What Every Special Educator Should Know About High-Stakes Testing

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The amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) stated that all students must be included in state and districtwide assessments. While this mandate does reflect the push for equal access and high standards for everyone, it also requires that all schools and all students face the consequences of such testing. Currently, 25 states require students to pass an exam to receive a high school diploma, and 7 require that students pass a test to be promoted to a certain grade (National Education Association, 2001; see Figure 1).

In an era in which such “high-stakes” exams are becoming increasingly common, what can we as special educators do to inform ourselves and help students face these issues? What should we know about accommodations, test preparation, test administration, outcomes, and legal and ethical concerns surrounding high-stakes exams?

What Accommodations Are Available?

An accommodation is any change to the standard test format to assess an individual’s abilities, rather than his or her disabilities. Although allowable accommodations vary, they general fall in one of four categories:

- Presentation (e.g., directions/questions read aloud, large print).
- Response (e.g., use of a scribe).
- Setting (small group or individual testing, study carrel).
- Timing/Scheduling (extended time, additional breaks; Accommodations, 2002).

Fuchs and Fuchs (1999) cautioned that “the purpose of identifying appropriate accommodations is to achieve valid, not optimal, scores” (p. 24). The chosen accommodations should be those that would give a larger boost to a student with a disability than one without (e.g., reading math word problems aloud to a student), while simultaneously upholding the purpose of the test itself (e.g., not reading the portion of the exam aloud that tests reading skills; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1999; Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 1998). To this end, Fuchs and Fuchs designed an instrument, The Dynamic Assessment of Testing Accommodations (DATA), which helps teachers determine which students will benefit from which accommodations.

Because the purpose of accommodations is to “level the playing field” for students with disabilities, a student's...
exam accommodations should be linked directly to those accommodations listed on the individualized education program (IEP) that he or she receives in the classroom (Pitoniak & Royer, 2001; Thurlow et al., 1998). The IEP team should focus on the student’s strengths, weaknesses, and individual learning characteristics, and refrain from basing their decision on the student’s disability level or current placement. Team members should consider only those accommodations that the student uses during classroom instruction and testing, as opposed to introducing new accommodations specifically for use on the state test (Thurlow et al.). It is extremely important to document on the IEP the team’s decision regarding accommodations, as well as the justification for that decision.

**How Can We Include Test Preparation in the Curriculum?**

One way to prepare students for high-stakes testing is to infuse explicit teaching of test-taking procedures and tips into the curriculum. Thurlow et al. (1998) broke down test preparation into three categories:

- Test approach skills (e.g., proper sleep and nutrition).
- Test-taking skills (e.g., knowing the meaning of frequently occurring directions, knowing when to eliminate certain answers).
- Test preparedness (knowing type and content of questions, understanding scoring procedures).

Collaboration with both special and general education colleagues is essential, because all students who participate in high-stakes testing are expected to have access to the general education curriculum. Teachers’ varied expertise is extremely important when working through the process of curriculum alignment, which involves “translating” state standards into clear and user-friendly instructional goals (Barton, 1999; McColskey & McMunn, 2000). Teaming also can be used to build or revise curriculum units. The special education teacher can serve as a resource to help tailor curricula to the needs of the individual and to infuse curricula with explicit strategy instruction (McColskey & McMunn, 2000).

Other recommendations for teachers include incorporating in-depth end-of-unit assessments that encourage students to use essential higher-order thinking skills. These projects might include the following:

- Developing a portfolio.
- Demonstrating an experiment.
- Researching a topic of interest.

**How Can We Prepare for Test Administration?**

As more students with disabilities are included in high-stakes exams, special educators increasingly are required to administer such tests. Formats, accommodations, and accountability procedures vary by state, and even by district and school, because of different interpretations of policies. Therefore, special educators must seek out training opportunities in test administration, because they may be required to administer a standardized test in a nonstandard environment. In addition, the test administrator should document which accommodations each student is to receive; how these are to be implemented; which accommodations the student used during the testing; and how any, occurred.

