



Students with disabilities: What should we expect?


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Topics to cover – references provided

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- Questions from education policy and practice: where do we start?
 - Cup half full or half empty? Teacher expectations, subjective special education categorical labels, search for objectivity (McGrew & Evans, 2004)
 - Cup half full: Do no harm, least dangerous assumption, presumption of competence
 - Policy initiatives to study what to expect from two groups: 1. Students with significant cognitive disabilities and 2. Persistently low performing students
 - Lessons learned over past 20 years
 - Where are we now?

Questions from education policy and practice: Where do we start?

- ▶ How can we determine how many - and which - students with disabilities cannot be expected to learn to the same expectations as their typical peers who move along successfully from grade to grade?
- ▶ How can we determine whether students with disabilities have been provided appropriate access to the general curriculum and specialized instruction in order to progress from grade to grade similar to typical peers?
- ▶ When we identify a group of students for lower expectations, what is an appropriately ambitious adjusted standard for them?
- ▶ What have we learned from focused attempts to answer these questions over the past two decades of standards-based reform?



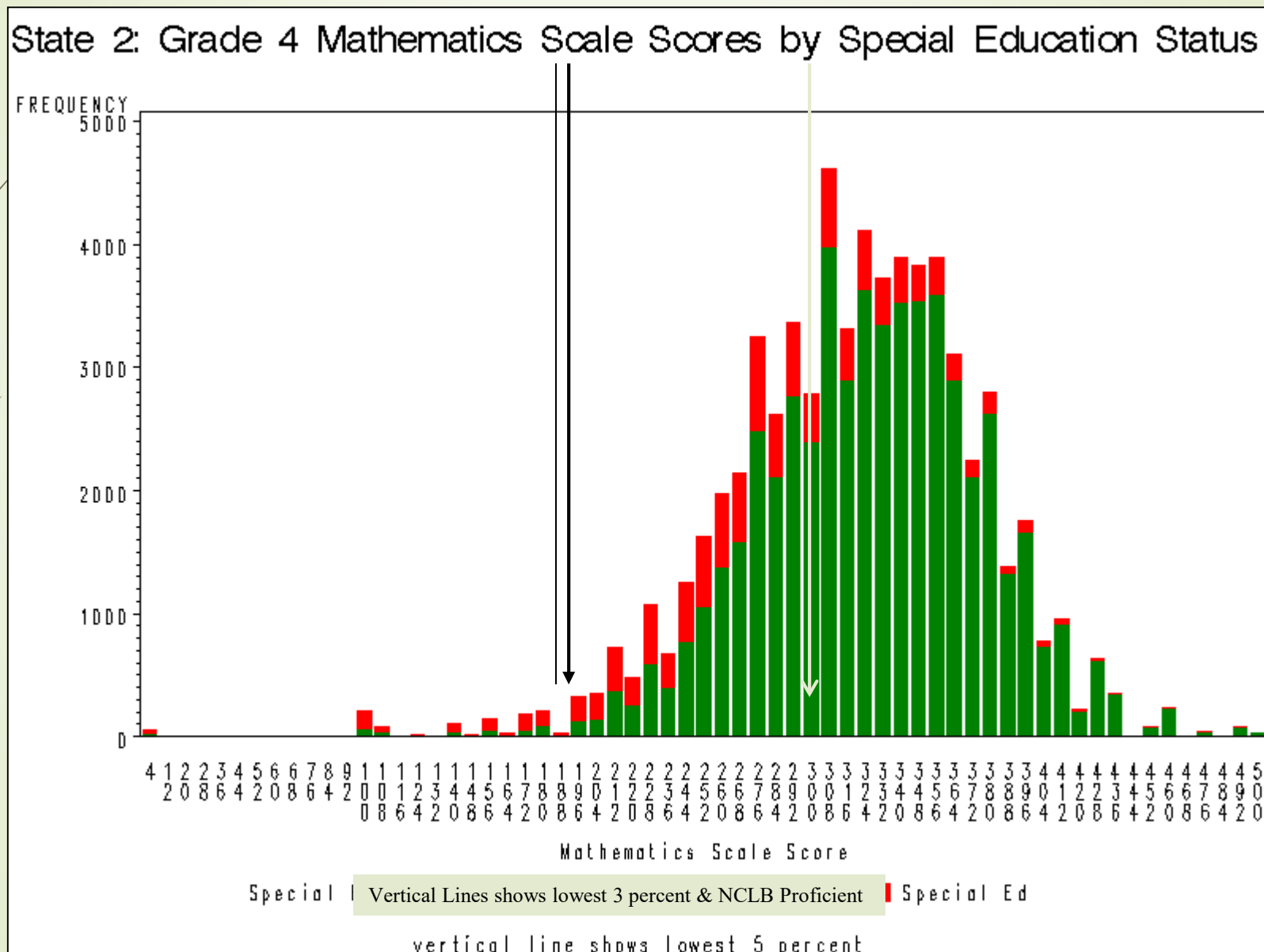
Cup half full or half empty? Teacher expectations, subjective special education categorical labels, search for objectivity

- McGrew & Evans, 2004 comprehensive review of teacher expectation literature: “Stereotyping students with disabilities ...as a group that should be excluded from general education standards and assessments is not supported by the best evidence from current science ...”
- “IQ test scores (and associated IQ-based disability category labels) are adequate, but not nearly sufficient metrics, by which to make reasonably precise predictions about any particular *individual* student’s future expected achievement progress. It simply cannot be done beyond a reasonable doubt.”
- Of the 15% of students with disabilities with Intellectual Disabilities (MR), substantial numbers achieved far beyond their IQ prediction.



