

ABSTRACT

Monica Smith-Woofter, THE IMPACT OF ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS AND STANDARDS-BASED IEPs ON CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (Under the direction of Dr. Lynn Bradshaw), Department of Educational Leadership, November, 2010.

The U.S. Congress has passed several laws since 1997 in order to ensure the students with disabilities have an opportunity to learn and access the general curriculum. States now include students with disabilities in state accountability systems whether it is through regular state assessments or alternate assessments. For students eligible to take an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards, they require the development and use of standards-based Individualized Education Plans (IEP) is a requirement. As states adhere to federal guidelines and regulations in an effort to implement standards-based reform, students with disabilities, along with their non-disabled peers are held to the same or similar grade level academic achievement standards.

This descriptive case study explored teacher perceptions of the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. Interviews of regular education teachers, special education teachers, principals, and exceptional children directors in two North Carolina school districts were conducted to gather perception data on the impact North Carolina Extend2 Alternate Assessments and standards-based IEPs had on classroom instruction and student achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities. Special education teacher observations and archival analysis of standards-based IEPs were used to determine trends and patterns. The participants' perceptions were also explored to determine the adequacy of professional development available to support and prepare

them for the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

The results of the case study indicated teachers viewed standards-based IEPs as a driving force for classroom instruction, teachers had higher expectations for students with persistent academic disabilities, teachers believed it was a shared responsibility of both the regular and special education teacher to teach students in the target population, and teachers viewed that most of the professional development was adequate. Teachers were using standards-based IEPs to determine and understand the students' present level of performance in order to adjust and plan for classroom instruction. Philosophical beliefs resulted in cultural changes that were experienced by teachers and principals who collaborated to teach students with persistent academic disabilities in inclusive or mainstreamed classroom settings. The professional development specific to IEP compliance, Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol and Reading Foundations were viewed as valuable training support for teachers as they prepared the teaching and learning opportunities of students with persistent academic disabilities. Although the majority of the professional development was adequate, the special education teachers acknowledged the need for more curriculum-based professional development to increase their content knowledge.

THE IMPACT OF ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS AND STANDARDS-BASED IEPS ON
CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Over the past fifteen years, federal policy has mapped the direction and focus of educational reform for all students. Many of these congressional and federal mandates were established to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, had access to the general education curriculum in order to maximize their opportunities to learn. “These laws were designed from the results of 20 years of research, demonstration, and practice that have suggested that in schools where all students are expected to succeed, all students do succeed” (Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2001, p. 4). The inclusion of alternate assessments in state accountability systems and content standards in Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are catalysts in this educational reform era that impact the ability to access equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

Alternate assessments are a popular topic of discussion among practitioners. Specifically, this research explores how alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs affect classroom instruction and student achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities. The federal government expects this impact to be positive. However, research is needed to explore whether performance and equal access are enhanced through alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

Federal legislation has strongly impacted school improvement efforts across the nation. “The standards-based reform is the driving force behind many educational efforts” (Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007, p. 143). In the last decade students with disabilities were included in the standards-based reform movement.

Specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 required the inclusion of students with disabilities in all district and state assessments by the year 2000. Numerous national reports indicate the need for the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems and open access to the general education curriculum.

What is the general education curriculum? The general education curriculum is the essential information that educators and the community believe should be taught for a given subject. Together content standards and performance standards guide the redesign of the general education curriculum. The primary purposes of the content and performance standards are to provide (a) a focus for the general curriculum, denoting the essential and challenging content and (b) ensuring that every student is taught, having the opportunity to learn the same grade-level content (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

The individual needs of students with disabilities must be taken into account when considering strategies for ensuring that all students have the ability to learn and all students should have standards that are challenging in this standards-based reform movement (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997).

We want the phrase “all students can learn” to be at the top of every school’s list of beliefs or principles, and we want “all means *all*” to be clearly understood. Alternate assessments...have the potential to operationalize this message, making “all students can learn” a measurable reality (Thompson et al., 2001, p. x).

It is the view of the federal government that with the inclusion of students with disabilities in the accountability systems of the states, students with disabilities are afforded an opportunity to learn. The inclusion of students with disabilities in standards-based reform ensured the opportunity for students with disabilities to receive the same educational benefits intended for all students and to hold schools and school districts accountable to meeting this goal (McDonnell et al., 1997).

Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) and academic content standards included in IEPs have the potential to drive curriculum, instruction, and student achievement. Based on the belief that whatever is tested is taught, it is assumed that teachers will be motivated to teach the curriculum for all students and work diligently to help all students learn the content. It is not apparent whether this potential is positive, negative or negligible. This case study explored the potential impacts of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement.

Students with disabilities are required to have IEPs that are specific to their educational needs and include strategies to meeting expected standards. With the federal policies mandating that states develop alternate assessments with high standards at the core, many educators are questioning whether or not states are implementing policies and practices that interfere with a student's IEP. For example, is it possible for standards-based IEPs to ensure that the functional needs of the student are met at the same time they address the academic needs of the student? Are individual student's needs ignored now that the federal government is requiring states to develop statewide alternate assessments within their accountability systems?

States are facing many challenges as they implement the new accountability mandates (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003). Challenges include developing age-appropriate, alternate assessments that are valid, reliable, and aligned with state standards. States will need to work through these challenges to ensure that students with disabilities, regardless of their disability and individual needs, have access to assessments. As more has been learned about including students with disabilities in accountability systems, the U.S. Department of Education has refined guidance and regulations to reflect high levels of rigor and technical adequacy, such as assessment blueprints documenting validity, reliability, and alignment with academic achievement standards or states' accommodation policies.

Conceptual Framework/Statement of the Problem

The inclusion of students with disabilities in standards-based reform is promoting their access to the general curriculum (McDonnell et al., 1997). The U.S. Congress has enacted several laws that will ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district accountability systems to the extent of allowing alternate assessments for students with disabilities in order to provide access to assessments to document their growth. States have developed alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities with the option of developing a second alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (Cortiella, 2007). These alternate assessments allow states to determine if students with disabilities are meeting learning expectations as developed by the state.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110) requires states to develop alternate assessments with guidelines. Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) allow states to develop assessments that measure whether or not students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have demonstrated proficiency on the extended content standards developed by the state. Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) are developed for students with disabilities who are unlikely to achieve grade-level proficiency within the year covered by the IEP. When states elect to develop AA-MAS, IEP teams are required to develop IEPs based on academic content standards for students with disabilities who are assessed using an AA-MAS (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). The federal government mandates the use of alternate assessments to increase access to the general education curriculum ultimately expecting improvement in instruction and achievement for students with disabilities. Therefore, research on the impacts of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement is important.

The federal mandates, which are explained in detail throughout the literature review, are established with little flexibility allowed to states as they implement the processes, procedures, and best practices for the deployment of both alternate assessments and content standards in IEPs. This in depth case study of two North Carolina school districts was conducted to explore the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. In addition the study examined the districts' implementation processes, best practices and

professional development opportunities as a result of the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

Significance of the Study

Studies and reports relating to alternate assessments, standards-based IEPs, and academic content standards published since 1999 supported the need for research involving longitudinal studies on alternate assessment outcomes and trends in achievement over time. Additionally, there is an interest in whether recent policies regarding students with disabilities impact classroom instruction and student achievement. In a review of the use of AA-AAS, (Browder et al., 2003) the authors found that research is beginning to indicate a relationship between instruction and alternate assessment outcomes. The relationship surfaces when teachers recognize the connection between daily instruction and alternate assessment data when making instructional decisions.

The studies and reports over the last decade encourage and recommend further research on the impact of alternate assessments on classroom instruction and student achievement. In addition, the teachers' perceptions of the overall value of using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs may be changing as they gain more experience in this area (Browder et al., 2007). The majority of these studies however, focus on the alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The federal government has placed a 1% cap on the number of students with significant cognitive disabilities who may be assessed using an AA-AAS (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). The students who are allowed to take an AA-AAS are categorized

using a variety of special education labels. Generally speaking, the students within this population are labeled with mental disability, multiple disabilities, and/or autism.

Specifically, students with significant cognitive disabilities experience difficulty in the following areas: attending to the salient features of stimuli, remembering new information, generalizing learned skills to appropriate contexts, self regulating behavior, meta-cognition and skill synthesis. Some of these students may have limited motor response repertoires, sensory deficits in both hearing and vision, and special health care needs, which may limit participation in school activities (National Alternate Assessment Center, 2009, p. 16).

Since the publishing of the U.S. Department of Education's Modified Academic Achievement Standards: Non Regulatory Guidance of 2007 more research has focused on students with mild to moderate disabilities to give states guidance in the development of AA-MAS. Students with disabilities may be assessed using the AA-MAS. There is a 2% cap on the number of proficient scores that may be counted for students assessed using an AA-MAS (Lazarus, Hodgson, & Thurlow, 2010). There is no explicit definition for students with disabilities within the 2% population. However, these students are below proficiency over several test administrations on the general state assessment and they have persistent academic disabilities. The students with persistent academic disabilities are not identified as having a significant cognitive disability nor are they receiving instruction through extended content standards. In addition, the IEP team agrees that the student will not achieve grade-level proficiency within the year the IEP covers (Ahearn, 2009b). Students with persistent academic disabilities have an array of exceptionalities that may include learning disabilities in specific areas such as writing,

reading, and mathematics, Asperger's disorder, other health impaired, and behavioral and emotional disorders. These students regardless of exceptional category have persistent academic difficulties that prevent them from reaching grade level proficiency in the same timeframe as non-disabled students; however these students tend to make significant progress over time.

To accommodate students with disabilities, states are required to develop specific eligibility criteria and guidelines for the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. The rules and regulations provided by the federal government may be used as guidance to states in the development and implementation processes. States that opt to develop and use AA-MAS may use the appropriate U. S. Department of Education guidance documents for the inclusion of modified academic content standards and modified academic achievement standards that address the needs of this population of students as it relates to alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. The modified academic content standards give students with persistent academic disabilities the opportunity to work towards grade level standards. The modified academic content standards are aligned with the general state content standards for the specified grade level. The modified standards are used to determine the goals and objectives in the student's IEP that are individualized and curriculum-based. In addition, the modified academic achievement standards are used to provide assessment levels for the AA-MAS for students within the target population.

The major findings and results of this research may provide policymakers with information that may be used to guide future discussions, decisions, and/or policy

governing the inclusion of students with disabilities in state accountability systems through the use of AA-MAS and standards-based IEPs. Likewise, teachers, building level administrators, and central office administrators may benefit from the findings and results of this case study to make informed decisions regarding classroom instruction, student achievement, and professional development for educators working with this student population. Finally, the results and findings may lead to important discoveries regarding the teaching and learning of students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

With many studies exploring the impact of alternate assessments on students with significant cognitive disabilities, more research is needed to investigate the impact among the population of students with disabilities who are classified as having persistent academic deficiencies prohibiting them from reaching grade-level proficiency within the specified year. The purpose of this study was to explore how the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs were impacting classroom instruction and student achievement for students with disabilities assessed using the AA-MAS. This in-depth case study examined and explored impacts and trends of the AA-MAS in North Carolina (NCExtend2) and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement in two school districts. Furthermore, this study explored the extent to which preparation and professional development activities assisted teachers to develop and implement standards-based IEPs and the NCExtend2 for classroom instruction and student achievement. Ultimately, the results and findings of this research may provide information to guide decisions regarding classroom

instruction, student achievement, professional development and policy at the national, state, and local levels.

Research Questions

In a 2007 report from the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), the task force questioned the extent to which the inclusion of the AA-MAS as part of the state's assessment system would lead to better instructional and curricular opportunities for students with disabilities (Cortiella, 2007). The NCEO question along with the need for further research in this area serve as the basis for investigation of the following research questions:

1. How are teachers using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
2. What are the impacts on classroom instruction of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
3. What are the impacts on student achievement of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
4. What is the teacher's perception on the adequacy of professional development in preparing them to use alternate assessment data and standards-based IEPs?
5. What trends are evident in standards-based IEPs the enactment of this requirement?

Methodology Overview

The methodological design was an in-depth qualitative study of two North Carolina school districts; the study gathered data from the educators' perceptions directly involved in the development and implementation of alternate assessments and

standards-based IEPs. In addition, an archival analysis was used to explore trends in the standards-based IEP over a period of three years. Participants included a purposeful sample of exceptional children directors, curriculum and instruction/professional development directors, building level administrators, and grade eight teacher pairs consisting of one special education teacher and one regular education teacher. The teacher participants taught students with disabilities who had been or were currently assessed using North Carolina's AA-MAS within the past three years. The goal was to select two grade eight teacher pairs within each participating school district.

There were three data collection methods used as part of this qualitative research. First, individual structured interviews were used to elicit teachers' perceptions of the impact on classroom instruction and student achievement. Second, observations of the special education teachers were used to complement the data on impacts. Third, an archival analysis of IEPs developed by the special education teacher was used to explore trends in IEP development. This study investigated and analyzed the IEP documents written by the special education teachers for students with mild to moderate disabilities that were assessed using the NCExtend2. The special education teachers involved in this case study determined the blind IEP documents that were pulled over the three-year study.

Assumptions and Limitations

There were several embedded assumptions with the enactment of the federal mandates on alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs affecting special education teachers, regular education teachers, and students with disabilities. One

assumption was that teachers in this study had adequate information, knowledge, and training needed to implement the use of alternate assessments and develop standards-based IEPs for students with disabilities. Another assumption was that the teacher turnover rates of the two school districts implied teacher stability. Instead, it was difficult to find teachers to participate who met all of the criteria. One criterion expected teacher participants to be currently teaching 8th grade students with persistent academic disabilities scheduled to take an AA-MAS during the school year in which the study was conducted. Several of the teacher participants did not meet this criterion. The teacher turnover rates in the participating districts had a greater impact than expected. Therefore, the selection criteria were modified to increase the number of potential teacher participants for the purposeful sample.

This study is based on a very small purposeful sample, thus viewed as an expected limitation. A second limitation within this case study was the inability to track individual student test scores for the target student population to provide student performance evidence of the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on student achievement. The reporting of student achievement scores for this student population was suspended for a period of time during this study. Individual student performance on the North Carolina AA-MAS was not reported for the 2009 accountability year; thus individual student scores could not be obtained. Therefore, student achievement impacts were based on the perceptions of research participants and not actual student achievement data.

The inclusion of only two school districts from the same geographical location of one state also limits the findings in this case study. Further limitations resulted from the

inability to complete all planned data collection processes. In one of the participating school districts, the principal investigator was not allowed to conduct the observation of one of the special education teacher participants. In the same school district, blind IEPs were not obtained for analyses. Thus, these data collection limitation factors affected the use of the triangulation process to further validate the data through cross verification from multiple data sources (Yin, 2003). Based on these noted limitations, the reported findings may only be used to provide beginning insights of the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs had on classroom instruction and student achievement in the two participating school districts.

Definition of Key Terms

Access to the general education curriculum – The meaning of this concept is that all students, including students with disabilities, should have the opportunity to learn the content that is essential for all students to know in a given curriculum. The curriculum should be taught in a manner in which students with disabilities can acquire the content (Hehir, 1999).

Academic achievement standards – define how students are expected to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have gained revealing the content standards they have learned (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b).

Academic content standards – are statements of the knowledge and skills that teachers teach to students (U. S. Department of Education, 2007b). They are the specific concepts, skills, knowledge, and subject matter that educators believe should be taught (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) – is the annual improvement that school districts and schools are expected to make as set by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in reading and mathematics. The goal of NCLB is that all students are proficient in reading and mathematics by the year 2014 (Cortiella, 2007).

Alternate assessments (AA) – an assessment designed for the small number of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular state assessment, even with appropriate accommodations provided to address their specific needs (NCLB, 2001).

Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) – are alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities designed to assess grade level content with less depth, breadth, and complexity than the regular state assessment (National Alternate Assessment Center, 2009)

Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) – are alternate assessments for students with disabilities who have persistent academic deficiencies and are unlikely to achieve grade level proficiency within the school year covered by the IEP. The AA-MAS is designed to cover the same grade level content as all other students (Cortiella, 2007). The North Carolina AA-MAS is called the North Carolina Extend2.

Individualized Education Plan – “A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised according to the requirements of IDEA” (Cortiella, 2007, p. 3).

Performance Standards – refer to the knowledge and skills that students are expected to demonstrate (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

Standards-based reform – an approach to education reform that sets standards of performance in designated subject areas as a means of strengthening the content of school curricula, increasing the motivation and effort of students, teachers, and school systems, and thereby improving student achievement. The reform assumes high standards for all students (McDonnell et al., 1997).

Students with disabilities assessed using an AA-AAS – refers to the group of students with disabilities who have the most significant cognitive disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). Educators often refer to this group of students with disabilities as the 1% population.

Students with disabilities assessed using an AA-MAS – refers to the group of students with disabilities who have mild/moderate disabilities, who experience persistent academic difficulties and are unlikely to achieve grade level proficiency within the school year covered by the IEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). The 2% population is used in referencing this group of students with disabilities.

Summary

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the concepts and formulation of alternate assessments and content standards as it related to students with disabilities having access to the general education curriculum. Chapter 2 presents the literature review of the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs to ensure that students with disabilities are included in states' accountability systems. The literature review has six main sections, (a) introduction, (b) historical

perspective and growing emphasis on accountability, (c) legislation: federal and state, (d) development and implementation, (e) effects, and (f) summary. Chapter 3 provides an explanation of the methodology used in this case study and the data to be collected from the population of special education teachers and students with disabilities involved in these studies. Chapter uses the research questions and emerging themes to report the findings and results of this case study. Within this descriptive case study the reporting of the findings follow a “linear-analytic structural” approach (Yin, 2003). Chapter 5 provides (a) a summary of findings and results focusing on similarities and differences between the two school districts, (b) a discussion of results and implications, (c) and a conclusion that includes limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since 1997, the federal government requires alternate assessments in an effort to ensure that students with disabilities have the same educational opportunities as non-disabled students and access to appropriate assessments to measure their learning (IDEA 1997). Students with significant cognitive disabilities and those with persistent academic disabilities were no longer excluded from state accountability systems since the enactment of IDEA 1997. Therefore, explorations of the impact of alternate assessments and academic content standards launched by many experts and researchers in the field were reviewed to capture the history pertaining to the congressional and federal mandates for the inclusion of students with disabilities in states' accountability systems, to gather evidence of effects on classroom instruction and student achievement and to determine the types of alternate assessments that were prevalent to best measure student achievement.

This literature review was organized into seven major sections to show how and why alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have become an integral part of states' accountability systems. The sections include the: (a) introduction, b) historical perspective and growing emphasis on accountability, (c) legislation: federal and state, (d) development and implementation, (e) effects, and (f) summary. Sources for this literature review were identified using an electronic search of databases through EBSCOhost, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, JSTOR and Proquest Dissertations and Theses. The descriptor terms used were *students with disabilities* paired with *alternate assessments, content standards, standards-based*

IEPs, classroom instruction, learning, student achievement, general curriculum, opportunity to learn, and history.

The literature dates back to the 1990s to parallel the development and enactment of federal law researching the inclusion of students with disabilities in state accountability systems, alternate assessments, and standards-based IEPs.

Researchers working with the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and special education practitioners have contributed much of this literature. The theoretical policy frameworks referenced within the literature review provided an understanding of the development and implementation of the federal policy on alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Dissertations relating to alternate assessments conducted since 2000 were also reviewed.

In order to provide an overall review and study of the literature, national reports and other sources were used to parallel the same time frame as the historical and legislative context of alternate assessments and content standards. Structuring the literature in this manner gave a holistic conceptual picture of the research. Some of the national reports served as crucial resources to help states better understand the laws as they were written. Three of the United States Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education) reports, included as references, were developed as resources for AA-MAS.

It is apparent with the federal guidelines established and emphasized in these U.S. Department of Education reports, (a) Modified Academic Achievement Standards: Non-regulatory guidance, (b) Rules and Regulations: Part 200-Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, and (c) Rules and Regulations: Title I –

Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, that states are expected to research best practices and work collaboratively as they adhere to the rules and regulations outlined by the government. The U.S. Department of Education reports, framed as frequently asked questions, served as a guide to states and educators in understanding the mandates. The legal guidelines and technical reports provided by states are accessible to educators both at the federal and state level. To assist educators across the nation, the federal government, along with leading researchers in this area, has established web-based resources to disseminate reports and information regarding alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Likewise, most states established testing and accountability websites along with websites concerning students with disabilities that provided the guidelines and criteria educators and parents may use within their state to determine the most appropriate assessment for students with disabilities.

Historical Perspective and Growing Emphasis on Accountability

Early Years in Special Education

During the last quarter of the 20th Century, all students regardless of their physical handicap or disability were guaranteed the right to a public education with the passing of *Public School Law 94-142 (PL 94-142)*, The Education of All Handicapped Children in 1975. This act required that students with disabilities have the opportunity to a free appropriate education and an individualized education plan to meet their educational needs. Until the passage of this law, schools could say no to educating students with disabilities (Itkonen, 2007).

PL 94-142, later re-named IDEA, “was primarily a civil rights law aimed at ensuring that school-aged children with disabilities were afforded due process in their dealings with public schools” (Nolet, 2006, p. 3). With the development of an IEP due to the enactment of PL 94-142, students with disabilities were entitled to “a free appropriate public education”. The IEP would meet the specific needs of the student while helping to provide access to an appropriate education. Schools were expected to match the “correct” intervention needed for the student to access “a free appropriate education” with the student’s unique characteristics identified through diagnostic assessments of the student’s abilities (Nolet, 2006).

“By the late 1980s, all states had adopted the federal special education policy,” PL 94-142 (Itkonen, 2007, p. 10). In the 1990s, the focus of general education shifted from access to outcomes as a result of the standards-based reform and accountability movements in general education (McDonnell et al., 1997). The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act became the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 to promote quality teaching and learning for all students. With this reauthorization, funding sources were available for states, districts, and schools in support of their efforts to help students reach high standards (Riley, 1995). “In 1995, the general education community argued that it was time to open up the special education law, and transform it from an access law to a quality and an outcomes statute” (Itkonen, p. 11). Specifically, in 1997, IDEA Amendments required that all students have access to the general education curriculum and be included in the general and district-wide assessment programs, with alternate assessments being conducted by July 2000 (Browder et al., 2007; Kohl, McLaughlin & Nagle, 2006; McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003).