**What Are the Expected Outcomes? What Alternatives Exist?**

Special educators should inquire about exam alternatives, because many states now provide alternate assessments for those students unable to participate in
Researchers estimate that alternative assessments are appropriate for about 20% of the special education population. Especially among students with disabilities. They recommend that the IEP team weigh and consider program options, maintaining a focus on the student’s needs. It may be extremely difficult to choose a vocational co-op program over test preparation or remediation programs, or vice versa; but the team should consider all the possibilities, especially in light of the student’s own vision for his or her future.

Final Thoughts
As special educators, we can take charge of what may seem like a no-win situation with high-stakes testing. We can take an open and honest approach to preparing students, while working to maintain high academic expectations and increase student motivation.

We need to involve the student and the IEP team in making informed decisions about the student’s future. We can become knowledgeable about high-stakes testing—choices, content, skills, process, remediation, outcomes—while simultaneously being an advocate for students.

Finally, we need to become involved in the ongoing debate surrounding testing and students with disabilities. High-stakes testing is becoming a nationwide phenomenon (see Figure 1), and special educators must meet the challenges it presents to ensure students the brightest possible future.

References

the standard assessment. Researchers estimate that this type of assessment is appropriate for about 20% of the special education population, such as students with moderate to severe intellectual impairments (Alternate Assessments, 2002). When considering whether to recommend a student for alternative assessment, however, we need to remember that choosing alternative assessment very rarely leads to a standard diploma.

In addition, we need to investigate the actual consequences of high-stakes exams and present them to students in an honest manner. Here are some essential questions to explore:
• What are students’ options for remediation?
• What are the requirements and options for retaking the exam?
• What are the appeals or waiver processes, and what was the outcome of past appeals?
• What kind of diploma or certificate will students receive based on their test performance?
• What do potential employers and colleges think about hiring or admitting an applicant with a nonstandard diploma or certificate?

Teachers often find themselves in the difficult position of discussing negative consequences of high-stakes exams while simultaneously attempting to bolster student motivation. Roderick and Engel (2001), however, discuss ways to make this process positive. They recommend setting goals that “provide an opportunity for feedback, a tangible reward, and a way to construct meaning regarding learning” (p. 219). These practices allow students to see their progress toward meeting the established standards.

What Legal and Ethical Concerns Accompany High-Stakes Testing?
We need to be aware of the ethical and legal issues involved in high-stakes testing. These issues include
• Use and abuse of accommodations and waivers.
• The balancing of academic with vocational or functional skills training.
• Questionable test validity.
• Possible test bias.

In addition, we must decide whether or how much to “teach to the test.” Currently, many of these legal and ethical issues are being raised in the courts and in public forums (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Pithonak & Royer, 2001).

High-stakes testing also requires the confrontation of vital issues regarding students’ futures. Thurlow and Johnson (2000) warned that more stringent graduation requirements such as high-stakes exams may lead to higher dropout rates,

Infuse explicit teaching of test-taking procedures and tips into the curriculum.
San Luis Obispo County Office of Education

The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education operates Alternative and Special Education programs. The special education programs are designed to serve children throughout the county with moderate to severe disabilities. The 10 districts and County Office of Education comprise the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). We have the following openings:

**Teacher, Serious Emotional Disturbance Classroom.** Elementary, middle and high school levels. Requires valid California teaching credential authorizing services to the Emotionally Disturbed.

**Teacher, Severely Handicapped.** Preschool and elementary school levels. Requires valid California teaching credential authorizing services to the Severely Handicapped.

**Autism.** Classified and certificated positions open in Autism programs.

All positions are full-time for the 2003/2004 school year. Salary: appropriate placement on the salary schedule depending upon experience and education, plus excellent benefits. For job postings and online applications, log on to [www.edjoin.org](http://www.edjoin.org) or visit our website at [www.slocoe.org](http://www.slocoe.org).

**Statistics:**
- Total K-12 school enrollment for San Luis Obispo County 37,600
- Special education enrollment 4,158
- Population of San Luis Obispo County 246,700
- Located on the California Central Coast, north of Santa Barbara
- San Luis Obispo is the home of California Polytechnic State University.

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