

THE PROMISE OF STANDARDS-BASED SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRANSITION TO PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

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Our nation is now well into more than a decade of the rhetoric and reality of standards-based reform. When the term “standards-based reform” first emerged in the late 1980s, endorsed by the president and governors alike, its possibilities for improving the results of U.S. education within the context of a global economy were still a dream. But, the dream covered more than just academic achievement, with goals addressing early childhood education, safe and drug-free schools, and the development of skills needed for success in post-secondary education and the world of work, as well as for successful school completion and life-long learning (National Education Goals Panel, 1992). That all of these “extras” are entwined in the concept of standards-based reform often is forgotten. It is little wonder why, given the current emphasis on testing and accountability. Still, if we are to reach the promise of standards-based reform, particularly within the realm of secondary education and transition to adult life, and especially if we are to do so for students with disabilities, then it is critical to step back, identify again why it is important to focus on academic achievement, and then capitalize on the opportunities that can be taken and created to ensure that students with disabilities not only show high academic achievement but also successful transition to post-secondary settings.

It is much easier to complain about the current situation than it is to figure out how to grab hold of the opportunities that it presents. The complaints are widespread these days – especially with the reauthorization of the ESEA *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act, which requires a focus on academic achievement for all students, including specifically students with disabilities. *NCLB* is consistent with the requirements for participation in assessments that emerged in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. It goes beyond those requirements to insist that not only do students with disabilities participate in assessments and have their scores reported, but that schools be held accountable for the assessment and other results (e.g., graduation, attendance) of these students and that adequate yearly progress (AYP) be shown for these students just as for other students (including ethnic and racial groups, students with limited English proficiency, and students in poverty). It is nearly impossible to pick up a newspaper and not see something about educational testing and the poor performance of students on the tests.

As the attention to the testing aspect of standards-based education continues, there are slowly emerging stories of some of the positive results of current standards-based efforts. For example, a recent Boston Globe article highlighted the performance of a student with Down syndrome who this year passed the rigorous Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). According to the article:

Katie Bartlett has spent all of her 17 years exceeding the expectations the world placed on her when she was born with Down syndrome. . . . Still no one was quite sure what would happen when Bartlett took the MCAS exam, now a requirement for a high school diploma in Massachusetts. This is what happened: She passed. . . .

Many education specialists who disapprove of a high-stakes standardized test still see a value in MCAS, because it highlights which classrooms are

giving special-ed students a first-rate education and which are not. A few even hold the belief that, in the long run, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System will prove a boon for the education of disabled students, whether they pass it or not.

The MCAS requirement “has been the most effective advocacy tool that I’ve seen come across the horizon, ever,” said Rich Robison, executive director of the Federation for Children with Special Needs, even though his 18-year-old son with Down syndrome and autism has not yet passed. “It forces schools to say, ‘Oh, yeah, we can’t just ignore them. Their scores are going to count. We do have to teach them something.’” (Bombardieri, 2002, p. A1)

In 2001, the state of New York presented results showing that the number of students with disabilities passing the Regents Exams was higher in 2000 than the number even taking the exams in past years (Gloeckler, 2001; New York State Education Department, 2001) – an indication that students are gaining access to the curriculum that before was considered “too difficult” for them.

Most of the stories we have seen thus far have emerged from high-stakes tests, those with significant consequences for students. But, we are also hearing about other changes that are occurring. Some of these changes focus on the identification and analysis of programs that are working to improve the educational results of *all* students, specifically including students with disabilities (“Award-Winning Paradise USD,” 2002). We hear of school districts that beat the odds, and do so by having as one of their primary characteristics, a commitment to “enabling *all* students in *all* schools to meet high standards” (“All Means All – Part 2, 2002, p. 2, emphasis in original; see also Simpson, 2003). We are now also hearing about the tremendous benefits that are occurring for students with significant disabilities who have been included in alternate assessments, assessments first required by IDEA 97 for those students unable to participate in general state or district assessments, not to mention the benefits for their teachers who have stated that they now feel like professional educators rather than babysitters, and that they have perceived positive changes in both instructional programming and enhanced student outcomes (Kleinert, Kennedy, & Kearns, 1999; Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2000).

