High Stakes Testing and Special Education

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High Stakes Testing and Special Education

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The original intent of testing was to determine how well a student could recall information read in text, or disseminated by the instructor regardless of the learners’ disposition. Today, tests are being designed to assess student’s abilities through the use of alternate assessments developed in response to federal legislation to determine educational standards for all students. The wrinkle however is how best to provide an appropriate method of measuring progress towards standards for students who are not able to participate in general performance assessments. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that requires annual testing of public school children in third through eighth grades. The aim was to use the results to help children, parents, and teachers know the depth of learning that is taking place and administer extra help if needed. School districts across the nation use the results of standardized tests to determine how successful current curriculum teaches different skills creating a standard measure. The standard measure was put into place to allow schools to determine a student’s ability and knowledge, and to determine relative success of the districts’ plan of implementation. While the intent is well placed, the results do not always complete the task because standardized test results are disproportionately higher in more affluent communities because of their socioeconomic circumstances. The tests also fail to make allowances for the accommodations required by students with learning disabilities to a degree that would allow for the data to be considered in the states’ assessment.
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

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M.S. Special Education

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Abstract

The original intent of testing was to determine how well a student could recall information read in text, or disseminated by the instructor regardless of the learners’ disposition. Today, tests are being designed to assess student’s abilities through the use of alternate assessments developed in response to federal legation to determine educational standards for all students. The wrinkle however is how best to provide an appropriate method of measuring progress towards standards for students who are not able to participate in general performance assessments.

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High Stakes Testing and Special Education

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# Table of Contents

- Abstract .......................................................... 1
- Table of Contents ............................................... 2
- Introduction ...................................................... 3
- Review of the Literature .................................... 3
- Method ............................................................. 12
- Results .............................................................. 12
- Discussion ......................................................... 19
- Conclusion ........................................................ 21
- References ......................................................... 23
- Appendix ............................................................ 25
The original intent of testing was to determine how well a student could recall information read in text, or disseminated by the instructor regardless of the learners’ disposition. Today, tests are being designed to assess student’s abilities through the use of alternate assessments developed in response to federal legislation, to determine educational standards for all students. The wrinkle however is how best to provide an appropriate method of measuring progress towards standards for students who are not able to participate in general performance assessments.

Testing is older than many realize; Socrates tested students through conversations, Plato inspired efforts to detail intelligence with the idea of giving power to the most adept, and in 1905, Alfred Binet and Theophile Simon authored A Method of Measuring the Development of the Intelligence of Young Children. Each person wanted to determine the depth of discernment within a young child or student. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that requires annual testing of public school children in third through eighth grades. The aim was to use the results to help children, parents, and teachers know the depth of learning that is taking place and administer extra help if needed (“Four Pillars of NCLB”, 2009).

Review of Literature

As high-stakes tests have become ingrained in public education, teachers across the country are feeling the intensified pressures to meet new testing policies. These decisions
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

may include whether or not a student graduates high school or is promoted from one grade to another, and they may also include the salary scales and tenure status of teachers and principles. As part of the accountability movement inherent in NCLB, stakes are also deemed high because the results of test, as well as the ranking and categorization of schools, teachers, and children that extend from those results, are reported to the public (Fuchs, Fuchs, and Capizzi 2005).

Under *No Child Left Behind*, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. School districts across the nation use the results of standardized tests to determine how successful current curriculum teaches different skills, creating a standard measure. The standard measure was put into place to allow schools to determine a student’s ability and knowledge, and to determine relative success of the districts’ plan of implementation. While the intent is well placed, the results do not always complete the task because standardized test results are disproportionately higher in more affluent communities because of their socioeconomic circumstances. The tests also fail to make allowances for the accommodations required by students with learning disabilities to a degree that would allow for the data to be considered in the states’ assessment (Fuchs et al, 2005).