Before 1997, students with disabilities were excluded from state accountability systems. Their education often differed from the education of non-disabled students. Even though students with disabilities were educated in public schools, their curriculum and instruction were different than that of regular education students. At times, the IEP for each student with disabilities was the main curriculum focus for the student. IEP teams assessed the student's academic and functional skills, acknowledged the student's present level of performance and documented problems and deficiencies, and then wrote goals and objectives that addressed the stated deficiencies (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001). This approach led to students with disabilities not having clear and equitable access to the general education curriculum as their non-disabled peers. The federal government hoped to address the lack of access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities with the enactment of IDEA Amendments of 1997.

IDEA Amendments of 1997 is “the primary federal law that provides funding and criteria for the education of children with disabilities” (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 251). At this point, states were required to develop alternate assessments for students with disabilities in order to include these students in the state accountability systems. Further changes resulted once IDEA Amendments of 2004 required the inclusion of standards in IEPs for students assessed using the AA-MAS (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001). The additional requirement of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs for students with disabilities would guarantee access to the same curriculum as students in general education. “Now, rather than focus on deficits, IEP teams have an opportunity to focus on helping students work toward high educational

standards” (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001, p. 4). This standards-based practice would move beyond just stating the student’s present level of performance and academic and functional deficiencies.

Opportunity to Learn

When an IEP team develops goals that are based on grade-level content standards it ensures access to the general education curriculum, which supports students’ opportunity to learn. Opportunity to learn was an idea that formulated from conversations among researchers as they discussed learning for all children (Moss, Pullin, Gee, Haertel, & Young, 2008). Opportunity to learn standards were originally a part of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. This provision outlined the basis for determining the quality of resources, classroom practices, and conditions of the education system as established by education agencies to provide all students the opportunity to learn the national content standards or state content standards (McDonnell et al., 1997; Moss et al., 2008). While students with disabilities were to benefit from the opportunity to learn, this concept is also inclusive of all students. The premise of opportunity to learn stems from the notion that students cannot be expected to learn content that they have not encountered (Moss et al., 2008).

“Political opposition has curbed efforts to develop and implement standards for evaluating opportunities to learn” (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 141). Although, states did begin identifying their opportunity to learn strategies in order to meet the early expectations outlined by the government, all references to the concept were removed from Goals 2000 in an effort to back off on stipulating the mandate at that time. However, it continued to be an expectation that all students were provided adequate

opportunities to learn the content that they were held accountable for learning.

Policymakers chose to accomplish this through the implementation of large-scale assessments for all students in state accountability systems.

Standards-Based Reform

"The movement to define standards for all students' learning and to hold schools accountable for this learning through large-scale assessments is called *standards-based reform*" (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006, p. 250). In this era of standards-based reform the two types of standards that must be established were the content standards and the performance standards. Once these standards were established, they were used as instructional guides for teachers. "The core of the reform rests on standards" (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 2). Nolet and McLaughlin (2000) state:

The primary purpose of the content and performance standards are to (a) focus the general curriculum on a core of important and challenging content, and (b) ensure that every student in a state or district receives instruction in the same challenging content (p. 6).

Thus, states were required to develop alternate assessments based on standardized content and performance standards that ensure students with disabilities are learning, accessing the general education curriculum, and developing competencies needed to succeed. McDonnell et al. (1997) stated that as more students with disabilities participate in standards-based reform, they are taught the state content standards and held accountable for learning them.

The Goals 2000 committee agreed with McDonnell et al. and made ten recommendations for states and communities to follow to help them with their reform

efforts. The committee's work was guided by two principles, (1) "all students should have access to challenging standards and (2) "policy makers and educators should be held publicly accountable for every student's performance" (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 197). The recommendations from the Goals 2000 committee were the groundwork for the federal policy that followed.

Additionally, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994) approved of the development of alternate assessments since the Act provided resources to states and communities to fund efforts for all students reaching their full potential. The Goals 2000 committee advised states and communities who moved forward with the standards-based reform movement to align with current special education policies and practices (McDonnell et al., 1997). The Act encourages states to adopt content standards and performance standards because it is believed that students will reach higher levels of achievement when more is expected of them. In the last decade, the United States has embraced standards-based reform and enacted several laws to ensure that students with disabilities are a part of the movement. With the reauthorization of IDEA Amendments of 1997, "standards based reform is now having a direct impact on students with disabilities" (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001, p. 214).

Modified Academic Achievement Standards Requirement

The federal government currently requires all states to include students with disabilities in their accountability systems in the areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b). The inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems may be through the use of the regular assessments either with or without accommodations or alternate assessments.

Alternate assessments, just like regular assessments, allowed states to determine if students with disabilities were meeting learning expectations. Since the implementation of the IDEA Amendments, the three primary types of alternate assessment formats used include portfolios, observations, and performance assessments (Hager & Slocum, 2005; Yovanoff & Tindal, 2007).

Now that students with disabilities were included in state assessment and accountability systems, states were given the flexibility to develop AA-MAS and AA-AAS (Thurlow, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007b). With regards to the AA-MAS, the population of students for whom this policy applies is the group of students whose disabilities may keep them from reaching grade-level achievement within the time frame covered by their IEP (Elliott, Kettler, & Roach, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007b).

In April 2007, the regulations on modified academic achievement standards were finalized. “If a student has persistent academic disabilities and is in the 2% population who qualify for modified achievement standards, he or she will also be learning content, but with outcomes that differ from grade-level attainment” (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006, p. 252). The purpose of developing an assessment of this type is “to create an accurate measure of achievement for students whose disability precludes them from reaching proficiency on grade-level content within the current year” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007b, p. 24). Through the alignment of alternate assessments to state content standards, students with disabilities would have access to the general education curriculum (Browder et al., 2007; Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trella, & Baker, 2006).

States have the option of choosing to develop (AA-MAS) for all grades. The U.S. Department of Education outlined rules and regulations to guide states in the development of AA-MAS. In the 2008 updates, NCEO confirmed that six states, North Carolina, Kansas, Louisiana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Maryland had developed an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (Lazarus, Thurlow, Christensen, & Cormier, 2007). In March 2010, NCEO reported 14 states had chosen to develop an AA-MAS as of October 2009; the original six states plus, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas (Lazarus et al., 2010). Since the final AA-MAS regulations were published, the NCEO has annually tracked states participation guidelines and analyzed those guidelines to report changes, characteristics of the guidelines, and other findings that may benefit states as they move forward with their development and implementation of AA-MAS (Lazarus et al., 2010).

Academic Content Standards in Individual Education Plans

Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (2003) allowed states to use modified content standards and alternate content standards for alternate assessments. In addition, IDEA Amendments of 2004 required the alignment of the AA-MAS with the general state curriculum. When AA-MAS are used, content standards are required to be aligned with the goals and objectives in a student's IEP. With the inclusion of content standards in the student's IEP for students with persistent academic disabilities, IEP goals are curriculum-based and individualized at the same time. As we moved towards a system based on standards, IEP teams could no longer make the mistake of developing isolated skill objectives in student's IEPs. Nolet and

McLaughlin (2000) stated, “The student’s program may have been individualized, but it could also be separated from the larger scope and sequence of a curriculum. Too often the IEP became the curriculum for the student” (Nolet & McLaughlin, p. 10). In 2006, Nolet added that IEPs were usually a collection of isolated skill objectives most often leading to isolated instruction. Even though the process of developing IEPs and the implementation of alternate assessments were standardized, the contents of the IEP protected the individual learning needs of the student when IEP teams developed appropriate curriculum goals and objectives. This new format for IEPs, most often referred to as standards-based IEPs, allow for student access to the general education curriculum. The standards-based IEP is required for all students with persistent academic disabilities who are assessed using the AA-MAS. Therefore, states are required to establish guidelines for IEP teams to follow to ensure that students with persistent academic disabilities have a standards-based IEP. However, Filbin suggests that states should consider the following, “Rather than focus on all standards, a standards-based IEP is intended to address only those grade-level standards for which a student will need specialized instruction and supports to progress in the general curriculum” (2008, p. 7).

With the standards-based approach to IEPs, these documents require teachers, parents, and other educators involved in the IEP process to think differently about the contents and the educational planning necessary for the education of students with persistent academic disabilities in schools today. The standards-based IEP plays a “different role for educational planning “ than it did two decades ago (Karvonen, 2009). Now that teachers are concentrating more on content standards whether they are

modified or extended, the teachers have the opportunity to provide better instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. In order to align assessment and instruction to grade-level content, it is important to understand the difference between academic content standards and achievement standards (Browder et al., 2007). The academic content standards contain “what students need to know” while modified academic achievement standards “spell out how well students need to know the academic content standards” (Cortiella, 2007, p. 3). The expectation that the federal government establishes through the requirements specified in the legislation is that this population of students assessed with an AA-MAS can learn academic content that is related to grade-level standards and it gives these students equal educational opportunities (Browder et al., 2007). Therefore, academic content standards must be included in a student’s IEP if the student is assessed using an AA-MAS. In the NCEO Synthesis 75 Report, nine of the 14 states that opted to develop AA-MAS as of October 2009 “required that the student’s IEP goals must be based on grade-level content standards” (Lazarus et al., 2010, p. 10)

In a California study conducted by Porter (2006), 12 special education teachers were interviewed to determine how they believed their special education classrooms for students with mild/moderate disabilities were changed and/or shaped by standards-based reform. Specifically, Porter was interested in whether the curriculum and instruction were impacted. Porter’s results indicated that the teachers believed the IEP was the most important guide for the instruction of students with disabilities. However, the teachers most often chose developmental level life skill standards instead of academic content standards. Although individual functional life skills are not the focus of

the state assessments, standards-based reform does not prevent the inclusion of functional life goals. The functional life goals are important in the reporting of progress to parents and making individualized instructional decisions, while ensuring the assessment of academic standards linked to content (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trelea, & Baker, 2006; Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006). Balancing the use of these two types of IEP goals and objectives may be a challenge for teachers given Porter's findings of teachers' stronger focus on functional life skills. A paradigm shift may be needed when developing IEPs based on more than just functional life skills.

In July 2007 as a result of the final federal regulations, North Carolina Exceptional Children's Division and the Division of Accountability Services began the requirement of developing standards-based IEPs for students with disabilities assessed using an AA-MAS before state assessments were given the spring of 2008. Each established IEP goal was required to be based on an academic content standard. Furthermore, the IEP goals aligned with academic content standards were designed to monitor a student's progress in achieving the student's standards-based goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). Because of this mandate, special education directors and teachers across North Carolina worked quickly to comply with this regulation.

Legislation: Federal and State

The federal legislative sources used date back to 1994 to give a clear outline of the historical legislative context of alternate assessments and content standards. Figure 1 is a chronological timeline of the federal and state legislation as it related to alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

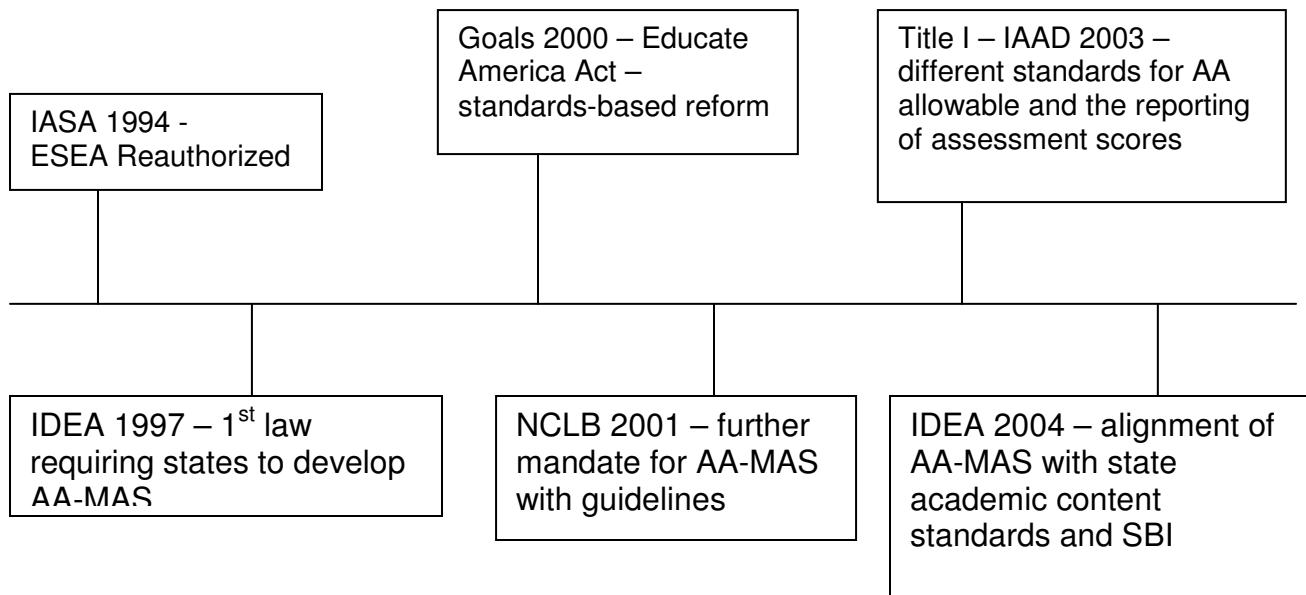


Figure 1. Timeline of federal and state legislation: Alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

The major federal laws studied were those that related to the mandates of including students with disabilities in statewide accountability systems and those that ensured students with disabilities had access to the general education curriculum (see Appendix A). Three laws, IDEA Amendments of 1997, NCLB, and Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged were specifically studied within reports generated by the U.S. Department of Education and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) Division of Accountability Services.

Research and the experience of many practitioners guide the U.S. Department of Education's efforts to reform education through the enactment of many federal laws affecting elementary and secondary education. More specifically, this reform legislation is enabling all students to meet challenging state standards (Riley, 1995). Students with disabilities are gaining access to state standards through the implementation of standards-based IEPs. Now that special education teachers are developing content standard specific IEPs for their students with disabilities, one would hope that these IEPs had a direct impact on classroom instruction.

One particular website, *ED.gov* gives information provided by the government for states to help guide them in their efforts to develop content standards, guidelines for IEP teams, and state level testing and accountability policies. The reports published by the various offices under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Education were good examples of the Vertical Influence theoretical model, discussed in further detail later in this chapter. The resources provided by the government entail the awards incentives, technical assistance materials, technical assistance centers, research data, and model projects that are available to states.

Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, Riley's 1995 explanation brief summarizes the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), which is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. IASA provides funding resources for states, districts, and schools to support their efforts to help students reach high standards. These new funding programs promote the alignment of curriculum and instruction, professional development, school leadership, accountability, and school improvement. For example, The Teacher Incentive Fund, The Enhanced Assessment Grants, and State Longitudinal Data Systems Grants provided funding for states to use to address accountability issues or enhance current practices. North Carolina has received several of these new funding programs, which are outlined in Table 1 (Briggs, 2009).

It is very evident that "in the past decade, several federal laws have helped reshape our approach to ensuring that all students succeed" (Thompson et al., 2001, p. 3). The first law that required states to develop alternate assessments ensuring that students with disabilities participate in general state and district-wide assessments by July 2000 was the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA. IDEA Amendments of 1997 required that all students with disabilities have access to challenging curriculum and their educational programs should be based on high expectations (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). In addition, attention to the educational performance of students with disabilities became a major focus, requiring the inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district assessment programs with appropriate accommodations.

Table 1

U.S. Department of Education Funding Programs in North Carolina

Type of Funding Program	Funded Agency	Amount
Enhanced Assessment Grant (2005) - Supports multi-state activities designed to improve the quality, validity, and reliability of state academic assessments beyond the requirements of NCLB	State	\$1,671,666
Longitudinal Data Systems Grant (2007) – Enables state education agencies to design, develop, and implement statewide longitudinal data systems to efficiently and accurately manage, analyze, disaggregate, and use individual student data	State	\$6,000,000
Teacher Incentive Fund Grants -Supports efforts to develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools	Guilford County Schools over (3 years) Community Training and Assistance Center over (2 years) Cumberland County Schools Over (2 years)	\$5,030,433 \$4,893,601 \$1,839,438

A second law that impacted the success of students with disabilities was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB was the reauthorization of IASA and ESEA. NCLB “mandates that all students participate in accountability testing, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” (Hager & Slocum, 2005, p. 54). Like IDEA Amendments of 1997, NCLB supported the inclusion of students with disabilities to the extent that if students were unable to participate in the regular state assessments, then states must develop alternate assessments. The rationale behind this push was eloquently phrased when Margaret Spellings, then Secretary of Education stated, “At its heart, the policy is all about improving the way we educate and assess children with disabilities. It’s a smaller more sophisticated way of serving their needs” (Samuels, 2006b, p. 20). NCLB was developed as a safeguard to ensure that states were appropriately assessing students with disabilities and not excluding them from state accountability systems as many states did prior to the passing of IDEA Amendments of 1997.

An additional law that explained the history of alternate assessments was found in the final regulations established in the 2003 Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (Title I – IAAD). These regulations gave states the flexibility to develop alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards and modified academic achievement standards and to report the scores for the students assessed using these alternate assessments. States use various types of alternate assessments such as portfolios, checklists, and IEP analysis. States may select from these approaches to develop alternate assessments that maintain a good balance between individualization and standardization.

IDEA Amendments of 1997, Section 504 Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title I required the inclusion of all students with disabilities in general state and district assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In addition, appropriate accommodations were expected to be available for students with disabilities when necessary. Furthermore, because all students with disabilities were included in state assessments and accountability systems, states were afforded flexibility to develop additional AA-MAS to meet the requirements of NCLB (Samuels, 2006a). The policy window for the federal mandates related to alternate assessments began with the enactment of NCLB in 2001. Since that time, IDEA Amendments of 2004 and Title I – IAAD 2003 provided the clarification and regulations needed to help states effectively design and implement sound alternate assessments.

IDEA Amendments of 2004 introduced the requirement of aligning alternate assessments with state academic content standards. In addition, IDEA Amendments of 2004 required IEPs to include measurable content standards for students with disabilities assessed using the AA-MAS. The inclusion of academic content standards encouraged the development of standards-based IEP goals that were now based on content specific skills instead of the traditional developmental or functional skills. Regulations were established under IDEA Amendments of 2004 to monitor, provide technical assistance, and enforce the procedures that stem from the implementation of the IDEA Amendments.

The numerous U.S. Department of Education sponsored reports relating to alternate assessments or standards-based IEPs published within the past nine years give states guidance with regards to rules and regulations on the development of

alternate assessments, modified and alternate academic achievement standards, the 1% and 2% regulation caps on the use of proficiency scores from state alternate assessment results in determining AYP status for states, and most recently on the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs. The Federal Register, the NCEO reports, and two other reports that were formatted as frequently asked questions were beneficial in understanding the meaning and rationale for alternate assessments. In addition, the NCEO and the Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) offer guidance in the area of special education programs and regulations with more recent direction in the area of standards-based IEPs. North Carolina's assessment briefs on alternate assessments, the guidelines for determining which alternate assessment is appropriate, the technical notes and accountability reports developed by the NCDPI Division of Accountability Services offered explanations and information about the alternate assessments that the state used.

The North Carolina alternate assessments are identified in Table 2. These alternate assessments were designed for students with disabilities who are not participating in the regular statewide assessment. The design and alignment of these alternate assessments are changed and adapted based on annual feedback from the U.S. Department of Education peer review process. NCDPI developed two alternate assessments to assess students in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science; one of which is based on modified

Table 2

North Carolina Alternate Assessments

Purpose of Assessment	
North Carolina Extend1 (NC Extend1) For students in grades 3 – 12	To assess student learning of grade level content standards through extended content standards based on alternate academic achievement standards using performance tasks
North Carolina Extend2 (NC Extend2) For students in grades 3 - 8	To assess student learning of grade level content based on modified academic achievement standards using modified multiple choice responses
North Carolina Extend Occupational Course of Study (NC Extend OCS) For students in grades 9 - 12	To assess student learning of grade level content based on modified academic achievement standards using modified multiple choice responses for students in the Occupational Course of Study diploma track
North Carolina Extend Writing 4, 7, & 10 For students in specified grades	To assess student learning of grade level content based on extended response
North Carolina Computer Adaptive Test For students in grades 6 – 12	To assess student learning of grade level content based on modified academic achievement standards
North Carolina Checklist of Academic Standards (NCCLAS) For students in grades 3 – 12	To assess student learning of grade level content based on grade level achievement standards using a checklist

academic achievement standards, the North Carolina Extend2 (NCExtend2). The North Carolina alternate assessment using modified academic achievement standards was developed to assess students in grades 3 – 8 and high school students enrolled in the Occupational Course of Study. The alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards must provide at least three achievement levels, as does the NCExtend2, which has four achievement levels. The NCExtend2 alternate assessment is developed for students with disabilities who need to be assessed using a less rigorous assessment based on the same grade-level content standards as the regular state curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2007c). NCExtend2 is specifically designed for those students who have major difficulty meeting grade-level proficiency, even with the best instruction, and they are tested using modified academic achievement standards aligned with grade-level content (Samuels, 2006a).

In 2007, North Carolina was one of a few states adjusting content standards and phasing into its second alternate assessment (Lazarus et al., 2007). The NCExtend2 is designed as a multiple choice test having no more than 40 items on the test, simpler directions and questions, and fewer answer choices than the general assessment. Although this test is a simpler format, “NCLB requires that alternate assessments meet the same high technical criteria for quality that apply to general state assessments” (Kohl et al., 2006, p. 109). Kohl et al. described the level of alternate assessments for 16 states, which included North Carolina. In addition, to remain in compliance with federal law, since the 2007-2008 school year, IEP teams are required to develop and implement standards-based IEPS for students taking the NCExtend2.

