or intervention specialists use the results from them? How does RTI fit into the process used for identifying students who need special education services?
3. What assessments or procedures are used to determine a student's eligibility for special education services? (The assessments may differ depending upon the targeted area: intellectual abilities, academic achievement, sensory acuity, adaptive behavior, language development, psychological development, perceptual-motor development, etc.)
4. Is the information received from any assessments that are administered specifically for special education purposes duplicative of information obtained from assessments administered to all students?

5. What assessments or procedures are used to evaluate a student's need for continued special education services?
6. What assessments or procedures are used to evaluate a student's need for services and supports after leaving high school?

As shown in Table 1 on pages 7 and 8, a supplemental inventory table could be used to compile information on special education assessments. The supplemental table contains the same rows as the inventory table in Achieve's *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*. All relevant data fields in the inventory table should be completed for the special education assessments.

### 3. IDENTIFY ASSESSMENTS USED TO MEET SPECIAL EDUCATION PURPOSES THAT ARE DUPLICATIVE OR ARE SIMILAR TO OTHER ASSESSMENTS USED FOR OTHER DIAGNOSTIC, INSTRUCTIONAL, AND ACCOUNTABILITY PURPOSES.

After the district inventory is completed, the specific assessments that serve the same or similar purposes need to be identified. For this analysis, the perspectives of the students who receive special education services should be taken into account. In other words, think about a student who is representative of many students being considered for special education services and all of the assessments that student would encounter during a typical year.

The assessments that are identified should include those used for special education purposes and those that all students encounter in a year. Identifying these assessments means reorganizing the information that has been gathered about assessments and their purposes. This reorganization should be done for a hypothetical student in several grades, including at

least an early elementary grade, a middle school grade, and a high school grade. This is the minimum number of grades that should be included in the analysis of inventory results.

Some assessments may be used for several purposes, which can result in duplicative assessments. For example, an assessment could be used for RTI as part of the process for identifying students for special education and as a way to monitor the progress of all students. It is important to consider how often these assessments need to be given to students for whom the baseline administration indicates that they are not likely to be candidates for receiving special education services. Also, at higher grade levels, other data, such as information from the state test, may provide information similar to the information provided by assessments administered specifically for RTI purposes.

As previously noted, IDEA requires the use of multiple measures when identifying students for special education services, but it does not require the use of specific assessments. Schools and districts have a great deal of flexibility in determining which assessments they choose to administer. A few states may have lists of suggested or approved RTI assessments districts can select from, but these lists should be used with caution because they can lead to the use of assessments that do not really meet districts' needs or are duplicative assessments that provide little useful information.

Steps to identify duplicative special education assessments were undertaken in District B. District leaders asked the school psychologist to document all assessments that a representative student in grade 4 referred for special education services would be administered. The District leaders were surprised to see that all students took the RTI assessments three times per year. The school psychologist identified 17 assessments administered during the school year for this hypothetical student. These assessments are summarized in Table 2 on page 9.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS  
CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS**Table 1. Example of a Supplemental Special Education Assessment Inventory**

Name of Assessment	Achievement Test A	Intelligence Test B	Written Expression Test C	Behavior Scale D	Progress Monitoring Instrument E
<b>Entity requiring assessment</b> <i>(state education agency or other state agency, district, or school)</i>	District	District	District	District	School
<b>Grade(s) tested</b>	Individual students in grades K–12	Individual students in grades K–12	Individual students in grades K–12	Individual students in grades K–12	Grades K–8
<b>Course(s) or subjects tested</b>	Reading and mathematics	N/A	English language arts/writing	N/A	Mathematics
<b>Which students are eligible or required to take assessment?</b>	Students with an identified learning disability (LD) in reading or mathematics	Students who may have an LD or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Students who may have an LD	Students who may have intellectual/developmental disabilities, autism, ADHD	All students in grades K-8
<b>Type of assessment</b> <i>(summative, interim/benchmark, formative, diagnostic)</i>	Diagnostic	Diagnostic	Diagnostic	Diagnostic	Diagnostic, benchmark, formative
<b>Number of years assessment has been administered in district</b>	5	8	3	5	12
<b>To which content standards is the assessment aligned?</b> <i>(source of alignment verification)</i>	Not aligned	N/A	Not aligned	N/A	Limited alignment to state standards
<b>Intended purpose of the assessment</b>	To measure the basic academic skills of reading, spelling, and mathematics computation	To use as an intelligence test and to assist in the diagnosis of LD and ADHD	To measure basic academic skill	To measure adaptive functioning/behavior	To use as part of a RTI system
<b>Intended use(s) of the assessment</b>	For special education identification and to evaluate student knowledge and skills for the triennial special education evaluation	For special education identification	For special education identification; used to assist in the diagnosis of an LD	For special education identification (autism, intellectual/developmental disorders) and to track progress	For special education identification; used to facilitate instructional/intervention decisionmaking at all tiers (i.e., grouping decisions)
<b>Users of the assessment</b>	School psychologist	School psychologist	School psychologist	Teacher, school psychologist	Teacher, school psychologist
<b>Do users of the assessment use it for its intended use(s)?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes

STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS  
CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS**Table 1. Example of a Supplemental Special Education Assessment Inventory (cont'd)**

Name of Assessment	Achievement Test A	Intelligence Test B	Written Expression Test C	Behavior Scale D	Progress Monitoring Instrument E
<b>To what degree do users of the assessment find it useful or not useful?</b> <i>1-not useful 2-somewhat useful 3-useful 4-very useful Explain why</i>	2 somewhat useful, similar information obtained from state assessment at higher grade levels, not aligned to state standards	3 useful, provides information that is used to diagnose an LD and ADHD	2 somewhat useful, similar information obtained from state assessment at higher grade levels	4 very useful, over the years this assessment has been found to be very useful	2 somewhat useful, useful as a diagnostic assessment at the lower grades levels, not very useful at the higher grades, teachers struggle to use it to make appropriate instructional decisions
<b>Type of administration</b>	Generally administered individually in district; some subtests can be administered to groups	Administered individually	Administered individually	Survey interview, parent/ caregiver and teacher rating forms	Computer administration
<b>Item types</b>	Oral response (also written response for some tests for those 8 and older)	Paper/pencil or digital	Paper/pencil	Oral, paper/pencil rating form	Paper/pencil or digital
<b>Accommodations</b>	Manual includes directions for signed administration and a list of accommodations	Braille and large print versions available	Scribe, read aloud, large print, and other accommodations available	Spanish version available	None listed in administrator manual
<b>Test administration time</b>	15–25 minutes for students 5–7 years old, 35–45 minutes for older students	Approx. 1 hour to complete core subtests	K: 10–15 minutes, grades 1–2: 15–25 minutes, grade 3: 20–30 minutes, grades 4–12: 40–60 minutes	Survey interview: 20–60 minutes, parent/ caregiver rating form: 30–60 minutes, teacher rating form: 20–30 minutes	Approximately 2 minutes
<b>Testing window</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Test frequency</b>	As needed (generally no more than once per year)	Administered 1 time per student	As needed (generally no more than once per year)	Varies	All students: 3 times per year, special education students: weekly
<b>Time between test administration and results to users</b>	Minutes	Minutes	Hours	Hours	Seconds/minutes
<b>Vendor</b>	Vendor A	Vendor B	Vendor C	Vendor D	Vendor E
<b>Contract exp. date</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	6/30/16
<b>Entity that holds contract</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	District
<b>Annual cost (total and per students)</b>	Varies from year to year based on the number of students who take the assessment	Varies from year to year based on the number of students who take the assessment	Varies from year to year based on the number of students who take the assessment	Varies from year to year based on the number of students who take the assessment	\$60,000
<b>Funding source(s)</b>	Special education funds	Special education funds	Special education funds	Special education funds	General education and special education funds





**Table 2. Grade 4 Example (Representative Student): Analysis Form for Assessment Inventory**

Assessment	Purpose	When Administered	Time for Administration	Who Uses the Data	Comments: Aligned to Content Standards? Same Information as Another Assessment?
<b>Formative Assessment — Reading Fluency (WRC)</b>	Progress monitoring	Every week	5 minutes total	Special education teacher	Not aligned to content standards; many teachers look at data only once every 3–4 weeks
<b>Formative Assessment — Reading Comprehension (Pts)</b>	Progress monitoring	Every week	5 minutes total	Special education teacher	Similar to information received with state test; many teachers look at data only once every 3–4 weeks
<b>Formative Assessment — Math Computation (CR)</b>	Progress monitoring	Every week	5 minutes total	Special education teacher	Not aligned to content standards; many teachers look at data only once every 3–4 weeks
<b>Formative Assessment — Mathematics Concepts/Applications (Pts)</b>	Progress monitoring	Every week	5 minutes total	Special education teacher	Similar to information obtained from state test; many teachers look at data only once every 3–4 weeks
<b>Formative Assessment — Writing (WWC)</b>	Progress monitoring	Every week	5 minutes total	Special education teacher	Similar to information obtained from state test; many teachers look at data only once every 3–4 weeks
<b>Intelligence Test</b>	Ability assessment	Once for initial evaluation	60 minutes total	School psychologist	Not aligned to content standards, but school psychologist believes it provides information that helps with determination of disability category
<b>General Achievement Test</b>	Achievement assessment	Once for initial evaluation	45 minutes total	School psychologist	Similar to information obtained from state test; not aligned to content standards
<b>Behavior Assessment</b>	Behavior measure	Once for initial evaluation	30 minutes total	School psychologist	Not aligned to content standards, but addresses area needing focus for this student
<b>Grade 4 RTI Screening Instrument — Reading</b>	Screening for possible intervention	3 times per year	10 minutes total	School psychologist	Not aligned to content standards; given to all students in the grade 4 times per year; similar information obtained from state test
<b>Grade 4 RTI Screening Instrument — Writing</b>	Screening for possible intervention	3 times per year	10 minutes total	School psychologist	Not aligned to content standards; given to all students in the grade 4 times per year; similar information obtained from state test
<b>Grade 4 RTI Screening Instrument — Mathematics</b>	Screening for possible intervention	3 times per year	10 minutes total	School psychologist	Not aligned to content standards; given to all students in the grade 4 times per year; similar information obtained from state test
<b>National Assessment of Educational Progress (random selection)</b>	None — state requirement	1 time, if randomly selected	60 minutes total	N/A	Required
<b>State Test — ELA</b>	Program improvement — state requirement	Spring	90 minutes total	Principal, general education teacher	Required; provides once-a-year information on students; contributes to accountability for school