Cup half full: Least dangerous assumption, presumption of competence, do no harm

- ▶ McGrew & Evans note that “The potential soft bigotry of setting a priori IQ or disability label-based low academic expectations (for students with disabilities) needs to be recognized, understood, and minimized.”
- ▶ Since that study, we have had two distinct opportunities to understand and try out answers to our initial questions.
- ▶ Over the past two decades, states grappled with defining two groups:
 - ▶ 1. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (ID/MR generally) who may benefit from an alternate achievement standard, with appropriately challenging expectations.
 - ▶ 2. Students with disabilities who are persistently performing at low levels, who as a group are very similar to students without disabilities who also are persistently low-performing. (See example.)




Source: Marion, Gong, & Simpson (2006)

Alternate Assessment for 1% of population of all student, about 9% of all students with disabilities

- All states have developed Alternate Assessments for students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities,” a term not defined in law or regulation, so participation criteria were developed by all states beginning in 1997 to define the term in practice.
- Two alternate assessment consortia (NCSC, DLM) were funded in 2010 and jointly addressed participation criteria based on collective state experience. There were very few differences across states, so consensus has been achieved. This was verified by 2017 study of all states (Thurlow, et al., 2017).
- Over time, Federal law, regulations, and policy were shaped by these findings from the field: This small group was identifiable and had specific needs for an alternate but appropriately challenging standard/ expectation.



A second group: Persistently low-performing students

- Modified Assessment options were discussed starting in 2005 as states grappled with students with disabilities who were seen as “in the gap” between regular assessment and alternate assessment.
 - Students “in the gap” included both students with disabilities and without. (See previous example.)
 - Grant opportunities were offered to permit states, researchers, and practitioners to learn more about these students, what and how they were learning, and ultimately, how best to assess what they are learning.
 - See Thurlow, Lazarus, & Bechard, 2013 for reports from 11 major state projects funded and completed.
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Consensus was reached but not in support of appropriateness of a modified standard

- Several projects found that students who might be candidates for a modified standard may not have had the opportunity to learn the content (see Parker, Gorin, & Bechard; Lazarus & Thurlow; Elliott, Rodriguez, et al.; Elliott, Kettler, Zigmund, & Kurtz)
- Among the conclusions, “More must be done instructionally to advance the learning of knowledge and skills we value for all students” and “more effort is needed to support teachers in ensuring students have meaningful opportunities to learn the grade-level intended and assessed curricula.” (See both of Elliott et al.)
- Changes to test construction were studied and tried out, but in the end, “reading level, test-taking strategies, and possible lack-of-instruction appear to be the actual ‘barriers’ to reading (Nagle & Cameto)
- Professional development needs were emphasized throughout: the projects found that educators did not have the knowledge and skills needed so successfully instruct low performing students with disabilities.

Where are we now? Do we have answers to our question?

- ▶ Based on the experience of defining and implementing participation criteria for the Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards, we have learned how to reliably predict the first group, a very small number of students who can benefit from an alternate but appropriately challenging standard/expectation.
- ▶ Based on extensive studies across multiple states and critical research questions surrounding students we perceived as “in the gap,” we have learned that until we address these critical lessons learned, we will do harm by assuming they cannot learn. That is, for low performing students:
 - ▶ Ensure that students are actually taught the content that the state defines as essential to successful futures for all students.
 - ▶ Ensure that educators have the knowledge and skills needed to successfully instruct low performing students with disabilities.

Larger lessons learned over past 20 years

We have a very small group of students who can benefit from alternate achievement standards, based on an alternate but appropriately challenging expectation, less than 10% of SWD on average.

- Conversely, for persistently low-performing students – with or without disabilities – we do not have the ability to identify which of them will learn the content required at their grade level, until we actually teach them.
- If we don't expect students to learn, and then do not offer them access to challenging content with appropriately specialized instruction, they will not learn. If we teach them all, some still may not learn it all, but we cannot know “which is which” in advance of teaching.
- It has become increasingly clear that for persistently low-performing students with disabilities to have a chance to learn the content required at their grade level, we need to effectively equip teachers and schools to deliver the necessary high-quality instruction.
- The costs are now or in the future, costs to the individual and family, and costs to society.