Consultation to Support Inclusive Accountability and Standards-Based Reform: Facilitating Access, Equity, and Empowerment

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Current federal legislation (i.e., No Child Left Behind (NCLB)) requires states to set rigorous academic standards, ensure classroom instruction addresses these standards, and measure and report students’ progress via large-scale assessments. NCLB assumes that inclusive accountability systems and standards-based reform will result in improved educational quality across states and school districts and increased access and opportunity for all students. In this article, we focus on three potential areas of influence for consultants committed to pursuing social justice in and through these policies: facilitating students’ access to the general curriculum; promoting equity in educational outcomes; and empowering educators and families to make appropriate decisions regarding participation in assessments. We also discuss challenges and lessons learned from providing systems-level consultation to support inclusive accountability and standards-based reform in numerous states. We conclude by offering ideas for future research and guidelines for providing consultation that facilitates social justice by creating improved opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Few recent educational policies have been as widely enacted and vigorously discussed as the standards-based reform and accountability systems now dominating the nation’s education agenda as a result of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Central to standards-based reform and
accountability is the belief that setting clear and rigorous academic standards, requiring teaching and learning in schools to focus on these standards, and measuring and reporting students’ academic progress via large-scale assessments can serve as an impetus for improved educational quality across states and school districts. “Indeed, advocates [of] standards-based education [have viewed it] as the critical lever for enhancing opportunities to learn and thus as a way of increasing equity in the educational system as a whole” (Resnick, Rothman, Slattery, & Vranek, 2003, p. 4).

To date, however, evidence of standards-based reforms and accountability systems’ attainment of this objective is mixed. For example, recent reviews of the research suggest that, despite over a decade of standards-based reform efforts, discrepancies in achievement between racial/ethnic groups and students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds generally have remained stable (Kosters & Mast, 2003; Porter, 2005). For example, Hanushek and Raymond (2004) found that yoking high-stakes accountability tests with standards-based reforms resulted in higher overall and subgroup performance (as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress), but the gains for Latino and African American students were smaller than those for White students, resulting in increased discrepancies in subgroup achievement.

Although these mixed results are disconcerting, one promising trend has been the positive growth in achievement (as measured by large-scale tests) for the general population as well as for many subgroups of students. “In March 2004, 33 states appeared to be on track to meet the Continuous Growth to 100% Proficiency requirement, compared with seven in March 2003” (Education Commission of the States, 2004, p. 22). Moreover, as Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson (2003) suggested, “It is important for us to consider recent history. Before standards and accountability systems, the curriculum actually provided to low-income students of all races . . . was typically a ‘low-track’ one, meaning basic and narrow” (p. 22). Standards-based reforms and accountability systems have raised expectations for students (and their teachers), resulting in an increased focus on producing progress toward acquiring proficiency in core academic areas (e.g., reading/language arts, mathematics, and science). Moreover, efforts to include and ensure the adequate yearly progress of students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and low-income students can provide the impetus for improved services not only to these groups but to the entire student population as well (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000). That is, when our efforts to improve access and outcomes for individuals or underrepresented groups take place in inclusive settings (e.g., general education classrooms), we maximize the probability that these efforts will result in better outcomes for all students.

A recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED, 2000) of student performance in 32 nations illustrates the importance of efforts to improve the educational performance of vari-
ous student subgroups. This OCED study found that the countries that had the largest discrepancies in student achievement also had equally troubling trends in other social indicators (e.g., indices of mental and physical health, competence and coping skills, and workers’ skill-level and employability). These results suggest increasing overall achievement and concurrently reducing disparities in performance is essential, not only as an indicator of educational effectiveness but also as a strategy for promoting social justice and economic well-being at the community, state, and national level (Roach & Frank, 2007).

Scheurlich, Skrla, and Johnson (2003) stated, “No matter what each of us values most as a pathway to equity, educational accountability has become the primary public space in which most of the discussion about … inequities in public education is now occurring” (p. 15). As such, school-based consultants who are committed to social justice cannot afford to be disengaged from the design, implementation, and evaluation of standards-based reform and accountability systems. In this article, we focus on potential areas of influence for consultants committed to pursuing social justice in and through these policies, including (a) facilitating students’ access to and success with rigorous grade-level instruction and curricula; (b) providing consultative support that results in greater equity of outcomes for individual students and vulnerable subgroups; and (c) empowering educators, families, and other stakeholders to make appropriate decisions regarding participation in accountability and assessment systems.