There are parents and teachers that will argue standardized tests provide the opportunity to know the position of schools and students. President of Public Agenda,
Deborah Wadsworth, found only ten percent or fewer parents felt their children suffered adverse affects from standardized testing: too much pressure academically, too much homework, or too many standardized tests. Tests are powerful in making teachers prepare students to take a test correctly, rather than presenting the opportunity to learn from specific subject areas. Whether or not you believe standardized testing provides enough data to help students, funding is now based upon their results (McNeil, 2000). A student’s full abilities need to be the focus of any test. Test results used strictly to measure a school systems ability to teach, and not focus on an individual’s ability, provides administrators and teachers the ability to focus on teaching students how to complete tasks rather than test taking skills. Teaching skills and encouraging students to apply the knowledge learned inside a classroom in real life situations should remain the goal of any educational facility or standardized test. (Kohn, 2001).

The most common type of standardized test is the norm-referenced test in which a student’s performance is systematically compared with the performance of other, presumably similar students. Minimum competency and criterion-referenced tests, those that measure student performance against established criteria, can also be standardized. However, not coincidentally, most vilification has been leveled at standardized, norm-referenced tests. Among the current criticism, a few stand out as most pervasive and most bothersome to those who worry over whether to support or oppose standardized testing, with perhaps the most serious being that such achievement tests do not promote student
learning. Critics charge that standardized achievement tests provide little direct support for authentic education, namely, what goes on in the classroom. They do nothing, critics contend, to enhance the learning process, diagnose learning problems, or provide students rapid feedback (Worthen, 1991).

Another criticism is that the content of standardized achievement tests is often mismatched with the content emphasized in a school’s curriculum and classrooms because of the inherent nature of the test. Because standardized test are intended for broad use, they make no pretense of fitting precisely and equally well with the specific content being taught in widely differing classrooms. Instead, they attempt to sample what is typically taught to most students in most school districts, resulting in a test that reflects most curriculums a little, but reflects none precisely (Worthen, 1991). Often this can lead to big gaps where whole lessons and units and months of instruction are skimmed over or left out altogether. Or an emphasis may seem wrong with too much attention paid to a particular component, while another isn’t properly covered. If standardized tests were thousand of items long and took days to administer, they’d probably be better predictors, but in their current form there are significant problems with the sample size (Cannon, 2006).

Additional serious indictments aimed at standardized achievement and aptitude measurements include that they are racially, culturally, and socially biased. Most published tests, critics claim, favor economically and socially advantaged children over their counterparts from lower socioeconomic families. Minority group members note that
many tests have disproportionately negative impact on their chances for equal opportunities in education and employment. We must acknowledge that even well intentioned uses of tests can disadvantage those unfamiliar with the concepts and language of the majority culture producing the tests (Williams, 1983). The predictable result is cultural and social bias that fails to reflect or take into account the full range of the student’s cultural and social background. A conviction that testing is biased against minorities has led some critics to call for a moratorium on testing and has also prompted most of the legal challenges issued against minimum competency tests or the use of norm-referenced standardized tests to classify students. It is tempting in the face of abuse to outlaw testing, but simplistic reactionary solutions rarely work well. (Evelyn & Johnson, 2004)

Schools and colleges have often been criticized for the lack of standard curriculum. Institutional heads especially have been blamed for their lack of concentration on instructional methods so that their students often fail in the standard tests. On the other hand, opponents of the standard tests are of the opinion that they are not only responsible for making the process of testing difficult but promote institutions to focus their curriculum to only the curriculum of the tests. They do not focus on the value of education and on knowledge acquisition. By making the process of learning standardized, educational institutions are ignoring social aspects. For the students who receive special education services, the new demands for public accountability for student achievement represents a
major shift from an accountability model that was grounded in individually referenced
individualized education program (IEP) goals (Gagnon, 2004). Federal legislation now
requires that students with disabilities be provided access to the general education
curriculum with the expectation that every student will be held to the same high
expectations as their typical peers.