Acknowledging that we have “evidence” of both the negative consequences of the emphasis on academics in standards-based education and the positive consequences, it is important to step back and identify again why it is important to focus on academic achievement and what the opportunities are that either exist or must be created to ensure that students with disabilities not only show high academic achievement but also successful transition to post-secondary settings.

Why Focus on Academic Achievement?

The reasons for including students with disabilities – *all* students with disabilities – in the assessments and accountability systems of standards-based reform have been identified repeatedly, from special studies conducted by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997), to research that has documented the inappropriate exclusions of students with disabilities (e.g., McGrew, Thurlow, & Spiegel, 1993), to the language surrounding the federal laws that require participation in

assessments and accountability systems (*IDEA* and *NCLB*), to a variety of books that provide suggestions about how to provide for appropriate inclusion of students with disabilities in academic assessments (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2000; Elliott & Thurlow, 2000; Kleinert & Kearns, 2001; Thompson et al., 2001; Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003).

While the importance of including students in some type of measurement system is generally recognized now, there continue to be questions about (1) why the focus should be on academics for some subset of students, (2) how high the level of academics focus should be for another subset of students, and (3) whether the focus on academics is making it impossible to meet the transition needs of students in the upper grades.

To address these questions, it is important first to remember that the assessment system encompasses different ways for students to participate in academic assessments. First, students with disabilities can participate the same assessments as other students, in the same ways that other students take them. Second, students with disabilities can participate in the same assessment as other students, with accommodations that are needed to enable them to show their knowledge and skills. Third, students with disabilities for whom the general assessment, even with accommodations, is not appropriate because they have significant cognitive disabilities, can participate in an alternate assessment.

Why the Focus on Academics for Some Students?

This question generally is posed with thoughts of students with significant cognitive disabilities in mind. The belief is expressed that these students really should be focusing on functional living skills and not wasting their time with academics. Some states have determined, in fact, that their alternate assessments assess these skills only (e.g., Georgia reports on communication, daily living, motor, cognitive functioning, social emotional, community, vocational, and recreational/leisure; Indiana reports on information, personal, social, recreation, and vocational) (Thurlow, Wiley, & Bielinski, 2002).

However, most states now have determined that functional skills can be embedded within important academic skills. They have done this by looking carefully at the academic standards in their states and determining how they could be extended or expanded to apply to students with significant cognitive disabilities. For example, the standard “The student will apply the properties of geometric shapes and spatial sense to connect geometry with problem solving situations” has been considered appropriate as is for students with significant cognitive abilities who can be assessed through an alternate assessment by evaluating the extent to which a student can “stock shelves at a grocery store” or “touch a switch to turn on a stereo” (Thurlow & Thompson, in press).

In many states, the important functional and independent living skills are embedded within the academic measures. Further, states’ scoring rubrics, which are used to determine whether students have successfully met the academic standards, often include measures of the degree of independence or the extent of generalization that the student demonstrates in performing a task (see Quenemoen, Thompson, & Thurlow, 2003).

The elevation of the focus of instruction to be standards-based has created a new professionalism among educators who teach (rather than “service” or “work with”) students with significant

cognitive disabilities. It is perhaps the greatest evidence of the promise of standards-based reform for students for whom the question about the relevance of academics has been raised.

How High Should the Level of Academics Be?

Perhaps the greatest concern today as we talk about including all students in standards-based reforms and the assessments that accompany them is that the tests are too difficult. There is a general sense that we know that “these students” cannot do what is being asked. For some, “these students” are those with mental retardation. For others, “these students” include those with learning disabilities. In the past, these students were sometimes referred to as “gap students” – those for whom neither the alternate assessment, nor the regular assessment, even with accommodations, was viewed as an appropriate assessment.

