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Perspectives on the Current State of Alternate Assessments based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards: Commentary on *Peabody Journal of Education* Special Issue

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In this commentary on the *Peabody Journal of Education* special edition, the author addresses implications of the contributing articles to three central domains of interest to states engaged in or considering the development of an alternate assessment on modified academic achievement standards: (a) identifying an eligible student population, (b) ensuring eligible students are provided access to appropriate instruction, and (c) developing more accessible test items.

The April 9, 2007, joint Title I Individuals with Disabilities Education Act regulations which authorized States to develop and implement alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) left largely to states the task of determining how the population of students eligible to take the assessment would be identified and defined. Whereas for several years earlier, most states had little difficulty identifying the population of students with the “most significant” cognitive disabilities pursuant to the December 9, 2003, Title I rule authorizing the implementation of alternate assessments on alternate academic achievement standards, the 2007 joint regulation necessitated substantially more time and resources to conduct investigations into the learning experiences and characteristics of the target population. As Egan, Ferrara, Schneider, and Barton (2009/this issue) comment, the task of identifying students eligible for an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards has become an “evolving, inferential, conceptual, and empirical enterprise”. The 2007 joint regulation described the eligible population as:

A small group of students with disabilities whose progress is such that, even after receiving appropriate instruction, including special education and related services designed to address the students’ individual needs, the students’ individualized education program (IEP) teams are reasonably certain

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that the students will not achieve grade-level proficiency within the year covered by the students' IEPs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 17748)

Inherent in the description of the eligible target population was the requirement that the barrier to attaining grade-level proficiency among this small group of students must not be attributable to lack of opportunity to learn grade-level material, but rather to the limitations imposed by the disability itself. The regulation made clear that eligible students were to be "students whose *disability* [italics added] has precluded them from achieving grade-level proficiency and whose progress is such that they will not reach grade-level achievement standards in the same time frame as other students" (p. 17748).

Also implicit in the regulation was the intent of the Department to remedy a problem created by the absence of an appropriate state assessment option for this group of students:

Currently, these students must take either a grade-level assessment or an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards. Neither of these options provides an accurate assessment of what these students know and can do. A grade-level assessment is too difficult and, therefore, does not provide data about a student's abilities or information that would be helpful to guide instruction. An alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards is too easy and is not intended to assess a student's achievement across the full range of grade-level content. Such an assessment, therefore, would not provide teachers and parents with information to help these students progress toward grade-level achievement. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 17748)

From its inception, one of the aims of the AA-MAS has been the quest for more accurate information about the knowledge and skills the identified students have acquired, by which to guide their future instruction. One of the most critical tasks facing states electing to develop an AA-MAS has been the identification of an eligible population of students—students who, *despite appropriate instruction*, are unable to demonstrate their acquired knowledge and skills on the available state assessments.

To ensure that ineligible students (such as students whose inability to demonstrate proficiency on a general assessment is solely attributable to lack of opportunity to learn (OTL) appropriate grade-level material) are not included among students for whom the AA-MAS is deemed appropriate, it behooves a state to undertake a comprehensive examination of the instructional access provided to the target population on whose behalf the assessment is being developed. To accomplish these investigations, many states have undertaken studies of the alignment of instruction provided to the target population to the state's grade-level academic content standards.

Complicating the development of the AA-MAS is the fact that the persistently low test performance among eligible students should also not have been solely because of the need for more accessible test items per se—as the AA-MAS should contain test items which are not merely more accessible, but are additionally of reduced difficulty. It is important also that, when investigating the needs of students with disabilities who have been persistently low performing, consideration be given to the likelihood that a portion of this population may in fact be quite able to demonstrate proficiency on an alternate assessment on grade-level academic achievement standards (of which only a few states have peer-reviewed and approved versions).

At the present time the U.S. Department of Education supports 31 states by means of either General Supervision Enhancement Grants funded through the Office of Special Education

Programs or Enhanced Assessment Grants funded through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in the development of alternate assessments. Most of these funded states are actively engaged in investigations into the group of special education students unable to demonstrate proficiency on either a general or alternate assessment. The fruits of such investigations, carried out for the dual purposes of test development and implementation, are certain to be enhanced by the information provided in the articles contained this *Peabody Journal of Education* special issue. In the commentary next, I address some of the salient points made by the contributing authors within three central domains of interest to states developing an AA-MAS: (a) identification of the eligible student population, (b) ensuring access to appropriate instruction, and (c) developing a more accessible assessment.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ELIGIBLE STUDENT POPULATION

