

**Written Testimony of Martha L. Thurlow, Ph.D.
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Before the
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP)
United States Senate**

**Hearing on
ESEA Reauthorization: Standards and Assessments**

April 28, 2010

Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi, and Other Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am the Director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), a research and technical assistance organization with funding from the Office of Special Education Programs and the Institute of Education Sciences. NCEO provides assistance to states and districts on the inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district assessments, and on important related topics such as standards-based reform, accommodations, alternate assessments, graduation requirements, universally designed assessments and accessible testing. Because of our focused organizational mission, we work closely with states as they implement standards and assessments for all of their students. We know of the challenges that states and districts face as they work to implement the goals of standards-based reforms. NCEO supports its technical assistance with policy research on current policies and practices in these and other areas. NCEO also conducts other research to move the field forward in its thinking in areas such as how to develop universally-designed assessments that are accessible for students with disabilities without changing the content or level of challenge of the test, and how to most appropriately assess students with disabilities who are also English language learners. We work with other organizations on the critical issues of access to the general curriculum, instruction, and other factors that must be addressed for assessments to show the improved learning that students with disabilities are capable of demonstrating.

I have been a member of the special education professional community since the early 1970s, and have personally viewed the tremendous changes in our country's approach to educating students with disabilities. I have also viewed the stumbles we have made along the way as we determine how to ensure that students with disabilities progress through school and emerge ready for college or a career.

I have been asked to comment on how standards and assessments can be improved to raise outcomes for students with disabilities. I have also been asked to share my thoughts about the special challenges that we face in developing assessments that provide meaningful information about all students. As I address these topics, I want to also make two important points that are critical to understanding the challenges and the promise of standards and assessments for students with disabilities.

Improving Standards and Assessments

To address ways to improve standards and assessments so that they are best for all students, including students with disabilities, it is important to clarify first who students with disabilities are,

and also to realize that (1) students with disabilities have benefited tremendously from our country’s focus on standards and assessments, and (2) standards and assessments, by themselves, do not guarantee that student performance will increase, or even that access to the general curriculum and instruction will occur.

Who students with disabilities are. Students with disabilities are not to be pitied or protected from the same high expectations we have for other students. They should not be excluded from the assessments that tell us how we are doing in making sure that they meet those expectations.

Students with disabilities who receive special education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act currently make up 13% of public school enrollment, with percentages in states varying from 10% to 19% of the state public school enrollment (see Table 1). They are disproportionately poor, minority, and English Language Learners.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of IDEA Part B Children in Highest and Lowest Percentage States

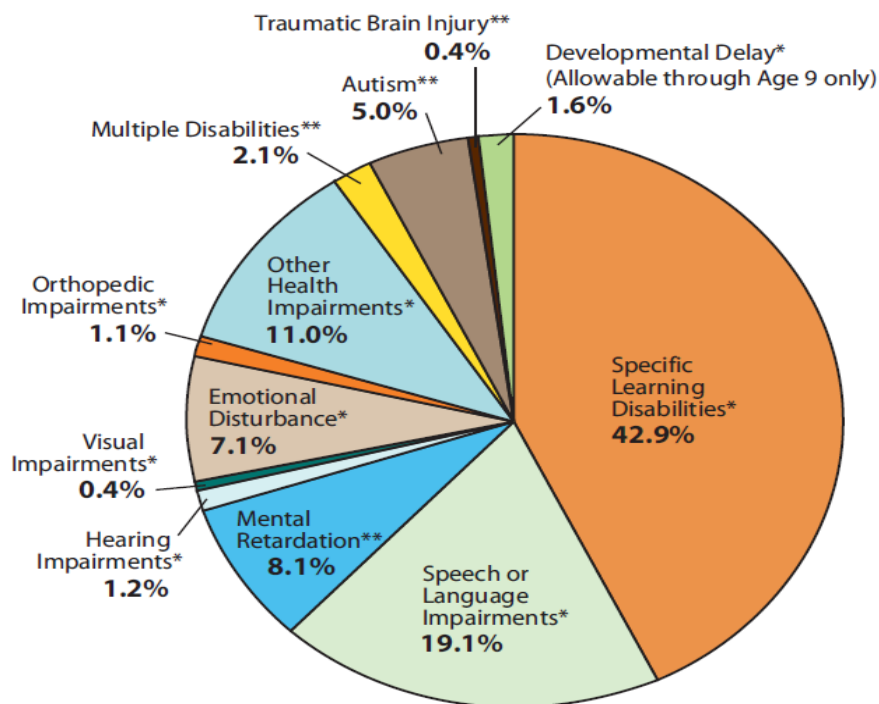
	Number of Children Served Under IDEA, Part B	Percentage of Public School Enrollment
Highest Percentage States		
Rhode Island	20,646	19.7
New Jersey	178,870	18.1
Maine	27,987	17.5
Massachusetts	149,743	17.3
Indiana	112,949	17.1
Lowest Percentage States		
Utah	46,606	10.9
California	468,420	10.6
Colorado	56,336	10.4
Idaho	21,703	10.3
Texas	344,529	10.1
United States Total	6,605,695	13.4