The phrase “soft bigotry of low expectations,” first used by President Bush, comes to mind here. If we do not assume that students can do something, then we do not expose them to it, and then they do not have it as the basis to build on with new knowledge and skills. The first decision that a student cannot do something is the slow but steady pathway to exclusion from important knowledge and skills needed for the future.

A project focused specifically on out-of-level testing has demonstrated much evidence of the slow bigotry of low expectations. Some of the myths and facts identified through research are summarized in Table 1. Clearly, there is a very tangled web that is woven when that first decision is made that a student will not be exposed to something because it is just too difficult. If this decision is made in first grade, the effects are much greater than if the decision is made in the fifth grade. This decision multiplies over and over again to the point that, indeed, a student potentially cannot even benefit from exposure to grade level content.

Does the Focus on Academics Make It Impossible to Meet Students’ Transition Needs?

Many today would argue that a focus on academics is part and parcel of meeting all students’ transition needs (Thurlow & Elliott, 1998; Elliott & Thurlow, 2000). Academics should not replace transition efforts, but the two should be integrated throughout schooling.

Unfortunately, the view of an integrated standards-based education and transition system is far from what exists in most places. For a variety of reasons, what typically exists is that students’ goals and objectives expressed on their IEPs and their transition plans are often separate and distinct from each other. Initiatives have been piled on top of each other rather than integrated, so that there are three separate initiatives: (1) high standards and learning expectations, (2) transition planning and services, and (3) IEPs and special education services (Quenemoen, 2002). According to Thompson et al. (2000), forcing these separated entities together into an integrated whole requires creativity on the part of the IEP team and flexibility in program that requires “outside-of-the-box” thinking. It requires identifying learning opportunities within transition activities.

Quenemoen (2002) suggests that standards-based reform actually has increased our ability to accomplish integrated planning. In the past it was not always clear precisely what knowledge or skills were required for all students at a grade level. Now, we have the content and achievement

standards for all students defined, based on what people in each state believe to be essential for future success.

Many states developed their approach to defining content standards in a very similar way to how we have thought about transition planning for school and adult life. For example, Maine content standards include in the preface these statements:

The Learning Results identify the knowledge and skills essential to prepare Maine students for work, for higher education, for citizenship, and for personal fulfillment. Strongly supported by the public, the Learning Results are built on the premised that:

- All students should aspire to high levels of learning;
- Achievement should be assessed in a variety of ways; and
- Completion of public school should have common meaning throughout the state.

(<http://www.state.me.us/education/lres/preface.htm>)

Later in the introduction to the Maine standards, the text goes on to specify the individualization and rich preparation that every student deserves – much in keeping with best practice transition planning:

This document defines only the core elements of education that should apply to all students without regard to their specific career and academic plans. Every student is expected to achieve goals that are broader than those outlined by the *Learning Results*. At the high school level, for instance, many students heading directly to post-secondary study or to the workplace may require learning experiences that exceed the *Learning Results* in specific content areas.

(<http://www.state.me.us/education/lres/preface.htm>)

As indicated in the Maine standards, and in most standards throughout the U.S., there are intended opportunities to merge transition planning and standards-based learning, individualized for each student with a disability by IEP-defined services and supports so that each student can be successful. Quenemoen (2002) provides an example of one such integrated approach in which all students participate. She describes three students (Ann, David, and Martha) who participate in a magnet program open to students of all abilities, with a science teacher as lead teacher, but using an interdisciplinary approach. The program is a combination of school, community, workplace, and service learning opportunities, organized around a common set of core standards (see Table 2). The school counselor, English, mathematics, and special education teachers, and a variety of community experts contribute to the learning plan as needed.

The students and teachers begin a semester by working primarily in the classroom identifying future adult goals, understanding their strengths and challenges, and building basic mastery of the core academic knowledge and skills required to carry out individualized projects. All students will design and carry out final projects related to the shifting ecology in the nearby ocean bay, with support from resources at an aquarium in the community. As the students and teachers work on building knowledge and skills, and identifying individualized project plans, each student, with help from the teachers, identifies additional learning areas – additional content standards – each student will need to work on to successfully complete a project. Table 3 shows additional standards that are included in the students' individualized plans.

