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Educational Accountability and Reforms: Impact of One-Size-Fits-All Outcomes on Students with Disabilities

Louisiana's shift to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has created a lot of attention with some people questioning and advocating against Louisiana's movement toward these standards. The effects the CCSS are anticipated to have on students with disabilities were mostly already issues with the existing grade level expectations¹ and the accountability system. In fact, most of the issues opponents of the CCSS have raised do not appear to be created by the CCSS, at least not the standards themselves. This article will describe how the education reform movements using the one-size-fits-all approach of performance on standardized tests to define winners and losers is the core issue, with or without the CCSS.

Prior to sharing the perspective of how students with disabilities are the ultimate losers in the "Education Competition," a brief explanation will be provided to give information related to the perspective on the CCSS. Many arguments against the use of the CCSS are not about the standards. The CCSS are standards.² The CCSS are not a curriculum, they are not a test, there are not any CCSS mandated instructional materials, and the CCSS do not have any required readings or texts. While some of the CCSS include some higher-order skills than Louisiana's previous Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs), there is a high level of alignment (i.e., more similarities than differences) between the GLEs and the CCSS.³ There have been concerns raised about how the CCSS were developed, who is financing the push to use them (and who will likely profit), whether standards are a movement to a federal curriculum, or issues with poorly developed instructional models or content that is not appropriate for young children. However, none of these issues are related to the actual standards in CCSS. While people may have concerns related to these issues, these issues are not directly related to the standards themselves.

Is Education Crisis Real?

A presentation by Christopher Tienken, Ed.D. provides great insight not into the CCSS as much as whether there is really an education crisis and whether schools are failing.⁴ This is critical since the argument for all of the education reforms occurring is based on the point that public schools are

¹ Louisiana Academic Standards and Grade Level Expectations <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/academic-standards>

² The Common Core State Standards <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>

³ Louisiana Elementary and Secondary Education Waiver application contains an alignment comparison between the Louisiana Grade Level Expectations and Common Core State Standards (p. 30) <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/la.pdf>

⁴ Don't Drink the Common Core Kool Aid, Presentation by Christopher Tienken, Ed.D. September 24, 2013.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us1tqamLzPU>





failing. If there really is not a crisis in education and schools are not really failing, it brings up more questions than which academic standards are used to measure academic progress (and success or failure) of schools and students. This week Superintendent John White provided additional information that schools are succeeding with educating kids to higher levels. Superintendent White reported that students in Louisiana schools today are a full grade level ahead of students ten years ago. And, the percentage of Louisiana students in poverty and with disabilities scoring basic and above on the LEAP and iLEAP tests has been increasing in Louisiana schools.⁵ The issue of whether schools are failing is critical since it is not the movement to the CCSS but how success is defined and measured in schools that is creating concern and the perception of a crisis. Perhaps the transition to the CCSS would not have been such a big deal if how students performed on measurements of the standards were not high stakes. It seems the more important issue to discuss is not which standards are used but HOW results of student performance are used.

What is the Accountability System Measuring?

Basing performance of schools, teachers and students only on how the students perform on standardized academic assessments creates major problems for students with disabilities. Student performance on standardized academic tests determines whether schools, teachers and students receive labels of success or failure. Schools identified as failing risk state takeover or losing students (and funding) to private or charter schools. Teachers who fail to have their students reach established targets risk poor job performance and eventually loss of pay increases, or risk getting fired. Students who fail may not be promoted to the next grade level, may have to participate in summer remediation, or may be promoted to the next grade without the skills and knowledge base to succeed in the next grade level.

A one-size-fits-all approach would be fine if there was an even playing field – that is if ‘all things were equal.’ But all things are not equal, particularly for students with disabilities and the teachers and schools that serve them. Unfortunately, the current rules required to win the “Education Competition” create an incentive for schools to choose players that perform well and this creates the “Segregation Solution.”

School performance scores are based on student performance and students with disabilities tend not to score as well on these tests as students without disabilities. Considering students with disabilities are identified because their educational performance is adversely impacted by their disability it really matters if an accountability system determines success on standardized academic test scores. This accountability system is basically identifying how few (or many) students with disabilities are served in

⁵ Louisiana Department of Education presentation to the Minimum Foundation Program Task Force September 23, 2013 (slides 23 & 32 for percentage of students in poverty and with disabilities scoring at Basic and Above)
[http://www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9BTJWZ4F3E1F/\\$file/MFP%20Task%20Force%20Presentation%209%2023%2013%20updated.pdf](http://www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9BTJWZ4F3E1F/$file/MFP%20Task%20Force%20Presentation%209%2023%2013%20updated.pdf)





a school. And that is basically what is revealed in the data. Simple math would suggest that increasing the amount of students with disabilities in a school will tend to result in lowering the school’s performance score. And that is exactly what is happening.

Do Successful Schools Serve All Children?