Source: Table 52 of 2009 *Digest of Ed Statistics*.

The vast majority— about 80-85% based on the latest distribution of disability categories – are students without intellectual impairments (see Figure 1). Rather, they are students who with specially designed instruction, appropriate access, supports, and accommodations, as required by IDEA, can meet the same achievement standards as other students. We must ensure that these students progress through school successfully to be ready for college or career. In addition, we have learned that even students with intellectual impairments can do more than we previously believed possible.

Figure 1. Distribution of Disability Categories in 2008-2009

Students Receiving Special Education Services by Disability Category



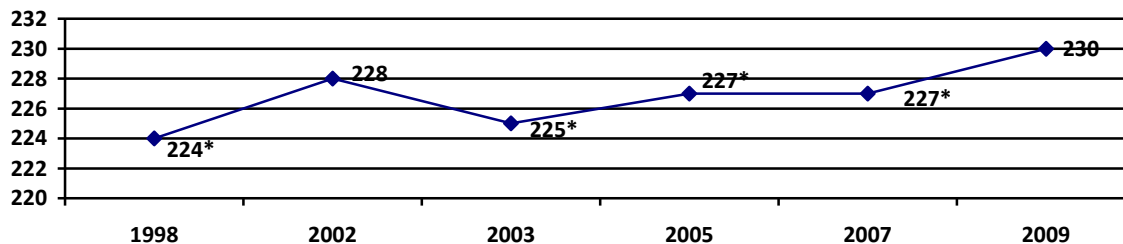
Source: www.IDEAdata.org
Part B Child Count (2008), Students ages 6-21, 50 states, DC, PR, BIE schools.

In many cases, students have surprised their teachers and parents – and themselves - by mastering content that, before standards-based reform, was never taught to them.

Benefits of standards and assessments for students with disabilities. There is no question that students with disabilities have benefited in many ways from our country's focus on standards and assessments. After decades of being excluded from state and district assessment systems, their participation in state assessments has increased from 10% or fewer of most states' students with disabilities participating in the early 1990s, to an average of 99% at the elementary level, 98% at the middle school level, and 95% at the high school level in 2007-2008 (Altman, Thurlow, & Vang, 2010). These increases are due in large part to participation requirements in ESEA and IDEA.

We also are seeing evidence of improvements in the academic performance of students with disabilities. Some of this evidence comes from trends in the performance of students with disabilities on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (see Figure 2 for 2009 grade 8 reading results).

Figure 2. NAEP Grade 8 Average Scale Scores of Students with Disabilities



* = significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2009

Although there are large gaps in performance between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities, we have built better understanding about students with disabilities, their opportunities to learn, and what can be expected of them. We have also learned much about what needs to change in their instruction, access to the curriculum, and in assessments in order to first see their achievement increase dramatically, and then to capture that achievement on sensitive assessments.

Standards and assessments do not guarantee improved results or increased access and instruction. Standards and assessment are part of a theory of action that has been driving educational reform in the U.S. for the past decade or more. It assumes that assessments and accountability promote interventions and improvements in the quality of instruction, which in turn will produce higher performance, which is then rewarded through the accountability system.