Palmer (2009/this issue) presents interesting findings from a survey completed by several states either considering or engaged in the development of an AA-MAS. It was gratifying to read that the respondent state motivations for developing this assessment centered on the desire to create a test that would better inform instruction of participating students. Because this assessment option was originally offered as a flexibility to states in the context of NCLB accountability, the concern some states have expressed—that the assessment “may not help” accountability, at least in the short term—suggests that at least some states realize that many eligible students will still not, at least initially, perform much better on any test aligned to grades-level content standards. In light of legitimate concerns about the costs of funding the development of the AA-MAS, it is understandable that the potential benefit to a state in terms of accountability may not be sufficient to justify the cost of development. It was gratifying to read in Palmer’s account that most respondent states justified the substantial cost of implementing this assessment by reference to the potential benefit it provided to the target group.

Lazarus and Thurlow (2009/this issue) also provide information on early state efforts to develop the AA-MAS. They write that most of the states in a position to develop these assessments early were those that had previously administered “out-of-level” assessments, a practice later disallowed for the purposes of documenting participation and performance on state assessments under NCLB. Lazarus and Thurlow raise an interesting set of questions that will undoubtedly prove useful in the course of continued tracking of the national picture as more states begin to develop these assessments. Although as the authors comment, most states had attained high levels of assessment participation without implementing an AA-MAS, it is important to consider that IEP Teams have had, until the advent of the AA-MAS limited options to reduce expected achievement standards for students with disabilities.

The question of how the new assessment will contribute to improving performance over time is a more important consideration when weighing the advantages of implementation. If states implement the AA-MAS, as Palmer’s (2009/this issue) results suggest, predominantly to provide better information to inform instructional interventions and accelerate learning, the academic benefit to and growth over time for participating students will be an outcome of great interest.

The task of establishing a coherent and inclusive assessment system, with the capacity to accommodate learning differences while measuring appropriately aligned content knowledge and skills is certainly the ultimate goal of every state Department of Education’s assessment

division. However, such an inclusive system can only be the result of a thorough understanding of the issue of inclusion—both for purposes of instruction and assessment. Because, by definition, students for whom the AA-MAS is required are students for whom grade-level achievement standards are inappropriate, the first step in developing a defensible alternate assessment on modified academic achievement standards must be a thorough investigation of the state's history of inclusion of eligible students in the general education curriculum, and the actual results of such inclusion.

Zigmond and Kloo (2009/*this issue*) present a review of historical and legislative decisions reflecting the inclusion of students with disabilities in the curriculum and in general assessments. They remind us that as early as the 1994 Reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, otherwise known as the Improving America's Schools Act, each state receiving Title I funds was required to ensure the participation of all students in state assessments. Zigmond and Kloo describe this period as an era in which exclusion of special education students from large-scale testing as well as "grade-level performance" was considered a humane response to students with disabilities. The NCLB amendment provisions extended these provisions, requiring that students with disabilities be held to the same academic and performance standards as everyone else, and prohibiting their exclusion from the accountability system. Although the years between 2001 and 2006 witnessed important progress by students with disabilities on state assessments, nevertheless during the 2007–08 school year it is sobering to note that only about 30% of students with IEPs nationwide scored at a proficient level either in reading or math (Thurlow, Bremer, & Albus, 2008).

Zigmond and Kloo take up a number of questions currently being pondered in school divisions around the country: To what extent have students with disabilities really been exposed to the general education curriculum? To what extent might their performance problems reflect inadequate provision of accommodations, Universal Design of assessments, or the burden of trying to master an inordinate number of state content standards? The three articles written by Palmer, Zigmond and Kloo, and Lazarus and Thurlow promise to advance the direction of these discussions within the field. The problem of ensuring guidance and training to IEP teams that are expected to determine student eligibility appropriately and consistently from year to year will soon fall to states.

To fulfill these responsibilities effectively, IEP teams must be provided with guidelines by which to differentiate between a student who, because of the impact of a disability, will benefit from the greater accessibility and precision of measurement afforded by an AA-MAS from the student who, with more aligned instruction or more appropriate accommodations, could validly demonstrate the extent of his knowledge and skill on the general assessment.

ENSURING ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION

The majority of states engaged in developing an AA-MAS are drafting and refining guidelines for the identification of students whose disabilities are such that neither an assessment based upon grade-level achievement standards nor an assessment based upon alternate achievement standards will provide a fair and accurate picture of what these students know and can do. At the same time, it is incumbent upon implementing states to ensure that the target group of students with disabilities for whom these tests are being developed have been and continue to be provided the opportunity to learn the content covered on the assessment and to make progress, hopefully

to “catch up” to their age-peers to the extent that they may become eligible to take the state’s regular assessments against more challenging achievement standards.

