

TESTIMONY

Before the National Assessment Governing Board on October 19, 2009

Ed Amundson, Special Education Teacher, Sacramento City Unified School District

Austin Naughton, , Special Education Teacher, Los Angeles Unified School District

Thank you for this opportunity for us to present today. My name is Ed Amundson and this is my colleague, Austin Naughton, and we are both high school special education teachers here in California. We are also members of the NEA IDEA Resource Cadre and give presentations around the nation on topics related to the education of students with special needs. The National Education Association is the nation's largest professional employee organization and it includes 3.2 million members at every level of education, from pre-school to university graduate programs, in every state and in Department of Defense schools abroad.

On February 4, 2009, a staff member from the NEA, Dr. Patricia Ralabate, presented testimony before the National Assessment Governing Board. We are grateful for incorporation of NEA recommendations into the July 22, 2009 report from the Technical Advisory Panel on Uniform National Rules for NAEP Testing of Students with Disabilities.

We are here today to provide our practitioners' perspectives regarding the aforementioned report, including suggestions for further consideration. The topic of assessment is important to us for many reasons. We understand and value the importance of assessing as many students as possible so that we can collect empirical data that gives us a better sense of how students, educators, and schools are performing across the nation. Without a clear picture of how our students are doing, it is difficult for educators to make the decisions about the appropriate placement and outcomes that are reasonable for the individual student.

Because special education programs have been focusing upon increasingly inclusive practices for moving students from relatively self-contained programs to "mainstream" and inclusive environments, students with significant cognitive challenges have developed better adaptive behaviors and the social and academic skills that enable them to appear more similar to their general education peers than used to be the case. For example, students with Down Syndrome now have greater educational opportunities and skills than used to be the case and this is due to the changing expectations we have for them. Thanks to improved early interventions and increased focus on academic standards, we are able to identify students and provide needed interventions that help them to succeed at subsequent grade levels. This allows us to better identify those students who need special education services due to their processing or cognitive

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skills. We are therefore hopeful that NAEP continues to explore the option for having assessments that address the needs of both higher and lower performing students.

The cognitive levels of students have not changed by much, but the expectations for **where** and **what** they learn have changed dramatically. Inclusive educational practices across grade levels have resulted in greater educational opportunities for students who used to be segregated in “self-contained” programs that had little connection to academic standards and standardized assessments other than the ones specifically designed for the individualized evaluation process.

These educational realities are why we encourage the expansion of approved accommodations for NAEP so that a greater range of students will be able to participate. We also urge you to continue consideration for the development of future assessments using the principles of universal design. As we strive to meet the needs of students with specialized learning needs around our campuses and in our communities, we recognize that participation in standardized assessments is a growing part of all students’ experiences at school. This seems to be especially the case for students with disabilities in this era of increased focus on accountability at the local, state, and national levels.

Greetings from a former New Yorker. As a teenager, I looked forward to the end of each school year, when we students would purchase our red Barron’s books from local bookstores --- this was before the Amazon was a website --- in anticipation of the end-of-course Regents exams. I took my first Regents exam as an 8th grader and the ritual continued each year, in various subjects, until I graduated with a Regents diploma at the conclusion of 12th grade. I even remember the day when a New York newspaper published the answer key of the Regents exam for Chemistry on its front page. Back then, our small, suburban public school had several levels of general education classes: non-Regents, Regents, and Honors classes. The fact that there academic course offerings titled “non-Regents” tells you something about the expectations for the students in those classes. They were expected to earn a local diploma, not a Regents diploma, and this was determined by the “track” of courses they were taking. My understanding is that such distinctions about diplomas no longer exist for students without Individualized Education Programs.

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When I became a teacher in Massachusetts in the mid-1990s, I was surprised to learn that the study-the-Barron's-book and take-a-statewide-test ritual did not exist yet, as it had in New York. Rather, my students were among the first to be experiencing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, which has become known as MCAS. Sure enough, a quick visit to the Amazon we all know well today, shows that students across Massachusetts can now prepare for the MCAS with their Barron's books.

A decade into my career as an educator, I found myself experiencing déjà vu here in California as exit exams, known here as CAHSEE, have recently begun to be required for graduation from high school with a diploma. Yes, there are Barron's books here, as well, and they also have red covers. I share this brief history of my educational journey because I am an example of someone who has lived in three different states and experienced the different educational assessment systems in each, first as a student, and now as an educator. Such mobility across the nation has helped me see the value of national assessments.

As an educator, I have proctored all sorts of assessments for individuals and groups. Just last Wednesday, I was a proctor for tenth graders at my school here in Los Angeles. When we arrived at the math section of the PSAT, we read the directions that granted students permission to place their calculators on their desks. Students across the USA encountered the same directions.