This theory of action has been slow to work for several reasons. First and most basic is that current instructional practices, especially for students with disabilities, are not uniformly effective in ensuring success for the students most in need. That is especially true for students with disabilities. Standards and assessments can be improved, but that is no guarantee that the outcomes of students with disabilities will be improved. To raise the outcomes of students with disabilities, we as a nation will need to step up for real change. We must hold our public schools accountable for the learning of students with disabilities, and expect that they commit to practices that we know work. And, given the substantial investment the federal government makes annually in support of special education, there need to be better results. We know it is possible because we are seeing success for all students in places with a strong commitment to the learning of all children – all including all students with disabilities. Studies of some of these places have identified what it takes to realize this success:

In 2004, the Donahue Institute identified 11 practices that existed in such schools, including such factors as: (a) a pervasive emphasis on curriculum alignment with the state standards, (b) effective systems to support curriculum alignment, (c) emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum, (d) culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement, (e) well disciplined academic and social environment, (f) use of assessment data to inform decision making, (g) unified practice supported by targeted professional

development, (h) access to resources to support key initiatives, (i) effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment, (j) flexible leaders and staff that work effectively in a dynamic environment, and (k) effective leadership that is essential to success.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2008) examined successful schools and districts across the nation, identifying two schools and three school districts where the success of students with disabilities was improved. Though different in location and student demographics, these schools and districts all (a) included students with disabilities in general education classrooms, (b) used data to adjust instruction to each student's needs, (c) changed the ways that general education and special education teachers work together, and (d) restructured administrative organizations and procedures.

In a recent study of several Ohio school districts where assessment scores showed strong increases over four years, Silverman, Hazelwood, and Cronin (2009) found that successful districts shared seven key characteristics: (a) focus on teaching and learning as driver of all decisions, (b) intentional culture shift away from a separate special education model to shared responsibility for all students, eliminating a culture of isolation, (c) collaboration through structures and processes to talk about data and inform instruction, (d) leadership that starts at the district level and uses data to address issues, with monitoring of instructional practice, but shared leadership with principals, building staff, and teacher leaders, (e) instructional practice that ensures access to general curriculum/grade-level content using research-based practices, (f) assessment that includes use of common formative assessments, and (g) curriculum that is aligned, with use of power standards, pacing guides, curriculum calendars, and a relationship to formative assessment.

These three studies, which have looked specifically at what works for students with disabilities, all recognize the importance of standards and assessments. But, they are also about so much more – about the student's access to the curriculum, about a system-wide commitment to all students, and about leadership, collaboration, and shared beliefs among the educators who work with all students, including students with disabilities. Although we can improve standards and assessments, doing so is not a guarantee of raised outcomes for students with disabilities.

Ways to continue to improve standards and assessments. Content standards are the foundation for improved outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities. These standards should identify what students should know and be able to do. Assessments are the means to determine where students are in their knowledge and skills in relation to the standards. A focus on improving standards and assessments should begin by addressing accessibility and universal design. By **accessibility**, I mean being easy to approach or enter, regardless of barriers that a student might have. Thus, accessible standards are ones that do not have inherent barriers to their attainment, such as a standard that requires a student who is deaf to listen. When I use the term **universal design**, I refer to a set of principles and procedures that ensure that assessments are appropriate for the widest range of students; universal design techniques can be applied from the beginning of test development to the point when students engage in assessments. The goal of universally designed assessments is to provide more valid inferences about the achievement levels of all students, including students with disabilities.

Improving Standards. Our nation has recognized the challenges of each state having its own content and achievement standards for students. Those challenges apply to students with

disabilities just as they do to students without disabilities. The potential benefits of common core standards for students with disabilities are great. With clear, well-defined content standards, it is possible to better identify appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, both for instruction and for assessments. And, if we think about all students from the beginning of the development of the common core standards, we can ensure that we do not inadvertently state our standards in a way that makes it impossible to accurately measure their knowledge and skills without instead reflecting their disability. By attending to these concerns from the beginning, we can ensure that rigorous content standards and performance expectations apply to all students, including those with disabilities.