North Carolina prepared for the development of standards-based IEPs in the 2000-2001 school year. In April of 2001, NCEO assessed the status and progress of states in the areas of standards and general education curriculum on IEP forms. Published in the NCEO Synthesis Report 38, at that time, North Carolina was among 13 states that had developed IEP forms in a manner in which the student's access to the general education curriculum was addressed based on their present level of performance and goals (Thompson et al., 2001). Furthermore the report indicated that North Carolina along with 30 other states had three or more participation options for students with disabilities that could be selected for this group of students to participate in the state accountability system.

Development and Implementation

Framing the federal mandates relating to alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs under two specific policy theories help to provide a deeper understanding of the logic behind the development and implementation of these federal mandates. The Diffusion Model of the Vertical Influence type (Berry & Berry, 1990) and two factors of Internal Determinants Model (Berry & Berry, 1990) were policy theories selected to guide the discussion on the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. These two policy theories help to explain the state adoptions regarding alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs as a result of continuous federal and state influences. The selected theoretical policies offer a conceptual understanding of the federal mandates within context.

Within the Internal Determinants Model, politics, economics, and social factors as well as the "motivation to innovate" influenced the development of alternate

assessments. States are developing alternate assessments because of the political, economic, and social influence of the government as a whole (Berry & Berry, 1990).

Within the federal policy to develop alternate assessments, the political, economic, and social influences are motivations for states to adopt the policy. Strong political pressure is apparent, based on the establishment of the federal laws that impact the policy.

Furthermore, economic pressure comes in the form of award incentives established by the U.S. Department of Education making funding available for states as they work towards the development and implementation of their alternate assessments.

Some of the motivations to innovate provided by the government were outlined in a letter written by the U.S. Department of Education signed by Margaret Spellings, then Education Secretary on December 14, 2005. In this letter, the support provided by the U.S. Department of Education included “discretionary awards to states, the development and dissemination of technical assistance materials, funding for technical assistance centers, and research and model demonstration projects” (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 1). The federal government makes these resources available with the expectation that regardless of whether a state takes advantage of any of the financial assistance or expert support through the establishment of centers and/or studies conducted by notable organizations or researchers, the state will move forward with the development of alternate assessments. The fact that states may lose federal funding if they do not comply is the strongest motivational factor that explains the compliance of states to adhere to federal requirements and establish their own state requirements and guidelines. Likewise, states offer financial incentives for schools that

make AYP or growth within the established accountability guidelines while adhering to the rules and regulations clearly stated by the federal government.

The idea of states having obstacles to overcome and resources available to overcome their obstacles as they develop alternate assessments based on the federal regulations is one aspect of the Internal Determinants Model that explains some of the nature of these federal policies. Because states were influenced by the actions of other states, there are obvious diffusion effects that help to further explain the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

The Diffusion Model of Vertical Influence (DMVI) as explained by Berry and Berry (1990) is used to continue the explanation for alternate assessment and standards-based IEP adoptions due to the government innovation involved and the emulation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs among states through the learning processes that occur due to the established federal procedures. For example, when states receive feedback concerning their alternate assessments or other aspects of their accountability systems through the U.S. Department of Education peer review process, they learn from one another, they are given the opportunity to address issues, and they borrow successful innovations. Second, some states are further along than others providing examples and creating process steps for the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs for other states. Finally, through the Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U. S. Department of Education, states are provided information and research that guide them with program improvements for students with disabilities. In addition, the annual NCEO reports,

especially those published since the final regulations on AA-MAS and other reports focusing on lessons learned are available for states to consider best practices, review findings, and obtain technical support for their continued work with alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Examples of lessons learned from the initial peer review process were reported in Filbin's 2008 report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education. One such lesson stated, "When conceptualizing an approach to the AAMAS, States may want to review the current approaches other States are taking with regard to the development of the AA-MAS as well as the technical considerations of the design" (Filbin, 2008, p. 11).

The federal government serves as the original innovation catalyst encouraging states to align with the government's innovations while also emulating the best practices and innovations of other states as a result of the peer review process and/or national reports providing guidance or technical assistance. The fifty states are essentially a social system. By definition of diffusion, the complexities of these federal mandates lie in the massive number of people comprising this social system who are involved in the development and implementation of these federal policies.

The underlying requirement of the federal policies that mandate the development and use of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs further supports one of the theoretical principles under the DMVI, which acknowledges that regardless of the autonomy that states possess in a federal system, there is pressure on all states to conform to the nationally accepted standards (Berry & Berry, 1990). The U.S. Department of Education peer review process fosters an environment for this principle to permeate. The pressure to conform to similar practices and designs for an AA-MAS

among states is evident in the 2008 survey results on the design changes that states have adopted as shown in Table 3.

In a debate on whether this pressure is “coercive” or “normative” with respect to the adoption of the type of alternate assessments a state generates, the most appropriate choice is that this pressure is “normative” because of the key phrase “best practices” (Berry & Berry, 1990). Within the federal laws that are the basis for the establishment of both alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, the federal government encourages the use of scientifically based research to support improvement in educational practice. Therefore, it is beneficial and compliant to adopt best practices.

Processes that are established by the federal government provide states with the opportunity to communicate their innovative practices, which lead to the opportunity for states to learn from one another and share ideas to develop successful alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Regarding the development of alternate assessments, states are required to present their alternate assessments to the U.S. Department of Education Peer Review committee to make certain that the “assessment meets the statutory requirements for validity, reliability, accessibility, objectivity and consistency with nationally recognized professional and technical standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b, p. 27).

Furthermore, under the reauthorization of the 2004 IDEA Amendments, regulations were added requiring monitoring, technical assistance, and enforcement of the procedures that the U.S. Department of Education, OSEP, and state education agencies (SEA) follow when evaluating and addressing noncompliance with the

Table 3

Comparison of AA-MAS and Regular Assessment: Design Changes, 2008

	Distractor Removed	Fewer Items	Fewer Passages	Segmenting of Passage	Shorter Passages	Simplified Language	Other
California	X	X	X		X		X
Connecticut			X		X		X
Kansas	X	X	X		X	X	X
Louisiana		X	X		X	X	X
Maryland	X	X					X
North Carolina	X	X			X	X	X
North Dakota							X
Oklahoma	X	X		X			X
Texas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note. (Albus et al., 2009, p. 22).

implementation of IDEA Amendments (Ahearn, 2009a). The OSEP specifically provides technical assistance for SEAs to help them with guidance in the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs to assist with compliance efforts within their state.

The peer review process is an ongoing monitoring process of the development and implementation of states' alternate assessments to ensure that these assessments are aligned with the state's content standards. Likewise the U.S. Department of Education, OSEP, and SEAs monitor the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs. Both practices are excellent examples of the Vertical Influence Model under the Diffusion Model in policy research because: (a) states emulate the policies of the federal government while learning from one another through the peer review process, (b) the federal government mandates specific requirements with regard to the development and implementation of the alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, (c) the state's discretion is limited, and (d) financial incentives result from the implementation of the federal mandates (Berry & Berry, 1990).

Due to compliance issues, in January 2009, North Carolina suspended the use of the NCExtend2 OCS alternate assessments and discontinued the use of NCCLAS in their accountability system because of the feedback received from the U.S. Department of Education Peer Review Committee. The reason for this moratorium in testing for students with disabilities at the high school level came from the memorandum sent to June Atkinson, North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruction from the U.S. Department of Education, which outlined stated concerns "regarding the alignment to grade level content of high school alternate assessments based on modified academic

achievement standards" (Briggs, 2009, p. 2). North Carolina's response from the peer review committee concerning the NCExtend2 OCS alternate assessment was a perfect example of the top-down influence that is evident in the development and implementation process.

The very nature of the DMVI infers top-down influence. The federal government of course is at the top with absolute political influence on states, while states align and conform to the political influences of alternate assessments, accountability policies, and standards-based IEPs to remain in compliance with federal law. State Education Agencies in turn, influence and exert pressure on local education agencies and schools to adhere to the rules and regulations within their own policymaking.

Effects

In reviewing the literature, twelve dissertations, reports, and studies from leading researchers, conducted in the last decade, focused on either the impact or the consequences of a state's alternate assessment, the validity of the alternate assessment, or its impact on instruction and student achievement. Table 4 summarizes the type of study, major findings, impacted population of students with disabilities, and recommendations for further research in the area.

Among the dissertations, reports, and studies reviewed, it was apparent that there was some impact on instruction and student performance in some states since the inclusion of alternate assessments. The summaries in Table 4 show a spread of findings indicating that alternate assessments had a positive impact or no impact at all on teacher instruction and student performance. This current case study was specific to the population of students with persistent academic disabilities. However the review of

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Arnold University of Washington Dissertation (2006) 1% population (significant cognitive disabilities)	Case studies of 3 middle school students on Washington Alternate Assessment (WAA) to analyze the impact of WAA on student access to the general curriculum. Used the statewide survey previously conducted by Washington state also for data analysis.	Professional development and district factors can make a difference in the level and type of educational change experienced by students with disabilities (students with disabilities) who are assessed using alternate assessments (AA)	-Indicating teacher's perception of and engagement with the AA process -Exploring the methods teachers use to align assessment and instruction -Perceiving changes in linking IEPs to state standards in response to the federal mandate
Elliott, Kettler, Beddow, & Kurz Peabody College of Vanderbilt University Study (2010) 2% population	A study to investigate the effects of using modified items in reading and mathematics tests to enhance accessibility by simplifying language and reducing memory demands without altering the grade-level content of the tested information.	Students with persistent academic disabilities who took tests with modified test items were more likely to score proficient on AA-MAS tests than the regular assessment.	- Further study of whether the improvements in test performance on accessible AA-MAS allow the majority of the 2% population to meet proficiency

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Filbin Report (2010) 2% population	A report generated for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education Student Achievement & School Accountability Program to provide updates on the six states that presented Title I Peer Review of an AA-MAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - States are working to create integrated systems of content standards, modified achievement standards and instructional supports - Emerging best practices - Identified challenges for states developing an AA-MAS 	<p>No recommendations for further research</p> <p>The information gathered provides clarification to states for peer review of an AA-MAS</p>
Gardner Seton Hall University Dissertation (2006) Students with disabilities (SWD) population in general	A study exploring the consequences of large-scale high-stakes assessments for SWD through the point of view, experiences, and perceptions of the directors of special services in 100 public schools in central and northern New Jersey	<p>Dir. of Special Serv. in NJ perceive that assessment has a positive effect on special education services. It is believed that student achievement and learning and professional development within the district has improved since the inclusion of alternate assessments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Longitudinal research to determine if there is an association between the inclusion of students in high-stakes large-scale testing and student achievement, - Examine the impact of student scores on planning and preparation, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional development

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Hager (2005) Utah State University Dissertation 1% population	Validation study of Utah's Alternate Assessment (UAA) using surveys and videotapes from experts in the field(directors, teachers, parents) (Concentrated on the impact on instructional goals and allocation of instructional time	- Validity of some aspects of UAA in the areas of test content, scoring reliability, and score stability - Evidence of weaknesses in the fidelity of test administration and some aspects of performance standards	AA test validation
Hanzlicek Dissertation Kansas State University Dissertation (2008) 1% population	Case study of implications for students with severe disabilities to identify instructional practices/planning for teachers who use the Kansas Alternate Assessment (10-yr old special education students with severe disabilities)	Majority of teachers perceived they had no support, staff development, or training in using student results. Teachers did not use student results, make connections between the IEP and state standards nor pre-assess students before picking indicators.	Study of instructional planning practices pertaining to students with severe disabilities

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Jezard University of Massachusetts Lowell Dissertation (2007) 1% population	A study to determine how special education teachers use the results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System – Alternate (MCAS – Alt) in order to ensure access to the general curriculum and state standards for SWD	Special education teachers responded: -MCAS-Alt have increased paperwork -MCAS-Alt interferes with direct instruction of SWD -Their instructional strategies have improved as a result of preparing for the MCAS-Alt -They only use the student results of the MCAS-Alt to track student progress -They have increased their expectations of SWD	Continue to examine the relationship between teacher perceptions and student achievement on AA Compare the teacher perceptions to their actual classroom practices

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Karvonen, M. Report (Chapter 3) (2009) 2% population	A white paper report providing information to NY State Department of Education for consideration concerning the feasibility of developing an AA-MAS (Eleven different authors for the ten chapters compiled to form this report)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers recognize the importance of holding 2% population to higher standards - Successful instruction for AA-MAS-eligible students requires effective collaboration between regular education and special education teachers - PLCs, Instructional coaches may prove to be beneficial approaches to supporting teachers as they develop suggested instructional strategies - Differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, and use of curriculum based measures are effective practices for target population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continued research to explore whether students with disabilities have an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills that are assessed on regular or alternate assessments (e.g. research that reviews IEPs to ensure learning goals and supports align with the AA-MAS) - LEAs may wish to weigh the potential benefits of focusing their professional development IEP design and use for effective instructional planning versus professional development on separate topics related to good instruction

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Kleinert, Kennedy, & Kearns Study (1999) 1% population	Surveyed teachers to gather their perception of the benefits of students with significant cognitive disabilities in Kentucky's accountability assessments	Teachers agreed with the core of best practices in Kentucky's AA, but concern was noted as to the alignment of this AA with general curricular expectations	1) Development of performance-based measures 2) parent perception of benefits of child's participation in AA 3) relationship between student's AA scores and post-school outcomes 4) relationship of AA and the student's IEP 5) evidence of changes in classroom practices and student results on AA 6) strategies for embedding performance-based assessment systems in school and classroom routines

Table 4

Research Involving Students Eligible for AA-AAS or AA-MAS (continued)

Authors	Type of Study	Major Findings	Recommendation(s) for further research
Porter University of Southern California Dissertation (2006) 2% population	Study investigating the progress of Standards Based Instruction (SBI) through the eyes of teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Study showed there was a failure in the implementation process of SBI because there is no shared vision - Special Ed Teachers believed that the IEP was the most important guide for the instruction of SWD, however, they often chose developmental level content standards 	Investigate this type study on a larger scale
Roach and Elliott (2006) Vanderbilt University 1% population	Case study to determine the influence of access to the general curriculum on student performance using teacher submitted materials who taught students with significant cognitive disabilities assessed by the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment in the fall of 2003	<p>The teacher completed curricular access questionnaire was the best predictor of student performance</p>	Further research needed to determine variables that are predictors of students' access to the general curriculum

Note. The major findings that are listed are those that are specifically related to alternate assessments and/or content standards with regards to classroom instruction or student achievement.

dissertations and studies included the target population as well as studies focusing on students with significant cognitive disabilities. It could be beneficial to consider research involving students with significant cognitive disabilities in order to review the elements of findings reported that might relate to the population of students with persistent academic disabilities or to the teachers teaching them. Since the final regulations on AA-MAS in April 2007, more research pertaining to students with persistent academic disabilities using this assessment has been published.

In recent years, Gardner (2006) along with other researchers and national education entities such as NCEO and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education promoted the need to conduct longitudinal studies on student outcome data examining whether alternate assessments were impacting student achievement. Other studies on whether there was a relationship between the implementation of alternate assessments and changes in classroom practice or instruction appeared to be a topic of interest (Gardner; Jezard, 2007; Kleinert, Kennedy, & Kearns, 1999; Karvonen, 2009).

Naturally, teachers may be viewed as expert or informed sources regarding the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on student achievement and classroom instruction because they are actively involved in the implementation of both and they are able to share firsthand knowledge or views concerning this impact. As indicated in Table 4, many researchers conducted studies that involved gathering data from special education teachers and directors.

At the dawn of alternate assessments, Kentucky's experience with alternate assessments gave states guidance as they developed their assessments (Browder et

al., 2007). Kentucky was one of the first states to have their alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) in place. The purpose of the Kleinert et al. study was to examine the consequences of alternate assessments on instruction and IEP development as reported by the teacher through a survey instrument. In the Kleinert et al. (1999) study of Kentucky's AA-AAS, teachers perceived that when states develop appropriate alternate assessments, they gained insight to the challenges that face students with significant disabilities. As states begin to develop AA-MAS, like Kleinert, other researchers reporting on findings related to the AA-MAS test development and implementation may give SEAs and LEAs more direction and guidance to address the challenges students with persistent academic disabilities face. One study that investigated the effects of using modified test items on AA-MAS reported on accessibility challenges for students with persistent academic disabilities (Elliott, Kettler, Beddow, & Kurz, 2010). The information gained from the Elliott et al. (2010) study indicated the test modification for AA-MAS increased the proficiency of students with persistent academic disabilities. Those results definitely justified the need for states to consider the option to develop and implement AA-MAS to allow students with persistent academic disabilities to meet proficiency on state assessments.

The Jezard (2007), Kleinert (1999), Karvonen (2009), and Porter (2006) studies explored the perceptions of special education educators and examined instructional elements of alternate assessments or standards-based IEPs on general education curriculum access, instruction, and achievement. "Kleinert et al. found that teachers recognized the benefits of inclusion in the state assessment system for their students and that teachers were incorporating the elements of the alternate assessment (e.g.

student individualized schedules and student self-evaluation) into their daily instruction” (Towles-Reeves & Kleinert, 2006, p. 32). Like Kleinert et al., Jezard (2007), reported similar benefits of including students with disabilities in state assessment systems. Jezard surveyed teachers who participated in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System-Alternate 2006 Summer Institute. Based on the 139 returned surveys, Jezard found that there were positive impacts for students with disabilities. The teachers reported that their instructional strategies improved and their expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities increased.

Educators should consider lessons learned that are reported in current research now that standards-based IEPs are required for eligible students taking an AA-MAS. Research conducted by Porter investigated the progress of standards-based instruction for the students with persistent academic disabilities. The teachers in the Porter study believed that IEPs were the most important guide for the instruction of students with persistent academic disabilities. If this holds true, then Karvonen’s (2009) report and Filbin’s (2008) report would benefit educators and guide SEAs and LEAs as they pursue the option to develop and implement an AA-MAS as well as improve upon the implementation processes involved. In January 2009, Perie was the project manager tasked with submitting a report to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) on the feasibility of NY developing an AA-MAS. Nine research experts were gathered to discuss and report on their findings. Karvonen was one of the nine experts to submit a chapter contributing to the compiled NY report. Chapter 3 of that report was Karvonen’s “examination of instructional strategies for teaching students with disabilities, with a focus on the issue of writing standards-based IEPs” (Perie, 2009, p. 19). In the

Karvonen report teachers recognized the importance of holding students with persistent academic disabilities to higher standards (2009). Filbin (2008) reported emerging practices and identified challenges that states may consider when developing an AA-MAS. Based on the teachers' belief in Porter's study that the standards-based IEP is the most important document to use to guide instruction, then the Karvonen and Filbin reports provide further guidance to plan next steps in the development and implementation processes of AA-MAS and standards-based IEPs.

Gardner (2006) explored the perception of special education directors in 100 public school systems in New Jersey. Gardner reported that one special education director believed student achievement and learning had improved because of the use of AA-AAS. Unfortunately, not all researchers found positive results. Hanzlicek (2008) reported opposite findings than Kleinert et al., Jezard, and Gardner. Hanzlicek's 2004 case study on teachers who administered the Kansas Alternate Assessment to 10-year old special education students with significant disabilities showed there was no impact on teacher behavior as it related to IEPs or use of student results. Teachers indicated that they did not make connections between the IEP and state standards nor did they pre-assess students before choosing indicators for the IEP.

Professional development appeared to be a key factor or catalyst as it related to the views that teachers had about the impact of alternate assessments and content standards. Based on Arnold (2006), Hanzlicek (2008), and Gardner (2006) there appeared to be a relationship between the perception teachers had about the professional development offered to them and their views on the impact alternate assessments or content standards had on classroom instruction, student achievement,

or IEP development. Arnold and Gardner both reported positive effects because of alternate assessment and content standard use and indicated that professional development had either improved or made a difference in the level and type of educational change experienced. On the contrary, Hanzlicek reported that teachers did not use student alternate assessment results nor did they see connections between IEP and state standards. In addition, those same teachers reported that they did not have support, staff development, or training on how to use the students' results. It is possible that the reason teachers did not see connections between the IEP and state standards may result from their perceived views that they lacked support and professional development in using student results as indicated in the Kansas Alternate Assessment study. Therefore, considering the professional development findings Karvonen reported may be beneficial approaches to supporting teachers as they develop instructional strategies to use with students with persistent academic disabilities.

Therefore, one can logically infer that if the professional development is adequate in preparing staff to use alternate assessments and content standards in their teaching, make connections between their use and instruction, as well as their relationship to student achievement, the impact might show exactly what the federal government expects. Since OSEP is monitoring the progress of states' implementation of IDEA Amendments and providing technical assistance, information, and research to help each state with their specific needs through the Project Forum at NASDSE, states should be able to continue to improve their processes and procedures as well as provide the support and assistance that their LEAs need.

Adequate Professional Development

Beginning in the 2007-2008 school year the North Carolina Exceptional Children Division and the Accountability Division required the inclusion of the academic content standards in a students' IEP if the student was assessed using the AA-MAS. Each established IEP goal was required to be aligned to academic content standards. Because of this mandate, Exceptional Children (EC) Directors across the state enforced the requirement throughout their respective districts. By the spring of 2008, IEP Teams' first attempt to develop standards-based IEPs, were well under way.

In preparation for the IEP Team meetings that were scheduled the spring of 2008, the North Carolina Exceptional Children Division provided reference documents for IEP teams to assist them with the development of standards-based IEPs. One reference document in particular that proved to be most helpful was the OSEP, A Seven Step Process to Creating Standards-based IEPs (Holbrook, 2007b). Holbrook's (2007b) report provided states with standards-based IEP program examples. In this document, Holbrook stated:

Prior to developing IEPs, all IEP team members, including parents, need to be familiar with the general education curriculum including the state's academic *content* standards and state assessments used for calculating adequate yearly progress (AYP). In order to make informed decisions about each student's strengths and needs, the IEP team should consider how the student is performing in relation to the state's grade-level content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled (p. 1).

