

National Center on Educational Outcomes

Special Topic Area: Participation of Students with Disabilities

Introduction

State and district assessments are used to provide information on the educational progress of students. Today these assessments are a key part of standards-based reform, and are used to measure the extent to which students are meeting standards. Beginning in the early to mid 1990s, it became evident that not all students were being included in these assessments, resulting not only in an inaccurate picture of education but also in several unintended consequences (such as referrals to special education). Furthermore, data from the assessments were difficult to interpret when different percentages of students participated (e.g., one place included 45% of its students and another included 60%).

Participation in large-scale assessments is now recognized by many educators and parents as a critical element of equal opportunity and access to education. This is true for students with disabilities. Low expectations and lack of information on which to make programmatic decisions plague the programs of students with disabilities who do not participate in state and district assessments. Assessments help to measure:

- How successful schools are in including all students in standards-based reforms.
- How successful instructional strategies are in helping all students achieve at very high levels.
- What specific curriculum and instructional areas need improvement for specific groups of students.

Participation in a state or district assessment system does not mean that all students take the same test. There are several ways in which students can participate in assessments. In the past, we often divided these into three categories: (1) assessments taken in the same way as other students take them, (2) assessments taken with accommodations, and (3) alternate assessments. More recently we tend to think about whether assessments are general assessments or alternate assessments, and the nature of the achievement proficiency standards to which students are held (e.g., grade level, alternate, or perhaps modified). With this kind of approach, the question becomes not whether students will participate in assessments, but rather – how they will participate.

Participation rates often are difficult to calculate, and sometimes require that states and districts revise their data management systems. These revisions have been worthwhile, and have pushed forward our knowledge about the participation of students in assessments.

NCEO is supported primarily through a Cooperative Agreement (#H326G050007) with the Research to Practice Division, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Additional support for targeted projects, including those on LEP students, is provided by other federal and state agencies.

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