Research evidence on teacher use of accommodations, and accommodations decision making by IEP teams, shows that teachers often have foundational misunderstandings of what the content and achievement standards mean. As a result, strategies to adjust instruction through accommodations often mean that students are denied access to the content; they are either over-accommodated or receive different content than intended by the standards. With clear and specific, teachable and learnable, measureable, coherent standards, teacher capacity to adjust teaching for individual needs can occur without losing the content or performance expectations. Common core standards that are clearer, fewer, and more rigorous should result in increased clarity for all, assuming that high quality professional development, training, and support continue for *all teachers* with *all students* as the standards are implemented.

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards – given the nature of the standards themselves – often require accommodations for students with disabilities. For example, in the case of students who are deaf, a standard that calls for “listening” should be interpreted to include reading sign language. In a similar vein, “speaking” for some students with speech impairments, for example, should include “communication” or “self-expression.” Students who are blind or have low vision should be able to read via braille, screen reader technology, or other assistive technology to demonstrate their comprehension skills. “Writing” should not preclude the use of a scribe, computer, or speech-to-text technology for students with disabilities that interfere with putting pen to paper, for example.

Assessments. We have made tremendous strides in making assessments more accessible for students with disabilities during the past decade. States and test developers have, in general, started the development of their assessments with the recognition that students with disabilities are general education students first. The implication of this is that assessments are better designed from the beginning with all students in mind, and should not preclude the participation of most students with disabilities. It is critical that during the development process we think of all students, clearly define what each assessment is intended to measure, and how that content can be measured for all students. Retrofitting assessments with accommodations and developing a series of alternate assessments because the general assessments do not work for all students is expensive for schools and stigmatizing for students.

The research base for developing accountability assessments that are more appropriate for all students has dramatically increased in the past several years. Based on this research, NCEO developed five principles for assessments used for accountability (Thurlow et al., 2008):

- All students are included in assessments in ways that hold schools accountable for their learning

- Assessments allow all students to show their knowledge and skills on the same challenging content.
- High quality decision making determines how students participate.
- Public reporting includes the assessment results of all students.
- Accountability determinations are affected in the same way by all students.
- Continuous improvement, monitoring, and training ensure the quality of the overall system.

Each of these is supported by specific characteristics of assessment systems that are appropriate for all students, including students with disabilities. All together, they provide an important framework for any future assessment system.

These principles reinforce what we have learned – first, thinking about students when assessments are first designed, developed, and implemented; second, defining allowable accommodations as part of the development process; and third, ensuring that the assessment system include all students, without exception. This way, developers have focused on ensuring that tests really measure what they are intended to measure – not extraneous factors, such as whether the students can figure out what the test developer means by a question or whether a picture has important clues about the answer to a question (Dolan et al., 2009; Thurlow et al., 2008; Thurlow et al., 2009). Identifying ways to improve assessments for students with disabilities has, in fact, resulted in improving assessments for all students.

What these principles do not do is indicate the specific nature of the assessment. Whatever the assessment approach – computer-based assessments, through course assessments, or paper and pencil end of course assessments – the critical point is to think about the whole population of students, including students with disabilities. Taking computer-based assessments as an example – these assessments show promise for increasing the accessibility of assessments. They also make it easier to fall back into some pitfalls that have been demonstrated to create problems for the assessment of students with disabilities. On the positive side, computer-based assessments can be developed in a way that embeds what are called “accommodations” when the test is paper based, such as the following described by Russell (2008):

- Users navigate and interact with the functional elements of the test delivery system using a standard mouse, keyboard, touch screen, intellikeys, switch mechanism, sip-and-puff device, eagle-eyes, and other assistive communication devices
- Text can be read aloud using a human voice or a synthesized voice, or can be signed
- All graphics, drawings, tables, functions, formulas, and other non-text-based elements of an item can be provided through spoken descriptions

An auditory calming tool can be provided that allows all students to select from among a list of pre-approved sound files, and play softly in the background as the user works on the test. A computer-based system could record each use of an incorporated feature or accommodation to document use for individual items as well as overall. There are tremendous possibilities for dramatically increasing the accessibility of assessments in a computer-based assessment system based on grade-level content standards. These assessments also have the potential to aid teachers as they determine how to move students to grade-level achievement.