CONSULTATIVE SUPPORT FOR ACCESS TO AND SUCCESS IN GRADE-LEVEL INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULA

Raising the achievement of all students is one of the most-desired outcomes of NCLB and other standards-based reform and accountability systems. According to the United States Department of Education’s (USDOE) Standards and Assessments Non-Regulatory Guidance document (2003b), “States must hold all public elementary and secondary school students to the same challenging academic content ... (and) develop strategies for ensuring ... students are taught the same knowledge and skills and held to the same expectations for achievement as are all other students” (p. 5). Expecting all children to learn basic skills and concepts in reading, language arts, mathematics, and science is an important target for achieving educational equity. Beyond the economic benefits of increased educational attainments (e.g., improved employment opportunities), literacy skills and conceptual understanding are required for citizens’ participation and active engagement in the democratic process.
Alignment is another key concept in standards-based reform; in fact, the term alignment appears more than 100 times in the NCLB legislation (Resnick et al., 2003). Alignment has been defined as the extent “to which expectations and assessments are in agreement and serve in conjunction with one another to guide the system toward students learning what they are expected to know and do” (Webb, 2002, p. 1). When content of instructional programs, state content standards, and large-scale assessments contradict each other, educators and students may experience increased levels of stress and undue pressure to achieve. Conversely, standards-based reform and accountability are based on the supposition that student success can be facilitated through coordination in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001; Roach, Elliott, & Webb, 2005).

Creating curricular access and aligning instruction to curriculum (i.e., state content standards) presents a challenge, however, because of the wide range of student experiences and abilities in most schools and classrooms. To facilitate this outcome, consultants must be familiar with the concept of universal design for learning (UDL). Universal design can be defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002, p. 1). UDL suggests that educators and policymakers can increase the likelihood that all students will be able to successfully access curriculum by considering the diverse ways in which different students learn during development of the standards and supporting curricular materials (Rose & Meyer, 2002). An initial attempt by a group of stakeholders to define UDL suggested it might involve

the design of instructional materials and activities that makes the learning goals achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Universal design for learning is achieved by means of flexible curricular materials and activities that provide alternatives for students with differing abilities. These alternatives are built into the instructional design and operating systems of educational materials—they are not added on after-the-fact. (Educational Resources and Information Clearinghouse & Office of Special Education Programs (ERIC/OSEP), 1998, para. 3; as cited in Thompson et al., 2002, p. 4)

To guide educators’ work in this area, the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST; www.cast.org) has developed a set of UDL guidelines. CAST-suggested universally designed curriculum includes the following:

- **Multiple means of representation**, which provide students with alternative means of acquiring information and knowledge;
- **Multiple means of expression**, which provide students multiple options for demonstrating what they know and can do; and
Multiple means of engagement that recognize students’ differing interests, allow all students to be appropriately challenged, and result in increased motivation (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

Since the early 1990s, CAST and affiliated investigators have used UDL principles to guide development of instructional software that supports accessibility (e.g., Thinking Reader, WiggleWorks, and Bobby; see http://www.cast.org/products/index.html) and creation and diffusion of curricular materials in accessible formats (e.g., Braille and digital Talking Books).

Consultants can work with educators and policymakers to review state standards and district curriculum guides and make revisions (if necessary) to ensure that these materials reflect the UDL guidelines. In our consultative work with educators, we have collaborated to develop extended curriculum frameworks (for students with significant disabilities) and have found it especially important to attend to accessibility for students with sensory impairments or other disabilities in this work. For example, a student who is blind or has a visual impairment will have difficulty mastering an objective from the content standards that reads “Student recognizes pictorial representations of idioms.” Similarly, a student with a disability that limits use of his or her hands may not be able to “create a three-dimensional model of the solar system.” In these situations, there are two possible courses of action based on the UDL principles. First, because many content standards will not be universally designed, teachers need training and resources to facilitate their efforts to provide curricular access to their students through multiple means of representation, response, and engagement. Second, a group of educators can be recruited by state or district leaders to work with consultants on revising content standards to more closely reflect the UDL principles. Recent studies have indicated the use of curricular and instructional materials designed according to UDL principles result in improved performance for students with disabilities (Burk, 1999; Dolan, Hall, Banerjee, Chun, & Strangman, 2005).