Another impediment to standardizing curriculums is the lack of preparation that
special educators receive which may limit them from being able to provide appropriate
content area instruction. Scholars also recognize that although special education teachers
may not have this knowledge, general education teachers do. Hence they recommend
school-based collaboration as a vehicle for joining the two knowledge bases and
developing the professional knowledge of special education teachers. Simply enabling
collaboration in professional development efforts, however, fails to recognize that some
special education teachers may not be ready to participate productively in collaboration. In
addition to lacking content knowledge, many special education teachers may not be well-
prepared to implement basic research-validated routines and strategies. This is most
obvious when considering the shortages of highly qualified special education teachers have
prompted the development of a plethora of alternative programs all of which differ in
duration and quality (Jenkins & Pany, 1978).

Educators have experienced student resistance to changes in testing formats,
especially in environments where students are accustomed to taking a specific type of test
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

over another and have developed a testing preference. In a classroom where mathematics is the subject of choice, this type of student bias can have a potential adverse reaction to testing and can negatively impact student grades (Jenkins & Pany, 1978). Changing testing formats in mathematics classrooms is therefore a significant challenge for educators who both wish to encourage the accessibility of the testing process for students and also to ensure that students can familiarize themselves with multiple assessment models. It is also important for those in special education to understand that, for many classroom teachers, enhanced performance of students with learning disabilities or other low-performing students is only one concern among many (Cannon, 2006). For example, the classroom teacher may have a mandated curriculum guideline to follow and mandated course content to teach without the additional concern of accommodating special education students.

It has been shown in some research that students with disabilities learn concepts more effectively when using hands-on or activity-based curriculum materials (Lynch, 2007). This is something that is disconcerting as it fails to align with traditional models that have historically used pen and paper assessments to evaluate student learning, with two of the most common being those that use multiple choice and open-ended essay questions. Both however have significant limitations in that multiple-choice tests are not suited for determining a student’s ability to apply critical thinking skills and carry out complex tasks and open-ended tests are not able to be machined scored (Lynch, 2007).
The presence of individual subjectivity in grading essays makes comparing scores problematic as it allows for a lack of conformity.

Comparable age ranges, class, and child development are considered when administering tests. The state of Tennessee assesses early education students, usually kindergarten through eighth grade, by administering the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) Achievement Test every spring. The policy states that students entering the ninth grade in the 2001-2002 school year must successfully pass exams in three separate Gateway Tests; Math, Science and Language. Failed tests result in not issuing high school diplomas. Gateway tests were created in an effort to help students improve their performance, improve the effectiveness of instructional delivery in a school or school system as well as provide accountability to students, teachers, and school systems alike (Tennessee High School Examination Policy, 2008).

The alignment of test content with standards is not a new concept. It has existed in one way or another since the beginning of the use of formal tests to aid in decision making. Alignment is a basic element in the body of evidence related to the validity of test score interpretations, particularly for achievement tests. However, the meaning and methods of determining if an assessment system is aligned with content specifications has expanded in the past few years (Bhola, 2003). The struggle has been to evaluate alternate assessments as a method of testing for the same content standards that are required for general education students. When first faced with the problem of the quality of such assessments,
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

it was decided that for alternate assessments to have the credibility, they would be required to meet the same standards as any mainstream evaluation. These assessments are being designed to measure how well the students have learned the knowledge and skills represented by the content standards (Marion, 2006).

Alternate assessment is a generic term for a family of methods used to assess the academic performance of students with significant 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 adequate yearly progress (Elliott & Roach, 2007) Alternative assessments are becoming an important component of each state’s assessment system, and as such, are required to meet the federal regulations outlined in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act.

During each of the past several years, the educational achievement of thousands of students with significant cognitive disabilities in the United States has not been accounted for in a meaningful and statistically sound manner, even though a vast majority of these students have participated in state-level alternative assessments. This situation, while perhaps unintentional, has significant implications for these students, their teachers, and others invested in the educational accountability of all school-aged children.