Some researchers are asking, “What can districts do to ensure the success of their students with disabilities in a climate of higher expectations and high-stakes assessments” (Walsh, 2001, p. 19)? Districts may be concerned with whether the IEP goals are designed to be measurable in order to monitor the student’s progress towards achieving his/her standards-based goals. Districts may also be concerned about the knowledge base of special education and regular education teachers as it relates to curricula and the development of standards-based goals. Strengthening the IEP process may be a key factor for districts. The Goals 2000 Committee acknowledged that the IEP process should serve “as a formal mechanism for deciding how students with disabilities will participate in standards-based reform” (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 9).

At the September 2007 joint North Carolina Exceptional Children’s Director and Local Education Agency (LEA) Testing Coordinator meeting, both groups of educators were given the IEP reference documents and other resource material to take back to their LEAs as first steps to inform special education teachers and help them understand the rationale for the federal requirements. This first step supported the element of putting the information in context as it relates to effective professional development practices. In 2001, the National Staff Development Council stated that in designing effective professional development, three key elements must be a part of it, “context, process, and content” (National Staff Development Council, 2001). Guskey (2000) added that it is important to determine the most effective approach to the professional development process that would work best in a given setting. This is due to the influence of context because “contexts, like people who shape them, are dynamic” (Guskey, 2000, p. 117).

NCDPI expected districts to provide special education teachers with the first element of effective professional development by putting these requirements in context. In order to help schools understand the big picture, North Carolina Exceptional Children Division recommended that EC Directors provide an overview of the new IEP provisions when conducting their staff development for special education teachers. The staff development was also expected to improve the IEP process through better alignment of IEP goals with general education curricular outcomes. In preparation for modeling a second element of professional development, EC Directors were given copies of the North Carolina developed modified academic achievement standards, the U.S. Department of Education Modified Academic Achievement Standards explanation document, and sample IEPs with the academic content standards included. These sample IEPs were examples obtained from the state of Alabama for use as models within North Carolina LEAs. These resources, along with the Standard Course of Study provided another key element of professional development, content.

With the short timeline for including the academic content standards in all IEPs for students participating in the NCExtend2, the state expected school districts to put effective processes in place and plan effective professional development for their special education teachers. A part of this professional development was expected to include curriculum support, if designed with the inclusion of the expected curriculum components, many special education teachers had the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge of curriculum.

What constitutes effective professional development? Guskey (2002) noted that effective professional development causes teachers to change classroom practices,

which causes changes in students' learning outcomes, and in turn has an effect on teachers' beliefs and attitudes. "Professional development programs are systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students" (Guskey, 2002, p. 381).

Regardless of the professional development approach, whether it is based on the recommendations from the National Staff Development Council or Guskey, effective professional development may prove to be crucial for special education teachers as they prepare to implement the federal mandates.

Summary

Browder et al. (2003) and Thompson and Thurlow (2003) gave educators information about what was known about alternate assessments at that time. Browder et al. (2003), specifically reviewed literature to provide information on what was known about alternate assessments as it related to the impact while Thompson and Thurlow surveyed states to report on the progress of states including students with disabilities in their accountability systems. Thurlow and Thompson conducted an online survey that showed major findings concerning the various designs and technical aspects of alternate assessments. Table 1 showed the design types of the various alternate assessments that states were using. These reviews provide states with valuable information and guidance as they work to design appropriate alternate assessments for the population of students assessed using alternate assessments.

The U.S. Department of Education stated, "the requirement that IEP goals be based on grade-level content standards merely provides more specificity about a student's involvement and participation in the general curriculum" (2007b, p. 30). Nolet

and McLaughlin (2000) indicated that government influence through the established law, particularly IDEA Amendments of 1997, emphasized that the education of students with disabilities can be more effective when schools guarantee access to the general education curriculum. Nolet and McLaughlin provided leading research in the area of accessing the general education curriculum with essential information that states may use to guide them in content standard development. In addition, literature provided by other leading researchers working collaboratively with Browder, Elliott, McLaughlin, Roach, Thompson, and Thurlow continue to give special education teachers the knowledge and understanding needed to face the challenges that lie ahead in helping students with disabilities fully access the general education curriculum within this era of standards-based reform. The necessary knowledge and understanding consists of linking classroom instruction to the use of alternate assessments, linking content standards in IEPs, utilizing student alternate assessment outcomes to influence instruction, and/or to ensure access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

The requirement of the federal government to include all students with disabilities in accountability systems using alternate assessments in order to improve instruction for students with disabilities is supported by the reported findings of the research conducted by Arnold, Gardner, Jezard, and Porter. More research needs to be conducted to further substantiate this expectation as well as continuous monitoring of the progress made across the nation. The federal government is continuously monitoring the progress of states in their development of alternate assessments, standards-based IEPs, and policies and practices that encourage and support the

participation of students with disabilities in accountability systems through the work conducted by the NCEO. Based on the ninth NCEO survey of state directors of special education, prepared by Thompson and Thurlow (2003), it was apparent “that more students with disabilities are accessing state/district academic content standards with increased academic expectations and more students with disabilities are participating in statewide assessments and included in accountability systems” (p. v). However, while it was apparent that more students with disabilities are included, one should pause to ask how are they doing?

As stressed in much of the literature and reports on alternate assessments, assessing all students is an important, challenging task that requires “knowledge of testing practices, test content, legal guidelines, and technical aspects of tests, as well as a clear understanding of students’ learning objectives and instructional programs” (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001). The literature, dissertations, and reports that were available were written for educators at the national, state, district, and school levels to supply all educational practitioners with the technical information, expertise and best practices that may be used in the development and implementation of successful alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

Generally, special education directors and teachers in North Carolina continue to provide training sessions to explain the implementation and development of alternate assessments and content standards in IEPs. These training sessions may help the special education staff better understand the expectations and processes outlined by both the federal government and state. This training comes to special education staff through a series of one-day information sessions and statewide conferences scheduled

by NCDPI on an annual basis. Afterwards, school districts were expected to utilize the expertise and knowledge gained by exceptional children directors and teachers who attended these sessions to train other special education staff and general education staff within their districts.

The question arises as to whether or not the training that North Carolina provides is adequate or effective enough for teachers. Is the training filtering down to districts adequate; especially since there was beginning evidence of a relationship between the professional development offered to exceptional children educators and their perception of the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs had on classroom instruction and student achievement as reported in studies conducted by Arnold (2006), Gardner (2006), and Hanzlicek (2008)? Based on the model of teacher change recommended by Guskey (2002) significant change in improvements in teachers' attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning" (p. 383). Guskey stated that improvements result from the new instructional approaches and changes in classroom practices.

Various reports and research reviewed supported the need for further examination of the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. This study was conducted to explore and determine this impact in two school districts. EC Directors, principals and teachers were interviewed to gather perception data concerning the impact of these federal mandates on classroom instruction and student achievement as well as to determine each participant's perception of the adequacy of professional development. Observations of special education teachers were conducted and blind standards-based

IEPs were analyzed to provide further insight with regards to the impact and discover trends. Exploring the impact, adequacy of professional development, and discovering trends may help educators develop and implement effective practices with regard to the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the districts involved in this case study and describes the research design and methodology that were used. Details of the research design and methods, population sample, data collection, interview protocol, observation specifics, archival analysis, and data analysis follow. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact North Carolina's alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (NCExtend2) and standards-based IEPs have on classroom instruction and student achievement. The federal mandates to develop and implement alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs were made with an expectation to affect classroom instruction and student achievement for students with disabilities. In so doing, one must also consider the adequateness of the professional development that is available to teachers to prepare them for the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs and use of alternate assessments. The following research questions were addressed to determine the impact of the alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs:

1. How are teachers using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
2. What are the impacts on classroom instruction of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
3. What are the impacts on student achievement of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
4. What is the teacher's perception on the adequacy of professional development in preparing them to use alternate assessment data and standards-based IEPs?

5. What trends are evident in the standards-based IEPs since the enactment of this requirement?

Research Design and Methods

This research was an in depth descriptive case study reporting findings and results from the two school districts in eastern North Carolina involved, District One and District Two. The descriptive method of case study is chosen because it is “useful in presenting basic information about the areas of education where little research has been conducted” (Merriam, 1988, p. 27). This case study was an educational exploration in which to “explain the causal links in the *real-life* interventions” (Yin, 2003) of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement.

This descriptive case study was centered-around a single-unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is two school districts located in the eastern region of North Carolina. The qualitative approach consisted of collecting data from eight teachers and at least six administrators across two districts to obtain their perceptions of the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. Teacher and administrator perceptions were obtained through the use of individual interviews. Teacher observations present evidence to confirm or explain perceptions. In addition, an archival analysis was conducted using IEPs of students with disabilities assessed with the NCExtend2 in which the special education teachers participating in these studies are involved in the development of the student’s standards-based IEP. Blind IEPs were collected from the 2006-2007 school year

through the 2008-2009 school year. The blind IEP data excluded any identifiable student information.

Population Sample

Description of School Districts

Participating school districts are two of thirteen primary school districts located in the eastern region of North Carolina. District One and District Two were specifically chosen in part, because of their proximity to one another, school district size, and regional location in North Carolina. These school systems had other characteristics in common. For example, Districts One and District Two were school systems that had experienced mergers. In previous years, each of the school systems merged their county and city school districts to form one single school system. Both school systems border some of the same counties, they have rural and city schools within their LEA, and their teacher turnover rates were similar and close to the state average. Furthermore, both exceptional children directors were employed by their respective school districts since the 2006-2007 school year and they were directly involved in the professional development plans for their teachers. At the beginning stages of this research, the expertise and cooperativeness of the exceptional children directors were also influential factors. District One and District Two shared common threads in their professional development plans, which were beneficial when comparing results and findings between the school districts. Additional descriptive elements included (a) school system size as it relates to student, teacher, and number of schools, (b) teacher turnover rates, and (c) professional development.

District One, on the exterior western border of the northeastern region of North Carolina merged city and county school districts in 1992. There are a total of 28 schools housing approximately 17,282 students and 820 full-time teachers. District Two is located on the southwest border of the northeastern region. District Two created a system of 30 schools when it merged the county and city school systems in 1986. In the 2009-2010 school year, District Two employed approximately 1,600 full-time teachers in order to serve over 23, 235 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth in 35 schools. Each year, approximately 300 new students enter the system.

With the teacher turnover rate for middle schools in both school districts close to the 14% state average, the principal investigator expected to have a sufficient pool of teachers to solicit participation. District One is slightly below the state average with a 13% turnover rate. District Two reported 17% teacher turnover rate, which is above the state average. Both school systems reported 76% or higher for employment percentages for middle school teachers with 4 or more years of teaching experience currently employed within their school district. Therefore, it was expected that the teacher participants would have at least three years of teaching experience.

District One implemented two phases of professional development to support educators with the implementation of these federal mandates. Phase I, which focused on the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs and the enumerate amount of paperwork involved, began weekly training sessions for special education staff in the spring of 2009. During the summer of 2009 three training sessions were held to support staff in the area of standards-based IEPs, alternate assessments, and curriculum. Weekly internal audits and training continued to occur throughout the 2009-

2010 school year to support teachers in the development and implementation of the standards-based IEPs.

Phase II of the professional development plans for District One focused on curriculum support. The first curriculum focus area began with teachers receiving research based professional development in the area of reading to include Reading Foundations training and Corrective Reading. A second curriculum focus included teachers receiving Transition Math training. The third curriculum focus area that began in February 2010 encouraged a more in-depth understanding of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study to include alignment and linkage of content standards to IEP goals.

District Two provided professional development to help prepare teachers for the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. As a collaborative group of instructional leaders, the Associate Superintendent of Instructional Services, the K-8 Curriculum and Instruction Director, the 9-12/Career Technical Education Director, the Title I Director, and the EC Director meet twice a month to plan and implement the professional development for the school system. All teachers received Reading Foundations training to better prepare them to teach reading in all subject areas and use reading intervention strategies to help improve reading comprehension for all students. The purpose of the Reading Foundations training was to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to help students become better readers. Teachers learned classroom interventions for the components of reading. The school system continues to offer the Reading Foundations training each year for new teachers. According to the EC Director of District Two, the school system had the most

general education teachers in the state trained in Reading Foundations. Beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, District Two offered Math Foundations training to provide similar professional development for teachers in mathematics instruction.

Description of Participants

The population was selected using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). More specifically, a stratified purposeful sampling was used because of the similar characteristics among participants and the opportunity to facilitate comparisons between school districts (Patton, 1990). Both district-level exceptional children (EC) directors involved in the study have been in special education in their respective school districts for at least the last 3 years, which strategically supports the alignment of their educational experience with special education and with the development and implementation timeline of alternate assessments, specifically the NCExtend2, and standards-based IEPs in North Carolina. District One's EC Director has been in education for 36 years. She has served in the capacity of EC Director for the last 3 years. District Two's EC Director has over 33 years of experience in education with the last 12 years in the field of special education. She has worked in two different school districts as the EC Director with the last 3 years in District Two. In addition to the two EC Directors being interviewed, this research focused on a small population of teachers and administrators within the two selected North Carolina school systems. Figure 2 shows the sample population involved in this study.

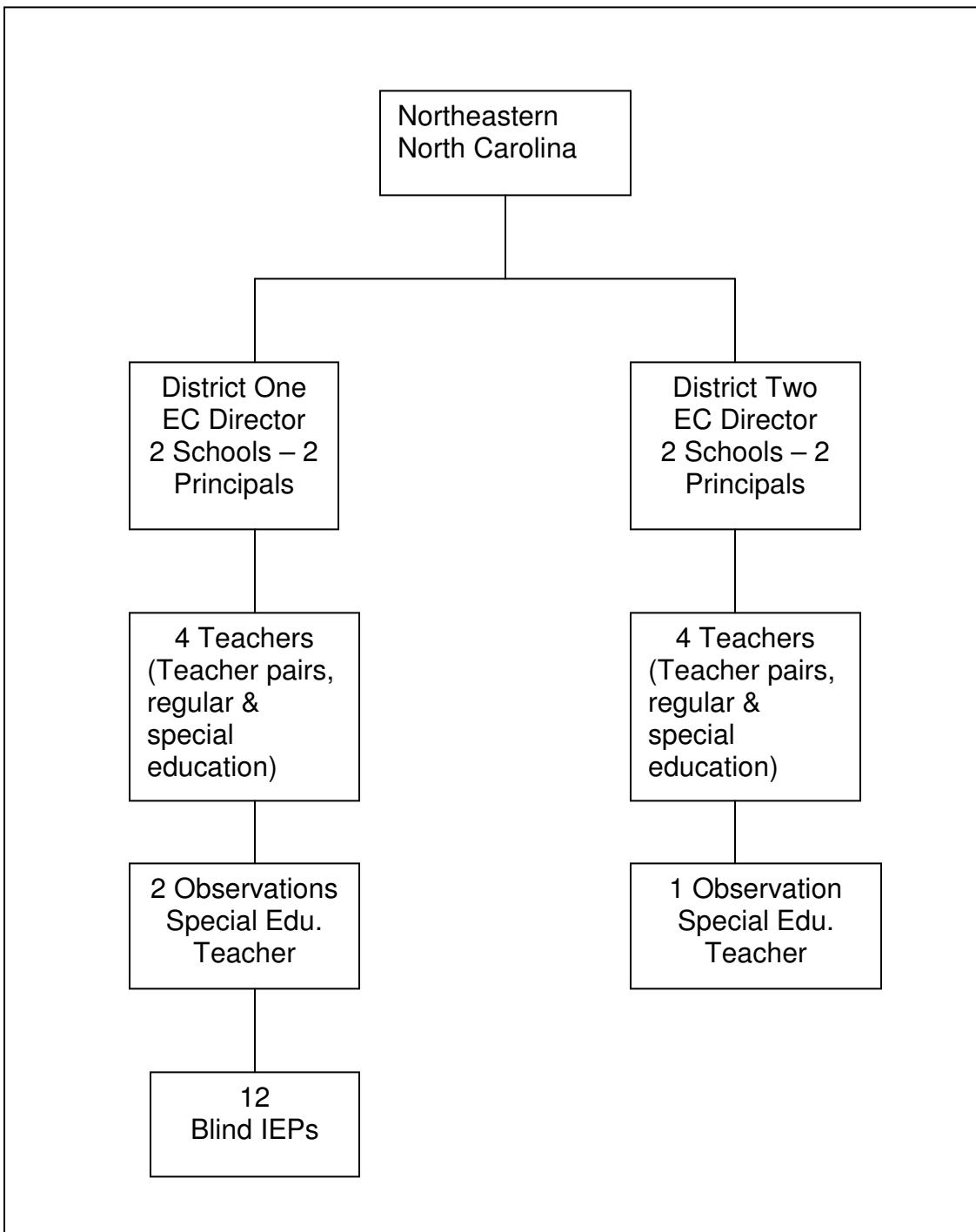


Figure 2. Purposeful sample population.

Based on the targeted profile of teacher participants, the exceptional children directors of the participating school systems selected two schools within each district, thus selecting the principal participants. Likewise, the principals selected the teacher participants to be interviewed and observed. For reporting purposes, the schools in each school district were assigned generic school names as well as fictitious names for the participants interviewed and observed.

Eighth grade teacher pairs consisted of one special education teacher and one regular education teacher actively teaching students with persistent academic disabilities since the 2006-2007 school year. The teacher pairs were expected to teach or have experience teaching students with persistent academic disabilities scheduled to take the NCExtend2 for the current school year. Other special education teachers who have not taught students with persistent academic disabilities since the 2006-2007 school year were not ideal participants because the 2006-2007 school year served as the baseline year for the IEP documents that were collected and analyzed for research.

The EC director selected the targeted potential teacher pairs and school. The EC directors had first hand knowledge of the eighth grade teachers with three years of teaching experience who were teaching students with persistent academic disabilities. The participating middle schools were determined by default based on the potential targeted special education teacher participants. The teacher population size within the two school systems increased the chances of teacher pairs meeting the select profile. However, teacher turnover rates unexpectedly affected the sample population. Therefore, in such cases where there were no special education teachers currently teaching students with persistent academic disabilities, special education teachers who

had previous experience teaching this population of students were selected as participants.

Two teacher pairs at grade eight in each of the participating school districts were the targeted teacher population interviewed, T=8. Perception data from the eight teacher participations were gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol and observation data from the three special education teachers were obtained. Principals and the EC directors in each LEA were interviewed using the same interview protocol, N=6. Potential research participants received a recruitment flyer to solicit their participation in this research (see Appendix C). Participation in this case study was on a voluntary basis. All participant identities remained anonymous when findings and results were reported. Once teachers agreed to participate in this research, they received the participant response and informed consent forms outlined in Appendix D and E. This case study also indirectly involved a population of students who were assessed using North Carolina's alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards, NCExtend2. The teacher participants or the EC director were expected to select the blind IEPs for the students involved in this study. IEPs of students with persistent academic disabilities assessed using the AA-MAS whose IEP was facilitated by the participating special education teacher were selected. The blind IEPs were used for archival analysis. Once the exceptional children directors designated the participating teachers and middle schools, the building level principal was interviewed using the interview protocol. Participating principals were interviewed before the principal investigator conducted any teacher observations of the special education teachers involved in this study.

Collection of Data

This case study utilizes three methods of data collection (a) interview, (b) observation, and (c) archival analysis. All participants in this case study were interviewed. The special education teachers were the only teachers observed with an additional follow-up interview after the observation. Standards-based IEPs served as the data used for the archival analysis. The archival analyses were used to corroborate and augment evidence about standards-based IEPs obtained from the interview and/or observation (Yin, 2003).

Interview Protocol

Six teachers, two directors, and four principals were interviewed individually to gain insight on their perceptions of the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs as well as their perceptions of the quality of professional development they received as they adhere to the federal mandates. Individual interviews were arranged to protect the teacher's or administrator's identity providing an atmosphere in which each participant would feel comfortable and free to comment on district, school, or building level concerns related to this research. Two teachers at their request were interviewed together. An interview protocol consisting of ten pre-set questions that follow later in this chapter were used to guide the semi-structured interview.

Both the structured interview and the semi-structured interview were considered. The structured interview, also known as a scheduled standardized interview to gain the perspective of the person being interviewed (Merriam, 1988), was considered because it more easily creates an opportunity for one-to-one comparisons between participant responses. The semi-structured interview is the selected choice for an interview

protocol since the goal was to obtain the participants' perception and at the same time allow for on-the-spot probing questions stemming from responses to the pre-set questions. The pre-set questions allowed for one-to-one comparisons while the probing questions may encourage more in-depth discussions with the interviewees to further clarify their perceptions and beliefs. During the semi-structured interview, neutral probing questions were asked when topics were worthy of further exploration.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the interview sessions with the teacher participants, EC director, and building level administrator. The interview protocol explored (a) the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs had on classroom instruction and student achievement and (b) the quality of professional development made available by the school district to prepare teachers for the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

In order to explore the teacher and administrator perceptions on the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have on classroom instruction and student achievement, the following questions were included in the semi-structured interview protocol:

1. What changes have you made in instructional planning, strategies, and practices due to the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
2. How have alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs impacted classroom instruction?

3. How have alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs impacted student achievement for the students with disabilities in your district/school/classroom?
4. What kinds of changes have you noticed between the goals and objectives that have been developed for students with disabilities?
5. To what extent have you noticed changes in student achievement since the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?

Special education teachers were interviewed a second time following their observation. The second interview allowed the principal investigator to clarify information and/or ask follow-up questions formed from the review of the first interview, the initial archival analysis of the blind IEPs, and the teacher observation. The interview approach was an informal conversational interview, which allowed for optimal “flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one or more individuals in that setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 342). Questions arising from the observation and/or initial archival review generated conversations as it related to each individual special education teacher in order to provide clarification and/or further insight into this research.

As stated previously in Chapter 2, the National Staff Development Council promotes that the elements: context, process, and content as integral elements of the design for an effective professional development. However, Guskey (2000) stated, “because of the powerful and dynamic influence of context, it is impossible to make precise statements about the elements of an effective professional development

program" (p. 117). Therefore, when reviewing the comments made about professional development for teachers involved in this case study, the focus was on the teacher's perception of the overall adequacy of the professional development as it related to the use of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, not on the effectiveness of one specific element.