Thus, with careful planning and some creativeness, academics do not detract from transition, nor does transition detract from academics. They go hand in hand to ensure that both needs are met.

Opportunities to Take or Create

A number of opportunities have resulted from the emphasis on standards-based education that are also bound to improve transition for all students, including students with disabilities. Still, there are opportunities still to be created.

Attention to Students with Disabilities

Rarely before has such attention been paid to the educational results of students with disabilities. For many years, of course, there were no data to pay attention to. Now that we have data, we begin to see that there is widespread poor performance (Bielinski, Thurlow, Callender, & Bolt, 2002) that can be addressed through instructional programs. And, more often than before, improving the educational outcomes of students with disabilities is of interest to everyone in the school, not just special education personnel.

Higher Expectations for Students with Disabilities

It is more obvious now than ever before that low expectations have to be purged. Protecting students from content that is too hard, failing to provide access to the general curriculum, and insisting on standards-based education from the earliest grades is the only way to stem the soft bigotry of low expectations.

Appropriate Accommodations In Instruction and Assessment

Dramatic changes have occurred around accommodations. To some extent, the need for instructional accommodations has been exposed by requirements that assessment accommodations align to instructional accommodations – something that is difficult to do if instructional accommodations are not thoughtfully identified and used (Shriner & DeStefano, 2002). The importance of assessment accommodations, and the need for better decisions about which accommodations are needed by individual students has been raised by the requirement that IEP teams document these on the IEP. Other changes have been the result of lawsuits challenging the status quo. In many states today, accommodations are viewed as valid unless shown to be otherwise. Today, the scores of students with disabilities who use accommodations such as individualized administrations and extended time when taking the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and most recently, the ACT, are no longer flagged (Fine, 2002).

Of course, there is much still to occur surrounding accommodations. There is still a gap in policy and practice between what occurs in K-12 schooling and post-secondary education and work sites (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). There is still a gap between what happens in elementary schools and what happens in middle and secondary schools (Thurlow, 1999). And, there is still a gap in the knowledge that students themselves have about what their own accommodation needs are and how to advocate for their needs. The process of self-advocacy that is needed has been described:

For students with disabilities to self advocate effectively, they must understand their specific disability; learn their strengths and challenges; identify factors that are interfering with their performance, learning, and employment; and develop compensations, accommodations and coping skills to help them succeed. In addition, through careful guidance, these same students must learn how to apply this knowledge effectively when making decisions, negotiating and speaking up on their own behalf (Carpenter, 1995, p. iv).

Educators working with students' transition plans must accept this as part of their responsibility to ensure that students have the skills that they need as they proceed through and exit school.

Improving Assessments

Because of requirements to include students with disabilities in large-scale assessments, the assessments themselves are changing (Thurlow, 2002a). In the past, students with disabilities were simply excluded from consideration when these tests were being developed, on the assumption that they would not be participating in them anyway. Today, test developers are systematically including students with disabilities in their field test samples, and identifying other ways in which their assessments are appropriate for students with disabilities. The regulations for the standards and assessments provision in *No Child Left Behind* specifically require that the state assessment system must “be designed to be accessible and valid with respect to the widest range of students, including students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency,” words that reflect the concept of universally designed assessments (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002). To achieve universally-designed assessments, we must encourage the participation of student with disabilities in field testing and we must participate on item development and item review teams so that the items themselves are universally appropriate.

The development of computer and web-based assessments are on the horizon. They offer great promise of increasing the accessibility of tests. Yet, for this to happen, students with disabilities and the accommodations that they might need must be considered from the beginning; if not the issues of participation in assessments are likely to mushroom for students with disabilities (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, & Lehr, 2002).

