

ACHIEVER



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New Policy Helps States Better Assist Students with Disabilities

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings last month announced the details of a new *No Child Left Behind* policy designed to help states better assist students with disabilities. The guidelines follow up on the secretary's April announcement to chief state school officers of additional alternatives and flexibility to implement the law.

The new guidelines reflect the latest scientific research that shows students with disabilities—approximately 2 percent of all students—can make progress toward grade-level standards when they receive high-quality instruction and are assessed with alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards. Under the new flexibility option, eligible states may implement short-term adjustments to their adequate yearly progress decisions to reflect the need for alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards; this is a separate

policy from the current regulation that allows up to 1 percent of all students being tested (those with the most significant cognitive disabilities) to take an alternate assessment.

“Under this policy, to be made final under a new rule, students with academic disabilities will be allowed to take tests that are specifically geared toward their abilities, as long as the state is working to best serve those students by providing rigorous research-based training for teachers, improving assessments and organizing collaboration between special education and classroom teachers,” Secretary Spellings said. “If you stand up for the kids and provide better instruction and assessment, we will stand by you.”

For more information, visit www.ed.gov. For highlights of the new flexibility, see Page 3.

The Challenge of Professional Development

By Michele Satchwell, Carmel, Ind.

Six years ago, the March teacher professional development session at Carmel High School featured three firefighters demonstrating the appropriate use of a fire extinguisher. This year, our March session featured teacher-led training in curriculum mapping, school and classroom interventions, and data analysis, as well as collaboration time for our professional learning communities. To say we've come a long way is an understatement. The difference was a teacher-led, school improvement plan that ranked student achievement as our highest priority and supported professional development as a means to our goal.

Shifting our focus from putting out fires to improving student learning was not easy. When we started to develop our school improvement plan, we

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“Our teachers are actually enthusiastic about professional development; it is no longer a reason for eye-rolling and resigned sighing,” said Carmel High School teacher Michele Satchwell, who is shown at left with seniors Stacy Harrison and Jason Eadie.



Photo by John Gress



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I knew we were not happy with the “one-size-fits-all” type of professional development to which we were accustomed. Although nearly two-thirds of our teaching staff held master’s or advanced degrees, we all were at different places in our instructional experiences. We knew we had to create a structure that would allow our teachers to maximize their abilities to help improve student achievement.

We first considered our students’ needs. On our school evaluation for accreditation, we had established improvement goals in critical thinking and communication. But when we looked at our students’ scores on the state graduation-qualifying exam, we realized that, while our students tested relatively well, there were six proficiencies in the areas of critical thinking and writing in which they needed to improve.

The structure we decided to use was a cross-curricular “study group” model. Each study group chose one of the proficiencies to target for student improvement, and then researched best practices for improving that skill. For example, my group focused on the skill of “justifying response” for which we studied discussion techniques from Socratic seminars. Each teacher then implemented his own Individual Action Research Plan, establishing baseline data for students, incorporat-

ing research into practice, planning assessments, and measuring and analyzing results.

The most difficult part was convincing all 260 teachers that this new plan was more than the current “flavor of the month” in professional development, that this could be the beginning of a comprehensive, systemic change in the way we approach school improvement.

The action plans themselves provided our first evidence that we were achieving the results we were seeking. Pretest and posttest data outlined in the plans showed that our students improved in all six of the targeted proficiencies. And the overall percent of students passing the state exam increased from 91.1 percent in 2001 to 94.3 percent in 2005. Our teachers found that working in study groups was a powerful experience. The value and joy of collaboration were cited by more than 92 percent of our teachers in their action research. When our most intractable curmudgeon announced that this was the most meaningful professional development he had ever experienced, I knew we were on the right track.

The school improvement committee was also thrilled to hear that our teachers weren’t satisfied simply with repeating the study groups. They wanted more change. Many of our teachers suggested that a collaborative study group of teachers who teach the same subject would be even more effective in improving student achievement. They wanted to be able to focus on the course standards and material, and target more than just one area for improvement.

Our teachers unanimously agreed that meeting for half a day four times a year and occasionally after school was simply

not enough. So we worked out a plan to meet during the school day for 50 minutes twice a month for collaborative work time without affecting student class time or extending the teacher work day.

Perhaps the most fulfilling by-product of our efforts has been a culture change. Talk in the halls and workrooms is now about student improvement.

Collaboration has become a way of life at Carmel. Common assessments are, well, common. Our teachers are actually enthusiastic about professional development; it is no longer a reason for eye-rolling and resigned sighing.

The true challenge of professional development, I discovered, is designing it to fit the needs of the whole school—for staff and students. The professional development plan should always be focused on data-driven improvements for student achievement, and be based on best practices for adult learning, too. Once the plan is under way, professional development efforts should be frequently evaluated at three levels synonymously with what we ask about student learning: Did we learn it? Did we implement it? And did it make a difference in student learning?