To better understand the quality of the professional development available to special education and regular education teachers to prepare them for the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs and alternate assessments respectively, the following questions were included in the initial interview as a part of the semi-structured interview protocol:

1. What professional development has been provided to help you implement these federal mandates? What other support helps you implement these federal mandates? Describe them.
2. What is most helpful in preparing you to develop standards-based IEPs?
3. Describe how the federal mandates have changed the ways you work with other teachers.
4. How have IEP team members been prepared for standards-based IEP meetings? What changes have you observed in those meetings?
5. What other comments or specific information related to this topic of discussion would you like to share?

Observation

A scheduled observation was conducted with each special education teacher.

After the initial interview, the principal researcher and the special education teacher

made arrangements for the scheduled observation. Following the observation, an unstructured interview was conducted with special education teachers only. The purpose of the second interview was to clarify information gained from the first interview as well as ask follow-up questions stemming from the observation and the initial review of the blind IEPs.

During the observation, the principal investigator focused on the specified indicators recording evidence observed and demonstrated by each of the special education participants. The principal investigator specifically observed the special education teacher to find evidence of indicators within *Standard III: Teachers Know the Content They Teach* in the new North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System Rubric (see Appendix B). The indicators include instructional strategies, content knowledge, literacy skills, and the alignment of concepts taught to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS). Special education teacher participants were observed only once for a maximum of 45 minutes. The types of instructional strategies used, literacy skills taught, evidence of content standards, and the content knowledge of the special education teacher were recorded as observation notes. The observation conducted for each special education teacher participant was not used for evaluative purposes and was not placed in their personnel file. The observation results were used solely for the purpose of data collection for this case study.

Archival Analysis of IEP

Since the federal mandate to include students with disabilities in state accountability systems, alternate assessments have undergone revisions, some of which were prompted by the U.S. Department of Education. North Carolina has

administered the NCExtend2 alternate assessment since the 2006-2007 school year.

Students with persistent academic disabilities have the opportunity to participate in statewide assessments using the NCExtend2 alternate assessment.

During the 2007-2008 school year, North Carolina required standards-based IEPs for students with disabilities who were assessed using the NCExtend2 alternate assessments. The students selected to obtain their IEP data were students who were scheduled to take an NCExtend2 alternate assessment during the 2009-2010 school year and were taught by the teachers participating in this study. The standards-based IEPs for students in this population served as the archival records to be analyzed. The collection of IEPs consisted of those whose development was facilitated by one of the special education teachers involved in this study. IEPs from the 2006-2007 school year served as the baseline IEP data for analysis. The IEP data were tracked over a three-year period to determine trends.

“A Seven-Step Process to Creating Standards-based IEPs” (Holbrook, 2007) and the NCEO Synthesis Report 38 (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001) serve as reference guides for the development of questions that were used when analyzing blind student IEPs to record the contents:

1. What is the designated assessment option on the IEP (Holbrook, 2007)?
2. How are standards specifically addressed on the IEP (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001)?
3. In what ways does the IEP address access to the general education curriculum with statements related to “present levels of educational

- performance” and “goals and objectives/benchmarks (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001)?
4. What language addresses how the child’s disability might affect involvement and progress in the general curriculum (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001)?
 5. To what extent are the stated annual goals/objectives measurable (Holbrook, 2007)?
 6. To what extent are the measurable annual goals/objectives aligned with the grade-level academic content standards (Holbrook, 2007)?
 7. What language addresses the reporting of the student’s progress throughout the year (Holbrook, 2007)?

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) Exceptional Children Division provided professional development modules for special education teachers to train and guide them in the development of standards-based IEPs. Standards-based IEPs must address the students present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) along with specified annual measurable goals and objectives for the student that were aligned to the standards. Modules 10 and 11 provided North Carolina educators with specifics to help guide the development of standards-based IEPs (NCDPI Exceptional Children Division, 2009). The PLAAFP components (see Table 5) and the Measurable Annual Goals components (see Table 6) were used to guide the archival analysis of the blind IEPs. The listed components should be found in each IEP developed since the second semester the 2007-2008 school year.

Data Analysis

Open coding or pre-set coding was used first to assign initial categories for the interview data. Afterwards, the open codes were assembled and organized logically to identify the context and conditions leading to outcomes, thus known as axial coding (Creswell, 1998). Open and axial coding was used when analyzing the interview transcripts and observation notes. Emerging core themes leading to axial codes guided the principal investigator in establishing appropriate categories for the perception data obtained from the interviews and the recorded observation data. The guiding questions used for the archival analysis allowed the investigator to record response statements. Axial coding was also used when analyzing these response statements. Table 5 and 6 served as rubrics for the archival analysis of the IEP in order to record additional information specific to the North Carolina required contents of the standards-based IEP.

Interviews, observations, and archival analysis the three data methods used were selected to provide “multiple sources of evidence” and to “develop converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation” providing “validation of the data through cross verification from more than two sources” (Yin, 2003, p. 98). The principal investigator determined key points and comments extracted from the interview transcripts, observation notes, and blind IEPs during the data analysis. In addition to these key points and comments, the open and axial codes allowed the principal investigator to organize data, categorize findings, and determine emerging themes. The themes allowed the principal investigator to report the findings in a logical format and build a descriptive “story” of the case study as categories connect to explain results, trends, patterns, and perceptions of the research participants (Creswell, 1998).

Table 5

PLAAFP Components (Module 10)

PLAAFP Components	PLAAFP Statements (Completed during the blind IEP analysis)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Data-based student specific information about the student's current academic achievement and functional performance2. Strengths of the student3. Needs resulting from the disability4. Effects of the disability on involvement and progress in the general education curriculum	

Note. NCDPI Exceptional Children Division.

Table 6

Measurable Annual Goals Major Components (Module 11)

Measurable Components

Any important givens/conditions (when, with what, where)...as applicable.
A skill/domain area (academic, behavioral, functional).

An observable learner performance (what the learner will be doing, an action).
Measurable criteria which specify the level at which the student's performance will be acceptable (e.g., speed, accuracy, frequency).

Note. NCDPI Exceptional Children Division.

Summary

The goal of this research was to determine the impacts, if any, alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have on classroom instruction and student achievement. Exploring how teachers were using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs may provide educators with information and guidance with addressing the needs of students with persistent academic disabilities as well as the needs of the educators who are responsible for ensuring access to the general education curriculum for this population of students. In addition, teachers, directors, and building level administrators may gain information concerning the adequateness of the professional development support available to teachers to prepare them for the implementation of alternate assessments and the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs. Examining the IEP documents beginning with the 2006-2007 through the 2008-2009 school years provided evidence of trends since the development and implementation of the federal requirement to develop standards-based IEPs. Archival analysis of the IEP provided more insight on the craft of maintaining the individuality of IEPs while including academic standards. Ultimately, the findings may be of interest to educators who are concerned with the teaching and learning opportunities for students with persistent academic disabilities.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

The results of the data collected as outlined in Chapter 3, are presented as a case study on the perceived impact of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based Individual Education Plans (IEP) on classroom instruction and student achievement in two different school districts. The perceived impacts within each school district are subsequently compared. The descriptive study reports the results of the unit of analysis, two school districts located in or near northeastern North Carolina. Five research questions were addressed in the study.

1. How are teachers using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
2. What are the impacts on classroom instruction of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
3. What are the impacts on student achievement of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs?
4. What is the teacher's perception on the adequacy of professional development in preparing them to use alternate assessment data and standards-based IEPs?
5. What trends are evident in the standards-based IEPs since the enactment of this requirement?

A purposeful sampling of 8th grade special education and regular education teachers, middle school principals, and exceptional children (EC) directors was interviewed to gather their perceptions of the impact alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have on classroom instruction and student achievement. In

addition, perceptions about the professional development provided to research participants were explored. Both EC directors were responsible for providing the professional development needed to prepare teachers to develop and implement alternative assessments and standards-based IEPs. Therefore, no other curriculum or professional development directors were selected to participate in the interviews.

Participating teachers, principals, and EC directors were interviewed, and three special education teachers were observed. The principal at each participating school scheduled all teacher interviews. Arrangements for special education teacher observations and the collection of blind IEP data were made through either the special education teacher or the EC director. The special education teacher participants were observed in order to gather further data to support the findings, as well as explore interactions and behaviors of teacher participants. During one interview, the regular education teacher and special education teacher pair requested to be interviewed together. Every interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher principal investigator.

Analysis and Coding of Data

The data were collected, coded and analyzed after all school level interviews were conducted. The data were collected over a period of six months. During the first four months school level interviews and observations were conducted. Once the teacher and principal interviews were completed, open coding and analysis of the data began while further data were collected from the EC directors and blind IEPs were obtained from one school district. A description of the coding processes for the collected data were explained in further detail in the section of data collection methods that follow.

The axial coding resulted in five emerging themes: utilization, classroom instruction, student achievement, professional development, and IEP development. These themes were aligned with the research questions (see Table 7).

In addition, Figure 3 presents the relationship among the five themes and the sub-themes that emerged from further exploration and axial coding (Creswell, 1998). Utilization is depicted as the central theme.

The emerging theme of utilization was used to explain some of the results obtained that centered on teacher behaviors whether they were specific to teacher/principal interactions (TBI/PBI) or teacher/principal observations (TBO/PBO). Teacher/principal behaviors were used to explain the use of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. In order to show the interconnectiveness between themes, the teacher/principal behaviors were noted in other categories due to the nature of comments expressed by teachers, principals, or EC directors to show cross connections. Within the classroom instruction theme, the three emerging sub-themes were planning (CIP), practices/strategies (CIPS), and resources (CIR). Within student achievement, the sub-themes performance (SAP) and expectations (SAE) emerged. Third, the emerging sub-themes for professional development described the type of professional development received, whether curriculum-based (PDCB) or practice-based (PDPB). Among IEP development, the sub-themes related to content (IEPC) or teacher behaviors (IEPTB).

The teacher/principal behavior codes as well as the classroom instructional codes surfaced in more than one thematic area. Therefore, these essential codes later

Table 7

Alignment of Emerging Themes and Research Questions

Research Questions	Emerging Themes
1. How are teachers using alternate assessments and standards	Utilization
2. What are the impacts on classroom instruction of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards	Classroom Instruction
3. What are the impacts on student achievement of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards	Student Achievement
4. What is the teacher's perception on the adequacy of professional development in preparing them to use alternate assessment data and standards	Professional Development
5. What trends are evident in standards-based IEPs since the enactment of this requirement	IEP Development

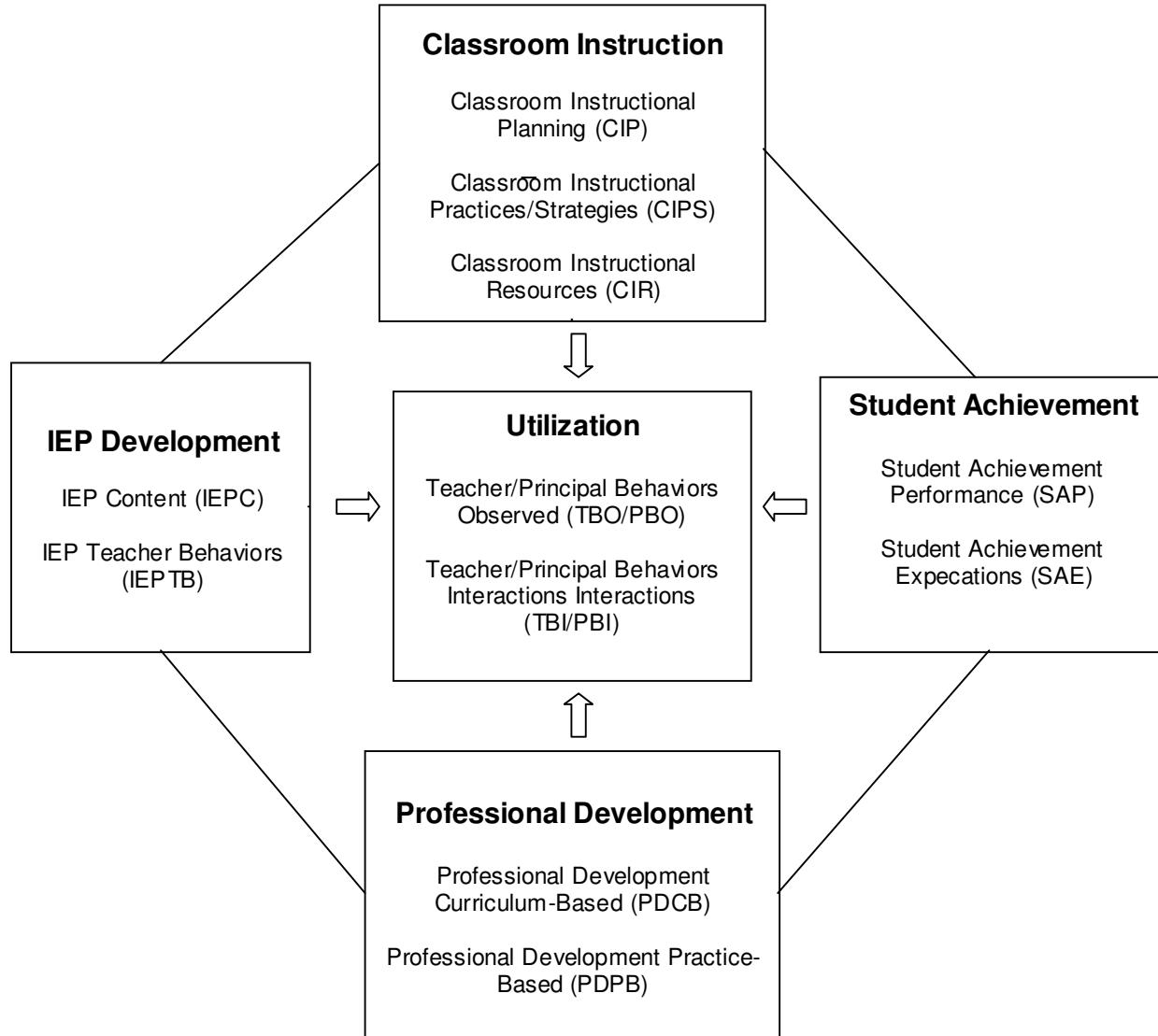


Figure 3. Five themes and sub-themes.

referred to as themes were used within the narrative and discussion to show the cross connections among the five main themes. In addition, the classroom instructional themes had the highest frequencies and were used repeatedly under other thematic categories. The reported findings were organized by section using each sub-thematic code to discuss the findings in more detail.

Interviews

The research questions were used to generate the questions for the interview protocol. Upon analyzing the interview data, initially four open codes were used to categorize the information. The initial open codes were classroom instruction, student achievement, IEP development, and professional development. As the coding process continued, data were sorted and arranged, “interconnecting the categories” to form axial codes (Creswell, 1998), and five themes emerged: utilization, classroom instruction, student achievement, professional development and IEP development. All five themes led to two or more emerging sub-themes to further explain and categorize the findings, show cross-connections within themes, discuss similarities and differences between the two school districts, and build the “story” as categories are connected (Creswell, 1998). An example of one of the first open and axial coding chart formed when capturing, categorizing and analyzing the interview data obtained from participants during a second read of each interview is shown in Appendix G.

First, the transcriptions of the interviews were read to gain an overview of the data and determine specific points of interest. During the second read of the interviews, key points and comments were extracted from each transcript and organized in a table format to logically arrange categorical themes based on the four initial broad open

codes shown on the left side of the table in Appendix G. Upon the third read of each interview transcript, the table of key points and comments were referenced and edited while open and axial codes were used to label and categorize all of the interview text that had been pulled from transcripts and organized in a table format for each school district.

Observations

The observation notes were coded using the same thematic codes and sub-themes emerging from interview transcripts. The majority of the open codes and axial codes shown in Appendix G were established themes and sub-themes that were generated during the coding of the interview data and then used in the coding of the recorded observation notes. These codes were used to categorize key findings that resulted from observations conducted by the principal investigator. The principal investigator focused on evidence of *Standard III: Teachers Know the Content They Teach* in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System Rubric during the observations of special education teachers (see Appendix B). During the review of the observation notes, evidence of thematic codes and the Standard III indicators were recorded to report trends.

IEP Documents

The IEP documents for students with persistent academic disabilities that were facilitated by the participating special education teacher were the archival records used for this study. Twelve blind standards-based IEP documents were collected and analyzed to examine contents and explore trends. The blind IEPs were examined to obtain evidence of specific components required in standards-based IEPs. Expectations

for examination of each student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) and the development of measurable annual goals (MAG) as developed by North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children Division were used to develop the IEP rubric protocol (see Tables 5 and 6). This protocol was used to record evidence of required elements of the IEP in order to identify patterns or trends.

Summary

Interviews, observations, and archival analysis were the three data collection methods used in this case study. Results obtained from 13 different interviews, three observations, and 12 blind IEPs were examined throughout this chapter. The data gathered were reported in narrative form organized by school district to include: (a) school population and participants, (b) findings addressing the research questions aligned to themes, and (c) summary. Districts were identified as District One and District Two. Pseudonyms were used for the school names and participant names in the reporting of the findings and results. The five themes, which aligned nicely with the guiding research questions, were used to organize the discussion of the findings.

The findings were explained using the five main themes and their sub-themes. Relationships among the five themes were discussed and described in further detail throughout this chapter.

Participants in the Study

District One

The two schools involved in the study in District One were referred to as Roger Middle School and Ward Middle School. District One had a total student population of

17,282 students of which 3,839 students were enrolled in middle schools during the 2009-2010 school year. Two hundred forty-seven of these middle school students in District One were scheduled to take at least one NCExtend2 alternate assessment for the 2010 accountability year. Roger Middle School had a population of 636 students with 11 total students taking the NCExtend2 for that accountability year in grades 6 – 8 while Ward Middle School had a student population of 764 with 17 total students in grades 6 - 8 taking one or more NCExtend2. In Roger Middle School, 4 of the 11 NCExtend2 students were 8th grade students and in Ward Middle School, 5 of 17 NCExtend2 students were 8th graders.

District One teachers, principals, and directors involved in this case study ranged between 4 and 36 years of K-12 educational experience. The exceptional children (EC) director of District One, Ms. Crane had 36 years of experience in K-12 education with the last three years serving in the role of EC director. Mr. Mell, principal of Roger Middle, had been with the middle school for one year. He had previously worked in the central office supporting professional development efforts for the district as a whole. Mr. Mell served as a building level administrator for a number of years prior to his central office experience and this particular administrative assignment. Mr. Mell believed strongly in teacher collaboration and had designed the master schedule to allow grade level planning meetings to be held for both regular education and special education teachers to plan and collaborate on a daily basis. Ms. Dot, principal of Ward Middle School was also a proponent of common planning for both regular education and special education teachers in order to foster an environment of collaboration and shared responsibility. In an interview with Ms. Dot, her philosophy with regards to educating

students with disabilities is that they are not a group unto themselves and they are “not the EC teacher’s kids.” “They are regular education students that happen to be exceptional” and having EC teachers to work with them is “just icing on the cake.” Ms. Dot, who spent some years in pharmaceutical sales, began her second career as a teacher in elementary and middle school. Her first experience as an administrator began when she was principal of the alternative school in this school district. She had a total of five years in administration with this last school year being her first at Ward Middle School.

The two teachers at Roger Middle School were in a grade level professional learning community (PLC) session the morning of the scheduled interview (TBO). Ms. Dee, a veteran 8th grade mathematics teacher for 18 years, taught some students who are taking the NCExtend2. Ms. Dee often planned with Ms. Sherlock, a special education teacher who taught science and social studies this school year and in the past had taught mathematics (TBI). Ms. Sherlock who usually taught students with persistent academic disabilities, had taught middle school students with disabilities for 9 years in all subject areas. Ms. Sherlock began as a lateral entry teacher when she entered K-12 education. At Roger Middle School, Ms. Dee taught the 8th grade students with persistent academic disabilities this school year. These students were mainstreamed in the regular education classroom receiving the same mathematics curriculum as those students who were not identified as students with disabilities.

Ms. Ups and Ms. Tones were the two teachers interviewed at Ward Middle School. The week before the scheduled interview, the special education teacher originally scheduled for an interview was hospitalized. Ms. Tones who had 4 years of

teaching experience in special education, with two of those years in North Carolina, was selected as a participant the day of the interview replacing the special education teacher who was in the hospital. Ms. Tones had been at Ward Middle School since she moved from the public educational system of New York. She worked mostly with students with persistent academic disabilities at Ward Middle School who were taught in the inclusion setting. With the inclusion model as this school's choice of educating the students with persistent academic disabilities, Ms. Tones worked directly with three 8th grade teachers throughout the school year (TBI). Ms. Tones followed cohorts of students with disabilities during the school day, working with them in all subject areas. Some students in these cohorts were identified as a student with disabilities but the cohorts were not limited to students with disabilities who had persistent academic disabilities. There were also times that Ms. Tones provided curriculum assistance on a pullout basis for a short period of time on different days during each week to assist the students with specific curriculum and modification needs. Ms. Tones partnered with regular education teachers to teach mathematics, language arts, science and social studies for students with disabilities in the inclusion classroom (TBI). One of the teachers that Ms. Tones partnered with was Ms. Ups, a veteran 8th grade mathematics teacher of 34 years.

District Two

District Two had a total population of 10,580 for the 2009 – 2010 school year. Within the total district population, approximately 241 students with persistent academic disabilities were scheduled to take one or more NCExtend2. There were approximately 4,641 middle school students across the district. In District Two, the schools involved in the study were Maple Middle School and Apple Middle School. Maple Middle School

housed 401 middle school students with 7 students in the target student population. Apple Middle School was much larger than Maple with a student population of 1,060. Eleven students at Apple Middle School were scheduled to take the NCExtend2 for the 2009-2010 school year.

The educational experience of participants in this district ranged from 4 years to 33 years. Ms. Virginia, the EC Director of District Two with 33 years of experience as an educator, had spent the last 12 years in special education as an EC Director in two different school systems. Mr. Angels, principal of Maple Middle School had 12 years of administrative experience and had been assigned to this middle school for 6 years. Education was Mr. Angel's second career after deciding he did not wish to continue in the world of business. He taught in the classroom for four years before beginning in administration. Ms. Dole, principal of Apple Middle School had served in this capacity for the last 3 years at Apple Middle.