NCLB’s emphasis on all students achieving proficiency on grade-level academic standards calls for a dramatic shift from the traditional curriculum and instructional practices that have been used with many students with disabilities and ELL students. For example, in some settings, special education and English language development programs may have focused primarily on the remediation of basic skills, providing curriculum and instruction believed to be appropriate for students’ “assessment-derived” mental ages or language proficiency. In special education, there has also been an emphasis on functional curricula that addressed students’ self-care, social, and vocational needs instead of grade-level academic content (Browder et al., 2002; Roach & Elliott, 2006). Although the past few decades have witnessed more educators and family members advocating for inclusive environments for students with disabilities or ELL students, inclusion in general education settings often has
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occurred in the absence of appropriate curricular materials and instructional supports. Consultants can take the lead in facilitating students' access to and success with general education curriculum and instruction by promoting and supporting educators' understanding and application of UDL principles in their classrooms.

CONSULTATION TO PROMOTE GREATER EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Substantial changes have occurred in federal regulations concerning students with disabilities and their involvement in state and districtwide assessment programs. For example, the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires states to establish goals for the performance of students with disabilities consistent (to the maximum extent appropriate) with the goals and standards established for the general student population in the state. Moreover, NCLB requires states to include students with disabilities and ELLs in large-scale assessment programs, with accommodations as necessary, or to provide alternative assessment options for students who cannot meaningfully participate in the large-scale assessments. These are challenging goals but not unrealistic.

A particularly vexing part of this regulation is creating opportunities for meaningful participation of students with disabilities and ELL students within a single accountability system that includes all students. In the past, a significant number of the students have been excluded or exempted from large-scale assessments. Historically, there were several possible reasons for the low participation rates of students with disabilities and ELL students in statewide assessment programs. For example, teachers and parents perceived that assessments were not relevant to students' needs and would be potentially frustrating experiences for students. Many educators also feared the ramifications of including these students when their inclusion would lower their schools' mean test scores. In addition, there was a perception that guidelines for administering a standardized achievement test prohibited, or at least limited, what could be changed without jeopardizing the validity of the resulting scores. Many educators had been admonished “Don't mess with the test” and so they were confused about what can and cannot be changed with a test.

Unfortunately, the absence of these groups of students on statewide and districtwide assessment resulted in unrepresentative mean scores and norm distributions for schools and districts. Moreover, the beliefs of some educators and policymakers that students with disabilities and ELL students could not do challenging work and, therefore, would not benefit from access to the general education curriculum and instruction provided to their peers
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(Ysseldyke, Thurlow, McGrew, & Vanderwood, 1994) were reinforced by their exclusion from large-scale academic assessments.

Because current federal policy represents a dramatic change in expectations for these groups of students, substantial consultative support (at both the system and classroom levels) is needed to develop and implement an accountability system that truly includes all students and allows them to demonstrate their proficiency. To facilitate equity in outcomes, consultants need to provide educators and families with information and guidance regarding a variety of issues:

1. The skills and concepts covered by both the state content standards and large-scale assessments.
2. The range of allowable testing accommodations on their state’s large-scale assessment and guidelines for determining which accommodations are appropriate and reasonable for which students.
3. The alternate assessment procedures that are in place for students with disabilities and ELL students and the criteria for determining which students qualify for alternate assessments.

For assessment results to be useful, the subject matter examined should be similar to what has been emphasized during instruction and students’ responses must be measured and scored accurately. In the words of measurement experts, the assessment results must be valid and reliable American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education (AERA, APA, & NCME), 1999; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007). Consultants must provide support to ensure that the assessments used to make important educational decisions meet rigorous technical standards for producing accurate and valid information.

