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Assessment, Equity, and Access for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Demonstrating Student Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act

Introduction

CEASD promotes high expectations for deaf students and knows that high standards can be met if deaf children are identified early, receive appropriate early intervention by qualified providers, are provided with full language and communication access in their home and school setting, and have access to the general curriculum in school. CEASD believes that deaf schools can and should be held accountable for the academic performance of the children who attend them. Deaf children are born with the same capacity as hearing children for academic, and later, employment success. Deaf children have a right to a school setting and student and family support that leads to such success. Accountability systems should provide an equitable opportunity for deaf schools to demonstrate how much they have helped each student progress towards standards set for all children.

Background and Unique Student Demographic Variables

The education of deaf and hard of hearing children presents some unique challenges and circumstances *not* generally confronted by other public schools. Although all schools face the challenges of educating students from diverse backgrounds who arrive at school with varying degrees of readiness, schools for the deaf encounter student demographic variables unlike other public schools. The composition of schools and programs for the deaf across this nation includes students who come to school without competence in a first language; students who lack access to world knowledge and incidental learning; students who learn English as a second language; students from families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; and students with multiple disabilities. Age of identification and early intervention services as well as age of enrollment into an appropriate program that provides for language and communication access are two other critical and complicating factors. Rigorous standards for achievement, high expectations for all children and closing the achievement gap with fair and equitable measures of progress are goals shared by educational leaders, parents and community members including those involved with the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Discussion of the aforementioned issues must be given consideration as we seek ways to ensure equitable inclusion of deaf students within assessment and accountability models but should not be interpreted or utilized as arguments against having high standards of accountability for all deaf students.

Purpose of this Document

Discussions for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization in 2007 are underway, and CEASD will join many interested parties in suggesting revisions to the law that will maintain high standards while providing flexibility where needed. Until that time, you, as a CEASD member school administrator, are trying to comply with a law that was written for a broad spectrum of States, school districts, and schools and may not neatly address the unique characteristics of schools for deaf children. Therefore, this document provides guidance as to (1) what you should be doing now to help your school comply with the law and (2) how you can show student progress to your State department of education, regardless of your school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status.

What you should be doing now to help your school comply with the law

Meeting NCLB goals requires school administrators to have a strong foundation not only in teaching and learning, but also in the elements of the State system. Schools for deaf students need to be demonstrating that we “get” the goal of high student achievement and are in fact working to make it a reality. There are a number of activities administrators should be undertaking, even though they are not spelled out explicitly in the law. These are actions that will help build a basis for your school’s compliance.

At the state level administrators should:

- Know your state’s NCLB plan.
- Understand how progress is measured in your state.
- Participate in your State’s bias review committee, which examines State assessment test items to ensure that they are not biased based on such factors as cultural or disability status.
- Participate in your State assessment test item development.
- Participate in your State’s decision making process as to which accommodations are available for the assessment Statewide.
- Provide ongoing staff training in these areas.
- Provide ongoing advocacy on the State assessment process.

Within the school you should:

- Employ and strongly support school-wide the general education standards-based curriculum that is in line with your State’s academic standards for each grade.
- Ensure each child has access to the general curriculum at the child’s grade level.
- Know what is being taught where and when, and why that can be defended as ensuring children have access to, participate in, and make progress in the grade-level curriculum based on content and achievement standards set for all children in that enrolled grade.
- Ensure that your school’s teaching methods are scientifically-based and/or peer-reviewed.
- Develop a decision making process to determine participation in assessments as well as instructional and testing accommodations through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations.
- Ensure that teachers document students’ performance on any assessments done in addition to AYP testing, including performance on classroom-based and district-wide assessments.
- Regularly collect and analyze data from both formative and summative assessments.
- Provide intensive staff training and ongoing professional development and coaching to ensure every teacher is following the above.

If your school makes AYP:

Congratulations! Continue following these steps to ensure that your school achieves at higher levels year after year, as mandated by NCLB.

If your school does not make AYP:

Here is where you can show your State department of education what you are doing to improve student achievement and use that to request that your school be placed in the “Met AYP” category.

The U.S. Department of Education is allowing States that did not make AYP because of the performance of students with disabilities a second chance to make AYP. If the States meet the following criteria, they may be permitted to change their AYP determination for the 2004-2005 school year. States must:

- Have met certain NCLB standards:
 - 95 percent or more students with disabilities are participating
 - alternate assessments are available,
 - testing accommodations are available, and
 - students with disabilities are included in the State accountability system

- Provide information on what they have done to improve student achievement, and
- Provide evidence that such efforts are working.

By extension, these criteria should apply to schools within a State, such as deaf schools. In conversations (or “negotiations”) with your State department of education about whether you school can be placed in the “Met AYP” category, you should outline the steps you have taken as described above and show that the students have progressed as a result.

If your classrooms are committed to and are using standards-based curriculum and instructional methods designed to ensure students are being instructed, AND the classroom assessments are documented as aligned to the grade level content and achievement expectations, THEN data from these classroom tests are an appropriate second look source of data for AYP determinations for schools with very low N overall and by grade. Those are huge assumptions – and it is HERE that schools for the deaf need to be demonstrating that we “get this” and are in fact doing it. One line of argument to a state is to demonstrate the intensive staff training and ongoing professional development and coaching to ensure every teacher is following this. Otherwise, classroom assessments are simply a measure of the status quo, and indefensible.

In short, if your school is doing everything right and still does not make AYP, demonstrating your school’s good work and showing that it is contributing to higher achievement may allow your school to be placed in the “Met AYP” category.

Conclusion

CEASD believes these short-term recommendations to schools are sound based on Secretary Spellings’ introduction of a “common sense” approach to NCLB implementation. Secretary Spellings said “There is a new equation at the Department of Education: the ‘bright-line’ principles of No Child Left Behind, such as annual testing and reporting of subgroup data, plus student achievement and a narrowing of the achievement gap, plus overall sound state education policies, equals a new, common-sense approach to implementation of the law.” New Department policy allows states that have met certain NCLB standards to provide information on actions taken to raise achievement for students with disabilities or narrow the achievement gap and evidence that such efforts are improving student achievement. Subject to the Secretary’s review and approval, States that meet Department-outlined criteria were permitted to adjust their AYP determination for their students with disabilities subgroup for the 2004-2005 school year. (U.S. Department of Education, Accountability for Students with Disabilities: Accountability Plan Amendments for 2004-05, May 10, 2005, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/raising/disab-acctplan.html> April 24, 2006) States are permitted to do so for the 2005-2006 school year as well. (U.S. Department of Education, “Dear Colleague” letter, December 14, 2005, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/secletter/051214a.html> April 24, 2006) A document, “Statewide Educational Accountability Under the No Child Left Behind Act – A Report on 2005 Amendments to State Plans, published by The Council of Chief State School Officers, can be downloaded from <http://www.ccsso.org/publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=286>. (Retrieved April 24, 2006)

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