Using and Collecting Data

Now that data are available on the performance of students with disabilities on state and district assessments, we need to look at these data more carefully and in various ways, and we need to collect additional data. This revelation is sweeping the educational field – not just for students with disabilities (Carr, 2003). But, it is particularly important for these students (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003). Judy Elliott, Assistant Superintendent for Special Services in the Long Beach Unified School District, delineates how to do this: “Disaggregate all district and state assessments . . . by type of service provided . . . by accommodation used, compare scores by individual grade level and over all grade levels (Elliott, 2002). Looking carefully at data over time has revealed that improvements in the performance of students with disabilities can be hidden if data are portrayed in certain ways (Bielski & Ysseldyke, 2001). Data are not the end in themselves. The goal is to take the data and look at what it means, and then to carry it forward into staff development on standards, curriculum, and instruction. One researcher indicated that

when teachers in an urban district in Michigan reviewed and talked about the test results of students with disabilities, disaggregated in various ways, they were motivated to identify ways to change their instructional practices. Collecting additional data, to ensure that students are making satisfactory improvements toward standards – so that adjustments can be made before the day of the assessment – is essential (Carr, 2003; Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003). As noted elsewhere:

State and district assessments are intended to raise the red flags; when this happens, other assessment efforts probably need to be implemented to determine how individual students are doing on more narrowly defined skills. This is where classroom assessment are relevant. Recognizing the role of specific assessments and using them to make appropriate decisions is a critical step in helping to realize the promise of standards-based reform. (Thurlow, 2002b, p. 201)

Improve Access and Instruction

Assessments in themselves, not even with accountability for test scores, will make a difference in the educational results of students unless there are changes in access to the curriculum and in instruction. Standards are to drive those changes.

There is increasing evidence of positive outcomes from standards-based education and its reliance on assessments and accountability (Ysseldyke, Dennison, & Nelson, 2002), and there is increasing documentation of how to provide standards-based education in ways that integrate the principles and practices of good transition programs with those of good standards-based education. It is easy to say that Katie Bartlett is high functioning, but not like most of our students with mental retardation, so her story of success is not all that important. It is also easy to say that the New York data do not negate the fact that lots of students still are not passing the Regents Exams, so the finding that more students are passing than ever took the test before is nice but insignificant. Is it not possible that are lots of Katie Barletts out there, who regardless of their specific disability or lack of disability, could have unexpected outcomes if they had the advantage of high expectations and the supports, services, and accommodations to meet their individualized needs throughout their life? Is it not possible that more and more students with and without disabilities can meet higher graduation requirements if they have access to high-level curriculum throughout their school careers, along with the supports, services, and accommodations to meet their individualized needs? The integration of standards and transition are part of the supports and services that make these possible and that is likely to give us more Katie Barlett and New York Regents Exams stories.

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Table 1. Myths, Assumptions, and Research Findings About Out-of-Level Testing

Myth	Assumption	Research Finding
More students participate in statewide testing when tested out of level.	Testing students with disabilities out of level is a good way to include students who cannot participate fully in the regular assessment, even with accommodations.	States struggle with how to include out-of-level test scores in accountability indices. Students participate in state tests, but are then excluded from accountability results.
Out-of-level testing is good for instructional decision making	Testing students with disabilities at their instructional level provides more usable information from instructional planning.	Special educators report that they do not use the results from out-of-level tests. Some test companies only provide raw scores for out-of-level tests. States' test results often are not available until 6 mos after testing – no longer relevant for planning instruction.
Students receive tests with items that they can answer.	Out-of-level tests are challenging standards-based assessments.	One state indicated that too many students were tested at too low a test level. Some students with disabilities report that out-of-level tests are too easy.
Out-of-level test scores are more valid.	Out-of-level tests measure what students actually know, which eliminates guessing during testing.	Some teachers and students with disabilities report that out-of-level tests are not taken seriously when the test items are not developmentally appropriate.
Out-of-level testing is better for students' self esteem.	Taking a test that is too hard for students with disabilities is frustrating, embarrassing, and negatively affects their level of self confidence.	Special educators report that teachers, parents, and students do not think about the future consequences of taking state tests out of level. A student with disabilities who is tested out of level may never be able to meet high school graduation requirements.
IEP teams work together to select students for out-of-level tests.	Most states have written assessment policies that require IEP teams to use specific criteria to select students for out-of-level tests.	Special education teachers report that they often make the decision to test a student out of level independently before the IEP team meeting convenes.
Test scores improve when students are tested out of level.	Out-of-level tests yield better student test performance because students are taking tests that are matched to their ability level.	Students who took the <u>same</u> norm-referenced test in level and out of level performed worse on the out-of-level test. One states' data showed a similar pattern when out-of-level and in-level test scores were compared between <u>two</u> norm-referenced tests.
Test companies have adequate	All test companies publish standardized tests that can be administered and interpreted	Test companies vary in the specificity of information provided for making decisions about interpreting and using out-of-level