I mention this recent experience because I will be the first to admit that the different regulations for standardized assessments are confusing to me, the proctor. When is it standard operating procedure to allow all students to use a calculator versus a testing accommodation granted to some students through their IEPs versus a modification that will invalidate their scores? If we educators find this confusing, how must the students be feeling about the differences on assessments, all of which occur within the same school sites? After all, how many of the students make distinctions between the numerous standardized assessments that they now experience? We adults have a big-picture perspective of the assessments and their individual meanings. For students who might be "going through the motions" of taking the different tests we tell them to take, such a perspective may be lacking.

Just about six weeks ago, we began the new school year here in Los Angeles. As I just mentioned, I was a proctor for the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test, which our district offers to all

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tenth graders pursuing a diploma. Just a few weeks prior, groups of students with IEPs spent two days testing the pilot of the California Modified Assessment, with calculators permitted as an accommodation. If a student also happens to be an English Language Learner, he or she is likely experiencing the annual California English Language Development Test (CELDT) during these first weeks of the school year. In addition, our school uses the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test as a universal screening tool and students deemed to need further reading support might then experience a Degree of Reading Power Test to help determine the level of intervention that might be needed. These assessments are in addition to the exams, quizzes, essays, and other assignments that students encounter in their classes.

I share this brief snapshot of our opening weeks of school to contrast the difference between the assessments student encounter today with what students previously experienced. Even when I was a youth in relatively test-oriented New York, the extent to which I experienced standardized assessments paled in comparison to the quantity of exams students experience these days. I am therefore eager to express caution about how we approach further assessing of students with disabilities since it appears that students with disabilities are experiencing a greater level of assessment than is the case for their peers without IEPs. For example, I am now in the process of conducting an academic assessment for a student who recently took the PSAT. In preparation for an upcoming IEP meeting, the student is also going to be assessed by at least seven other colleagues. Thus, students with IEPs may also be assessed individually as part of the evaluation cycle for their annual IEP meetings.

In the months to come, most students at our school, including those with IEPs, will be expected to take our district's Periodic Assessments in academic subject areas at several points in the school year. Plus, there is the California Standards Test conducted over the course of a week each spring through the statewide Standardized Testing and Reporting process (STAR). Students not pursuing a diploma experience the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) and students who have not yet passed the high school exit exam have multiple opportunities to take it during grades 11 and 12.

If you find the aforementioned assessments to be a bit exhausting, imagine being a student participating in all of these assessments. Then, imagine what it must feel like to know that you might not do well taking standardized tests, yet you are taking more of them than anyone else in your school, often instead of attending the very classes in which you might be experiencing difficulty even when you are

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attending them regularly. I contrast this reality with the students who voluntarily take numerous exams as part of the college entrance process, such as Advanced Placement, the ACT and/or SAT. Students with disabilities might also be taking these tests, as well, but they are relatively optional compared to the previously-described testing mandates.

So, where does the NAEP program fit into this assessment experience for students with disabilities? I think it might go without saying that there is a risk of student “burn-out” from all the different assessments that they are experiencing. I also feel that there is genuine confusion among students regarding the extent to which accommodations, such as use of a calculator, are permitted. For the students who are not necessarily taking tests to try and enter certain types of colleges or universities, does the NAEP become just another assessment that they are randomly selected to take and how does this impact their performance --- do they run the risk of test-taking burn-out?

We need to be cognizant that for this test to have value, it should not be buried in a myriad of assessments in which students see little, if any, value. For students that might be already exhausted or burnt-out by so many tests, how do we ensure that they are doing their best on a test, such as NAEP, where they do not even get an individual score? We in California struggle with this reality regarding the CSTs, which are administered in the spring, but scores do not come back to schools until the fall. There is often too little connection between how a student performs on those tests with the result received several months later. For the exit exams that have the very high stakes of determining whether a graduate will earn a diploma or a certificate of completion, there is little need to convince the students of the tests’ importance, even if results are not obtained for several months.

We want to be clear that we are grateful to see that the Technical Report includes recommendations for further defining accommodations and modifications because this creates a national definition that will help guide future state and national assessment development.

We are also in favor of efforts to create versions for both the highest and lowest performing groups. It will provide a better picture of our students’ capabilities and increase participation rates. We want all students to participate but we understand that students with severe cognitive disabilities may be excluded from NAEP while they develop an appropriate assessment for that population.

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We also want to encourage further expansion the types of accommodations that are allowable. For example, it's not clear if the directions can be presented via tape recording. Directions can be repeated, but can they be recorded and then presented to specific children? We have already mentioned the need for assessments that feature the principles of universal design to allow multiple ways to participate and express students' skills and knowledge. For example, a computerized format for the assessment would be accessible to the widest group of children. We feel that NAEP could set the standard for assessment accessibility using an adaptive computerized format.

In conclusion, we are thankful to be a part of this process and greatly value the opportunity to speak with you today. As educators who happen to be active in the National Education Association, it is our goal to represent the perspectives of our colleagues with the ultimate goal of all students having opportunities to participate and to be successful. We believe every child deserves a great public school that prepares him or her to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. NEA fully supports the inclusion of students with disabilities in large-scale assessment and accountability systems. The challenge is how to do this in a way that validly and fairly represents what they have learned.