However, the target population, even with appropriate instruction, will by definition require more time to master grade-level material, and this pace of learning will preclude the students’ ability to attain proficiency by the end of the school year without increasing instructional time during the school year, or extending the academic calendar year.

As Zigmond and Kloo (2009/*this issue*) remind us, the solution to this slower pace of learning has traditionally been the implementation of “elongated” courses with less demanding material, which ensure that students enrolled in them cover less material by the end of the academic year. But such solutions effectively reduce the opportunity to learn, unless ways can be found to increase instructional time simultaneously. Coverage of the full scope of the academic content standards with mastery of critical grade-level knowledge and skills will require new approaches to augment and intensify the instruction provided during the traditional school year.

Lengthening the duration of education in years has also been a traditional approach to the dilemma of slower paced learning, but the historically low graduation rates among students with disabilities suggests new approaches to teaching children who learn at a slower pace are sorely needed. During the 2006–07 school year, more than 26% of students with disabilities were confirmed to have dropped out of school, whereas only about 56% graduated with a regular diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Instituting an “extended-time” approach within a traditional academic year only institutionalizes the practice of below-grade instruction and is incompatible with the expectation that a student take an end-of-year assessment aligned to the full scope of the state’s content standards.

It is important to stress several adverse consequences of a decision to provide below-grade instruction to a student with a disability. Not only does below-grade instruction prevent the student’s access to the general education curriculum and deprive a child of the opportunity to learn grade-level content, but it also precludes any fair assessment of what the student knows and is able to do, as well as any valid interpretation of resulting scores. Moreover, the assessment of students on content they have been provided no opportunity to learn violates fair testing provisions cited in the Standards of Educational and Psychological Testing. A key requirement built into the joint Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act regulation of 2007 attempts to safeguard the opportunity to learn—requiring that all students participating in AA-MASs have “access to the curriculum including instruction for the grade in which the student is enrolled” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 17778).

As Common Core State Content Standards are developed, there is renewed hope among education leaders that general and special educators will leverage their resources to develop well-articulated and differentiated curricula aligned to the new standards for students with disabilities at all ability levels. In addition, these developments provide reason to hope that the critical learning progressions required to bridge the teaching of these standards within and between grades will be delineated, to ensure mastery of the material encompassed by the new content standards, within the course of every school year.

Although the breadth of the content covered in the curriculum for students receiving special education is expected to align to what is covered in regular education—for students assessed against Modified Academic Achievement Standards, the depth of coverage may be reduced. In differentiating instruction, there may also be merit in prioritizing for mastery content standards that are reiterated from year to year, such that a student can revisit material that extends the

“essential learning” inherent in a content standard during subsequent years without departure from the overall instructional alignment to grade-level content standards in any given year. In addition, options for year-round or extended instructional services may prove to be a more productive option for students requiring extended learning time.

Zigmond and Kloo (2009/*this issue*) make the important point that states face hazards when implementing an AA-MAS—if the wrong students are found eligible, teachers may “give up” on trying so hard to teach them. It is incumbent upon leaders in state Offices of Special Education to ensure that IEP teams are provided guidance to avoid the unintended consequences of inappropriate eligibility decisions. Likewise, the implementation of the safeguards required in the regulation to ensure IEPs for such students are aligned with state-adopted content standards, and the progress of participating students is monitored, will help prevent unintended outcomes.

As has been the case with students taking alternate assessments on alternate achievement standards, it is possible that some students found eligible for the AA-MAS will be held to a lower standard than they are capable of attaining. Nevertheless, by implementing standards-aligned instruction, by ensuring appropriate standard-setting on the new assessment, and by working toward a comprehensive and integrated assessment system inclusive of formative and benchmark assessments, states can assist participating students to benefit rather than suffer from assessment against a lower achievement standard.

As Zigmond and Kloo (2009/*this issue*) mention, the field is only beginning to scratch the surface in providing curriculum-based assessments for use in tracking student progress in the curriculum. To realize the goal of tracking student progress optimally, states will need to not only provide aligned and integrated end-of-year assessments but also institute aligned formative assessments for teachers to use in teaching and reteaching grade-level content, and aligned benchmark or interim assessments to gauge what areas of the curriculum must be retaught prior to the end-of-year summative assessments intended for use as system accountability measures. Summative end-of-year assessments can no longer stand in as providers of the sole source of information for teachers and parents about student progress against grade-level content standards. Likewise, end-of-year assessments must no longer be the first time during a school year that a struggling student is assessed on the content covered in the state’s adopted standards.

