

Public Abstract

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Title:Implementing the Federal NCLB Assessment Policy at the Local Level for Learners Affected with Moderate to Severe Disabilities: An Analysis of Educators' Decision-Making Process

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 required 98% of students in the United States to be assessed annually to determine achievement levels in the area of communication arts and mathematics during grades three through eight. Students are also assessed in the area of science once during the elementary grade cluster. The State of Missouri uses the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) to assess students as required by federal legislation during the spring of each year. Certain accommodations to administration, setting, timing, and response can be provided to students with documented disabilities.

No Child Left Behind along with the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 allowed for the most profoundly disabled two to three percent of students in each school district to be assessed by an alternative processes. The State of Missouri uses the MAP-A to assess students that qualify for an alternative assessment. Whether a student has qualified for accommodations or an alternative assessment, the decision, made by a team comprised of the student's parents and educators, is documented in their Individualized Education Plan.

Students challenged by a disability which moderately to severely affects their learning are among the most impacted by the requirements of federal and state government to be assessed annually. Likewise, the team making the decision for accommodations or alternative assessment is faced with the challenge to make a decision for a testing route that provides the most leveled playing field possible for the student. The research gathered for this study attempted to determine how the decision-making teams in a large suburban midwest school district made decisions about assessment for its third, fourth, and fifth graders where challenged with moderate to severe disabilities.

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the training, knowledge, and procedures in determining the testing route for learners functioning in the moderate to severe range of disability. The study was conducted to determine if the federal, state, and local policies were in compliance with the federal laws while at the same time taking into account the individuals' academic best interest.

This study used a mixed method approach to triangulate the data gathered from IEP team members. First, confidential surveys were completed by special education teachers, regular education grade level teachers, principals, counselors, and building level special education supervisors. District level special education supervisors were then interviewed. Finally, special education teachers and building level special education supervisors were interviewed. The interview participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

The research found that the majority of participants did not participate in training specific to making decisions for a testing route or accommodations for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Those that had participated in training had done so inconsistently. Some had participated in training on their own. Those that had received training felt it was ineffective in providing IEP team members with the tools necessary to make decisions for an assessment route.

Sixty-nine percent of the participants in the survey indicated they had knowledge of the criteria to make decisions for assessment for their students with moderate to severe disabilities. This information was contradicted through interviews. District special education supervisors felt very few teachers present with very much knowledge to help them make decisions. While the special education teachers and the building special education department chairs appeared to have adequate knowledge of the criteria for making decisions for assessment, they felt there were some criteria that was confusing. The criteria indicating a

need for a documented “significant cognitive impairment” and for a student to be participating in an essential skills program were confusing and contradictory to the foundational laws of NCLB and IDEA.

The procedures for making decisions for assessment for students with moderate to severe disabilities were also explored. The participants in the survey felt IEP teams made decisions as a team at IEP meetings. They followed a specific procedure examining available data such as disability label, diagnostic information including intellectual level, types of goals in the IEP and physical and emotional characteristics of the student.

IEP team members participating in interviews felt since teams are unclear about certain criteria. This made the process more difficult. Teams rarely made a decision for alternative assessment for any child other than those with a disability label of intellectual disability. This left many students with disabilities in the moderate to severe range of disability without the significant cognitive impairment to endure the challenges of the regular state assessment assisted only by the few allowable accommodations.