

Standardized Testing and Students with Disabilities in Chicago Public Schools: Does Inclusion in Testing Mean Inclusion in Meaningful Learning?

Federal law requires states to test almost all students with disabilities (SWD). Illinois uses PARCC tests in grades 3-8 and SAT college admissions exams in high school. (One percent of all students may be assessed with alternative assessments based on alternative standards.) English language learners also take the ACCESS test. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) requires Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests for promotion at grades 3, 6 and 8. The tests are also used for admission to some high schools, in teacher evaluations and in rating schools. The theory is that full inclusion in *testing* will drive full inclusion in *learning* the “standard” academic curriculum. The theory has not worked: Students with disabilities continue to score lower than other groups while incurring the brunt of the harmful consequences of overtesting. Part of the problem is the lack of resources and support; another is the overemphasis on tests.

1. **For some students with disabilities, standardized tests are cognitively inappropriate.** They may be a grueling and traumatic exercise. For some, testing borders on (or crosses the line) into abuse. For example, Chicago teachers report increased mental health referrals due to extreme test stress. They describe students vomiting, pulling out eyelashes and threatening themselves or others.
2. **CPS prioritizes testing over teaching, services and supports.** Budget and staffing cuts reduce access to needed services. Resources are diverted from teaching to test preparation and administration. Service providers are pulled out of classrooms to monitor testing. All of this wastes time and resources that students and teachers could use to make progress on students’ individual learning goals.
3. **Schools with large special education populations are penalized when ratings depend on standardized tests.** State law requires teacher evaluation to include student test scores, including scores of SWDs. Special education students, especially those with the most significant disabilities, are often concentrated in under-resourced neighborhood high schools. Learning suffers when schools lack the resources to provide SWDs with the services they require. Adding insult to injury, CPS uses poor SWD test results as evidence that special education *is not working*. Then CPS cuts the school budget even more.
4. **CPS misuses standardized test scores to determine advancement from grade to grade.** MAP scores are used at grades 3, 6 and 8 to decide student promotion. This policy hurts students in general, but the harm tends to be greatest for students with disabilities. Grade retention does not improve student learning but does lead to more dropouts. CPS policy says students with IEPs “are expected to meet the same promotion criteria as their same age, same grade, non-disabled peers *unless the IEP modifies the promotion criteria in whole or in part.*” Yet CPS officials discourage IEP teams from modifying promotion criteria.
5. **Many common test accommodations, such as extra time, can be a double-edged sword.** Extra time may help some SWDs do better. Often, however, it leads to students spending many hours working to complete the test, without any score gain. Students with IEPs have accommodations for learning and

assessment legally spelled out in their IEP. These may include additional time for testing, use of a human reader or scribe, and use of a handheld calculator. Some schools do not have enough staff to provide accommodations. Computer-administered tests may provide built-in accommodations. These can be inadequate compared to their pencil and paper equivalents. For example, text-to-speech reading functions are often not as good as a human reader, and built-in, screen-based calculators can be harder to use. When students are tested at an inappropriate level, however, neither set of accommodations help.

6. **CPS now allows only accommodations the test companies provide. This denies students some legally permissible options.** CPS' office for special education (known as Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services, or ODLSS) provides computer software that IEP teams must use to identify accommodations. But the software makes it impossible to use accommodations other than those the test maker includes. So, for example, students are no longer allowed readers for paper-and-pencil PARCC tests. In addition, the state-mandated SAT high school exam limits accommodations if the student wishes to have her/his scores sent to colleges. Some additional accommodations are allowed for those who do not choose to submit their scores to college. Even then, some accommodations previously allowed for instruction are no longer allowed for testing.
7. **Computer-adaptive testing (CAT), like MAP, can create added hurdles.** Computer-adaptive testing adjusts the difficulty of test questions based on a student's responses. But special educators warn that a student who receives ever more difficult test questions as a result of correctly answering questions early in a test session could become overwhelmed and give up. On the other hand, students who recognize they are being given easier and easier questions may internalize the message that they are not "smart" and lose interest in learning.

Because of federal, state and district pressure, test preparation often dominates teaching and learning. As a result, inclusion can mean being in a classroom or school that fails to provide a high-quality education. Not only must the misuse of testing on students with disabilities end, but the whole structure of test-driven schooling much change.

There are good ways to assess students, particular those with disabilities, that support high-quality teaching and learning. CPS should embrace high-quality, teacher-led classroom assessments that provide multiple ways for students to show their knowledge and skills. In particular, teachers should use performance assessments and portfolios.

What You Can Do

- Join with other parents and educators to push Chicago Public Schools to allow IEP teams to approve any legally allowed accommodations. The state and district should not buy any tests that do not allow all these accommodations.
- Join with parents and educators to shift CPS assessment away from standardized tests towards teacher-designed, student-focused assessments.
- Appeal to the state to hold CPS accountable for following special education rules.
- Push for transparency: State law requires schools to share information with parents about the quantity and timing of standardized tests, but not all schools comply. Make that part of the district's annual report card.
- Support an elected school board for CPS. The appointed Board of Ed has a poor track record on testing and special education but can't be held accountable.

More info on standardized testing and assessment for special education students at <http://bit.ly/assessingspecial> and at <http://www.fairtest.org/standardized-testing-and-students-disabilities>.