Computer-based systems also make it easier to fall back into some pitfalls that have been demonstrated to create problems for the assessment of students with disabilities. We must

avoid pitfalls of the past in designing computer-based systems. They should be developed to be as transparent as possible about the content on which students are assessed and the ways in which the content is assessed. They should not revert to normative assessments, which compare students only to each other rather than to content standards, even in the name of being able to measure growth. Title I evaluation systems prior to 1994 were based on these types of approaches, and demonstrated dramatically that schools can show that students make “progress,” but the progress is meaningless if it is not tied to the intended content and achievement targets. These practices resulted in the failure of the system in identifying where schools were succeeding and where they were not. Students remained far behind their peers – and even increased the achievement gaps - in schools deemed successful based on flawed testing assumptions. Computer-based systems should not revert to an out-of-level testing approach. To avoid the mistakes of the past, any adaptive computer-based assessments must be on **grade-level**. Even when constrained to grade-level, adaptive testing practices must be transparent enough to detect when a student is inaccurately measured because of splinter skills common for some students with disabilities, for example, with poor basic skills in areas like computation and decoding, but with good higher level skills, such as problem solving, built with appropriate accommodations to address the barriers of poor basic skills.

The research base has dramatically increased for new forms of assessments, like alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS), developed to measure the academic achievement of a very small number of students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities. NCEO, in collaboration with the National Alternate Assessment Center (NAAC) has conducted an extensive literature review and has identified ten common misperceptions about AA-AAS, as well as research-based recommendations to ensure common understanding and high quality assessments (Quenemoen, Kearns, Quenemoen, Flowers, & Kleinert, 2010). A summary of the research-based recommendations is included in Appendix A.

Challenges in Promoting Improved Achievement for Students with Disabilities

Our greatest challenges in improving achievement for students with disabilities are NOT in the area of assessments. But including all students in assessment and accountability systems as well as requiring reporting of assessment results broken out by student groups that historically underperform has been critical in helping us understand our great challenges. These greatest challenges are in delivering high quality instruction in the standards-based curriculum to every student with a disability. Although there are some ways in which assessments can be improved, the real work that needs to be done is in providing students with disabilities greater access to the curriculum, making sure that they have the individualized instruction required by IDEA as well as appropriate accommodations and other supports they need to succeed. States that have done this have seen the improved results.

We know how to educate all children, including those with disabilities, if we have the will to do so. The discussion should not be about *whether* students with disabilities can learn to proficiency – and thus, it should not be about *whether* they should be included in the assessment and accountability measures we have for all students – it must be about whether we have the will and commitment to make it happen. We must build on the research that has shown that where there is shared responsibility and collaboration among staff, and where students are held to high expectations and are provided specialized instruction, supports and accommodations so that they can meet those high expectations, students score higher on assessments.

Still, there are some risks as we move forward to develop assessments based on common core standards. It is too easy to explain away the gaps in achievement for students with disabilities by characterizing these students as poor little children who should not be held to the same standards as others because of their disabling condition. This characterization is inconsistent with what we know about students with disabilities – and flies in the face of the purpose of special education. We should expect to see a value-added benefit from the Federal commitment to supplementing state and local funding for special education services. This benefit will be realized through the unwavering expectation that all students with disabilities receive high quality and specialized instruction, have universal access to the challenging grade-level curriculum that is the right of all students, and participate in rigorous and inclusive assessments of their learning.

Thank you.

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**Appendix A:
Rethinking Assumptions about Alternate Assessment based on
Alternate Achievement Standards**

*To facilitate the process of rethinking assumptions about alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS), common misperceptions are identified first, followed by the assumptions underlying them and a research response to those assumptions. A comprehensive summary of the literature underlying the research responses is provided in **Common Misperceptions and Research-based Recommendations for Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards** (NCEO Synthesis Report 73 by Quenemoen, Kearns, Quenemoen, Flowers, & Kleinert).*

Common misperception #1 – Many students who take the AA-AAS function more like infants or toddlers than their actual age, so it makes no sense for schools to be held accountable for their academic performance.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

Some people assume that students who take the AA-AAS have such severe disabilities that they are unable to learn academic content. Sometimes, this misperception is rooted in the assumption that all students must progress through typical infant and preschool skill development before any other academic instruction can occur.