The concepts of test score validity and reliability are quite abstract and sometimes seem important only to the experts who construct tests. Most educators, students, families, and policymakers, however, do care about the quality of tests, especially if important educational decisions, such as promotion or graduation, are based on such tests. Issues surrounding validity and reliability also become extremely complex when applied to real-life cases: “How should we report the scores from assessments given with testing accommodations?” or “Are scores obtained from modified assessments valid?” The answers to these questions are far from clear and continue to be the subject of considerable debate in the research literature and practice guidelines. Because of the high-stakes decisions attached to many large-scale assessments, verifying the technical adequacy of these measures is a social justice issue.

Although the NCLB legislation appears to suggest otherwise, most educators also realize that no single test can serve all the possible purposes for testing. A variety of assessments are necessary to provide educators with
a comprehensive view of what students know and can do. This should not be surprising, given the array of desired outcomes and goals for students’ schooling. Teachers, families, and policymakers want students to be able to read, write, communicate orally, use technology, do research, calculate, conduct experiments, and understand and solve social problems. Some of these skills or competencies can be assessed meaningfully with a group-administered, paper-and-pencil test that requires brief answers, but others require more individualized assessments with direct observations by a teacher or the creation of a product or detailed report. In light of this fact, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO; Lazarus, Thurlow, Lail, Eisenbraun, & Kato, 2006) has recommended that states develop guidelines specifying how students with disabilities can be assessed in multiple settings using a variety of methods. Although it is important to assess student performance in a variety of ways, it is equally important that consultants help educators and other stakeholders understand that skills or competencies must be assessed multiple times to ensure confidence in the assessment results.

One of the most frequently adopted approaches for increasing the meaningful participation of students with disabilities in assessments is allowing changes to testing procedures. Such changes are commonly referred to as testing accommodations. Consultants should provide educators and students’ families with information and materials regarding testing accommodations to facilitate students’ meaningful involvement in assessment programs. Testing accommodations are intended to offset distortions in test scores caused by a disability without invalidating or changing what the test measures (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). When appropriate testing accommodations are used, the resulting test scores are considered more valid indicators of a student’s knowledge and skills. That is, testing accommodations allow students with disabilities or ELLs to demonstrate the full range of their skills and understanding. The social justice impact of testing accommodations should not be underestimated, as the appropriate provision of accommodations allows students to succeed in important testing programs required for graduation from high school and access to postsecondary education.

Although accommodations should not change the construct being tested, they should provide differential effects (or “boosts”) for a student’s or group’s performance (Tindal, Heath, Hollenbeck, Almond, & Harniss, 1998). If the test alteration works for all (or nearly all) students or if it fails to work, then the alteration would not be considered an accommodation. To be considered a legitimate accommodation, a student’s accommodated performance on a test must exceed the increase attained by students without disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, & Karns, 2000). For general recommendations about testing accommodations, consultants should review CTB/McGraw-Hill’s Guidelines for Inclusive Test Administration (2004) at www.ctb.org or the NCEO document by Thurlow, House, Boys, Scott, and Ysseldyke (2000; available from http://education.umn.edu/nceo/). In addition, consul-
Consultants must be familiar with regulations from their state department of education and recommendations from test contractors regarding “allowable” accommodations on their state’s large-scale assessments.

To date, there is not a comprehensive research base to guide educators’ decisions about which accommodations invalidate test results or which accommodations improve test performance without invalidating test results. Fewer than 20 experimental studies of the effects of testing accommodations on test scores of students with disabilities have been published, although numerous investigations are under way in research centers across the country. For brief and readable reviews of this research, we recommend consultants and other educators read Sireci and Pitoniak’s (2007) chapter in the recently published volume *Large-Scale Assessment and Accommodations: What Works?*, recent summaries of the research from NCEO (e.g., Johnstone, Altman, Thurlow, & Thompson, 2006), or the recent issue of *Assessment for Effective Intervention* that featured an entire series on testing accommodations research (guest-edited by Niebling & Elliott, 2005).

Consultants must also be familiar with federal and state policies concerning alternate assessments. The term *alternate assessment* refers to a family of methods used to assess the academic performance of students with disabilities or limited proficiency with English. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “An alternate assessment must be aligned with the State’s content standards, must yield results separately in both reading/language arts and mathematics, and must be designed and implemented in a manner that supports use of the results as an indicator of AYP [adequate yearly progress]” (USDOE, 2005, p. 15).