“Unfortunately, the alternate assessments currently in use in a number of states are
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

...technically flawed because of (a) poor alignment with content standards (b) unreliable scores and/or (c) proficiency scores that are not consistent with NCLB” (Elliot & Roach, 2007, p. 303). In essence, many alternate assessments designed in response to NCLB requirements do not meet the standards established for educational tests, making it impossible to determine how well students with significant disabilities are achieving against standards-based criteria.

The main alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities that is used in over half of the schools nationwide, is a portfolio assessment that complies evidence of student achievement related to the state’s content standards. Many states now require that teachers follow certain standards and meet grade-level expectations and portfolios allow teachers to provide evidence of meeting these standards (Harris, 2009). The portfolio should include several basic features including a student profile, table of contents, and entries that address each of the state content standards assessed that may include but are not limited to reading, writing, and mathematics (Zucker, 2003). The content evidence in the portfolio allows for the results to be related to the state standards and therefore with those of the general population. That correlation for students in the alternate system would mean that their scores would be aggregated in a meaningful way while still allowing for specific learning disability accommodations.

And while many districts acknowledge the limitations in technical adequacy of the information gained through portfolio assessment, is has been the most accountable system...
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

for special education students. An alternate assessment portfolio provides an appropriate
method of measuring progress on state goals and standards for students who are not able to
participate in the states general tests while still ensuring that students will be able to use the
accommodations outlined in their IEP. A portfolio can also provide different benefits for
children, families and teachers. Children can experience a sense of pride when looking
over their work. Teachers and families can see the progress the children in class have
made over time. Teachers can use this information to improve teaching and support
learning (Harris, 2009).

Another option would be to alter the content areas to more closely reflect the types
of instruction considered best practice for students with disabilities. This can be seen in the
practice of granting local diplomas to special education students who could not
successfully meet state standards. This would, however, make comparisons of scores on
the alternate assessment with scores on the state’s high-stakes assessment system
impossible. It would additionally also directly contradict with the ideas put for the NCLB
that requires that all students be accounted for in state assessment (Williams, 1983).

Method

The study was based on the perceived success and failures of high stakes in special
education and was plan and carried out according to the following methodology:

I. Data Collection:
   Surveys were distributed
II. Participants:
Teachers of special education students in a suburban high school in Upstate New York.

III. Data Analysis:
The surveys will be reviewed and compared to identify possible trends.

Additionally, confidentiality will be established in the following ways:

- All of my records will remain in my possession at all times and will only be seen by my advisor and myself.
- All records will be maintained in a manner that allows me to deny others access to them.
- No individual characteristics that can be traced to individuals will appear in the final report.

Results and Discussion

Opinion and background surveys were distributed to the faculty members of a High School located in Upstate New York during February of 2010. They were given to a variety of members of the special education department as well as various content teachers who have had significant experience with co-teaching and teaching assistants.

Respondents were chosen based upon their association with students with disabilities but results were submitted anonymous. Of the twenty surveys distributed, twelve were received in time to be reviewed and considered for the results of this paper. The following are the results to each of the survey questions. Where applicable, I have removed duplicate answers in the interest of space and organization.
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

The first question of the survey asked them to identify specific strategies that they have provided to help students prepare standardized tests, respondents complied the following list:

- Actively study each day
- Choose a quiet, non-distracting place to study
- Study for short focused blocks of time
- Organize new information using outlines, charts, flashcards, timelines, and concept maps
- Occasionally study with a friend and quiz one another and compare notes
- Switch the types of tasks you are working on to help you maintain focus
- Keep a note pad on your study table to jot down a brief reminders
- Turn the distraction, into a reward. Once you master this idea, reward yourself.
- To counteract boredom or lack of interest, try to identify the cause.
- Established a good physical environment
- Review notes
- Determine a realistic goal to strive towards
- Ask others for help