**Table 2. Grade 4 Example (Representative Student): Analysis Form for Assessment Inventory (cont'd)**

Assessment	Purpose	When Administered	Time for Administration	Who Uses the Data	Comments: Aligned to Content Standards? Same Information as Another Assessment?
<b>State Test — Math</b>	Program improvement — state requirement	Spring	90 minutes total	Principal, general education teacher	Required; provides once-a-year information on students; contributes to accountability for school
<b>State Test — Science</b>	Program improvement — state requirement	Spring	90 minutes total	Principal, general education teacher	Required; provides once-a-year information on students; contributes to accountability for school
<b>State Test — Social Studies</b>	Program improvement — state requirement	Spring	90 minutes total	Principal, general education teacher	Required; provides once-a-year information on students; contributes to accountability for school

When the district team members saw the list of assessments administered to the hypothetical student receiving special education services, they were amazed. They began to discuss the information collected for the purposes of program evaluation and whether those data, which were required to be collected, also provided information that could be used for screening for special education services.

This team decided that for students in grades 4 and above, a reasonable screener for the need for intervention was the state assessment. In grades prior to grade 4, where foundational skills are essential skills, the state assessment did not provide the information needed. Thus, by identifying potentially duplicative assessments, the team reduced the number of assessments administered to a typical student needing special education services from 17 to 14. The team did this by determining that at the student's grade level (grade 4), and with the other progress-monitoring data being collected, the initial screening information on reading and mathematics performance was not needed. A good proxy for this information was provided by the state assessments in reading, mathematics, and writing.

#### 4. ENSURE THAT ASSESSMENTS TAKEN BY STUDENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PURPOSES IN A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM ARE OF HIGH QUALITY AND CONSIDERED USEFUL BY THOSE WHO IMPLEMENT THEM AND USE THE RESULTS TO TAKE ACTION.

High-quality assessments are reliable measures that are valid for the intended interpretations. But they are more than that. They also must be appropriate for the purposes for which they are being used. This is particularly important for assessments used for special education purposes.

Students with disabilities, like other students, are instructed in grade-level content. In general, assessments should be aligned to college- and career-ready (CCR) content standards. Some commonly used screening tools for special education may not be aligned to content standards, including assessments often used for RTI purposes, because they focus on basic foundational skills. At higher grades, the gap between foundational skills and CCR standards is especially large. All assessments that special education students take

should be evaluated in relation to their alignment with state standards. If there is a mismatch, there needs to be a rationale for why an assessment is appropriate to use.

Questions to consider for assessments that are taken by students for special education purposes include:

- Which assessments are most useful in the identification and evaluation of students who receive special education services? Are there assessments that are not particularly helpful (e.g., teachers/administrators do not use the data from the assessment, the data provided are not instructionally useful, the assessment is not a valid measure of what is being taught, etc.)?
- Which assessments are of high quality and aligned to state CCR standards? Is there any reason to use an assessment not aligned to standards? There needs to be a strong rationale for the use of any assessments that are not aligned to state standards, since in most cases using assessments that are not aligned to standards for important decisions is inappropriate.
- Are there any assessments that users do not find useful? If so, why?
- Are there any assessments that provide redundant information? Is similar information received from multiple assessments? It is easier to add assessments than eliminate them. Districts sometimes find it difficult to discontinue an assessment that has been used for years, even if it has outlived its usefulness.

As shown in Table 2, District B used several assessments for progress monitoring and RTI screening that were not aligned to state standards. The district also noticed that every student was participating in universal screening even

though data from the previous year strongly suggested that many of these students were not candidates for special education.