Ms. Swan and Ms. Bow were selected as the two teachers to be interviewed at Maple Middle School. Ms. Bow, a mathematics teacher of 6.5 years taught 8th grade students along with Ms. Swan. Ms. Swan was selected to be interviewed two days prior to the interview because the original teacher scheduled to be interviewed transferred to another school system accepting an EC director's position within that school district. Maple Middle School with only 7 students identified in this targeted student population had one special education teacher assigned to the majority of this population of students for the 2009 - 2010 school year. However, Mr. Angels was not comfortable selecting that teacher as a participant, because she had only been at their school for two weeks, having replaced the original special education teacher who left to work in

another school system. Thus, Ms. Swan, a special education teacher of 13 years was selected as a participant. She was currently teaching students with persistent academic disabilities but these students were not scheduled to take the NCExtend2 this school year. In the past, she taught students with persistent academic disabilities who were scheduled to take the NCExtend2. Ms. Swan and Ms. Bow requested to be interviewed together instead of individually. The interactions and behaviors during this interview were noted and recorded as observation notes to capture noteworthy findings and results.

Ms. Fishel and Ms. Ginger were the teacher participants at Apple Middle School. Ms. Ginger, the special education teacher with the most experience in this case study had taught students with disabilities for 22 years with most of those years teaching 8th grade students. Ms. Ginger offered support to all students with disabilities, regardless of whether they were in the target student population. Ms. Ginger provided additional curriculum support in all subject areas. Ms. Fishel was one of the 8th grade language arts teachers that Ms. Ginger worked with to offer additional curriculum support for the students with disabilities in the 8th grade. Ms. Fishel had been teaching language arts for 15 years but she was not currently teaching students who have persistent academic disabilities that were scheduled to take the NCExtend2. It had been 2 years since she had taught a student who was assigned to take the NCExtend2 reading alternate assessment.

Summary

The EC directors selected schools that had several teachers with three or more years of experience teaching students with persistent academic disabilities. In addition,

the principals at each of these schools were very knowledgeable about students in this target population. The educators in both districts believed that it is a responsibility of all staff to educate students with persistent academic disabilities.

Utilization

This section presented findings addressing Research Question 1: How are teachers using alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs? This research question was aligned with the emerging theme, “utilization.”

District one. Ms. Crane, the EC Director in District One and the building level participants reported no formal use of alternate assessments. There was no reported use of NCExtend2 scores to guide instruction or plan curriculum. However, all participants agreed that the standards-based IEPs were used routinely. Based on their observations of colleagues, all teacher participants reported that regular education teachers were more actively involved in the development of the goals and objectives and statements acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses or present level of performance for students with standards-based IEPs (TBO). Ms. Crane added, when conversations centered around the requirement of stating the present level of performance, it helped both the EC teacher and regular education teacher move forward with determining specific needs for students as well as specific goals and objectives. Ms. Dee used the Accelerated Mathematics STAR assessments to determine diagnostic information about the students she taught throughout the school year. Likewise, other teachers including Ms. Sherlock used Accelerated Reader with all students to help determine the specific needs of the students they taught throughout the school year (CIR).

District two. The EC director, Ms. Virginia had gone from working in a small district to a very large school district. She recognized it was “physically impossible to know every student, family, and teacher,” but, there were still positive aspects of working in such a large district when dealing with the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. She indicated, “problem-solving financial constraints and thinking outside the box is an easier task because there are more funding and human resources to help with resolving many of our issues.” However, she made it clear that the absurdity of some federal regulations caused more problems than offering solutions. For example, as with the regulation regarding the cap on the use of alternate assessments, in which someone has stated, “statistically only 1% of the total population should be of the severe profound range and statistically only 2% of the total population should require alternate assessments” based on modified academic achievement standards, “but they do not consider the practical or realistic ramifications that may result from these mandates and how they may affect school district operations, practices.” For example, Ms. Virginia explained that

District Two has a large population of students with both persistent academic disabilities and significant cognitive disabilities in the county and this may be a result of the location of a research medical university facility and research hospital located within the county.

There were students with disabilities receiving academic services while placed in one of the area hospital facilities and if it was during testing time they were tested by this school district regardless of the student’s short stay in the area. However, when considering the 1% or 2% cap regulations for the school district when it comes to

accountability measures, Ms. Virginia argued, "while these very valid student placements receive services and are tested, many times it still results in an overage." The student numbers for students with disabilities were above the 1% or 2% cap, resulting in the school district not being in compliance for accountability purposes. She concluded, "The reality is you need to look at the population of the district and have some formula of whether it is over use or not."

Both schools in District Two supported the option of students with persistent academic disabilities taking regular state assessments instead of the NCExtend2 alternate assessment. The EC director, principals and teachers believed that this population of students deserved to have a chance at taking the regular state assessment since the structure and level of difficulty of the NCExtend2 alternate assessment is not that different from the regular assessment. For example, the teachers and EC director each stated in their interviews that they do not view the EOG reading alternate assessment as being that different from the regular EOG assessment. The only noticeable difference is that they have only three answer choices as opposed to four answer choices. The reading passages are just as long and difficult for students with persistent academic disabilities. The student's EOG scores whether it was an alternate assessment or regular assessment were mainly used for historical purposes and to academically place students in courses (CIP).

District Two utilized the state assessments on a limited basis, but they used district benchmark assessment data to guide instruction throughout the school year. The benchmark assessment design was patterned after the regular and alternate assessments. Both Maple and Apple middle schools analyzed individual student

benchmark alternate assessment and regular assessment data, student subgroup data, and whole school data to determine the best instructional practices for all students (CIP). On the day the principals were interviewed, they attended their routine principal's meeting to review and analyze benchmark data for their schools (PBO). During the interview with Mr. Angels, he showed a database of student assessment scores and explained how he color codes the various categories of students to determine which student groups were in need of additional curriculum support during the school day and after school (PBO). Mr. Angels and his teachers utilized the district benchmark data to track student performance, determine trends, and guide instruction. Ms. Bow in agreement with Mr. Angels stated:

Those benchmarks have really helped us out. Not to mention past EOG scores, past standardized test scores, we use based on putting them in, we have remediation classes - we look at scores in classes and who needs some extra help one-on-one, that sort of stuff (CIP and CIPS).

As far as the use of standards-based IEPs, the regular education teachers in this district stated that they were reviewing the student's IEPs more. The regular education teachers were specifically looking at the student's present level of performance and the stated goals and objectives in order to help students with disabilities experience success in the regular classroom (CIPS and CIR). The regular education teachers were also using the standards-based IEPs to target student weaknesses and build upon student strengths in the classroom.

Summary. District One participants indicated no use of alternate assessments.

District Two used alternate assessments when scheduling students with persistent

academic disabilities or targeting them for academic intervention. Both districts encouraged their students with persistent academic disabilities to take the regular state assessment instead of the alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS). Classroom assessments and benchmark assessments were used frequently to guide classroom instruction and address student's strengths and weaknesses. The classroom assessments and benchmark assessments, regardless of using it for summative purposes also, were used as formative assessments by some of the regular education teacher participants in District Two. The regular education teachers in District One used some of their classroom instructional resources as diagnostic and formative assessments throughout the school year. Accelerated Reader, Accelerated Math, ClassScapes, and Number Worlds were mentioned as classroom instructional resources that teachers used to determine if students with persistent academic disabilities were mastering the objectives taught in the classroom. The participants in both school districts reported that standards-based IEPs were used to guide classroom instruction in order to know the students' capabilities and strengths and weaknesses for the subject they taught.

Classroom Instruction

This section addressed Research Question 2: What are the impacts on classroom instruction of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs? This research question was aligned with the emerging theme, "classroom instruction."

In exploring the impacts of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction, three emerging themes, planning,

practices/strategies, and resources were used to discuss the findings and results. In addition, teacher behaviors were noted resulting from the impacts on classroom instruction. The perceptions of the participants and their views of whether the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs had impacted classroom instruction were discussed in length to answer this research question.

District one. Classroom instructional planning (CIP). The teachers in Roger and Ward middle schools had common planning periods and met routinely as professional learning communities to plan curriculum, instruction and intervention strategies (TBI). In Ward Middle School, the students with disabilities were taught in an inclusive setting. In Roger Middle School, the students with disabilities were either in the regular classroom or pulled out. While observing the special education teacher, Ms. Sherlock at Roger Middle School, goals and objectives from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) for science were written on the white board above the teacher's agenda for that day. Ms. Sherlock explained the science concepts that the students would be learning in class on that day. Ms. Sherlock stated she planned at times with the regular education teachers but she created her own lesson plans for her classroom instruction. After observing her during one of her combined science and social studies class periods, it was evident that Ms. Sherlock aligned her instruction with the NCSCOS, she knew her content and she made instruction relevant to the students. These three indicators within Standard III: Teachers Know the Content They Teach of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument were observed by the principal investigator during the scheduled observation (TBO).

At Ward Middle School, the special education teachers and regular education teachers planned together and were co-teachers in the inclusive classroom (TBI and TBO). This was necessary because the regular education teacher was the primary teacher while the special education teacher served as a support teacher providing accommodations, interventions, and modifications for the students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. The focus of covering the standard course of study for each teacher was the same, but with slightly different priorities. The special education teachers specifically prioritized the standard course of study to teach the students with disabilities what they needed to know. The regular education teachers planned shorter instructional periods to make sure the students with disabilities were successful in the inclusion classroom.

Classroom instructional practices/strategies (CIPS). Both schools utilized small group instruction versus whole class or large group instruction in the inclusion classroom. A variety of instructional practices were used to provide quality instruction for all students. The teachers at Ward Middle School were co-teachers in the inclusion classroom (TBO). This practice has encouraged teacher behaviors in which special education and regular education teachers interact more often, they communicate both face-to-face and via email and collaborate in professional learning communities (TBI). Within the inclusive classroom, students were heterogeneously grouped and given more one-on-one attention. Intervention strategies and remediation were made available for students during the school day as well as after school. The regular education teachers used more hands on activities to teach the concepts to students with disabilities (TBO). Ms. Ups who taught mathematics at Ward Middle School said that she used personal

student white boards for the “more tactile students.” She had also changed the length of assignments and slowed down her teaching to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities whom she taught.

Ms. Crane mentioned several additional reading intervention practices/strategies that were being used in the schools that no teachers at either one of the participating schools mentioned. She stated that Reading Mastery, Corrective Reading, and Reading Foundations were the reading practices/strategies used most often in the schools and the school district was moving towards finding more math instructional strategies for teachers to use. Some of the additional math instructional strategies mentioned by Ms. Crane were Math Envision and Transition Math.

Classroom instructional resources (CIR). At Roger and Ward Middle Schools, students were mainstreamed for mathematics and language arts classes, while the special education teachers taught science and social studies in resource (pullout) classes to benefit students with disabilities. Regardless of the academic placement of students with disabilities, each school used an array of instructional resources to benefit students with disabilities. The special education teachers and regular education teachers used these resources to improve classroom instruction and increase the opportunities for students as they learned the curriculum. These resources provided teachers with formative and summative assessment data that they used to plan and guide instruction (CIP). The resources used at each middle school are shown in Table 8.

According to both teachers at Roger Middle School, Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Math appeared to be useful instructional resources for students with

Table 8

Classroom Instructional Resources

Roger Middle School	Ward Middle School
Accelerated Mathematics	Number Worlds (Math)
Accelerated Reader	ClassScapes (All tested subjects)
Active Boards	Active Boards

disabilities. More specific, it was common practice among the teachers at Roger Middle to use the STAR Assessment features of the Accelerated Reader and Math as diagnostic tools throughout the school year to assess the mastery level of all students (CIPS). The STAR Assessments allowed teachers to determine and track individual student levels in reading and mathematics achievement and class growth.

At Ward Middle School, ClassScape was the instructional resource tool of choice. ClassScape, created and designed by staff at North Carolina State University, is an online assessment tool used to assess whether students are mastering curricular objectives for the majority of the North Carolina state assessments. Teachers used this online tool for formative and summative assessments (CIP).

District two. Classroom instructional planning (CIP). The observed teacher behaviors that reflected the impacts on classroom instructional planning that teacher participants indicated implied positive impacts on classroom instruction. The philosophy at Maple Middle School was to ensure that all of their special education teachers became experts in at least one content area. Ms. Bow who taught 8th grade mathematics at Maple Middle School stated, “that EC teachers are zoning in on more specific skills related to the content when teaching students with disabilities.” Likewise, Ms. Swan the special education teacher who taught 8th grade students along with Ms. Bow, stated “regular education teachers just work harder to see that the kids get the curriculum” (TBO). Teachers worked together to analyze assessment data and the information gained was used to drive instruction (TBI). The principals and teachers in Maple and Apple middle schools were actively involved in data analysis throughout the school year. While visiting Apple Middle School to interview the participants there, Mr.

Angels and Ms Dole, principals of the participating schools in this district were coming out of their data meeting. Principals were just as involved in the data analysis of student performance and achievement as the teachers (PBO). Further evidence of classroom instructional planning was indicated by Ms. Fishel, the 8th grade language arts teacher at Apple Middle when she stated in the interview that:

Ms. Ginger and I plan together a lot. Whether it's supplemental things that I start and she'll continue with the child, when the child gets services with her, or a lot of the times, she will ask me what I do in my regular classroom so that she can make changes to accommodate them in her class. So we do a lot of same activities or either provide the same type of instruction but we just make some adjustments (TBI).

With teachers and principals collaboratively analyzing data and teachers co-teaching students with disabilities, there appeared to be more open communication whether it was through emails, face-to-face conversations, or during common planning periods (TBI/PBI). Mr. Angels, Ms. Bow, and Ms. Swan all commented in their interview that they often interacted with their colleagues and they saw other regular education and special education teachers during the school day doing the same, whether it was face-to-face in the hallway between class changes, in meetings, or during common planning periods (TBO and TBI).

Classroom instructional practices/strategies (CIPS). Mr. Angels commented in his interview that “the change in the culture and the climate, the change in the instructional practices, the change in assessments and how we use data and all these kinds of things have, impacted instruction positively.” All educators at Maple and Apple

Middle Schools were trained to use the 30 instructional strategies of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). SIOP was a tool formed by teachers and researchers compiling 30 instructional strategies of best practices “developed as a model of sheltered instruction that teachers can implement to improve the academic success of their limited English proficient (LEP) students. The protocol is grouped into 3 sections, preparation, instruction, and review/evaluation” (Eschevarria & Short, 1999, p. 10).

Mr. Angels, Ms. Bow and Ms. Swan agreed that the use of SIOP had been instrumental in helping students better understand and learn the content they were teaching. Maple Middle School teachers were committed to using cooperative learning and differentiated instruction in the classroom on a regular basis. These two strategies were selected with the intent that they would strategically improve the quality of instruction for all students in the classroom. In order to differentiate student instruction, teachers analyzed student work and assessments on a daily basis to determine the content that students with disabilities had mastered (SAP and TBO). The results of the quarterly benchmark assessments were used to guide instruction and when students with disabilities needed additional remediation, they were “pulled out of non EOG elective courses such as PE, Art, etc.” At Apple Middle School, when necessary, regular education teachers moved at a slower pace while EC teachers like Ms. Ginger, positioned themselves in the classroom to “stay closer to the students during instructional presentations in case students with disabilities needed extra help or clarification” (TBO).

At both schools in District Two, students with persistent academic disabilities received curriculum support and assistance at additional time periods during the day in conjunction with the students mainstreamed in the regular classroom or in an inclusive classroom setting (TBO). With this practice of inclusion, the special education teacher was not the teacher of record, instead the special education teacher provided classroom interventions for students with disabilities and helped them complete class work received from the regular education teacher as observed of Ms. Ginger during her afternoon curriculum support class at Apple Middle (TBI and TBO). Regular education teachers and special education teachers alike agreed that the regular education teachers were using modifications in the classroom more frequently to address the specific needs of students with disabilities (TBO).

Classroom instructional resources (CIR). The participating middle schools in District Two may be using a variety of instructional resources, however participants in this case study mentioned only two resources. Apple Middle School used Thinking Maps more readily than the SIOP strategies to help students better understand the content while Maple Middle School used Study Island and two select SIOP strategies, cooperative learning and differentiated instruction throughout the school year. While conducting the observation with Ms. Ginger, Thinking Maps posters were hanging throughout the classroom for easy student reference. With Study Island, teachers competed for time in the computer lab to use this instructional resource. Ms. Bow stated that she used the Study Island lab on average twice a week. Based on her elaboration of how she used Study Island and the information she gained about her students instructional needs this instructional resource definitely guided her classroom

instruction. As shown in this excerpt, Ms. Bow provided a glimpse of how this resource was used and the impact on her classroom instructional practice (CIPS):

When we get the benchmark and we actually use Study Island a lot for some benchmarking, and just to get some idea, and then I can individually look at each child and see what they are missing, where I'm losing them - I can individually look at 'em - look at them as a class and then definitely base my instruction - ... we're really focusing on EOG review right now - we just went over goal one and we did a lot of review - and we are really having a hard time with irrational numbers, so that really focuses my review;...they're really understanding comparing and ordering numbers - that helps us go back and look and reevaluate how we're doing things and see which one needs more help and who can I pair together (CIP and CIPS).

Summary. The regular and special education teachers in each school district take advantage of the opportunity to plan together, communicate face-to-face, and help one another teach students with persistent academic disabilities. The educators in both districts believed that it was the responsibility of all staff to educate students with persistent academic disabilities. These educators believed in working together as colleagues to meet the needs of their students. The research findings also revealed that teachers and principals were open to capitalizing on the expertise of their colleagues to collaboratively meet the needs of students with persistent academic disabilities. The findings also showed that the teachers in both district used classroom instructional resources as formative assessment tools to guide classroom instruction for students with persistent academic disabilities.

Student Achievement

This section presented findings addressing Research Question 3: What are the impacts on student achievement of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs? This research question was aligned with the emerging theme, “student achievement.”

Teachers and principals talked very little about student achievement impacts. The two emerging themes that surfaced in the limited conversations on this topic were student performance and expectations. The participants’ comments revolved around the teacher behaviors as they related to student expectations and performance.

District one. All participants in District One believed that teachers had higher expectations because of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. However, only 50% of the teachers attributed the increase in student achievement to the fact that these mandates are required. The teachers agreed the professional development that the district office provided had helped with student performance and achievement in reading. In an excerpt from the interview with Ms. Dee, the reading professional development appeared to have an impact on student achievement in her eyes.

We have had much professional development on different reading strategies and we've also implemented Accelerated Reader this year so the students are reading more. I have seen that. Some other professional development - there's one going on right now, which is another reading strategy, so we are real heavy on reading strategies this year. It is bringing up our reading scores.

District two. When answering this research question, Mr. Angels quickly stated, “Student achievement is about the teacher in the classroom as far as what kind of quality instruction you get. NCLB – the idea is good, but folks that are making the rules don’t have a clue.” Participants at Maple Middle School believed expectations had increased for students with disabilities but they attributed this increase to the fact that teachers recognized that all kids can learn even though students with disabilities had limitations. Those limitations do not keep them from learning the same material that non-disabled students learn. The teachers and principal at Maple Middle School believed the key was in understanding the student’s strengths and weaknesses and utilizing the expertise of all teachers involved to address the needs of students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting.

Ms. Virginia, EC director stated, “We quite frankly see improvement in our results, closing our gaps.” She adds that the dropout prevention and graduation gap are significantly below the state and the gap is narrower. “We are growing at a rate faster than the state is improving.” Ms. Virginia encouraged schools to schedule the students either in inclusion or in a way that the student spent at least half their time in the general education class before being pulled out for individual curriculum support given by the special education teacher. Thus curriculum support class was not considered a study hall, it was a class that gave students an opportunity to receive additional instruction and intervention that would help the student with persistent academic disabilities experience academic success. Ms. Virginia strongly believed that we do students a disservice automatically allowing students with persistent academic disabilities to be

placed on alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS). She described this disadvantage in the following excerpt:

In my opinion, people have pushed students into NCExtend2 instead of the regular assessments... This short changes expectations for students with persistent academic disabilities. For example, there are no content differences, nor level of difficulty differences between the NCExtend2 writing prompt than that of the regular EOG writing prompt. When explaining the differences in these two types of writing assessments, I tell my special education teachers to think wide ruled paper versus college ruled paper, otherwise, it is the same prompt. This creates a disadvantage for students with persistent academic disabilities assessed using the NCExtend2 writing assessment because we are assuming they can't write in small spaces, when actually they have less room to express themselves, and our students tend to need more space to express themselves because it takes them a little longer to get to their succinct point. There are a very few students in which alternate assessments are intended to help, but I think we have over utilized it and therefore put them under greater scrutiny.

Ms. Swan and Ms. Bow also agreed that there was no real benefit to allow students to be on the NCExtend2, unless it was known that the student was going straight into the Occupational Course of Study at the high school level. Both teachers expressed that if the student was going to high school to complete the regular Future-Ready Core Graduation requirements, then students with persistent academic disabilities needed to experience taking EOGs so that they may transition to high school and began taking EOCs without the previous handicap of using AA-MAS. The special

education teacher at Apple Middle School shared the same sentiment as the staff at Maple Middle School and agreed with the philosophy that students with disabilities moving on to high school to complete the regular high school diploma track should not be assessed using the NCExtend2.

Summary. Participants in district two strongly believed that students with persistent academic disabilities were better served when given the option to take regular state assessments instead of alternate assessments. The target population of students were encouraged to pursue the regular high school diploma instead to the Occupational Course of Study diploma. The educators in both school districts preferred to teach students with persistent academic disabilities in the regular classroom setting and provide these students with additional academic support through the curriculum assistance class.

Professional Development

This section presented findings addressing Research Question 4: What is the teacher's perception on the adequacy of professional development in preparing them to use alternate assessment data and standards-based IEPs? This research question was aligned with the emerging theme, "professional development."