The true excitement of professional development is realizing that you have created a culture for change that is suddenly, wonderfully leaving no one behind—neither student nor teacher.

Michele Satchwell is an English teacher and chairman of the School Improvement Committee at Carmel High School, a No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School, in Carmel, Ind. She co-authored Reading Lists for College-Bound Students and the four-volume STACS: Strategies to Acquire Composition Skills.



Satchwell with fellow teachers Dave Bardos and Ronda Eshleman.

Photo by John Gress

"... [T]he crux of the matter ... [is] looking at how do we keep girls involved, how do we keep underrepresented minorities involved in the sciences. All kids are interested, we just have to make sure we don't pass on the silent message 'You shouldn't be involved in some kind of way.'"

Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman to enter space and currently national spokesperson for the Bayer Corporation's Making Science Make Sense Program, in her remarks during the May 17, 2005, broadcast of *Education News Parents Can Use*.



**June 21
8-9 p.m. EDT**

Education News Parents Can Use monthly broadcast will focus on service learning. Visit www.ed.gov/news/av/video/edtv or call (800) USA-LEARN for details.

Close-Up: **No Child Left Behind** **State Flexibility For Students With Disabilities**

States that demonstrate student progress and effective implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* may merit additional flexibility in their efforts to raise student achievement, according to a new commonsense approach to implementing the law. The U.S. Department of Education announced in April a set of guiding principles, titled "Raising Achievement: A New Path for *No Child Left Behind*," which takes into consideration the unique situations of states when considering the approval of state accountability plans or consolidated applications. The four principles include: (1) ensuring that students are learning; (2) making the school system accountable; (3) ensuring that information is accessible and parental options are available; and (4) improving the quality of teachers.

The first step toward employing this new approach is the flexibility states will have in using alternate assessments and modified achievement standards for some students with disabilities. In addition to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (the 1 percent already covered under the current Title I regulations), research indicates that there is another group of students with disabilities, approximately 2 percent of the school-aged population, in need of modified standards and assessments. This group of students can make progress toward but also may not reach grade-level achievement within the same time frame as other students.

The Department is working on final regulations to implement the new policy, for which it will release a notice of proposed rule-making to seek public comments. The goal of the regulations will be to:

- Ensure that states hold these students to challenging, though modified, achievement standards that enable them to approach, and even meet, grade-level standards;
- Ensure access to the general curriculum to ensure that students in this group are taught to the same high standards;
- Measure these students' progress with high-quality alternate assessments so parents are confident that their students are learning and achieving;
- Provide guidance and training to Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to identify these students properly; and
- Provide professional development to regular and special education teachers.

In the interim, states that meet the eligibility guidelines can make adjustments to their 2004-05 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) definition for students with disabilities. The Department has suggested two options for AYP adjustments and states may offer their own ideas for the secretary's consideration. One option applies only to schools or districts in eligible states that did not make AYP based solely on the scores of their students in disabilities subgroups. A second option applies to eligible states that currently assess students based on modified achievement standards. Only states that intend to develop alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards are eligible for short-term flexibility.

To increase the state's ability to provide rigorous assessment, instruction, and accountability for students with disabilities, the Department will direct \$14 million in 2005 to improve assessments, help teachers with instruction, and conduct research for students with disabilities who are held to alternate and modified achievement standards. Additional funds will be directed in 2006.

For more information, visit www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/05/05102005.html.

Please Note

We will take a break for the summer and resume publication with our September issue. As we plan for the next school year, we welcome your comments on how we can continue to improve *The Achiever* to meet your needs.

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FIRST CLASS**



**“When it comes to
the education of our
children, failure is
not an option.”**

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH



NEW RESOURCES! Just Added to **FREE** Web Site

The most dynamic Web site for teaching and learning resources from more than 35 federal organizations is just one click away. The Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE) site—www.ed.gov/free—recently added to its “New Resources” collection 30 online resources ranging from arts to science education. Updated weekly, the site includes, among its recent additions, the following recommendations.

MyPyramid.gov offers an animated tour of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s recommended nutrition pyramid, in which users can assess their diets and physical activity, review a sample menu and use the food-tracking worksheet to improve their eating habits.

Nationalatlas.gov, a primary online source of U.S. maps and geographic information from the U.S. Department of the Interior, allows users to develop their own maps by selecting certain features, such as cities and counties, roads and rivers, population and congressional districts, crops and livestock, earthquakes and forest types, and much more.

19th Century America in Art and Literature presents seven paintings, including Lackawanna Valley and The White Cloud, Head Chief of the Iowas, paired with written documents from the National Gallery of Art’s collection. Student activities and discussion tips are designed to help teachers use these primary sources to reconstruct the impact of geography, economics and politics on the nation as it shifted from an agricultural to an industrial economy, as Americans moved west, and as the country fought the Civil War.

Brown v. Board: Five Communities That Changed America, from the National Park Service, describes the five cases that originated in Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia and Washington, D.C., on which the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 to end segregation in public schools.