Research Response: First, learner characteristics data from many states show us that MOST students who participate in AA-AAS have basic literacy and numeracy skills. Second, we have understood for many decades that waiting until these students are “ready” by mastering all earlier skills means they “never” will be given access to the skills and knowledge we now know they can learn. In the 1980s, educators realized that students with significant disabilities could learn functional skills to prepare for independent adult life, even before mastering all lower skills. In recent years, research suggests that these students can often also learn age-appropriate academic skills and knowledge even when they have not mastered all earlier academic content.

Research-based Recommendation: Build accountability systems to ensure that all students who are eligible for the AA-AAS have access to and learn academic content expected for their same-age typical peers, to an appropriate but challenging alternate achievement standard.

Common Misperception #2 – Many students who participate in AA-AAS have life-threatening medical conditions or are not able to communicate.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that AA-AAS students are a small homogeneous group of students with multiple problems that go well beyond what schools can actually handle; these students cannot speak, hear, or communicate in any way.

Research Response: Students who participate in AA-AAS are generally less than 1% of the total student population or about 9% of all students with disabilities. Most of the students who take the AA-AAS (90%) have consistent communication skills. Only about 10% of AA-AAS students communicate on a pre-symbolic level (without intentional use of language, pictures, objects, or signs). These students *can* communicate, but need to be given opportunities to learn effective strategies, including the use of assistive devices.

Research-based Recommendation: For the small group of students who initially demonstrate a lack of symbolic communication (about 10% of students who take the AA-AAS), educators should persistently and systematically seek multiple and varied communication strategies including assistive technology to permit these students to learn and then to show what they know on an AA-AAS.

Common misperception #3: Students in the AA-AAS can learn only rote academic skills, so AA-AAS should reflect only these skills.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that the curriculum for students with severe disabilities often has been based on math skills of time and money and reading skills limited to sight words because that is all these students can learn.

Research Response: It is true that research through the 1990s reflects a very narrow curriculum. Researchers now are finding strong evidence of academic skills and knowledge development among these students, including abstract concepts and transfer of learning, for students who participate in AA-AAS. We are only beginning to learn what these students are capable of, once given the opportunity to learn and access to appropriate accommodations such as assistive technology. In our work with states, we have encountered many teachers who have been “surprised and amazed” at what their students are able to learn when given the chance.

Research-based Recommendation: Build AA-AAS approaches based on a model of academic content development that allows these students to demonstrate a range of grade-level content that their peers are also learning and demonstrating.

Common Misperception #4 – The AA-AAS has eliminated the teaching of important functional skills.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:
People sometimes assume that the addition of academics to the curriculum for students with severe disabilities means that there is limited time for teaching functional skills like self-care, community participation, and safety. There is not enough time in the day to do both.

Research Response: AA-AAS are designed to ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities are taught academic content like their peers, but a student’s IEP will often still include important functional skill goals. Many teachers have found that blended instruction in academic and functional skills yields better results for both. The “line” between academics and functional instruction begins to blur as teachers and parents discover how truly useful and satisfying increased literacy and numeracy skills are for these students, for quality of life and enjoyment, for integration into the community, school, or adult life, and for future employment.

Research-based Recommendation: Provide training and support to teachers so that they can effectively merge academic and functional instruction where appropriate and so that they understand the vital importance of academic skills and knowledge to full participation in family, school, and community life.

Common misperception #5 – AA-AAS must cover all of the same content that is on the general assessment for typical peers.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that the grade-level curriculum is very challenging and has far too much information for these students to cover in a year, let alone learn at all, but federal law requires the same content on all tests.

Research Response: Federal regulations permit states to define the appropriate depth, breadth, and complexity of content coverage for the AA-AAS. Researchers are working on ways that students can access grade-level content at various “entry points.” States must show that these content priorities truly “raise the bar” of historically low expectations, and are clearly linked to the content that typical students in the same grade should know and be able to do. Since this is a shift for teachers who do not have experience with this content, training and support to teachers is an essential component of high quality alternate assessments.

Research-based Recommendation: Provide training to teachers, and to other key assessment system stakeholders and advisors, on what research suggests these students are able to know and do when given the opportunity.

Common Misperception #6 – Most AA-AAS are entirely individualized and differ for each student.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that teachers make so much adaptation and adjustment to the assessment for each student that there is no way you can compare results from one school to another.

