

AFTER FORMAL ASSESSMENTS: **DO NOT PASS GO!**

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Wonder why it's so hard to make inclusive education work? There are many reasons for this dilemma, but the one we'll focus on now is the assessment process (those pesky tests given [1] when a child is first referred for special ed services, [2] every three years while a child is receiving services, and/or [3] when parents or educators feel they're necessary).

In general, what's the outcome when students with disabilities are evaluated with formal, standardized, traditional tests? *Dub!* Seldom do they "pass" or "measure up!" The result? They're denied placement in an age-appropriate, regular ed classroom!

Millions of students with disabilities are subjected to the tyranny of formal, standardized tests which purport to measure intelligence, social/emotional development, and more. These tests are supposed to be used to learn something new about a child—to measure the child's strengths and needs—so parents and educators will know in what areas the child needs more help and in what areas he doesn't. This information is supposed to be helpful to the team of parents and educators as they write the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) each year.

But for too many children with disabilities, test results are far from helpful. They actually cause harm when they result in children being segregated in special ed rooms.

There are a variety of problems with the traditional special education assessments/evaluations routinely used to measure children with disabilities. The tests may not be appropriate for the child; the tester may not provide accommodation for the child's disability; the person giving the test may not be qualified to administer the test; the child may be fearful of the "stranger" who gives the test, anxious about being in a strange environment, and/or tired, hungry, or otherwise not "at his best" when he's tested; and/or a multitude of other conditions may contribute to negative outcomes for the student.

A number of special ed and regular ed teachers have revealed a disturbing belief: many educators do not use formal evaluations/assessments to discover new information about a child; *they use them to prove what they already believe to be true!*

Considering all the above, is it any wonder that traditional assessments seal the fate of so many students with disabilities? *Dub!*

Few schools follow the spirit or the letter of the law. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) states, "A *variety* of assessment tools and strategies are used to gather relevant and developmental information about the child, including information provided by the parent, and information related to *enabling the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum . . .*" and "If an assessment is not conducted under standard conditions, a description of the extent to which it varied from standard conditions (e.g., the qualifications of the person administering the test, or the method of test administration) must be included in the evaluation report." (*italics added*).

In reality, few children are assessed relative to their involvement and progress in the general (regular ed) curriculum, per IDEA. Instead, standardized assessments, *which may have no correlation to the general ed curriculum*, are used.

Educators who insist that only standardized tests can be used may not be familiar with the law. It's important to note that when many educators say what they can/can't do, they're really talking about *school policy*, not the law (IDEA). It's distressing to realize this happens in many other special ed areas, not just with assessments. Many educators—from administrators to paraprofessionals—*have never read the law*. Thus, they tend to operate from school policy rather than IDEA. (But *that* story is told in another article!)

The solution to this dilemma is simple: informal, non-standard assessments! As the law states, "A

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variety of assessment tools and strategies” can be used to “gather relevant and developmental information about the child, including information provided by the parent...”

How is an informal assessment done? That’s easy to figure out once we decide who the best person is to assess a child relative to “*enabling the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum.*”

Let’s look at one more part of IDEA which states that a child’s placement should be “as close as possible to the child’s home” (neighborhood school) and that, “Unless the IEP . . . requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school he or she would attend if nondisabled; in selecting the least restrictive environment, consideration is given to any harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services that he or she needs and a child is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum.” Is there any doubt that the law intends for a child with a disability to be educated in an age-appropriate, regular ed classroom, in the neighborhood school?

Have you figured out who is the best person to assess a child—who is the expert on “the general curriculum?” If you said, “The regular ed classroom teacher,” you’re right!

What’s the best way to do an informal assessment? Any way that will give us the most accurate information about the child! Unlike standardized assessments, informal assessments can be individualized to the child and the classroom environment.

Let’s look at nine-year-old Robbie. Since fourth graders are, in general, nine-year-olds, Robbie should be entering the fourth grade next school year. A fourth grade teacher can assess Robbie, relative to his participation and progress in the fourth grade, and there are many ways to accomplish this. She can (1) have Robbie visit her classroom and then observe him participating in various educational activities;

(2) observe him in his current classroom; (3) meet with him one-on-one in her classroom or in Robbie’s home; and/or (4) visit with Robbie, his parents, and others who know him well. During these “meetings,” she can talk to Robbie, ask him questions, have him do assignments and/or activities as a way to measure his abilities, while simultaneously arriving at some conclusions about what supports and/or accommodations Robbie will need to be successful in her fourth grade classroom. Other classroom teachers could do the same. The PE teacher could assess Robbie for gym class, the art teacher for art, and so forth.

Parents play a vital role in working with general educators to design and administer informal assessment, since they’re the experts on their children and can provide valuable technical assistance. For example, Robbie’s mom could let the classroom teacher know that her son does his writing on a computer and that he learns best through computer programs and games instead of books.

Moving from traditional, standardized (and inaccurate) assessments to informal, non-standard (and accurate) assessments is something we (parents and educators) must be willing to try if we want to follow the law *and* acquire the most accurate information about a child. And the information gathered would not be used to exclude a child. Instead, the data gathered would enable the IEP team to write goals and objectives related to “*meeting the child’s needs that result from the child’s disability to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum,*” (IDEA) [italics added].

The law is very clear. Students with disabilities are expected to “participate and progress in the general curriculum.” Formal assessments that focus on child’s perceived deficits, and which then lead to exclusion, are far more than just a “*Duh!* Factor.” They represent serious errors of judgment we can no longer afford to make.

Children’s lives are at stake. Students with disabilities are counting on us, and we must not let them down.