COLLABORATING IN TEACHER PREPARATION TO

Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

by Sharon P. Robinson

Summary

This article makes a case for state boards of education to work with schools of education to ensure all teachers—even brand-new ones—are prepared to serve diverse learners effectively, including students with disabilities. This goal is within reach thanks to performance measures for new educators such as the Performance Assessment for California Teachers, Connecticut’s BEST program, and the soon-to-be-nationally available Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA), which now includes 26 participating states. Robinson highlights the potential of the TPA to help ensure teachers can achieve positive results with all learners. The success of the TPA depends on the collaboration of state boards of education and educator preparation programs to ensure the new assessment and related policies are aligned to support the mutual goal of effective practice. NASBE’s Study Group on Teacher Preparation, Retention, Evaluation, and Compensation recently voiced similar goals.

Introduction

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AECTE) is an alliance of institutions engaged in the critical work of preparing effective educators for the nation’s schools and student learners. The Association has long called for the preparation of teachers to focus on meeting the needs of the diverse learners that makeup today’s classrooms. AACTE joined the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) in a recent call for every educator, before becoming a teacher-of-record, to have significant exposure and clinical experience in the field teaching a diverse set of students.

New teachers should begin their practice with the knowledge and skills requisite to advancing student development and achievement from Day 1. State boards of education are right to set an entry bar sufficient to inspire confidence that those teachers licensed by the state can advance student achievement, even before they begin to mature and improve with experience on the job. There should be no instance when a student is exposed to a teacher-of-record who is still training or is not deemed highly qualified, having demonstrated the requisite knowledge and skills to become highly effective.

To be practice-ready on their first day on the job, new teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of the vast diversity of learners who are likely to populate their classrooms. English-language learners, students from various cultural backgrounds, and students with disabilities are among the learners most teachers now find in their charge.

Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Currently, the majority of students with disabilities spend more than 80 percent of their school day in general education classrooms. Yet, too many general education teachers report that they do not feel prepared to effectively instruct diverse...
learners, including students with disabilities. Moreover, these students often perform below expected levels on achievement measures, indicating they are not receiving the education they deserve. To bring greater attention and action to this issue, AACTE and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) issued a policy brief in 2011 that outlines a vision for preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

A principal idea underlying this report is the importance of teachers, parents, and the public understanding that it is the educational right of students with disabilities to have access to the same instructional content as all of their peers. Research suggests students who are excluded from general classrooms suffer disadvantages well beyond their immediate lost educational opportunities. Since 1975, federal law has called for students with disabilities to be educated in the “least restrictive environment” appropriate for their needs. More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 began requiring states to include students with disabilities in annual standardized math and reading assessments, which has revealed achievement gaps that motivated school leaders to include students with disabilities in general classrooms. This situation confirms the imperative to ensure general education teachers are adequately prepared to instruct and produce learning gains for students with disabilities.1

What, then, is the role of special education teachers? While students with disabilities might spend less time with special education teachers in separate classrooms, special educators are still essential—particularly with the increasing identification rate of children with disabilities. In addition to advanced knowledge of student learning challenges and research-based interventions, special educators’ work requires strong collaboration skills so they are able to serve in a co-teaching role—sharing instructional responsibilities with a general education teacher—or as a member of a formal or informal instructional team.

For students with disabilities to succeed in an inclusive classroom environment, their teachers must view
them as capable of learning and as full participants in the classroom community—not as part-time students who are ultimately the special education department’s responsibility. This is where teacher preparation programs should help teacher candidates understand how to collaborate regularly with specialists, as needed for each student, and be accountable for all of their students.

Teaching a diverse group of learners equally and effectively is an incredibly complex endeavor. To start, teachers should be prepared to recognize that student diversity is the norm, not the exception, and approach instructional design with a keen eye for a learner’s unique needs. Integrated classrooms thrive when conceived as a community of learners, where all are respected and all are expected to contribute by learning. Teachers must not only know the content they are teaching, but also be able to employ practices that both challenge and motivate all of their students. They must also know how to continuously assess each student’s progress and be flexible in adjusting their instruction to those students appropriately. For students with disabilities, that might mean employing evidence-based approaches such as Response to Intervention, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, or Universal Design for Learning.

To prepare teachers for this level of work, the report by AACTE and NCLD stated that pre-service programs must offer candidates robust experiences with diverse student populations, based in clinical settings supported by strong school-university partnerships, before they become a teacher-of-record. And to gauge candidates’ readiness to succeed in their own classroom, the report recommended that state teacher licensure requirements include performance assessments that demonstrate pre-service teacher candidates’ ability to apply what they have learned with a wide range of learners.

### The Teacher Performance Assessment

A major evolution has occurred over the past decade in states’ expectations of candidates’ readiness to teach. Traditionally, licensure tests have been used as competency tests that indicate a candidate is minimally qualified to teach based on his or her knowledge of a subject and its pedagogy. Just a few states have offered any measure of the actual performance of candidates prior to licensure. Now, however, a focus on the ability to teach—rather than just knowing how to teach—is rightfully taking root. Portfolio-centered performance assessments such as Connecticut’s BEST Program, the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT), and the new nationally available Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) are examples of this sea change.