Research Response: A good AA-AAS allows a defined amount of flexibility in administration of the items and tasks because students with the most significant cognitive disabilities vary in how they take in and respond to information and requests. Even so, AA-AAS must also adhere to basic standards of technical quality so that the scores can be compared for accountability purposes. An AA-AAS should incorporate training, oversight, and structures to balance flexibility with standardization of procedures and ongoing monitoring to ensure the assessments are administered, scored, and reported as intended.

Research-based Recommendation: All AA-AAS scores should indicate whether the student is proficient in an academic domain through procedures that allow flexibility but control for possible sources of error.

Common Misperception #7 – An AA-AAS measures teacher performance in compiling attractive portfolios or examples rather than measuring student academic performance.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that teachers who are able to put together pretty portfolios or examples, or who can choose student examples that make them look good, will score higher than teachers who may teach well but who do not spend time creating pretty portfolios or examples of what their students do.

Research Response: Given what we understand about student characteristics, most AA-AAS formats require test administrators familiar to the student. That means that in most cases, teachers interact with the student to capture accurate evidence of what the student knows and can do. A good AA-AAS is designed to control for administrative responses that are decorative, and to focus on independent student performance. Research has shown that teachers who are well-trained in instruction and assessment administration often have students with higher AA-AAS scores, but spending a lot of time making the portfolio “look good” has little impact on scores.

Research-based Recommendation: Train teachers on systematic data gathering procedures, provide oversight, coaching, and monitoring to ensure they implement the procedures as intended, and design scoring processes to exclude evidence that reflects teacher behaviors instead of independent student performance.

Common Misperception #8 – It would make more sense if teachers simply reported on their students’ progress meeting IEP goals rather than requiring an AA-AAS.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have IEPs that define what they should be learning. Gathering data that already are used for the IEP is the best measure of the students’ achievement.

Research Response: A good IEP will identify the services, supports, and specialized instruction needed so that the student can learn both academic and functional skills and knowledge. Data gathered on the specific goals and objectives in the IEP are important for individual accountability among IEP team members for these short- and long-term goals and objectives, in all areas where the student has them. Some of these goals and objectives will specify the services and supports the student needs to *access* the general curriculum, but student progress based on the IEP does not provide accountability for student *achievement* of proficiency in the general curriculum. In contrast, AA-AAS are designed to provide data for system accountability to ensure that all students are provided access to and are achieving to proficiency in the general curriculum.

Research-based Recommendation: Design AA-AAS so that there are comparable data on the effectiveness of schools in providing access to the general curriculum to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Common Misperception #9 – Some AA-AAS formats (i.e., portfolio, checklist, performance assessment) are better than others.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that one method is better than another, with “better” meaning more technically adequate; the specific method that is considered better or worse often is based on good or bad experiences in the past.

Research Response: Research on the technical quality of AA-AAS has shown that the format of the test is a poor predictor of technical quality. What a “portfolio” or “checklist” or “performance assessment” or what any other type of format name is can vary enormously, and a number of states now use hybrid models that combine elements of these approaches. Any of these types of formats can be of poor or high quality. A good AA-AAS should sensitively and accurately measure what students know and can do once they have been given appropriate access to interesting, age-appropriate academic content.

Research-based Recommendation: Select the format of the AA-AAS based on beliefs about academic teaching and learning for AA-AAS students.

Common misperception #10 – No AA-AAS can be a technically adequate measure of student achievement for accountability purposes.

Assumptions Underlying Misperception:

People sometimes assume that the AA-AAS breaks all the rules of good design of large-scale assessments as judged by high quality psychometric evidence that have been used by measurement experts for a century.

Research Response:

The challenges of designing AA-AAS are very new; prior to the 1990s, no large-scale assessment program included students with significant cognitive disabilities, and very few measurement experts had experience designing assessment for these students. Fortunately, there has been a great deal of work done since the 1990s on issues that have emerged in developing psychometrically sound AA-AAS. AA-AAS can be designed to produce valid and reliable information about student outcomes

Research-based Recommendation: State assessment offices should address three components of the assessment design as they develop and implement the AA-AAS: (a) description of the student population and a theory of learning for these students, (b) structure of the observations from the assessment, and (c) interpretation of the results. The technical defense of an AA-AAS starts and ends with these three components.