The district decided to use state test results for RTI purposes in grades 4 and above. The district also decided that at grade 3, students who scored above a set level in the fall screening would not be included for winter or spring administrations of the RTI screener. Additionally, District B decided to reduce progress-monitoring administrations for students with disabilities to once every three weeks.

#### 5. ASSESSMENT LITERACY EFFORTS SHOULD INCLUDE BOTH GENERAL EDUCATORS AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SHOULD INCLUDE INFORMATION ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THE ASSESSMENTS THEY TAKE.

Many educators have little understanding of how to use assessments to support instruction, and there is a need for professional development on assessment literacy. Both general and special educators would benefit from learning more about how to design, construct, and evaluate assessments that measure students' learning of the intended targets.

Assessment literacy professional development for all teachers, including both general and special education teachers, should include information about special education students and the assessments they take. It should also include information on how to make decisions about accessibility features and accommodations. All teachers should be able to confidently make decisions and implement them for instruction and assessment. Assessment literacy should also be a part of preservice teacher training programs.

## 6. ENSURE THAT PARENTS ARE INFORMED OF THE INTENT AND PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENTS IN EDUCATIONAL AND POST-SCHOOL PLANNING.

Although knowing the intent and purposes of the assessments that are being administered to students is critical for school personnel, it is also important for parents to be aware of the assessments being administered to their children and the purposes of those assessments. This awareness is especially important for parents of children receiving special education services because of the consequences that accompany some of these assessments, including the decision to label a child as a student with a disability and the possible decision to exit a student from services. Assessment participation decisions may also affect whether a student will be able to graduate with a standard diploma.

When parents are informed of the types of assessments, both formal and informal, that are being conducted, they can also make valuable contributions by providing information about their child. Parents bring a wealth of information into discussions about their child's educational and post-school plans. Such information should be viewed as part of the assessment process. For example, parents can provide information about their child's interests and preferences, behaviors at home and in the community, and functional skills used in daily living activities. Their observations and experiences with their child should complement other forms of assessment information and be integrated and used within the IEP planning process.

There are excellent resources for parents and guardians of students with disabilities. These resources address the general processes that involve special education

assessments, as well as those that address the importance of CCR assessments for students with disabilities.<sup>10, 11</sup>

## Conclusion

There are concerns about too much testing for all students, including students with disabilities. Conducting an assessment inventory is an excellent way for districts to take stock of their assessments. Including the assessments that students who receive special education services take and looking at the system from the perspective of a student with disabilities is important. Most students with disabilities take the same assessments as other students (as well as some additional ones for special education identification and evaluation purposes), so there is a need to be mindful of the overall number of assessments taken.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Special education services are broadly construed as special education and related services. Related services include speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and rehabilitation counseling, for example. Throughout this paper, the term “special education services” means special education and related services.

<sup>2</sup>Thurlow, M.L., Thompson, S.J., & Lazarus, S.S. “Considerations for the Administration of Tests to Special Needs Students: Accommodations, Modifications, and More.” In Downing, S.M., & Haladyna, T.M. (Eds.) *Handbook of Test Development* (2006): 653–673. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, Inc.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Education. “Fast Facts: Inclusion of Students with Disabilities.” *Digest of Education Statistics, 2013* (2015). Washington DC: National Center on Education Statistics.

<sup>4</sup>The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was first enacted in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, provides funds to states to provide services to children with disabilities. It includes specific requirements to ensure the appropriate identification of these children and the provision of a “free and appropriate public education,” known as FAPE. States may add to the requirements reflected in IDEA and the regulations associated with it, but they may not eliminate any of the protections provided by the federal law.

<sup>5</sup>Both IDEA and the ESEA require participation in state assessments. IDEA also addresses districtwide assessments.

<sup>6</sup>The information in this paragraph is from U.S. Department of Education. (2011). *Q and A: Questions and Answers on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Evaluations and Reevaluations*. Available at: <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CQaCorner%2C3%2C>

<sup>7</sup>Thurlow, M.L., & Ysseldyke, J.E. “Current Assessment and Decision-Making Practices in Model LD Programs.” *Learning Disability Quarterly* 2 (1979): 15–24.

<sup>8</sup>National Center on Response to Intervention. (2010). *Essential Components of RTI — A Closer Look at Response to Intervention*.

<sup>9</sup>Achieve (2014). *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*. Available at: [www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory](http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory).

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, the Parent Resource Information Hub at [www.parentcenterhub.org/](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/), the National Center for Learning Disabilities at [www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org), and the Council for Disability Rights at [www.disabilityrights.org](http://www.disabilityrights.org). For relevant laws, see WrightsLaw at [www.wrightslaw.com/info/child.find.index.htm](http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/child.find.index.htm).

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, the following websites: [www.achieve.org/files/CSS-SWDs-Resources-Mar2013.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/CSS-SWDs-Resources-Mar2013.pdf) and [www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/commoncore/](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/commoncore/).