The assembled list was a rather predictable amalgamation of common teaching practices that one would expect from experienced professions. I would consider each strategy to be a component of an overall plan of success for many different learning styles. I would however caution applying each of these without first considering the individual needs of the student in question because I believe that universal measures are rarely appropriate, if ever, for all students. And while I wouldn’t expect any of the previous suggestions to be especially harmful if applied to most students, I would also not expect equally advantageous results.
When asked to comment on the extent of success or failures for the previously identified services, responses fell into two distinctive groups, successful or unresponsive. The majority of the respondents valued the suggested strategies they themselves listed but there were several who believed that some of the exact same tools they employ in the classroom were ineffective. It was rather perplexing that teachers who identified particular strategies would then immediately label them as unresponsive considering they were just asked to list strategies they use to help students prepare for tests. I would imagine that those who believed specific teaching techniques were ineffective felt that way because of a particular experience with a student(s) who for whatever reason did not find it beneficial and not and overall condemnation. Through my experiences I have routinely discovered that for ever successful implementation of a teaching strategy, there are several instances were students had less than ideal responses due to a variety of reasons. This however is only an inference on my part however and it could very well be that teachers are using modus operandi that they themselves don’t believe in.

Survey takers were additionally asked to consider other potential services available to use in your district that are currently not in place, and identify which one they believe would be the most helpful.

- Effective time management
- Analytical thinking skills
- Dyslexia training
- Operant conditioning
- Sign language training
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

- Accelerated Reading
- Immersion (foreign language)

The prospective lists offers insight into the wide variety of differing views held by teachers that speaks volumes about how teachers value certain programs. They do however present serious and potentially impossible funding problems as they all would require some sort of additional instruction and considering the current budgetary issues faced statewide, discretionary spending would likely be at a premium. Realistically, unless an identified program could be added to instruction already in place I would hesitate to even considering any of these potential ideas.

Beyond the wishful programs outline in the previous question, the survey asked what professional training, if any, respondents received that would allow them to successful prepare students for standardized tests. The vast majority indicated at least one professional development seminars which have been merged into more generalized groupings.

- Professional development seminars:
  - Creating units to support differing learning styles
  - Developing critical thinking skills for research
  - Utilizing technology
  - Creating a problem-based curriculum
  - Differentiated instruction
  - Multiple Intelligence
  - Assessments and evaluations
  - SMART board

- Regents test writing/grading
- Undergraduate and graduate course work
- Master teacher collaborator (for untenured teachers)
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

While the compiled list is an impressive testament to the continuing development of skills and techniques, none of the listed programs were specifically designed to prepare students for success on the year end tests. And while there could be an argument made that some of the potential programs could contribute to students improvement, the glaring lack of any dedicated program speaks to the currently gap between curriculum design and reality. As much as parents, teachers and administration value test scores, we still do not have programs designed to improve test scores. So the lack of evidence to the contrary would seem to suggest that there are some fundamental discrepancies in how we as educators go about preparing students for what we have already admitted to being highly valued.

When considering their training and experience, respondents were asked what skills they have developed to assist students prepare for cumulative tests. The following is a list of responses:

- Effective classroom teaching to varied audiences in terms of subject matter
- Ability to convey the competence in subject matter and confidence in one’s ability to teach
- Ability to develop course curriculum and individual lessons
- Effective use of common instructional aids, including audiovisual techniques
- Ability to help students understand the general principles and concepts underlying a particular lesson
- Ability to explain both basic and difficult concepts clearly
- Ability to put a specific lesson into larger context (clinical relevance, prior material)
- Ability to ask good questions (testing, study, case histories)
- Ability to provide feedback to students
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

- Awareness of the strengths and limitations of various means for evaluating teaching performance
- Ability to adjust lesson plan based on information garnered from student questions
- Ability to foster an effective learning environment including showing respect for the student, encouraging their intellectual growth and providing a role model for scholarship and intellectual vigor

Educators, especially in the highly regulated culture of our state, are if nothing else well trained to provide high level of instruction. The list of developed tests is an obvious example of just how much we as a culture are willing to invest in the process to ensure quality results. However, I would argue that while all the provided items are generally considered beneficial, they are not specifically designed to improve test scores. And while I realize that by implementing these strategies throughout the year a student might be better prepared to face the challenges associated with cumulative evaluations, there is some part of me that would argue that unless you specifically provide opportunities for students to learn how to actually take the test, you are missing something.