The contribution by Roach et al. (2009/*this issue*) provides useful guidance to states attempting to ensure curricular access for students with disabilities, by indicating the need to incorporate into state monitoring efforts indicators by which to track access to the general education curriculum, activities that will additionally help states document the consequential validity of the AA-MAS. The authors provide an intriguing review of the concept of “opportunity to learn” (OTL), its legislative history, and the role it has played in the history of school reform. Roach et al. also remind us that because the OTL provisions in the Goals 2000 Educate America Act were never instituted, OTL standards were made voluntary in the 1995 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Thus, in the 30 years since the 1981 *Debra P. v. Thurlington* ruling, the need to provide opportunity to learn skills and concepts assessed by mandated achievement tests has been a continuing problem on a national scale.

Under the provisions of NCLB, all students were ensured access to the same content standards (content standards developed for “all students”). Nevertheless, states proceeded to develop content standards that often resulted in barriers to the creation of aligned alternate assessments by specifying in the content standard an inherent standard of achievement. Some state content standards dictated a level of performance complexity and skill (such as a text difficulty level) that

effectively rendered test items correctly aligned to those standards inaccessible to some students with disabilities—including students who were not students with the most severe cognitive impairments. Because requirements for alignment prohibit the modification of content standards themselves, confounds between content and achievement standards pose a problem for students with disabilities that must be avoided during the development of Common Core State Content Standards to render such standards accessible to “all students.”

Roach et al. (2009/*this issue*) remind us that previously proposed OTL standards had included the goal of aligning curricula, instructional practices, and assessments to a state’s content standards. Without such instructional alignment, students cannot be expected to, and should not be able to attain proficiency on, an AA-MAS. The frameworks presented in their article for evaluating alignment, as well as methods of rating instructional emphases in the enacted curriculum, will prove invaluable to educators in monitoring efforts as well as in the development of consequential validity studies pursuant to the implementation of the AA-MAS.

Studies cited by Roach et al. support the beneficial effect of inclusive classrooms in maximizing outcomes in reading vocabulary, math computations, and math applications. They also suggest that two other factors—student engagement and academic learning time—be measured to assess the effectiveness of inclusion. Moreover, the authors propose inclusion of several domains of student engagement, rather than trying to treat engagement as a dichotomized construct. Likewise, the assessment of coverage of material during instruction is described. To transition students from prerequisite to on-grade-level skills, recent advances in delivery of aligned and differentiated instructional modules with built-in formative assessments hold promise as tools to foster both engagement in instruction and the extension of academic learning time for students eligible for the AA-MAS.

Roach et al. (2009/*this issue*) write that historically the IEP development process has not consistently resulted in improved access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Goals and objectives most often listed in students’ IEPs have not matched the curriculum and instruction provided in inclusive environments and do not adequately address objectives for reading comprehension or number concepts. Future studies are needed to monitor the effects of the presence of “standards-based” IEP goals on inclusion, curricular access, and academic engagement. Roach et al. have resurrected the heuristic role that studying opportunity to learn and curriculum access can play in the evaluation of the impact of educational programming changes of all kinds.

Although of late, some disability advocates have been cautious about the unintended consequences of even identifying a population of students eligible for an AA-MAS, contending that there are also persistently low-achieving students without disabilities and plenty of room for improvement in providing opportunities to learn for such students. In response, it is important to address factors other than disability, including mobility, lack of motivation, and engagement as well as lack of opportunity to learn, which may play a role in persistent low achievement. The interventions and supports appropriate to these different scenarios, including the assessment options required by different groups of students, are, however, distinguishable. The impact of a student’s disability alone must be the determining factor in eligibility decision making for the AA-MAS.

It is only by assuring that all “tier one” instruction is fully aligned to state-adopted content standards for the grade and that “tier two” evidence-based interventions are implemented in a Response to Intervention format that states can ensure that the learning needs of all struggling

students in general education programs are met. At the same time, technical development of the AA-MAS must reflect the specific learning needs of the target group of students with disabilities.