In general, states have used three different approaches—portfolio assessment, performance assessment, and rating scales of achievement—in their alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) for students with significant cognitive disabilities (sometimes referred to as “1% alternate assessments”). Each of these three approaches generally requires the collection of evidence of student skills and knowledge (e.g., classroom work products, videotapes, interviews, structured observations, students’ responses to on-demand tasks) that are aligned or “linked” to states’ grade-level content standards. These classroom-based evidence samples must be scored subsequently to provide a characterization of students’ level of proficiency (Elliott & Roach, 2007). Consultants can provide important support to educators in evidence collection and scoring of AA-AAS. By attending to the alignment between policy elements and facilitating curricular access and opportunity to learn, consultants can enhance the instructional validity of alternate assessments, enhancing outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

It should be noted that the regulations requiring alternate assessments have evolved considerably over the past few years. For example, a recent amendment to NCLB and Title I adds to the flexibility (and challenges) that
states have in measuring the achievement of a subset of students with disabilities. Specifically, these new regulations (often referred to as the modified achievement standards or “2% alternate assessment” regulations) allow states to develop modified academic achievement standards and related tests that are challenging (but less difficult than the general statewide tests) for students who receive grade-level instruction yet fail to perform at a proficient level in the state’s accountability system. Consultants may be called upon to provide support for the development and implementation of these new alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) and to assist educators in making decisions regarding which assessment option is most appropriate for individual students. With the advances in alternate assessments and testing accommodations, more accurate and meaningful information about student performance will be available to educators and policymakers, allowing resources to be allocated toward student subgroups and communities that demonstrate the greatest need.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS, FAMILIES, AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

With the advent of standards-based educational reforms and changes in laws concerning the assessment of all students, many educators need more advanced knowledge of assessment tools and practices. NCLB has placed an unprecedented emphasis on student achievement in conjunction with increased levels of accountability for the professionals that work with students in public schools. Unfortunately, research conducted at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing suggests that the difficulties with understanding and meaningfully applying assessment data is pandemic at all levels of the educational system—from the statehouse to the schoolhouse (Baker, Bewley, Herman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2001; Baker & Linn, 2002). In light of this, consultants need more knowledge about the use and interpretation of standardized group achievement tests with all students because of the increased consequences associated with such tests in statewide assessment programs. Moreover, this knowledge must be shared with educators and family members to empower them to be full participants in making decisions about student participation in standards-based reform and accountability.

To prepare educators to meet the demands of standards-based reform and accountability, NCLB includes a requirement for professional development that extends beyond instructional strategies and content knowledge to address inclusive instruction and assessment practices. NCLB requires state and local educational agencies to provide in-service training regarding instruction for children with special needs and the use of assessment data to guide classroom practice (Title IX, Section 9101[34]). This mandate reflects national trends toward improved assessment literacy for educators in
requirements for teacher certification and professional standards of practice (Roach & Frank, 2007; Stiggins, 1999; Wise, 1996).

Over the past decade, we have been involved in continuing professional development (CPD) efforts for inclusive assessment practices in more than a dozen states. Our work has been guided by the integration of these experiences within a research-based model for effective CPD (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Garet et al., 1999), a case-based focus recommended from cognitive psychology (Putnam & Borko, 2000), and the use of the Internet culminating in the development of a CPD program for the Council of Exceptional Children called Assessing One and All (AOA; Braden & Elliott, 2001). AOA is an Internet-based teacher development course with the instructional goals of enhancing teachers' general assessment literacy, knowledge about and tactics for administering testing accommodations, and understanding of alternate assessment. A textbook by the same name as the Web course, Assessing One and All (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001), accompanies the course. All elements of the course also are provided on line from the Council for Exceptional Children Web site (http://www.cec.sped.org/pd/aoa.html). Research on teachers' use of the AOA program provides "proof of concept" with respect to nonstandard CPD and its ability to improve educators' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for inclusion (Huai, White, Braden, & Elliott, 2006).