out-of-level testing instruments.	as is.	test scores.
Equating out-of-level test scores yields accurate on-level scores.	Test companies provide accurate equating functions for test score conversion.	Test company representatives are unable to provide a statistically derived estimate of the amount of error that was introduced through the equating process developed for their instrument.
Out-of-level test scores are easy to locate in states' reports.	Out-of-level test scores are reported at the district and state level in the same manner as scores from the regular assessment are reported.	Some states do not analyze out-of-level test scores at all. Other states aggregate out of-level test scores with other types of test scores.

Adapted from Minnema (2002).

Table 2. Common Set of Core Standards for All Students in the Magnet Program

Career Preparation

Preparing for the Future. Students will be knowledgeable about the world of work, explore career options, and relate personal skills, aptitudes, and abilities to future career decisions.

Integrated and Applied Learning. Students will demonstrate how academic knowledge and skills are applied in the workplace and other settings.

English Language Arts

Processes of Writing and Speaking. Students will demonstrate the ability to use the skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard English Conventions. Students will write and speak correctly, using conventions of standard written and spoken English.

Science and Technology

Ecology. Students will understand how living things depend on one another and on non-living aspects of the environment.

Continuity and Change. Students will understand the basis for all life and that all living things change over time.

Inquiry and Problem Solving. Students will apply inquiry and problem-solving approaches in science and technology.

Scientific Reasoning. Students will learn to formulate and justify ideas and to make informed decisions.

Communication. Students will communicate effectively in the application of science and technology.

Table 3. Examples of Individualized Standards for Students in the Magnet Program

Ann	Martha	David
<p>Mathematics: <i>Mathematical Reasoning.</i> Students will understand and apply concepts of mathematical reasoning. Students will be able to analyze situations where more than one logical conclusion can be drawn from data presented.</p> <p>English Language Arts <i>Informational Texts.</i> Students will apply reading, listening, and viewing strategies to informational texts across all areas of curriculum.</p> <p>Future and Career-Related Activities. Use of public transportation to get to community learning sites independently; development of teamwork skills with appropriate social behavior; manage schedule to incorporate class time with work schedule at Subway, Inc.</p>	<p>Mathematics: <i>Data Analysis and Statistics.</i> Students will understand and apply concepts of data analysis</p> <p>English Language Arts: <i>Research-Related Writing and Speaking.</i> Students will work, write, and speak effectively when doing research in all content areas.</p> <p>Future and Career-Related Activities. Participate in scientific team canvassing of bay area pollution and effects on specific creatures; participate in annual census of species; explore post-secondary requirements and colleges offering science preparation that will match her interests.</p>	<p>Mathematics: <i>Patterns, Relations, Functions.</i> Students will understand that mathematics is the science of patterns, relationships, and functions.</p> <p>English Language Arts: <i>Process of Reading.</i> Students will use the skills and strategies of the reading process to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate what they have read.</p> <p>Future and Career-Related Activities. Articulate linkages between artistic and creative endeavors and the scientific approach to the world; identify specific careers where arts and sciences are integrated, and identify requirements to succeed in those careers, including post-secondary preparation; explore teaching as a career by serving as peer support to another student.</p> <p>Visual and Performing Arts <i>Creative Expression.</i> Students will create and/or perform to express ideas and</p>

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