The 'Rise and Fall' of Alternate Assessments Based on Modified Standards

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In my last blog post, I talked about how advocacy groups are opposing any moves that look like loosening test restrictions on students with disabilities. From their point of view, most students with disabilities should be taking the same tests as their typically developing peers—which means they should be receiving the same level of academic instruction as their peers.

But for a handful of years, easier tests existed. Called "alternate assessments based on modified academic standards," they were for students who were not severely cognitively disabled, but were still not meeting grade-level standards. Up to 2 percent of all students, or about 20 percent of students with disabilities, could take the test and be counted as proficient under No Child Left Behind.

"I believe that this is a smarter, better way to educate our special education students," said then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in 2005. At their peak, 17 states had created this particular type of alternate assessment.

But just four years after the Department of Education released regulations on those tests, they were on the way out—largely because of a change in political leadership at the department.

*U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2011:* "We will not issue another policy that allows districts to disguise the educational performance of 2 percent of students. That's unacceptable, and that must change. We have to expect the very best from our students and to tell the truth about student performance so that we can give all students the supports and the services they need." The department made phasing out the tests a condition of granting a flexibility waiver from NCLB accountability requirements.

But what can we learn from the brief life of the tests that came to be called the AA-MAS? In a look back at the alternate tests that will be published in the February edition of the *Journal of Special Education*, researchers say that the main challenge the tests exposed isn't a matter of appropriate assessments: it's that too many students were not given access to rigorous academics that would allow them to pass those tests in the first place.

"I think it all comes back to an instructional issue. The kids weren't really getting access to the grade-level content," said Sheryl Lazarus, a senior research associate at the National Center for Educational Outcomes, and the lead author of "An Analysis of the Rise and Fall of the AA-MAS Policy.

Federal regulations required that individualized education program teams were required to demonstrate that a candidate for the AA-MAS would not achieve grade-level proficiency in a year, even with appropriate instruction. But among the states that adopted these tests, that number of students in that group varied widely. For example, in Michigan, between 6 and 8 percent of 5th and 8th graders in special education took the AA-MAS during the 2009-10 school year. But in Oklahoma, 45 to 50 percent of 5th and 8th graders with disabilities were assigned to the alternate assessments.
The analysis also cited a separate study that found that 5 to 6 percent of students in an unnamed state were assigned to alternate assessments in one testing year, even though they had scored proficient or above in the regular tests the year before. That finding "raised major questions about the validity of the process by which teams assigned students to test types," the analysis stated.

Some argue that it's logical to assume that students with disabilities won't test as well as their typically-developing peers, but Lazarus said it's important to think about what types of disabilities are most common among students in special education.

"We always think of the kids with the cognitive disabilities or intellectual disabilities, but when you look at the categories, most have specific learning disabilities. The second largest is speech and language. The next one that is up fairly high is emotional disabilities, and they are a group that often struggles to perform well, and I believe has some of the lowest grad rates. But there's not intellectual reason those children should not be learning grade-level content."

(According to the 2014 report to Congress on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 40 percent of students with disabilities have "specific learning disabilities" such as dyslexia. Eighteen percent have speech and language disabilities. The emotional disturbance category accounts for about 6 percent of students with disabilities.)

In addition to pointing out instructional challenges the analysis also noted that some elements of the alternate assessments—for example, fewer "distractor" options on multiple choice tests, larger font sizes, more white space, and fewer items per page did help some students with disabilities. Some of those accommodations have been built into the common core tests currently under development, and many are available to all students, not just students with disabilities.

The National Center for Educational Outcomes asked states to compile their own "lessons learned" from the alternate assessments based on modified standards, which it compiled into a 400-page report for those who are interested in going into deep, granular detail. One important main takeaway is that states must continue tracking the performance of all low-performing students—including students with disabilities—as they move into tests aligned with the common core, Lazarus said.

"This a population that really was under the radar before this," she said. "Now, some incredible research has come out of this. As we move forward, we have to try to ensure that we don't lose track of this population as they do go back into the general assessment."