On the basis of our CPD research as well as our consultative services to facilitate understanding and implementation of testing accommodations and alternate assessments in multiple states, we offer a number of observations regarding effective CPD for inclusive accountability and standards-based reform. For example, we believe CPD should situate learning with case-based illustrations to provide educators with practical information within a generalizable framework. We also have found that integrating general accommodation and support principles with specific case-based applications that use state-specific policies, forms, and practices enhances educators' understanding and application of content.

Too often, the resources allocated to change capacity for inclusive instruction and assessments are typically insufficient to the task. Brief, passive exposure (via one-shot workshop) to policies is unlikely to change educators' practice. One option is Internet-based CPD, which is effective for most, but not all, adult learners. It does, however, accommodate varied schedules of busy professionals and provides an excellent means to supplement initial training sessions. We have found that including multiple aspects of CPD certification (e.g., continuing education units, availability of college credit options) and using a variety of media (e.g., Internet, workshops, self-directed study groups, books) enhances outcomes by allowing learners to customize the CPD to their needs and learning styles.

CPD directed to general principles of assessment, accountability, and principles of accommodations should be presented jointly to general and special educators. Separately serving these constituencies is less effective in
promoting mutual understanding and providing opportunities for discourse between them. Separate activities and content focused on the state or district alternate assessment system(s) are essential for educators who serve students with disabilities, but these activities and concepts must build on general principles of assessment literacy and include information on testing accommodations to facilitate understanding of the broader context and issues in which alternate assessment occurs.

Holding educators accountable for the learning outcomes expected from CPD is also important. This can be accomplished by a variety of tactics including self-assessments; end-of-unit quizzes; and situated activities that conclude with structured, corrective feedback. In addition, these strategies facilitate identification and correction of educators’ inaccurate or erroneous understandings about assessment.

We recognize that not all of these recommendations can be used in every situation. However, we also are sensitive to the intense and immediate pressure created by federal and state goals for participation and performance in educational accountability and assessment programs. Professional development is one way to deliver expert consultation. Thus, our goal is to help enhance CPD so that it builds capacity for including students with disabilities in educational assessment and accountability programs, especially students with the most significant disabilities, and increases the reliability and validity of the results of their assessments.

The federal government has suggested that one of the goals of NCLB is to help “parents know their children’s strengths and weaknesses and how well schools are performing; [so that] they will have other options and resources for helping their children if their schools are chronically in need of improvement” (USDOE, 2003, p. 5). This is an admirable goal but one that presents serious challenges in implementation. Like the nation’s educators, many parents and family members have limited understanding of large-scale assessments and their interpretation. As such, information provided in assessment reports and school report cards (which are required by NCLB) may be difficult for parents and families to use in making decisions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program provided for their children. Consultants who are committed to social justice could take the lead in developing parent/family training and informational materials that would support their understanding of state standards and accountability systems.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED IN PROVIDING SYSTEMS-LEVEL CONSULTATION

Promoting Teacher Buy-in and Involvement

Our consultation efforts in multiple states and school districts confirm what many school-based consultants experience in their day-to-day practice:
Teachers matter! Without the commitment and involvement of educators who work with students on a daily basis, standards-based reform and accountability cannot succeed in creating equity and opportunity. For example, we have worked in multiple states to develop and validate alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Creating standards-based, classroom-embedded alternate assessments would be impossible without the support of classroom teachers who are willing to share their ideas about what students with disabilities typically can and should learn. In our work, we have been fortunate to work with and learn from many committed and creative educators who have assisted in the development classroom-based tasks and rating-scale items for assessing students’ performance.

We believe a central lesson from our consultative experiences is the necessity of making space and time for teacher collaboration. We agree with the observations of Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) that “change involves learning to do something new, and interaction is the primary basis for social learning. … The quality of working relationships among teachers is strongly related to implementation” (p. 77). Teacher isolation is a significant barrier to educational change that supports social justice. Without opportunities to interact and collaborate on a regular basis, many teachers find themselves “re-creating the wheel” rather than sharing their best ideas and most effective practices.

