

Assessing ALL Students: Utah's Alternate Assessment

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Legislative requirements such as the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17, 1997 [IDEA 97]) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have caused teachers and administrators across the country to take a closer look at the assessment of students with disabilities. Current mandates require ALL students to participate in statewide testing. Does that mean that all students must take the end of level CRT? Certainly we are all aware that the student population is incredibly diverse and that not all students will be appropriately assessed with the same instrument. Utah's Alternate

Assessment (UAA) is part of the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students (U-PASS), and was created to bridge this gap in the assessment of students with the most severe cognitive disabilities.

The IEP team is empowered to determine how students with disabilities will participate in the current assessment system. That may include any accommodations or modifications that a student may need for a grade level assessment. In order to be eligible to take the UAA, the student must have an IEP that documents and **reflects** the need for an alternate assessment because he/she is unable to participate in any other component of U-PASS.

The UAA has recently been revised to not only meet the federal requirements, but to provide valid information that can be used to improve the outcomes of educational programs for students. The changes in the UAA help focus efforts on two components: standardization and individualization. Direct observations of student performance are recorded and measured against standardized performance criteria in the areas of Language Arts and Math. The UAA consists of approximately 100 tasks in these two areas. IEP teams will select one task from the Language Arts area and one task from the Math area that represent part of the student's educational programming in the IEP. In the spring assessment period, teachers will measure three different trials of student performance by observing skills embedded in naturally occurring routines in natural settings. Since each task is individualized and standardized, there is no question about what level of proficiency the student has reached after the performance has been recorded.

By creating an assessment with standardized tasks, teachers and administrators will be able to make meaningful comparisons across classrooms, schools, and districts. As with most assessments, the UAA is a representative piece of data that can be used to guide and inform teachers and parents. Information gained from this assessment can be used to address changes that may need to occur in a student's programming, in a school or district's professional development, or possibly help to shape a school or district's curriculum needs. The UAA is available on the webpage at: www.usoe.k12.ut.us/sars/

Academic assessment. It is recommended that assessment of academic achievement include multiple measures (formal and informal). Formal assessment measures (i.e., Woodcock Johnson-III Achievement Battery, Stanford Achievement Test) are indexed to the student's normative reference group and yield essential academic reference points. Informal measures facilitate comparisons to the classroom community and can assess individual student growth (comparison of individual to self over time). In the interest of efficiency, it is recommended that literacy (reading and writing) and study/organizational skills are the initial focus of academic assessment. Suggested informal assessments include, (a) curriculum based measurement of reading and writing skills, (b) work sample review, (c) review of homework completion rate, and (d) desk/work space organization analysis.

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) reading 2 levels below expected for age and grade, (b) literacy skills ranked in the bottom 20% of the environment/class, (c) failure to make adequate progress academically over time, (d) low (i.e. <60%) completion or accuracy of assigned work, (e) organizational skill deficiencies, (f) academic performance (i.e., grades) in the bottom 20% of the class and (g) below the 40th percentile on formal assessment.

Social skills assessment

Assessing social skills should be done from the parent's, teacher's, and student's perspectives. Rating scales such as the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence (Walker & McConnell, 1988), and School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS) (Merrell, 1993) are recommended. Additional strategies (e.g. sociometrics) can be time consuming but may be very helpful in determining how a student is perceived by his or her peers (Sheridan, 1995).

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) significantly low subscale or total scale scores in any of the social skills domains and (b) consider individual item responses that indicate the student consistently fails to perform adequately in specific areas such as in making friends, receiving criticism, controls temper, and requests permission to leave the house.

Functional behavior assessment (FBA). A FBA is recommended for behavioral concerns defined during the evaluation. If the behaviors of concern are complex in nature, a formal FBA assessment should be completed (O'Neill et al, 1997). If the behavioral concerns are less complex, the use of an informal (i.e. A-B-C chart) or computer assisted FBA program (i.e. Functional Assessment and Intervention Planning {FAIP}) can suggest possible functions of the problem behavior and provide recommended intervention. Both informal and formal processes require collaboration with important adults in the student's environment. Behavioral interventions should result from the FBA, regardless of whether the student is IDEA eligible.

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) evidence that problematic behaviors are not an appropriately adaptive response to a given environment (b) identification of specific antecedents such as transitions from one activity to another, academic "down" time and associations with problematic peers, and (c) indication of consequence-type indicators that address the impact of peer attention, avoidance of specific adults or academic subjects/tasks, and specific outcomes associated with in-school or out of school suspension. ■