

ATTACHMENT

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND AND REFERENCE INFORMATION FOR 84.324F

Background: Large-scale assessments of student achievement are key components of educational accountability and reform, and no area of achievement receives more attention than reading. Reading is an essential skill for functioning in school and in adult life. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires States to assess student proficiency in “mathematics and reading or language arts” to help in determining if schools are making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward the goal of academic proficiency for all students. This law clearly reflects the importance of holding schools accountable for developing and assessing reading proficiency for students. However, for students who have disabilities that affect reading, conventional assessments of achievement can be problematic.

A variety of disabilities can affect reading, such as blindness and other visual impairments, specific learning disabilities, mental retardation, deafness and other hearing impairments, and orthopedic or health impairments that impede the physical components of reading. Approximately half of the students receiving special education are identified as having specific learning disabilities, and it is estimated that 70 percent to 80 percent of the students with specific learning disabilities have reading difficulties (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Lerner, 1989; Kavale & Reese, 1992). Students with deafness or other hearing impairments often have deficits in reading achievement, with some studies reporting that their average reading comprehension is roughly six grade equivalents lower than the hearing population at age 15 (Karchmer & Mitchell, 2002). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 found that secondary-aged students in all categories of disability averaged below-grade-level reading achievement. For example, students with specific learning disabilities averaged 3.4 years below grade level. For students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, or deaf-

blindness the average discrepancy was 2.6 years, 3.6 years, and 5.3 years, respectively. For students with orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, or traumatic brain injury, the discrepancy was 2.8 years, 2.4 years, and 4.6 years, respectively. The largest discrepancies were found for students with mental retardation or multiple disabilities, whose reading achievement averaged 6.3 and 5.8 years below grade level, respectively (Blackorby, Chorost, Garza, & Guzman, 2003).

For most current assessment instruments, reading deficits are addressed through accommodations such as Braille, large print, magnifying equipment, oral presentation of instructions and/or test items, signing, extended time and paraphrasing. Such accommodations are used with relative frequency in State assessments (Thurlow, 2001). Problems arise when accommodations compromise the validity and comparability of assessments, and this issue becomes particularly acute when students who have disabilities that affect reading are included in large-scale reading assessments. For some accommodations, such as large print and magnification, expert opinion generally holds that threats to validity and comparability on reading assessments are minimal (Bielinski, Sheinker, & Ysseldyke, 2003). However, other accommodations, such as oral presentation of reading tests, signing reading tests, paraphrasing, extended time, and Braille are thought to threaten validity and are “non-allowed” accommodations on many tests and in many States (Bielinski, et al., 2003; Thurlow, House, Boys, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 2000; Sireci, Li, & Scarpati, 2003). For students needing those accommodations, it is sometimes impossible for currently available large-scale tests of reading proficiency to produce scores that are valid and comparable to the general population.

On the face of it, it may be counterintuitive to discuss the assessment of reading proficiency for students who have disabilities that limit their ability to read. One might simply argue that if they can't read to take the reading test, then they can't read. However, this is an oversimplification and

misstatement of the student population, the purposes of assessment, and the nature of reading. Among this population are students with remediable reading deficits for whom schools must be accountable for achieving grade-level proficiency in reading (as required under NCLB) and for whom progress toward proficiency must be assessed. Also among this population are students who may never be able to read in the conventional sense (for example students with blindness), and students who may always be dependent on accommodations or supports to read (for example some students with severe learning disabilities, mental retardation, or physical disabilities). For such students, schools must still be held accountable for developing reading proficiency to the equivalent of grade level, although the topography of reading for these students may differ from the norm.

Large-scale assessments can have different purposes, and sometimes several purposes are addressed in a single assessment. For example, NCLB requires that State assessments not only provide information necessary for determining AYP, but also produce individual student interpretive, descriptive, and diagnostic reports that allow parents, teachers, and principals to understand and address the specific academic needs of students, and include information regarding achievement on academic assessments aligned with State academic achievement standards (Sec. 1111(b)(3)(C)(xii)). Thus, the failure of a test to provide a meaningful score not only precludes the student's demonstration of academic proficiency, but it also denies essential information to the parents and the schools as they endeavor to improve student achievement.

The nature of reading and literacy are topics of continued debate, and a precise and universal definition of "reading" is elusive. A recent analysis of State reading or literacy standards found that the specific standards vary from State to State but tend to share the following common themes: (1) literacy defined as acquisition of discrete skills such as phonemic knowledge, word recognition, and fluency; (2) literacy defined as knowledge of conventions and/or elements in print, such as

expository elements, print conventions, and context; (3) literacy defined as an interactive, thinking activity involving such elements as inferential comprehension, critical analysis, and higher-order thinking; (4) literacy defined as a catalyst for personal growth involving such elements as vocabulary development, and reflection on self and culture; and (5) literacy defined as a problem solving tool involving such elements as mining information, following directions, and solving problems (Thompson, Johnstone, Thurlow, & Clapper, 2004). Judging from their standards, States clearly view literacy as a complex and meaningful activity. This view is consistent with current formulations of reading as a complex interplay of factors such as text, purpose, reader characteristics, and context, with changes occurring, in part, as a result of social changes and new technologies (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, 2002).

Principles of universal design have been proposed to make assessments more accessible for students with disabilities while maintaining validity and comparability of scores (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002; Sireci, et al., 2003). Tests that are designed to be inherently accessible and valid for the widest possible range of students can avoid many of the problems associated with assessment accommodations and modifications, and can reduce the need for accommodations, modifications and alternate assessments. Based on the preceding discussion, certain principles can be suggested for making large-scale assessments of reading proficiency more accessible for students who have disabilities that affect reading. For example, such assessments should be based on constructs of reading that permit flexible expression of reading proficiency while maintaining the validity and comparability of scores. These instruments should reflect the complex nature of reading and, to the extent possible, allow individual student profiles of performance (and perhaps growth) to be summarized and aggregated across students. Accommodations necessary for the participation of students with disabilities should be usable without threatening validity and comparability. Format

and readability factors that are unrelated to the constructs of interest should be controlled.

Assessment results should be robust and stable enough to allow for monitoring group trends across years despite changes in student populations. And, high expectations for student achievement of full reading proficiency should be maintained, regardless of the flexibility the student is given in expressing reading achievement. These principles are suggestive and not intended to be final or exhaustive.

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