



State-Wide Testing and Learning Disabilities

Position Paper of the Learning Disabilities Association of America

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LDA recognizes the important role that state-wide assessment of learning outcomes have in raising academic standards for students and documenting educational accountability for the public. For students with learning disabilities, however, such assessments present both needed opportunities and new barriers. It is imperative, therefore, that the needs and rights of students with learning disabilities are protected whenever state-wide assessments are implemented.

LDA recognizes that each state develops, implements, and modifies its own state-wide assessment system and process. The specific details and the practical implications for students with learning disabilities vary widely from state-to-state. As a result, families and professionals must become knowledgeable and up-to-date about state-wide assessment in their own state, if they are to provide vital guidance and support to students with learning disabilities.

LDA urgently reminds states and districts that they hold the key to ensuring that students with learning disabilities receive fair treatment and achieve higher academic outcomes. When states design or modify accountability processes and schools provide individualized educational services, the following crucial expectations must be met:

Opportunity and access to the general curriculum.

Students with learning disabilities must have access to the academic content to be tested on state-wide assessments. Schools must ensure access to classes and courses that provide the opportunity to learn that content. Their teachers must possess knowledge in general curriculum areas such as science, social studies, and the humanities and the instructional skills to transmit that knowledge. Providing the needed individualized combination of general education, collaborative, remedial, and intensive teaching will often be required in order for some students with learning disabilities to demonstrate their actual ability to master needed academic content.

The lifespan impact of high-stakes testing.

For students with learning disabilities, the results of high-stakes testing should never be used as the sole criterion for decisions such as promotion, graduation, diploma type, and scholarship eligibility—many of which will, in turn, also determine available post-secondary schooling and employment opportunities. Because achievement in students with learning disabilities is typically uneven across academic subjects and/or types of tasks, determining school success must be expanded to consider such factors as class grades, club/service participation, and patterns of high-stakes testing performance. Similarly, such factors should be considered in apprenticeship, union, post secondary, and professional entrance and exit decisions.

The rights of students with learning disabilities.

The rights of students with learning disabilities must be protected so that high stakes testing criteria are not used to deny appropriate educational services under IDEA or educational opportunities and benefits under Section 504. Students with learning disabilities must be provided with equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs that include high-stakes testing criteria. In addition, clear and fair due process procedures must be available to students and families concerning available accommodations, test participation, “flagging,” alternate assessment, and related issues.

Appropriate and available accommodations.

Each student with learning disabilities must be provided with the appropriate accommodations through the IEP or Section 504 processes. These accommodations should be available, as needed, throughout the student’s school and post secondary educational experiences, and thus also be provided on standardized or alternate assessments.

The accommodations used during testing activities should be based on:

- advance planning by school and family,
- inclusion of the accommodations in the applicable IEP/504 provisions,
- a reasonable match between accommodations used in classroom activities and in subsequent types of test items,
- selection from research-supported and empirically accepted accommodations, and
- a clear appeal process.

The focus should be on achieving a balance between assessment and accommodations, so that each individual student with learning disabilities. The goal should be to enable students with learning disabilities to demonstrate the intelligence, ability, knowledge, and skill that he or she possesses.

Test characteristics.

Among the states, there is a wide variation in the tests used. Some are locally developed, while others commercially prepared. There is variation in the content areas covered; in the use of objective or open-ended items, and in the emphasis on factual knowledge or problem-solving processes. Although specific items would not be available, information about the content areas and type of items on tests in a given state must be made available so that families, professionals, and students can facilitate preparation prior to the tests.

Because cutoff scores are statistically established and applied to all students, it is especially important that the norms be based on a population including both students who are non-disabled and learning disabled. For the same reason, regardless of the type of test used for state-wide assessment, it should possess high levels of validity and reliability that are established through widely accepted methodologies.

Phasing in of requirements.

For most students, state-wide, high stakes tests provide a series of checkpoints as knowledge and skills build throughout their years of schooling. Many students with learning disabilities, however, have only recently been given access to the general curriculum and begun participating in state-wide tests. These students cannot be expected to achieve results that accurately reflect their ability. Clearly

established and publicized guidelines should provide an appropriate transition period for this gradually diminishing group of students.

The uses and reporting of test results.

The results of state-wide tests can be used for many purposes—some constructive and some destructive. For individual students with learning disabilities, test scores can identify content and skills that are mastered, as well as suggest areas for remedial or more intensive instruction. However, patterns of academic skill development are typically uneven in these students and doubts remain about the science of testing. Therefore, it is unwise and unacceptable to rely on test scores, especially composite scores, as the sole criterion for moving students with learning disabilities through the educational system.

At district and state levels, test results can constructively guide areas where in-service training of teachers or allocation of additional materials and support is needed. In the same way, compilations of both aggregated and disaggregated data across districts and states should be used to provide insight into the success of students with learning disabilities in achieving higher academic success.

Needed research.

Implementation of accountability and high-stakes testing has brought many new components to the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities. Research should carefully investigate both the short and long-term impact and effects of access to the general curriculum, the use of accommodations, the administration of state-wide assessments, the provision for alternate assessments, and the use of test performance criteria for educational advancement.

LDA fully supports educational accountability that seeks to improve the skills, competence, and attitudes of America's students and workforce, as well as increase competitiveness within the world market. However, these efforts must always be balanced by the need to nurture the unique abilities and talents of each individual with learning disabilities. LDA is committed to ensuring that such a balance is achieved and maintained.