Each school system and individual schools provided professional development for teachers to help prepare them to develop standards-based IEPs as well as provide them with instructional tools and strategies to better teach all students. However, many of the professional development opportunities were specific to students with disabilities to better meet their needs whether they were pulled out for curriculum support classes, mainstreamed, or in an inclusive setting. In chapter 3, the professional development

provided at the district level that the EC Directors arranged and facilitated were explained. During the interviews with principals and teachers the intent was to obtain the participants perception of the professional development that had helped them implement these federal mandates and to discuss further needs in this area.

District one. According to the perceptions of the special education teachers and principals in District One the only professional development opportunities that had helped them with the federal mandates were specific to the development of standards-based IEPs. It was evident from the teacher interview comments that the Phase I professional development facilitated by the district office was adequate in helping teachers develop and write standards-based IEPs. Phase I professional development trained special education teachers to develop and implement standards-based IEPs and learn how to adequately complete the paperwork involved in the development of the standards-based IEPs. Both EC teachers and principals stated that they received ongoing support for the IEP paperwork throughout the school year. Ms. Dot, principal of Ward Middle School was appreciative that some of the ongoing support was provided in the form of webinars to keep teachers on site instead of requiring teachers to travel off site which kept teachers out of the classroom for longer periods of time.

However, the regular education teachers were either indifferent about the professional development offered or felt that it was mainly for the special education teachers and not the regular education teachers. Ms. Dee at Roger Middle School was the only regular education teacher in District One to comment about specific professional development. She shared that the 8th grade core teachers, at least the math, language arts and science teachers had received Active boards in their

classrooms and several professional development sessions to learn how to use the Active Inspire program were provided (CIR). Ms. Dee also believed that the professional development on reading strategies had helped increase the reading scores for the students at their school.

While there was evidence of Phase I professional development filtering down to the intended audience and it was viewed as adequate at both schools, there was only one school that provided evidence of Phase II professional development. The Phase I professional development was practice-based and provided the support and information needed for teachers to effectively develop the standards-based IEPs with the required details and specifics that were expected to be included in the IEPs. The Phase II professional development was curriculum-based as opposed to practice-based and Ms. Dee believed the reading professional development helped students in her school.

District One EC Director, Ms. Crane, indicated that Phase II professional development began in February 2010. Ms. Crane stated “there is a big push to develop training teams for Reading Foundations.” “Four academic coaches and two EC program specialists are trained in Reading Foundations and the plan is to train 100 people a year.” Also, the intent was to follow this same model for training in Foundations of Mathematics. Ms. Crane concluded that the district offered professional development on standards-based IEPs and on instructional strategies, which she commented, “that’s what it’s all about.” She perceived that teachers would agree that there had been a lot of professional development on the reading and math, but not enough professional development specific to the use of alternate assessments.

Ms. Crane further added that the reading training and certification(s) of newly hired special education teacher graduates of East Carolina University (ECU) prepared them to teach the subject instead of only teaching them to differentiate instruction or utilize intervention strategies. She was pleased that ECU special education teachers were graduating with degrees in content areas as well. With this new educational approach at ECU, special education teachers were prepared to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements.

District two. Three of the four teacher participants in District Two Schools specifically talked about the SIOP training that the district offered in order to provide teachers with useful best practices and strategies that they could use in the classroom. Ms. Fishel at Apple Middle stated that the “SIOP training, which is for the EC child or the EC type of child,” has impacted her classroom instruction.” She further commented “the child sees it, hears it, and does it; so that works.” Likewise, Mr. Angels added:

Teachers are trained in SIOP, so using those strategies, as far as the 28 different strategies that we focus on, differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, those kind of things are what we have tried to put in, and those things work well with exceptional children, but they also work well with all regular children.

Ms. Dole, principal of Apple Middle admitted that their school experience with SIOP wasn’t the best. Based on her reflection of the process, she indicated in hindsight, instead of focusing on all 28 strategies to implement at once, in her words, “what we should have done was just focus on a few and gone deep, than focus on many and gone wide.” However, the principal and teachers agreed that the school had experienced success with the school-wide use of Thinking Maps as classroom

instructional tools and a means to provide alternate assessment options for students with disabilities (CIR and CIPS).

While the school district concentrated on specific professional development for all schools, each of the two schools in District Two had internal school sponsored or directed professional development that was offered at the request of teachers and/or administrators to support teachers with the implementation of the federal mandates. In particular, Apple Middle School received training in Thinking Maps. Both teacher participants utilized thinking maps in their classroom, whether as instructional tools or alternate assessment choices for students with disabilities. Maple Middle School sponsored in-house professional development specific to effective classroom interventions and strategies. In the interview with Ms. Bow, she described one particular professional development that had impacted her and helped her change instructional practices to benefit to the students she taught. This particular professional development involved both special education students and teachers training regular education teachers to look at things through a different lens. In this excerpt, Ms. Bow attempted to explain in short what the students and EC teachers tried to convey and share with regular education teachers:

Our EC kids put us in their shoes. They met with us and they gave us some crazy like math problem. They were like here solve this. This is what we see when we look at the page. It was like some insane problem. They explained to us how we can help them, as teachers, and what they face - and that we might not think that they really have a problem, but they do - and then EC teachers gave us some tips on making tests, and how to make it not so, you know, even as simple

as don't use long paper because it makes it look like so much - then just different things - they gave us some tips on how we can help our kids out so that they are not so overwhelmed.

This particular workshop allowed regular education teachers to reflect and think about different ways of teaching students with disabilities and to be more cognizant of what these students experienced in the regular classroom and their limitations or the obstacles they must overcome in order to experience success.

Summary. The professional development provided by the districts to support teachers to develop and implement alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs were viewed as professional development primarily for special education teachers more so than regular education teachers. The majority of the professional development provided for the research participants focused on how to write effective standards-based IEPs. The school level participants agreed that this practice-based professional development helped them to effectively develop and implement standards-based IEPs. The teacher and principal participants reported only a few curriculum-based professional development opportunities offered by the district. The building level participants also felt they needed more curriculum-based professional development to help them with compliance and instructional needs. The EC directors however, shared more examples of curriculum-based professional development opportunities that they perceived to be available to both regular education and special education teachers. The EC directors believed the curriculum-based professional development that was arranged by the district better prepared teachers to teach students with disabilities and adhere to the federal mandates. Thus, there was a disconnect between the perceptions

of building level participants and the EC directors as it related to the types and adequacy of professional development offered in each school district.

IEP Development

This section presents findings related to Research Question 5: What trends are evident in standards-based IEPs since the enactment of this requirement? This research question was related to the emerging theme, “IEP development.”

The discussion surrounding standards-based IEP development was reported based on trends noted in interview conversations and archival analysis of the blind IEPs. The intent of the IEP data collection was to gather teacher perceptions with regard to the process and implementation and analyze actual IEP documents to determine trends and gain further insight on the topic. With respect to the archival analysis of IEPs, the intent was to track the IEPs that EC teacher participants facilitated. The teacher turnover rates in these two school systems appeared to be ideal because the rates were similar to the North Carolina teacher turnover rate. However, it was determined quickly that tracking IEPs by the “special education teacher participant only” would be near impossible. Thus, the IEP data collection criteria changed to include targeting the teacher’s current collection of IEP folders for students with persistent academic disabilities who were assessed using the NCExtend2.

Upon collecting the IEP data, it became apparent that while the EC teacher this school year might be the “keeper of the folder,” for the targeted student population, it did not necessarily mean that the teacher was also the keeper of the folder the previous year(s). The IEPs of students in the targeted population that were facilitated this school year by the special education teacher participant were selected by the special education

teacher at one school and randomly selected by the principal investigator at the other school. The student's IEP for the last three years were pulled for review and analysis. In both schools, tracking IEP development by "teacher only" was impossible because the special education teachers did not necessarily facilitate the IEP process for the same student for all three years. Therefore, the selection of the blind IEPs were first based on whether the special education teacher facilitated the IEP process for the most recent school year then the selected student's IEP for the last three school years were pulled. It was a rare find to discover a student that had the same special education teacher facilitating their IEP process for the last three school years.

Difficulty was experienced in obtaining the blind IEP data for District Two Schools. The EC director for District Two preferred that the blind IEPs come from the EC district office. Several attempts were made over a period of three months to collect the archival records from District Two. However, regardless of the multiple attempts to obtain the blind IEPs for District Two, none were provided for review and analysis. Thus, the results of the archival analysis of the blind IEPs were reported for District One only. After numerous follow-ups with the principal or the special education teacher at both schools in District One, 12 blind IEPs were collected for review and analysis.

District one. Archival analysis of the blind standards-based IEP. The participating special education teacher for the 2009-2010 school year facilitated the IEPs selected. The special education teacher, Ms. Sherlock at Roger Middle School provided three sets of blind IEPs. One set out of three had the same teacher facilitating the student's IEP process for three consecutive years . Ms. Tones did not have any assigned student IEP folders for students with persistent academic disabilities assessed with NCExtend2

the previous school year. Thus, the student IEPs pulled for Ms. Tones were facilitated by her for the 2009-2010 school year only, with copies of these selected student IEPs dating back to 2006-2007 school year.

In comparing the format and structural components of the 2006-2007 IEP to that of the 2008-2009 IEP, the majority of the format and structure were the same with the inclusion of two new sections. The new sections added to the IEP were the summary of assessment information and the competency goal alignment (IEPC). The IEP form for these two sections had guiding questions for the IEP team to form statements specific to that section. The inclusion of the new sections along with the stipulation that annual goal(s) be written in a measurable format provided the additional components necessary to make the IEP standards-based. Under the competency and benchmark section of the IEP, the goal statements were specific and directly aligned to content standards. In addition, the annual goals were more specific, instead of broad and general. For example, one student's IEP annual goal in 6th grade for reading was "Joan will improve and increase reading skills (IEPC)." To one that was measurable in 8th grade for reading that stated, "Joan will apply correct grammar and language usage, and she will increase fluency and comprehension while studying the characteristics of literary genres with 80% accuracy (IEPC)." The majority of the MAG goals were written with the measurable component statement including a certain percentage of accuracy such as 80% and 85% or a statement specifying the frequency of correct responses such as 3 out of 4 and 4 out of 5 (IEPC).

District one. Perceptions of IEP development. Ms. Sherlock used the PLAAFP components to develop appropriate statements to make the IEP standards-based. She

“looks at the student with disabilities’ present level of performance before moving forward with determining specific needs and establishing goals and objectives (IEPTB). Ms. Sherlock admitted that she had higher expectations and believed that “since the IEP requires the alignment of goals and objectives, the students with disabilities are doing better because all teachers are following the specifics that students need and following the information obtained in the IEP.” Ms. Sherlock had also observed regular education teachers more actively involved in the development of the goals and objectives statements (TBO). Even though the special education teacher believed that regular education teachers were following the specifics within the student’s IEP more, Ms. Dee, the regular education teacher participant at the same school stated, “She hasn’t really paid any attention to changes.” However, Ms. Dee mentioned later in the interview that she believed teachers were following the IEP more. Both teachers agreed that regular education teachers were following the IEP more, expectations were higher, and there was active participation from the regular education teacher in IEP meetings (IEPTB).

In the inclusive setting at Ward Middle School, the special education teacher saw benefits of working with and observing students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting. Ms. Tones stated, “Inclusion provides the EC teacher the opportunity to gain student feedback during instruction and see the student’s strengths and weaknesses as it relates to the curriculum being taught.”

District two. Perceptions of IEP development. Ms. Bow and Ms. Swan, the teacher participants at Maple Middle School agreed that teachers were more collaborative in their efforts to develop standards-based IEPs (IEPTB). According to Mr.

Angels, “conversations are more productive and focused.” Ms. Bow “adds that the regular education teacher has more input on the goals and objectives and she is reviewing the IEP more (IEPTB).” Likewise, Ms. Swan stated “regular education teachers and special education teachers are talking more, giving each other feedback, helping to determine strengths and weaknesses to note on the IEP as well as giving input on strategies.” Ms. Fishel, the regular education teacher at Apple Middle School stated that “the way we do it here, I’m sure it’s done the same way in every school, but we get as well as give feedback to the EC teacher.” In the interviews with the regular education teacher and special education teacher participants at Apple Middle, both teachers echoed that regular education teachers are always a part of the IEP development. The federal mandates had not caused them to act any differently when developing IEPs. At Apple Middle School, Ms. Fishel expressed that it is the standard practice of both regular and special education teachers to discuss

Strengths/weaknesses, any strategies that we use that may be effective, things that we know are not effective, all of that is discussed before we make any changes, additions, or whatever to the IEP so that we all understand what this particular child needs or what works and what doesn’t work.

According to Ms. Virginia, EC director of District Two, in previous years the Brigance assessment was the main assessment choice that many special education teachers used to determine strengths and weaknesses and identify areas in which target goals and objectives needed to be written for students with disabilities. But now to meet the requirements of federal mandates for SBI, Ms. Virginia encouraged the use of curriculum-based measurements (CBM) and universal screening probes that were used

to assess students with persistent academic disabilities and help teachers conduct true progress monitoring of students with disabilities. Central office support staff were available to help special education teachers and regular education teachers learn to use curriculum-based measures and track student success (CIPS).

Ms. Virginia who participated in many IEP team meetings had observed that the IEP goals were “more definitive goals aimed at grade level standards.”

For example,

If Johnny is in the 5th grade, but functioning on a second grade level, and the teacher recognizes that it is a reading fluency issue, then it makes my staff think then we need to do more fluency drills because that is the only way we are going to build fluency. If it is a comprehension issue, I need more time and practice at maybe moving beyond single paragraph comprehension to multi-paragraph, because that is the expectation at 5th grade.

In addition, Ms. Virginia shared that District Two not only required the inclusion of content goals for students with persistent academic disabilities, their county required this for all IEPs. She stated this was their district’s philosophy because

We believe you have to know what the goal is that we are working towards. If our goal is to reduce the gap, so that students can get the benefit from instruction in the general curriculum, you have to know what the expectation is and know what the present level of performance is and write your goals aimed at moving the child closer to grade level expectations.

Ms. Virginia believed that standards-based IEPs focused in on the appropriate intervention a student with disabilities needs. She added, “It helps our teachers

understand that they cannot be responsible for the grade level content instruction and provide remediation at the same time, so they have to work with general education teachers to accomplish the needs of students with disabilities.”

Ms. Virginia attended IEP meetings frequently so she had the opportunity to notice trends. From her observations at IEP meetings, she had observed that there was an increase in communication between special education teachers and regular educations and active participation from the regular education teacher in meetings. Regular education teachers were asking more questions and giving specific statements related to the specific needs of the student and present levels of performance (TBI and TBO). Ms. Virginia added,

Now we have more meaningful conversations instead of the way it has been in the past where the regular education teacher said little, until it was time to discuss modifications and would recommend a buffet of modification choices.

Ms. Virginia believed that more of the special education teachers can articulate the curriculum and standard course of study; they are more knowledgeable and can explain the curriculum. She thought that alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have even impacted the way central office administrators worked together. “There has been a more united focus at the central administration level to the classroom level.”

Summary. There was evidence of common components within the standards-based IEPs across schools. The components from Tables 5 and 6 as shown in Chapter 3, were used to guide the analysis of the contents within the IEP. The format and structure of the standards-based IEPs follow the same format with statements addressing the required components of the IEP. Present level of performance

statements were clear and concise and the measurable annual goal statements were results-oriented and aligned to content standards. It was reported that regular education teachers were more actively involved in the IEP process and in order to meet the specific needs of students with persistent academic disabilities, regular and special education teachers and central office educators within each school district were working together more.

Summary

Based on the participant perceptions, results presented in this case study showed favorable indications that standards-based IEPs were definitely impacting classroom instruction and student achievement. While the early results in other research may not have reached the intent of the federal regulations (Gardner, 2006; Hanzlicek, 2008; Kleinhert, Kennedy, & Kearns, 1999) there was evidence that the districts were moving in a positive direction. Participants in this study perceived that standards-based IEPs were impacting the teaching practices and student results in positive ways. For example, these impacts included differences in the way special education teachers and regular education teachers worked together as they taught students with persistent academic disabilities and as they developed standards-based IEPs for the target student population. The participants believed that educating students with persistent academic disabilities was a shared responsibility; thus students with persistent academic disabilities were taught in an inclusive setting or mainstreamed and provided additional curriculum support in curriculum assistance courses scheduled during the school regular school day. Interpretation of these findings, implications, and recommendations are presented in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 reviews the research problem, methods, and results of the study with an interpretation of findings. In addition, conclusions, unexpected challenges, and implications are discussed and linked to previous research. Chapter 5 ends with recommendations for further research and a concluding summary.

Statement of the Problem

The federal government has mandated that states develop alternate assessments for students with disabilities to guarantee access to the general curriculum and ensure that all students with disabilities have the opportunity to learn the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. With the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems, states have the option of developing an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS). In doing so, IEP teams are expected to follow guidelines to identify the appropriate students who would be eligible for an AA-MAS. Once students with persistent academic disabilities are identified and scheduled to take an AA-MAS, IEP teams are directed to develop and implement standards-based IEPs for the identified students. The expected outcome of adhering to these federal mandates should result in positive impacts on classroom instruction and student achievement for students with disabilities.

Review of Methodology

The research presented is a descriptive case study of the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs and their impact on classroom instruction and student achievement in two school districts. Interviews, observations, and archival analysis were methods used in the data collection process,

fourteen research participants, consisting of EC directors, principals, regular education teachers, and special education teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol to gather their perceptions of the impact. Observations of three special education teachers were conducted focusing on evidence of *Standard III: Teachers Know the Content They Teach* in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System Rubric. Twelve blind standards-based IEPs were analyzed to determine trends or patterns. The multiple data sources were analyzed and compiled to report findings.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

There were noted similarities and differences between the two school districts in this case study. The similarities and differences in findings were summarized and discussed within all five thematic areas. The greatest similarities were noticed in classroom instruction, professional development, and IEP development.

Utilization

District One reported no use of the AA-MAS results for students with persistent academic disabilities. District Two used AA-MAS on a limited basis to determine the best course placements and necessary intervention for students with persistent academic disabilities. A few principals and teachers in District Two stated that they used alternate assessments for historical purposes to determine trends in student performance and target struggling students. Principals in District Two used alternate assessments for administrative decisions such as scheduling and targeting subgroups of students who may need additional intervention to better prepare for the state assessments at the end of the school year. In District Two, the alternate assessments

were not used as the primary assessment choice for students with persistent academic needs; the regular state assessments were the first option of choice.

The teachers in this case study all indicated that they do not use alternate assessments, but they used and analyzed student assessment scores gained from classroom assessments whether they were teacher-generated or software-based to guide classroom instruction. There was no reported evidence indicating that District One used alternate assessments. Both districts reported that they used the standards-based IEPs for the target student population to (a) guide classroom instruction, (b) identify specific strengths and weaknesses, and (c) review the student's present level of performance.

There is a possibility that the lack of professional development or professional learning community conversations with regard to the use or benefits of AA-MAS and the influence they could have on curriculum and instruction was a barrier for participants. None of the exceptional children directors or principals reported any professional development that focused on alternate assessment use. Guidance in the area of alternate assessment use and linkage to classroom instruction could benefit teachers and principals as they continue to educate students with persistent academic disabilities who are assessed using an AA-MAS. Understanding the linkage between AA-MAS, standards-based IEPs, and curriculum and instruction could expand the impact or perceived benefits that teachers and principals experience. In a 2009 survey of state's perspectives on implementing or not implementing AA-MAS, Palmer stated that respondents for those states that have chosen to develop an AA-MAS "generally

perceived that a positive influence on curriculum, instruction, and the general assessment is likely (2009, p. 582).

Classroom Instruction

All participating schools in this case study either mainstreamed students with persistent academic disabilities into the regular education classroom or they used the inclusion model of instruction in which the special education teacher and regular education teacher co-taught these students alongside their non-disabled peers. In addition to teaching students with persistent academic disabilities using one of the instructional settings, these students received additional academic support in curriculum assistance classes taught by special education teachers at each participating school. The curriculum assistance classes were scheduled for students with persistent academic disabilities in place of, or in addition to, elective classes such as physical education and art.

The unexpected finding of the philosophical similarities of both school districts and their view of best practices for educating students with persistent academic disabilities was a positive discovery for the target student population within these two school districts. The principals and teachers agreed that the best placement of students with persistent academic disabilities is in the regular classroom whether through inclusion or mainstreaming. This finding indicated a change in culture. In the past, this population of students was most often taught in resource classroom settings for their core courses with limited opportunities to be in the regular education setting, often through elective courses. At the time of this study, these students were served primarily core courses with the option of curriculum assistance classes available to them in place

of some of their elective courses. The change in culture that obviously existed within both school districts provided students with persistent academic disabilities an opportunity to experience the same general education curriculum as their non-disabled peers. With an impact such as this, the federal government and other states could benefit from the lessons learned by the participants in this case study. This paradigm shift shaped their cultural and philosophical beliefs.

A variety of classroom instructional practices, strategies, and resources were used by both school districts to meet the needs of students with persistent academic disabilities. The most common instructional strategy used by the teachers within both school districts was Reading Foundations. Reading Foundations is a professional development opportunity in which teachers receive training to increase their knowledge and skills and improve instructional practices to effectively teach students who are struggling readers (see <http://www.ncsip.org/instruction/reading.html>). North Carolina Department of Public Instruction offers a five-day training session on Reading Foundations as support to all school districts. Participants in District One reported more of a variety of classroom instructional resources specific for use in reading or mathematics. District Two participants described another resource that was used in all subject areas, Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocols (SIOP). SIOP, a tool kit of instructional best practices to improve academic success for students with limited English Proficiency has been used by District Two as classroom instructional strategies for all students (Exchevarria & Short, 1999). Fifty percent of participants in District Two used differentiated instruction as one of the SIOP strategies of choice. They believed that strategy in particular was one of the most effective observational protocols to use

within their inclusive or mainstreamed classrooms for all of their students with disabilities. Their SIOP choice was right on target with Karvonen's examination of various instructional strategies that were effective when teaching students with disabilities. Karvonen stated, "differentiated instruction allows teachers to identify how each AA-MAS-eligible student will access grade-level content; respond to student progress and adjust instruction accordingly; and incorporate learning supports needed due to student disabilities" (2009, p. 67)

Student Achievement

Although data related to student achievement were limited several interview participants agreed that because of the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, teachers had higher expectations of students with persistent academic disabilities. In addition, the EC director in District Two reported the gap between the performance of students with persistent academic disabilities and regular education students was closing. She added students with persistent academic disabilities were performing better because regular education and special education teachers were taking responsibility and working together to help the target population of students succeed. Furthermore, all teachers reported that they had higher expectations for students with persistent academic disabilities and many times, these students were encouraged to take regular end of grade/end of course (EOG/EOC) assessments instead of AA-MAS. While there was no hard evidence to support an impact on student achievement, the perceptions of these participants were promising in that they can see positive changes.