Another concern is the pressure that standards-based reform and accountability systems are creating for teachers and administrators. In our consultation experiences, we have witnessed many individuals going “beyond the call of duty,” putting in long hours to conduct assessments or develop curricular materials. Although some pressure may be useful for focusing individuals’ and systems’ attention on important educational goals, there are limits to the utility and appropriateness of this policy approach. Too much pressure can lead to “burnout” and diminished sense of professional efficacy. “There is much research to confirm the importance of efficacy—the sense of making a meaningful difference, of true accomplishment—in teachers’ motivation and performance. … Conversely, when one’s sense of efficacy is low … effort, engagement, and persistence weaken” (Evans, 1996, p. 95). We believe attention must be paid to the emotional costs of high-stakes accountability systems. Without appropriate support and recognition, the system cannot be assured of the continued commitment of our best and brightest educators.

The Difficulties of Building Capacity and In-System Understanding

Inclusive assessment and accountability systems require partnerships and leadership. Partnerships must be in place or developed among state special education leaders, measurement and assessment directors, teachers, and parents of students with disabilities. In many of the states we have worked in, we have observed limited partnerships and unclear leadership responsibilities.
As a result, during the early years of NCLB, there was (a) a relative absence of persons knowledgeable of students with disabilities and English language development on state-level committees responsible for developing content and achievement standards, (b) uncoordinated responsibilities for professional development on testing accommodations and alternate assessments, and (c) a lack of personnel with time and expertise to conduct studies on the effects of testing accommodations and the validity of alternate assessment scores. To address these concerns in the short term, many states either hired outside consultants; amended contracts with private test vendors to handle the “heavy lifting” involved in developing new assessments and conducting validity studies; or sought technical assistance from the federal government or one of its funded centers, such as NCEO (www.education.umn.edu/nceo) or the National Alternate Assessment Center (www.naccpartners.org). Meanwhile, ELL and special education leaders were overwhelmed with implementing the legislative requirements—professional development, parent information meetings, development of alternate content standards and new accountability reports—and continuing to attend to their many pre-NCLB responsibilities. In many states, this has resulted in a shortage of state department of education and school district staff with the multifaceted expertise needed to lead others in the development, validation, and effective use of the inclusive assessment strategies and standard-based reform.

When state department and district-level staff do acquire the needed expertise in inclusive assessment and standards-based reform, they can be overwhelmed with requests to do more, to do it faster, and to train others. Some leaders have emerged and provided states and school districts needed expertise, but many have moved on to the testing industry and private consulting groups where the work is equally intense but the pay is better. This movement of intellectual capital from public schools to private industry undermines the effectiveness of support and leadership provided to the frontline educators (e.g., classroom teachers, site administrators, and support staff) who have a daily impact on students and their families.

Building capacity in the inclusive assessment and standards-based reform arena starts with individuals who are knowledgeable of student diversity, effective instruction, measurement concepts, and assessment practices. The capacity-building process also requires educational leaders to provide the requisite support in terms of time, organizational structure, funds, and commitment to improve both instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. The process of capacity building is further advanced when educational stakeholders understand the value of inclusive assessment and early assessment results suggest movement toward increased equity and opportunity.

Consulting with states or school districts on inclusive assessment policies and practices almost always means consulting with a team of individuals
who share some common understandings but also are likely to individually possess some unique knowledge and skills. Thus, consultants often must work across departmental areas and help forge new partnerships in a climate of change and stress. To support these efforts, school-based consultants should become familiar with the concepts and strategies outlined in the educational leadership and organizational consultation literature (e.g., Elliott, 2007; Shriberg, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Future Research on Social Justice and Inclusive Accountability

Policymakers’ and the public’s support for inclusive standards-based reform and accountability systems (e.g., NCLB) is based on the assumption that improved performance (as measured by large-scale assessments) will contribute to improved life outcomes for students (e.g., improved graduation rates, higher paying jobs, decreased rates of incarceration). Although this supposition is appealing, additional research is needed to show that policies like NCLB actually affect students’ postsecondary attainment. Some researchers (e.g., Berliner, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Porter, 2005), have questioned whether the achievement gap is attributable primarily to what happens in school. Understanding how factors beyond school interact with standards-based reforms and accountability systems is essential. For example, additional research demonstrating the ways in which extracurricular activities (e.g., involvement in sports, drama, music, or church groups) contribute to students’ engagement with and subsequent performance in school could help inform and broaden consultants’ scope of practice in support of educational reforms and improved student outcomes.