Survey takers were then asked if they believe that all students should be required to take standardized tests. The answers rather expectantly fell into those that agree with high stakes testing and those who are opposed. Of those that agree with standardized tests, the following rational were given:

- Students know what is expected and that the test really counts, so they work harder.
- Schools identify and can address student weaknesses early.
- Schools discover areas of overall weakness, prompting them to refocus resources where they are most needed.
- Education across the state is more consistent, eliminating situations where schools in some districts are superior to others.
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

- Accountability to the public

Conversely, those that disagreed with standardized test, the following rational were given:

- Scores are unreliable
- Lack of objectivity
- Bias against students with disabilities and minorities
- Increased test anxiety
- Produces teachers who are forced to teach to the test
- Misinforms the public
- Drives out good teachers
- Increases grade retention and drop-out rate

Those that disagreed with the current testing model where additionally asked if there are any alternative assessments they believe should or could be used to assess students who have IEP’s. The following are a list of the potential evaluations that they cited:

- Portfolio assessment
- IEP & local diplomas
- Hands-on or activity-based curriculum

Of those alternative assessments identified, respondents were asked to what extent, if any, do you believe the assessments could or have been successful. All responses were distinctly positive and in favor of alternative assessments. Because respondents had already acknowledged that they disagreed with current model in favor or alternative assessments, their responses were predictably flattering towards their previous suggestions.

It would be contradictory for those who would be in favor of reversing the legislation
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

behind NCLB to disagree with their own suggestions. It is still unclear at this point which alternative assessment would be the most widely accepted.

Per the directives outlined in IEP’s, students who qualify are eligible to receive additional assistance in the form of small group in order to help them develop and foster specific academic goals. Accordingly, the survey asked respondents to what extent, if any do they believe academic support (study skills) have on student grade point averages. Of the Special Education teachers polled, all of the agreed that study skills are a positive influence on a students’ grade point average, while the content teachers were spilt on the effectiveness of the service. From both informal discussions with various faculty throughout the year and the interviews conducted as part of the requirements of this class, the most prevalent reasons given from teachers who quested academic support was that they were unacquainted of the daily activities and responsibilities. This would point to a need for both the district and Special Educations teachers to somehow make their daily activities more accessible to other staff.

Additionally, they were asked to consider to what extent, if any, do they believe academic support (study skills) have on students scores on standardized tests. Of those that answered, 60% believe that their teaching has a significant impact on student success, 30% believed they had a moderate influence and the rest thought that student success was wholly decided by the student. This question specifically asked teachers to reflect on their
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

potential to positively impact scores which has historically been a sensitive issue as it is commonly brought into discussions surrounding merit based pay scale.

And finally, survey takers were asked if there are alternatives to academic support (study skills) that you believe would be beneficial to students with IEP’s. Responses were limited on this question to issues raised concerning the administrations handling of the Special Education department over the past year. Respondents identified staffing issues wherein teachers are paired with content teachers for successive years to help build cohesiveness, limit the number of supervisory periods, and follow students throughout their progression in high school. Budgetary cutbacks and declining classifications have played significant roles in the overall moral and effectiveness of both teachers and staff since the hiring of a new superintendent that drastically redefined the criteria of how students are referred for additional support.

Achievement test batteries are designed around what is thought to be the content of the school curriculum as determined by surveys of textbooks, teachers, and other tests. Textbook and curriculums are designed on the other hand in part around the content of tests. One cannot discern which side leads and which follows, each side influences the other, yet nothing assures us that both are tied to an intelligent conceptualization of what an educated person ought to be taught. And while no test is perfect, taken as whole, educational and psychological measurements are incapable of harming students’; it is instead the way in which their results can be misused that is potentially harmful.
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

We would hope that teachers use a broad range of curricular materials and activities that address standards—what we have identified as important for students to know and be able to do. Teaching to the test is not a new practice brought about by NCLB. Teachers have been doing it for as long as standardized tests have been used to make important educational decisions. Years ago, William Mehrens stated, "Although teaching to the test is not a new concern, today's greater emphasis on teacher accountability can make this practice more likely to occur. Depending on how it is done, teaching to the test can be either productive or counterproductive." Educators will observe, however, that current test prep efforts do include using questions from old tests, which state departments of education release. Technically, these are not parallel forms of the same test.