DEVELOPING A MORE ACCESSIBLE ASSESSMENT

Egan et al. (2009/this issue) provide a comprehensive review of considerations that should guide the formulation of performance level descriptors and other standard setting methods applied to the AA-MAS. As the authors indicate, a fundamental concern in standard setting is the lack of familiarity among test designers and psychometricians with this target examinee population. They identify the information that can be gleaned from understanding both the enacted and the intended curriculum appropriate to eligible students. The AA-MAS should be designed to provide teachers and parents with an accurate picture of their progress against the same grade-level content standards measured on a general assessment, and the definition of a modified performance standard must be developed in the context of the entire framework of performance level descriptors within a balanced and integrated assessment system (e.g., Gong, 2009).

Egan et al. also indicate an additional potential benefit of AA-MAS, which is its potential within a comprehensive assessment system to provide a missing link whereby students are enabled to “graduate” from the AA-AAS to the AA-MAS, or from the AA-MAS to the regular assessment. As many teachers of students eligible to take an AA-AAS have reported, students with disabilities often surpass expectations when provided an opportunity to learn academic content aligned to appropriate grade-level content standards. No student should be presumed incapable of graduating from a lower to a higher achievement standard.

AA-MAS must satisfy two essential technical requirements—it should improve access to the assessment for the target group, over and above the access to the regular assessment such students could attain with appropriate accommodations, and it should permit a more accurate assessment of the grade-level knowledge and skills such students have acquired. The modifications represented in the test must appropriately reduce the complexity of the cognitive processing demanded by the test and must establish more reasonable expectations for content mastery.

As Egan et al. (2009/this issue) advise, the development of modified academic achievement standards should illuminate the content that should be taught to eligible students while reflecting the “depth” to which the associated content can be learned within the course of a school year. In addition, modified achievement standards must also pertain to the mastery of content standards intended for “all students” in the enrolled grade. These authors provide practical direction in articulating the relationship of performance levels to grade-level achievement from the inception of policy-based standards, through their development as empirically based performance level descriptors.

Egan et al. also propose several practical methods to help states decide how to accomplish the establishment of performance standards on the AA-MAS and the linkage of those standards to the general assessment, with considerations to guide the vertical articulation of cut scores. The authors also provide useful descriptions of the limitations associated with each approach.

Further adding to the considerable value of this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*, Kettler, Elliott, and Beddow (2009/this issue) introduce a pragmatic tool by which to measure the accessibility of test items which promises to be useful in developing or refining test items for a variety of target populations. The Test Accessibility and Modification Inventory (TAMI)

was developed to address the problem of understanding item accessibility, given that known psychometric properties associated with test items are generally derived from item trials on the general population. Although developed in response to the AA-MAS, the TAMI would appear to have potential utility in other assessment contexts, such as increasing accessibility of general assessments by permitting quantification and measurement of item-accessibility for subpopulations of students with disabilities or for English language learners.

Kettler et al. (2009/this issue) describe a theoretically derived approach based on Cognitive Load theory, which has roots in the work of George Miller, Paas et al.'s triune model of cognitive load, Clark et al.'s (2006) guidelines for maximizing the efficiency of learning, Haladyna et al.'s guidelines for construction of items and response options, and Rodriguez et al.'s work on distractor analysis. The TAMI consists of both an item analysis and test analysis component, and assists in appraising the structural complexity of test items, separating sources of item complexity (germane, intrinsic, and extraneous), and permitting the evaluation of item alignment to grade-level content standards. The resulting tool promises to be helpful in designing accessible test items to enable students to make more efficient use of limited attentional and working memory capacity during the test-taking process. Item development, especially when intended to improve access for students with disabilities, will benefit from the contribution of cognitive psychologists, both to advance our understanding of the nature of cognitive processing challenges encountered on test items by students with disabilities as well as to minimize unnecessary barriers created by test items which demand cognitive processing extraneous to the content being measured.

Although it is critical when examining item characteristics for modification that research be carried out on a sample of students with disabilities carefully screened for a history of opportunity to learn the underlying content being assessed, so as to avoid confounding the effects of accessibility and instruction, the TAMI and the general modification paradigm introduced by these authors will no doubt prove to be an important tool in the quest for more accessible tests. The authors' approach to the study of student cognitive processing for purposes of item development, including use of student focus groups and follow-up teacher interviews presents a research paradigm which can improve understanding of item accessibility-requirements for an AA-MAS.

Over the past 2 years, concerted efforts have been made by state departments of education across the country to address long-standing gaps in the availability of accessible assessments and opportunities to learn. Together with innovative programming to support standards-aligned instruction for all students with disabilities, the development and implementation of more accessible and more challenging alternate assessments is vital to ensure continued and meaningful educational progress for students with disabilities. The articles in this special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* make valuable contributions to the furtherance of these important objectives.

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