The advent of a nationally accessible, valid and reliable assessment of teaching performance is an exciting development that will allow all states, school districts, and teacher preparation programs to adopt a common framework for defining and measuring teacher competence. Results of the assessment may be used to inform teacher licensure and recruitment, as well as program approval—in terms that are recognized and used across states. The TPA was recognized and recommended by NASBE’s Study Group on Teacher Preparation, Retention, Evaluation, and Compensation as a “rigorous and comprehensive evaluation process.”

The TPA is the first nationally available, valid, and reliable performance-based assessment for preservice teachers. This assessment is being developed by a consortium of 26 states and nearly 200 institutions led by AACTE, Stanford University, and the consortium’s operational partner, Pearson. Some 10,000 teacher candidates participated in field tests of the TPA during spring 2012, and the assessments are now available nationally for the 2012-2013 school year (see textbox).

The TPA offers a wide range of subject-specific portfolio assessments, including two in special education. The TPA was recognized and recommended by NASBE’s Study Group on Teacher Preparation, Retention, Evaluation, and Compensation as a “rigorous and comprehensive evaluation process.”

Candidates in TPA subjects other than those specific to special education must also proficiently...
address the learning of students with diverse needs. This requirement orients candidates to the reality of today’s integrated classrooms and to the professional responsibility of designing learning experiences that allow all students to make progress on curriculum standards.

In all subjects, the TPA consists of Embedded Signature Assessments (ESAs), which vary across preparation programs, and a common portfolio assessment based on what is known as the Teaching Event. The ESAs are distinctive, formative assignments embedded in course work, driven by the program’s mission and specific teaching philosophies or goals that contribute to the unique character of program graduates. For example, ESAs might include lesson plans, child case studies, analyses of student work, observations of student teaching, or other elements that the institution and its clinical partners deem most consequential.

The Teaching Event is constant across all programs, comprising a three-to-five-day lesson series taught by the candidate to a class of students. Teaching Events are subject-specific and produce artifacts for a portfolio that documents teaching and learning through evidence such as lesson plans, video clips of instruction, student work samples, and teacher assignments. These artifacts are accompanied by reflective commentary by the candidate, explaining the professional judgments underlying each artifact.

By capturing and assessing this kind of evidence of effective practice, the TPA has the potential to both predict and influence a teacher’s success in teaching diverse learners and to identify areas in which the teacher needs more support.

The TPA is aligned with key standards already employed in most states, including the Common Core State Standards for K-12 students, the Interstate Teacher and Support Consortium model standards for beginning teachers, and standards of specialized professional associations. The Common Core standards require students to apply knowledge to address questions and not simply to recall the content they learn. The analytical and literacy skills required by the Common Core standards are also skills required to be successful

Beginning in the 2012-13 academic year, edTPA will become available for use nationally. Several states have already formally adopted or are considering edTPA for statewide use to license new teachers or approve teacher preparation programs. The 26 states that are currently members of the Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (TPAC) include:

In addition, Western Governors University is also a member of TPAC and offers online accredited teacher preparation programs across the United States.
in the TPA. In other words, teacher candidates who are successful with the assessment will have been taught in a manner that develops and enhances such skill throughout their program, in both academic and professional studies.

**Teacher Performance Data and State Education Policy**

AACTE’s and NCLD’s report identified specific recommendations for state policymakers that are feasible if the TPA is employed for teacher licensure and/or preparation program approval. These include a recommendation that states develop policies and implement programs that will ensure that every teacher-of-record is skilled in instructing diverse students, including students with disabilities. In addition, the report calls on states to assess the effectiveness of general education teachers in achieving results with diverse students, including students with disabilities, in all teacher evaluation systems—a goal that could be met by using the TPA with in-service teachers.

For all stakeholders to realize the benefits of the TPA, institutions of higher education and state education leaders have to recognize it as a priority in their curriculum, program design, and funding allocations. Hundreds of institutions are already on board, and many others have indicated interest. Collaboration between state boards of education and institutions around how to use the TPA and the data it stands to generate will help educator preparation programs see the assessment as meaningful and not as a mandate. This is an opportunity not to be missed.

As NASBE’s study group recommended, state boards of education should require the TPA for licensure decisions on all new teachers, including those prepared through alternative routes. Linking licensure to passage of the assessment would ensure all teachers are equally equipped to serve the state’s diverse classrooms. Nationally, states’ data on teachers and their preparation programs would be more complete, more comparable and, therefore, more useful if all novice teachers were required to complete the same assessment.

Institutions are unified and energized about the TPA’s potential to create a common language within and across programs, as a valid and reliable assessment with high-quality rubrics and scoring procedures. They recognize that employing the assessment takes great effort and resources, and with the state’s support, as well as having a voice in how data is used, they will become willing partners.

Preparation programs and their teacher candidates have much to gain from the TPA. Completing the assessment alone is a vital professional development activity for candidates. Receiving in-depth professional feedback through a nationally recognized system gives them invaluable guidance for their future practice. Additionally, when used as a program approval requirement and when institutions receive meaningful, robust data, the TPA data can inform program renewal and be used for accreditation or other purposes that require evidence of candidates’ effectiveness.

Of course, it is the nation’s students who stand to gain the most from these developments. Every learner in every classroom, including students with disabilities, has the right to a teacher who has validated his or her ability to help all students learn.

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