Analyses of educators’ understanding and implementation of systems-level, equity-focused reforms is another potential target for consultation research. In the pursuit of richer understandings of the success or failure of reform efforts, researchers have begun to focus on variables that had previously been ignored in implementation efforts. According to Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991), “neglect of the phenomenology of change—that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended—is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms” (p. 4). To address this shortcoming, consultation researchers can attempt to “break open the black box” of implementation to determine how inclusive accountability and standards-based reforms are affected by the contextual features and interpersonal relationships within the systems targeted for change and the educators’ emotions and cognitions regarding proposed changes in practice.
Spillane (1999) suggests that educators’ capacity and commitment to successfully enact new practices depends on whether their practice context includes (a) opportunities for rich deliberations about the substance of reforms and the practicing of the reform elements with other educators and reform experts (e.g., researchers or consultants) and (b) access to material resources or artifacts that support their understanding of the proposed change. Additional research that explores how social interactions and material resources influence educators’ implementation could help guide and shape consultation practice in support of inclusive standards-based reforms and accountability systems.

Suggestions for Providing System-Level and School-Based Consultation to Support Inclusive Accountability and Standards-Based Reform

Expert consultation on inclusive assessment and standards-based reform requires command of the consulting process along with knowledge of an array of analytical and technical skills, federal regulations and state policies, methods of effective instruction, and the ongoing research on testing accommodations and alternate assessment procedures. Based on our consulting experiences with several states over the past decade, we have seven suggestions to share with others that we believe will increase the likelihood of effective consultation in these areas.

1. Effective consultants are advised to study a state’s education standards documents and Web site to ensure they understand its (content and achievement) standards framework and the array of assessment options for all students.
2. Effective consultants must use terminology consistent with state and district policies and be able to readily translate concepts such as reliability, validity, standard error of measurement, cut score, criterion-referenced score, proficiency, and AYP into meaningful examples for educators and parents.
3. Effective consultants must have a command of current system data (i.e., the percentage of students with disabilities, the percentage of students with disabilities who perform at or above the proficient level in reading and mathematics, etc.) and an accurate understanding of test scores from both the general education test and the state’s alternate assessments.
4. Effective consultants must have a comprehensive understanding of professional testing standards (i.e., AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999) and U.S. Department of Education peer review guidance documents (April 2004, Standards and Assessments Peer Review Guidance: Information and Examples).
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for Meeting Requirements of the NCLB Act of 2001) as a guiding framework for discussions about issues such as alignment, technical adequacy, and consequences of assessment.

5. Effective consultants must understand disabilities and how disabilities can affect learning and test performance. Along with this background knowledge and credibility “requirement,” it is important for consultants to have experience with instructional methods commonly used with students with disabilities and ELL students and understand methods that maximize the accessibility of curriculum and assessments for all students.

6. Effective consultants should highlight the important connections among professional development, valid assessments, and performance monitoring of educators. Systemwide changes to assessment practices require systematic continuing professional development and performance monitoring with feedback for educators.

7. Effective consultants must be able to work with teams of educators with diverse talents and knowledge and be prepared to address resistance to change among the staff members required to implement policies. If formal teams do not exist, the consultant will need to facilitate team building or collaboration across department areas to advance meaningful inclusion for students with disabilities in both the instruction and the assessment systems.

In summary, implementing inclusive instruction and assessment practices presents challenges for many educators. Consultants who can provide informed guidance and support are needed to advance the practices of educators and to facilitate accountability systems that include all students in a meaningful way. In its review of states’ progress under NCLB, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) has identified the ongoing pursuit of civil rights as one of the central issues in implementing the legislation.

At its core, NCLB is a civil rights issue and requires commitment. The 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education is a stark reminder that school integration has not been accompanied by equality of student academic achievement across color and income lines. The clearly set goals of NCLB offer an unprecedented opportunity to raise expectations and significantly narrow achievement gaps that persist in U.S. schools. (ECS, 2004, p. vii)

We agree with the ECS and believe that improving educational outcomes for all students should be one of the driving concerns for school-based consultants. As a result of these consultative efforts, we expect students and their families will experience more access, more equity, and empowerment.
REFERENCES


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