What has become apparent through both my research and literature review is that there are steps to be taken to match the value we have placed on test scores to the preparation we give students to ensure they are successful. Regardless of your individual opinion about the morality of high stakes testing, with our current system being what it is, we must as responsible educators be sure that we are not setting our young people up for failure.

So how does one plan for good instruction? For many teachers, instruction has come to mean addressing as many standards as possible. But, state exams do not test every benchmark annually. To assist teachers with providing good instruction leading to improved student outcomes, some have suggested that teachers have copies of standards
and frameworks for each subject they teach, and use them along with related state documents to plan lessons in regularly scheduled grade-level or subject matter team meetings. In addition to identifying a topic and rationale, a truly standards based lesson would include statements of specific content standards to be addressed in the lesson, objectives that translate the standards into outcomes-based language. This means that objectives include descriptions of student behaviors or products that should result from the instruction. Additionally, curriculum materials and instructional activities sequenced to elicit the performances stated in the objectives and assessments of student work should be based on performances and behaviors identified in the objectives.

Conclusion

Controversy exists between how best to assess a widely varying school population, and public school teachers and their students are caught up in this controversy. Teachers have a responsibility to help students understand and deal intelligently with this controversy as they teach the material to their students as part of their content curriculum. To inform the discretion of their students, and enable them to deal sensibly with the controversy between methods, teachers much help their students understand the issues involving them and the methods of the course. The theory underlying high-stakes accountability oversimplifies how behavior is conditioned by rewards and punishments. Extrinsic sources of motivation actually undermine natural curiosity and a student’s enjoyment of learning. Punitive consequences achieve temporary compliance at the cost of demoralizing teachers and students. The fundamental criticism
of high-stakes accountability systems is that they rely excessively on extrinsic motivation at the expense of intrinsic motivation. Some of the negative consequences of high-stakes accountability systems include higher dropout and retention rates, lower motivation, teaching to the test, and unethical test preparation.

The one clear conclusion regarding alternate assessment systems is the conscious opinion that they need to undergo the same degree of scrutiny as general education assessments. The critical element of standards-based reform is the notion that well designed; high-quality tests will be the impetus for improving instructional practices. But the reality is that assessment is only a piece of a well constructed curriculum that all students require to be successful. And although considerable practical challenges exist when developing assessments for students with disabilities, it will remain a worthy exercise to help ensure proper testing for all students.
High Stakes Testing and Special Education

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High Stakes Testing and Special Education

Appendix A

Special Education Evaluation Survey

1. What specific strategies, if any, have you provided to help prepare students for standardized tests?

2. To what extent, if any, do you believe these strategies (referenced in question 1) have been successful?

3. What specific strategies, if any, do you believe would be helpful to prepare students for standardized tests that you currently do not employ?

4. What training, if any, have you received that would allow you to successfully prepare students for standardized tests?

5. What skills, if any, have you develop as a result of your position and experience to help students be successful on standardized tests?

6. Do you believe that all students be required to take standardized tests? (If possible, please elaborate your answer.)

7. Are there any alternative assessments you believe should or could be used to assess students who have IEP’s?

8. To what extent, if any, do you believe the assessments (referenced in question 7) could or have been successful?

9. To what extent, if any do you believe academic support (study skills) have on student grade point averages?

10. To what extent, if any, do you believe academic support (study skills) have on students scores on standardized tests?

11. Are there alternatives to academic support (study skills) that you believe would be beneficial to students with IEP’s?