The assessments and accountability system do a great job of further identifying that students have disabilities or that schools serve more students with disabilities. School performance scores (SPS) are strongly influenced by which students are served in a school. Much has been written about the impact (inverse relationship) of the percentage of students in poverty on school performance scores.⁶ And, not surprisingly, schools with high percentages of students with disabilities tend to be labeled as failing. Schools with the high scores tend to have the low percentages of students with disabilities and students in poverty. The table below shows data on the average SPS, percentage of students participating in free and reduced lunch (i.e., below 250 percent poverty) and the average percentage of students with disabilities in schools grouped as either high, middle or low within each of the grade levels assigned to schools.

| | | Average SPS 2011 | Average Percentage of Students on Free and Reduced Lunch (Poverty) | Average Percentage of Students with Disabilities |
|-------------|------------------------------|------------------|--|--|
| “A” Schools | High A | 149 | 31.1% | 3.6% |
| | Middle A | 128 | 39.9% | 8.0% |
| | Low A | 121 | 47.5% | 9.1% |
| “B” Schools | High B | 116 | 49.8% | 9.4% |
| | Middle B | 111 | 54.2% | 10.0% |
| | Low B | 107 | 60.4% | 10.2% |
| “C” Schools | High C | 102 | 62.9% | 10.3% |
| | Middle C | 98 | 69.1% | 11.3% |
| | Low C | 93 | 74.5% | 10.6% |
| “D” Schools | High D | 87 | 81.7% | 11.4% |
| | Middle D | 79 | 86.6% | 12.0% |
| | Low D | 71 | 91.2% | 11.3% |
| “F” Schools | F (not alternative) | 56 | 93.1% | 11.3% |
| | F (alternative) ⁷ | 31 | 77.6% | 31.5% |

⁶ Why Schools “Fail” or What if “Failing Schools” Aren’t? Noel Hammatt in EdTraveler, June 2013

<http://exploringeducation.blogspot.com/2013/06/v-behaviorurldefaultvmlo.html>

⁷ Schools labeled as failing (i.e., “F” Schools) were divided into alternative and non-alternative schools. Alternative schools are any school self-identified as an alternative school, schools known to only serve students with disabilities or students who are incarcerated.





What was the ‘average’ rate of disability and poverty in 2011? In Louisiana, 68.3 percent of students participated in free and reduced lunch and 11.3 percent of students were identified with disabilities. Interestingly, on average, schools with just about this combination of students (68.3 and 11.3 percent of poverty and disability, respectively) were at a “C” performance level. However, on average, the highest performing schools have less than half the average percentage of students in poverty and less than a third of the expected percentage of students with disabilities. Meanwhile, on average, schools identified as the lowest performing have an above average percentage of students in poverty AND relatively high rates of students with disabilities. It is disturbing that our society has adopted and accepted an accountability system that results in identifying a school as failing if it serves too many students with disabilities.

In 2011, not a single school with more than 10 percent of students with disabilities and more than 75 percent of students in poverty (i.e., on free and reduced lunch) received a grade of “A.”

The Segregation Solution

Segregation occurs in two ways – serving low rates of students with disabilities in a school, or sending students with disabilities to an alternative or special campus. In either case the result is a manipulation of school performance scores that makes comparisons across schools much more complex than the single number (SPS) or school letter grade currently used.

School systems have increased the use of magnet and/or selective admissions schools. This is a clear and disturbing way to use the “Segregation Solution” to increase school performance scores. Consider that when the state took over Orleans Parish, the parish was allowed to keep all of the high performing schools. These high-performing Orleans Parish schools have about half the expected rate of students with disabilities.

Some school systems, including the state, use alternative programs and special schools that tend to serve extremely high percentages of students with disabilities. It is not clear how much impact the removal of students is having on some schools identified as high performing. What is clear is that some high performing schools are in school systems with ‘failing’ alternative schools. And, the student populations of these schools are very different, with the alternative schools having high rates of students with disabilities and in poverty while the high performing schools have relatively low rates of students with disabilities and in poverty.

School Choice and the Impact of the “Student Shuffle” on Accountability

Unfortunately, the reform effort touted to fix failing schools is likely to make things worse. Charter schools and private schools have long histories of not serving students with disabilities.⁸ It took a

⁸ Charter Schools: Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities. U.S. Government Accountability Office June 7, 2012. <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-543>





lawsuit by parents of students with disabilities to the Department of Education to create a system of accountability for charter schools in New Orleans to accept and continue to serve students with disabilities. Unfortunately, as charter schools are allowed to expand across the state, the law does not require them to serve the same percentage of students with disabilities (or those with more severe needs) as should be expected.

Only three percent of private school students in Louisiana had disabilities in 2011 and reports from the Department of Education indicated that only six percent of the students accepting vouchers to private schools had disabilities. This is not surprising since private schools could not be required to provide the services and supports needed by students with disabilities. Most parents of students with disabilities would not put their child in that situation.

How do these student movements, the “Student Shuffle,” impact the schools that continue to serve students with disabilities? As more students without disabilities leave a traditional public school, that school’s percentage of students with disabilities increases. And, as the percentage of students with disabilities in a school increases it is expected for that school’s performance score to decrease.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Many of these issues stem from federal law that requires states to use a single academic assessment for most (99 percent of) students and identify the lowest five percent of schools for significant reform efforts. Louisiana expanded the definition of a failing school to include more than 70 percent of all schools. The first step should be the public and public officials taking stock of what is considered a successful or failing school and whether students really are not making progress. A single measure is a poor indicator of educational success and obviously does not provide an accurate indication of whether a school provided the best educational opportunity to the students in that school.

Parents of students with disabilities understand, probably better than anyone else, that performance on a standardized test does a poor job of indicating whether their student had a successful school year. It is time to expand our ability to recognize the successes in schools in a way that will reduce conflicts between parents seeking the individualized programming their children need and the pressures of school administrators to focus on their performance on standardized academic assessments. To be sure, creating an educational accountability system that balances educational outcomes and expectations with ensuring each student is provided the opportunity and incentive to achieve to their maximum potential will be difficult – but we can do better than what is in place.

