

 The Northeast Regional Education Cooperative (REC 4)
How Do We Grade Students With Disabilities?

Is it fair to give them an A or a B for doing work that is significantly different from the rest of the class or after we have provided them with accommodations and modifications to the curriculum and instruction?

We recognize that a diploma or a grade in and of itself tells nothing about what a child knows, believes, or can demonstrate because of the tremendous variability within and across schools as to what a grade or diploma represents. Many traditional grading practices and procedures are arbitrary and subjective. For example, within a particular school, an earned grade in one math class may not mean the same thing in another math class (e.g., calculus vs. general math, one trigonometry class vs. another). In fact, within the same class the learning of two students receiving the same grade can be vastly different.

The "correct" approach to student assessment is a hotly debated issue. Some advocate the continuation of competitive, normative comparison practices (e.g., A, B, C, D, and F: percentile scores). Others advocate the adoption of outcomes-based assessment and instructional strategies. The National Center on Education Outcomes, for instance, calls for the identification of outcomes and acceptable performance standards for all students, assessment of students with reasonable accommodations if necessary, and the reporting of progress of schools in meeting their stated outcomes (Shiner, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, and Honetsschlager, 1994).

Performance-based and other authentic assessment approaches are more compatible and supportive of children with and without disabilities than traditional standardized achievement testing. They give those who wish to know about student performance a much richer picture of what students actually can do and the supports they need to do it than standardized test scores. And is that not what we truly want to know? As Nel Noddings (1992) put it, "We should move away from the question, "Has Johnny learned X?" to the far more pertinent question. "What has Johnny learned?" (p. 179).

Alternatives to traditional grading available to school personnel who want distinctions to appear on report cards and transcripts for students who have different goals or who receive accommodations include pass/fail systems, student self-assessments, contracts with students, criterion or checklist grading, and portfolios. Indeed, some teachers choose to use these alternative assessment methods for all of their students. Another alternative is to use the IEP as the vehicle for grade determination. Students with disabilities have an advantage over other students in that they have an IEP, which, when used appropriately, clearly defines the objectives they are to reach, any accommodations required during instruction and assessment, and the criteria for determining grades.

The IEP is a powerful tool when working with school personnel reluctant to provide accommodations in instruction and assessment. Specifically, the IEP is a federal requirement, and federal law supersedes state and local laws, politics, and practices that might allow accommodations to be ignored. Perhaps, then, the questions that we should really be asking here are, "Which students would benefit from accommodations and modifications in assessments based on learning style, multiple intelligences, and different interest?" and "If we accommodated for everyone and employed more of a portfolio approach through which students' actual performances and products were presented, what would be the purpose of grading and report cards?" These questions lead us away from discussion about whether or not students provided with accommodations should be given different grades and focus our thinking on "good teaching" - the identification and use of strategies to facilitate all children's learning.

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