Professional Development

In this case study, the teacher pairs participated routinely in professional learning communities (PLC) and special education teachers often lead professional development to help regular education teachers with effective intervention strategies to better serve and meet the needs of students with disabilities. In the PLC meetings, teachers worked together to review the standard course of study, plan and develop curriculum and instruction, as well as discuss the specific measurable annual goals and learning objectives for students with disabilities. In District Two Schools, the PLC meetings involved more than just teacher-teacher learning opportunities, the administrators in District Two Schools were taking advantage of PLC opportunities to analyze data and discuss ways to better meet the needs of students with disabilities as well as their non-disabled peers. For example, the principals interviewed were analyzing recent benchmark data for their schools to determine the curriculum areas that students had not mastered and to identify struggling students needing more focused intervention. Furthermore, the EC director, Ms. Virginia indicated that central office administrators participated in PLC sessions at their level in order to make informed decisions about the best instructional direction for the district, research-based practices that are beneficial to implement, and continuous instructional monitoring. “Successful instruction for AA-MAS-eligible students will require effective collaboration between general educators and special educators” (Karvonen, 2009, p. 78). The educators in these school districts modeled the kinds of collaborative practices that foster an instructional environment in which students with persistent academic disabilities can experience success.

The Reading Foundations professional development and the standards-based IEP professional development specific to completing the required paperwork appropriately were reported by the majority of participants to be useful and beneficial. No professional development for alternate assessments use was reported in either school district. The majority of professional development reported by District Two participants were curriculum-based or practice-based while District One participants reported that the majority of the professional development provided by their district office focused on the standards-based content required in IEPs. Regardless of the type of professional development, the participants in this case study believed it helped them meet the federal expectations of preparing students with persistent academic disabilities to access the general curriculum and to develop and implement standards-based IEPs.

IEP Development

Based on the analyses of the standards-based IEPs, the contents of the IEPs in District One changed over time to include the required components of present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) and measurable annual goals (MAG). This change was in direct compliance with the federal regulation guidelines. There were noted differences in the IEPs especially with the annual goal statements specified for students with persistent academic disabilities. In addition, the interview data provided evidence that both the regular and special education teachers were working together to develop and use the PLAAFP components, MAG components, and the student's identified strengths and weaknesses to guide their classroom instruction when teaching students with disabilities.

The research participants were in agreement that regular education teachers were more actively involved in the development, implementation and review of standards-based IEPs. Regular and special education teachers reported that the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs influenced them to plan, communicate, and interact more frequently to meet the needs of students with persistent academic disabilities. Thus, one type of professional development focus recommended by Karvonen was in place to provide training to “strengthen collaboration among IEP team members” (2009, p. 86).

Seventy-five percent of the regular education teachers stated they were actively involved in the development of IEPs. Principals, EC directors and teachers alike stated that standards-based IEPs appeared to have a direct impact on classroom instruction. However, none of the teachers gave any indication that they were conducting any progress monitoring of the students’ IEPs. All teachers may have reviewed the IEP, but that may have been a one-time occurrence. The EC director of District Two was the only research participant who referenced progress monitoring of classroom instructional practices and no one mentioned progress monitoring of IEPs. As Filbin reported, “progress monitoring may be a useful tool in helping IEP teams annually make appropriate assessment decisions” for students with persistent academic disabilities (2008, p. 27) These two school districts may want to adopt this best practice to ensure that this target student population makes gains throughout the school year. Even with well designed, long-ranged lesson plans, as well as measurable annual goals, teachers cannot assume the student will make progress according to the specified plan if developed only on an annual basis. Teachers will need to monitor

progress closely and know when to make decisions to adjust instruction (Filbin, 2008; Karvonen, 2009). Monitoring student progress is important. Ms. Bow and Ms. Swanson appeared to understand the importance of this practice thus, recognizing that adjusting instruction based on student performance informed them of next steps for planning instruction for the students with persistent disabilities that they taught.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, several conclusions can be drawn as a result of this case study. They are: (a) standards-based IEPs can be a driving force for classroom instruction and student achievement, (b) higher expectations of students with disabilities and shared responsibility for teaching them have the potential to increase access to the general curriculum, and (c) adequate professional development impacts classroom instruction and student achievement.

The Value of Standards-Based IEPs

In this study, principal and teacher participants did not believe alternate assessments were impacting classroom instruction or student achievement. This perception could be based on their limited use of alternate assessments or the belief that students with persistent academic disabilities who intended to complete the regular high school diploma track should take the regular state assessment instead of an alternate assessment. However, one could argue that through the development and implementation of alternate assessments, the inclusion of students with disabilities in state accountability systems has indirectly impacted classroom instruction and student achievement based on the mere fact it has changed principal and teacher behaviors. For example, these two school districts designed and patterned their benchmark

assessments based on the format and structure of the state assessments. They then used these benchmark assessments to guide instruction. The participants clearly indicated that the district benchmark assessments were impacting classroom instruction and student achievement, thus, it is logical to infer that there were indirect impacts since these benchmarks are patterned after state assessments. This educational strategy, if practiced among other school districts in North Carolina, could result in positive impacts on classroom instruction and student achievement

The impact on classroom instruction and student achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities appeared to be more evident in the use of standards-based IEPs. The standards-based IEPs and the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems were perceived to be the guiding force that is impacting classroom instruction and student achievement. There is definite agreement among all participants that the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs and the higher expectations that teachers had of students with disabilities were positively changing classroom instructional planning, practices, and resources for students with persistent academic disabilities.

Higher Expectations and Increased Access to the General Curriculum

The instructional planning, practices, and strategies and the collaborative efforts of all teachers on a daily basis are driving and influencing classroom instruction and student achievement for all students. Furthermore, all of the teacher participants indicated that they were frequently working together to create and use the standards-based IEPs for this population of students in order to target strengths and weaknesses

and determine present levels of performance to help students experience success in the regular classroom.

Based on the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, one can link the increased practice of including students with persistent academic disabilities in the regular education classroom to the requirement of these federal mandates. Adopting the practice of including students with persistent academic disabilities in the regular education classroom would give this population of students more access to the general curriculum and better prepare them for assessments, whether educators choose to assess these students using regular state assessments or alternate assessments. Furthermore, allowing students with persistent academic disabilities to receive their primary education in the regular education classroom through mainstreaming or inclusion also indicated that more educators are seeing benefits of, or at least the necessity of including students with disabilities in an effort to ensure access to the general curriculum. The majority of the participants indicated that expectations for students with disabilities had increased because perceptions had changed. Educators are recognizing that all children can learn regardless of their limitations and given the opportunity to learn, they can achieve.

With the expectation that students with disabilities are included in accountability systems, teachers and principals are recognizing that students with disabilities need access to the general curriculum as much as possible. Based on the findings in this case study, regular education teachers and special education teachers are working collaboratively to meet the specific academic needs of students with persistent academic disabilities to ensure that they experience success in the classroom and

perform well on state assessments. For students with persistent academic disabilities, the choice of educational setting, use of classroom generated student data, higher expectations, instructional practices of teachers, and professional development are impacting their educational experiences.

Two of the four principals had previous careers unrelated to special education. These two principals were very passionate about their beliefs as it related to educating students with disabilities and they stated up front that every teacher was responsible for the education of students with disabilities, not just the special education teacher. Every participant involved in this research shared and expressed this same philosophy. If all educators adopt this philosophy, it would result in the opportunity to learn, higher educational standards and access to the general curriculum for all students with disabilities.

The Value of Appropriate Professional Development

All participants believed in collaborative planning for regular and special education teachers. They also believed that all teachers were responsible for the education of students with disabilities, therefore, opportunities for collaborative planning strengthens the classroom instruction and measurable annual goals for students with persistent academic disabilities. The collaborative opportunities through professional learning communities and professional development directly impacted the principal and teacher interactions and behaviors, thus impacting classroom instruction. This research along with Porter's (2006) study showed that special education teachers believed that the IEP is the most important guide for the instruction of students with disabilities. Therefore, it was not surprising that the teachers in this case study believed that

standards-based IEPs had the greatest impact on classroom instruction and student achievement. Porter's study also suggested that the greatest barriers to the implementation of standards-based reform and standards-based IEPs in classrooms serving students with persistent academic disabilities are the weaknesses of the standards-based IEP implementation process. Teachers need to be actively involved in the implementation process and fully understand the alignment of standards-based IEPs and classroom instruction. Therefore, it is important that state and local agencies investigate the progress of teachers as they work with students with persistent academic disabilities. In addition, educators should focus on developing professional development opportunities that address weaknesses within the implementation process as well as the content knowledge that teachers need to ensure access to the general education curriculum.

In this case study, the majority of professional development provided for teachers to prepare them to develop and use alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs was perceived to be adequate. If the professional development is viewed as adequate, it transfers into effective classroom instruction for students because teachers perceive it to be worthy of use. SIOP and Reading Foundations professional development were perceived to be adequate and beneficial in helping teachers teach and address the needs of students with disabilities. However there were more reports of practice-based professional development for the completion of IEP paperwork or instructional practices and strategies. Arnold's study while targeting students with significant cognitive disabilities supports similar findings by Karvonen for recommendations regarding professional development supports for teachers teaching

students with persistent academic disabilities. Professional development and district factors can make a difference in the level and type of educational change experienced by students with disabilities, thus educators may need to consider conducting a needs assessment to determine the types of supports that would benefit educators to successfully teach students with persistent academic disabilities (Arnold, 2006; Karvonen, 2009).

At least 50% of the participants stated that more curriculum-based professional development was needed to help with classroom instruction, the development of aligned curriculum, and measurable annual goals for students with persistent academic disabilities. Therefore, it would be beneficial to poll educators about their professional development needs as they continue to provide the best educational opportunities for students with disabilities and meet the federal requirements to develop and implement alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. It is also important to communicate the vision and mission of the professional development efforts that are provided in support of preparing educators to meet these federal mandates.

Perceptions of professional development were inconsistent in this case study. In one district every participant talked about the same professional development opportunities available to them while in the other district the building level participants reported different professional development opportunities than that of the EC director. The EC director in District One shared that there were numerous professional development opportunities, both practice-based and curriculum-based provided to staff across their district. However, the majority of the building level participants reported that the professional development provided for them to support in the development and

implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs focused on the paperwork requirements for the standards-based IEPs. This example of variation among districts affirms the need for consistency in professional development across district lines, especially when preparing teachers to meet high-stakes legal requirements for student instruction and results. A needs assessment to prioritize professional development would be a best practice for educators to design and plan the necessary supports that educators need to adhere to the federal requirements. The professional development plans should meet the needs of both regular and special education teachers whether it addresses content or pedagogy in order to positively impact classroom instruction and student achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities.

Unexpected Challenges

There were unexpected challenges of this study involving the selection of special education teacher participants, the collection of state test score results, and the triangulation of the findings reported. The principal investigator and the principal participants faced challenges with the selection of special education teachers. It was impossible to find special education teachers based solely on the original criteria specified in Chapter 3. The special education teacher participants were expected to be teachers who were teaching students with persistent academic disabilities that were scheduled to take the NCExtend2 AA-MAS. The teachers were also expected to be currently teaching this population of students and have experience teaching them since the 2006-2007 school year. Only two special education teachers out of four met all of the criteria and three other special education teachers were considered but not

selected. The teacher turnover rate for these two school districts had a greater impact than expected.

This research began as a mixed methods study that included a quantitative analysis of student test scores in the target student population. The inability to access test scores for students with persistent academic disabilities during a period of time when this research was conducted prompted the change to a strictly qualitative study. Relying on test score results for any given target student population may create challenges for educators due to the vast changes in accountability at the state and federal levels. Tracking and analyzing test scores would provide the opportunity to explore and determine trends in student achievement as well as compare these quantitative findings to that of the perceived results obtained from the research participants. A longitudinal study of student test scores for students with persistent academic disabilities could be used to provide beneficial information regarding decisions about classroom instruction, student achievement, and educational policies related to students with disabilities.

Multiple sources of data were used. However, the unavailability of blind IEP data from one of the school systems as well as one of the principals within this same school system restricting the use of the observation data collection method limited the process for complete triangulation in order to avoid intrinsic biases. This challenge was addressed by intentionally using more than one data type within the specified data collection method whenever other sources of data collection methods were not available. This allowed for further validation of the data obtained in determining converging key points and comments that emerged during the analysis. Whenever there

was no opportunity to triangulate the data using all three of the data collection methods, at least two different data collection methods were used for validation purposes. While this case study cannot be used to make generalizations, perceptions of the research participants based on the data analysis results, the intrinsic biases, the multiple evidences found in two or more data sources, and somewhat subjective opinions of the principal investigator, confident results are reported regardless of challenges faced.

Implications of the Study

Although the results of this case study emerged from limited data in only two school districts and are cannot be generalized, lessons learned from the experiences of these teachers, EC directors, and principals can enrich what is known about teaching and learning for students with persistent academic disabilities and inform policy and practice.

Educational Leaders

Principals, EC directors and other school and district leaders need to consider the relevance of the findings with respect to the use of standards-based IEPs to guide classroom instruction and impact student performance. These findings indicate the importance of educational leaders providing the vision and adequate professional development needed to direct and support teachers as they adhere to the regulations for development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. It is important for educational leaders to make the necessary connections between policy and best practices to positively impact teaching and learning for students with persistent academic disabilities. The potential for student achievement opportunities and quality teaching and learning for students with disabilities can be

maximized if educational leaders see the connections and benefits of scheduling students with disabilities in the general education classroom whether through mainstreamed or inclusive settings. The perceptions of participants in this study indicated that once educational leaders set high expectations and created opportunities for regular and special education teachers to collaborate and participate in joint professional learning communities, important educational changes were experienced by students with disabilities in their school districts.

Teachers and Faculty

Teachers and faculty who are expected to develop and implement alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs would benefit from professional development that allows regular and special education teachers to share their expertise with each other. Teachers need opportunities to collaborate when developing and planning curriculum and implementing best practices and instructional strategies to meet the educational needs of students with persistent academic disabilities. The teachers in this case study were receptive to and believed in working collaboratively to educate students with disabilities. They also supported inclusion and mainstreaming students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting. Therefore, it would behoove teachers to recognize the benefits and findings reported in this case study and others alike.

Policy Makers

Educational policy makers realize that in order to guarantee access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities, legislative provisions would be necessary. Through the enactment of federal legislation related to alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs, the government expected students with

disabilities across the nation to be afforded access to the general curriculum and an opportunity to learn. The results of this case study indicated that this expectation was becoming a reality in the two participating school districts. The findings provided supporting evidence that instruction for students with persistent academic disabilities was no longer a focus for special education educators alone. The requirement to develop and implement alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs had influenced all educators in these two school districts to consider classroom instructional best practices/strategies, resources, and academic content that would benefit students with disabilities as they are taught along-side their non-disabled peers.

Reports, studies, and updates are slowly becoming available for students with disabilities in this target population. Though more research had been done for students with significant cognitive disabilities (the 1% population), many of the findings related to instructional practices and professional development may be used to support possible best practices for students with persistent academic disabilities (the 2% population) as well. Through U. S. Department of Education grant awards issued to states to support research on AA-MAS and standards-based IEPs for the this population, educational practitioners are able to learn from these published documents to guide their beginning or continued work as more states consider the option to develop and implement an AA-MAS. Educational policy makers need to continue to provide the financial incentive grant opportunities and supplemental resources to support continued study in the area of AA-MAS. Promising research findings already published such as Elliott et al. (2010), Filbin (2008), Lazarus et al. (2007), Lazarus et al. (2010), Karvonen (2009), Porter (2006) and Thurlow (2008) should be reviewed by educators and policy makers who

work with students with persistent academic disabilities. In addition, these groups should be encouraged to keep abreast of new findings and changes that result in improvements specific to these federal requirements.

The educational practices of all educators need to be inclusive and beneficial to all students, regardless of their academic abilities. The political, social, and economic influences of the federal government motivated educators in these two school districts to adopt appropriate instructional practices support professional development and accept responsibility for educating students with persistent academic disabilities. Participants in this study viewed the changes as positive and the professional development as helpful.

The results in this study supported beliefs the placement of students with persistent academic disabilities was key and the philosophical beliefs of educators working with this target student population made a difference in their educational experiences. It is crucial that teachers are prepared to work with this population of students and collaborate with one another to ensure the best educational process for students with persistent academic disabilities. It is also essential to design and provide ongoing professional development that is not only practice-based as it relates to standards-based IEPs or use of alternate assessments, but inclusive of curriculum-based foci. The curriculum-based foci should include a) best practices that can help teachers better educate the target population and b) improvement of the special education teacher's knowledge base of content and curriculum to understand and teach the content with the academic skills needed for a given subject area. These federal mandates positively impacted the educational experiences for students with disabilities

in these two school districts and influenced teachers to raise their expectations for students with disabilities. In conclusion, the enactment of these federal mandates made a difference for students with persistent academic disabilities assessed using the AA-MAS in these two school districts. Is it possible that these federal mandates are making a difference for other students with persistent academic disabilities across the state or nation?

Recommendations for Further Research

When conducting educational research, implementing best practices in education, and adhering to policies in education, educators are faced with challenges that at times are beyond their control. For example, research design can be constrained by limited access to minor students who are also disabled and by frequent changes in educational tests and measures that limit longitudinal quantitative comparisons. The National Center on Educational Outcomes was tasked with the continuous monitoring of such educational policies. Educators who value the continuous monitoring and the opportunity to keep abreast of the numerous educational reform efforts across our nation would benefit from further studies conducted in this area. The results of this study suggested areas for further research and they are discussed in the following sections.

Replication and Expansion of This Case Study to Include a Larger Population

An important recommendation for further study would be to increase the purposeful population sample to include a larger number of teachers, principals, and exceptional children directors to gather more perspectives on the impacts alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs have on classroom instruction and student achievement. This research involved only two school systems out of 115 in the state of

North Carolina. Therefore, the results were merely a report of the findings of this case study and are limited in transferability. A larger population sample would increase the transferability as well as further substantiate or refute findings and results of this case study.

Effects on Non-Disabled Students in Inclusion Classrooms

When educating students with persistent academic disabilities, regular and special education teachers in this study reported specific instructional practices/strategies that included teaching at a slower pace, using more hands-on activities, and using a variety of instructional strategies and resources. In addition, both groups of teachers used formative and summative student assessment data to guide classroom instruction and help students with persistent academic disabilities succeed in the regular classroom and on state assessments. Although these trends were having positive impacts on students with persistent academic disabilities as reported by these research participants, when considering the fact that these regular education teachers were teaching the curriculum in smaller segments and at a slower pace, concern could be raised for non-disabled students. How are these trends and changes in classroom instruction impacting student achievement for students without disabilities who are also taught in the inclusion classrooms or in the regular education classrooms alongside students with persistent academic disabilities? Research exploring the impacts on student achievement for non-disabled students who are taught in classrooms with students with persistent academic disabilities would be beneficial.

Longitudinal Study of the Impacts Alternate Assessments and Standards-Based IEPs have on Student Performance

One of the most obvious areas for further research is to explore impacts of the development of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on student achievement as measured by student performance on standardized tests. With a moratorium placed on the reporting of alternate assessment results during some of the accountability years within this research period, individual student assessment data for the target population was unavailable. Tracking individual student data since the 2006-2007 school year over a three to four year period would allow for exploration into a longitudinal study of trends in performance before and after the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs.

Tracking and analyzing test scores would provide the opportunity to explore and determine trends in student achievement as well as to compare these quantitative findings to teacher perceptions on student achievement. A longitudinal study of student scores on standardized tests for students with persistent academic disabilities could be used to provide beneficial information regarding decisions about classroom instruction, student achievement, and educational policies related to students with disabilities.

As North Carolina continues to redesign and develop more rigorous alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standard AA-MAS, future studies could focus on student achievement data to determine trends and explore patterns that are specific to North Carolina students that could be compared to national trends. Such quantitative studies of student assessment scores could corroborate or refute the participants' perceptions that alternate assessments and standards-based

IEPs were positively impacting classroom instruction and student achievement.

Correlation Between State Alternate Assessments and District Benchmark Assessments

Consistent with the findings of Hanzlicek (2008), there was no evidence that teacher perceptions in this case study had received professional development opportunities in using student alternate assessment results. Although, the teachers did not formally use state assessment results, the majority indicated that they did use benchmark assessments to guide instruction. Thus, the relationship between alternate assessment scores and benchmark assessment scores that school systems use to guide instruction would be another area recommended for study. The standards-based IEPs require the inclusion of measurable annual goals. In addition, these goals are continuously monitored to track student performance and to periodically determine how well students are meeting their specified goals. The continuous monitoring of student performance may be done through formative assessment or curriculum-based measures. “Teachers need to know how to design or identify, and use, effective formative assessment methods” (Karvonen, 2009, p, 72). Furthermore, North Carolina promotes a comprehensive assessment approach that includes three components to provide a balanced assessment system, formative (ungraded), benchmark (graded), and summative (graded). Examining the relationship and determining possible correlations among the types of graded assessments would in form the use of benchmark assessments to guide instruction and predict student achievement.

Summary

This case study was conducted to address the need for research regarding the impacts of federal regulations regarding alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs for students with persistent academic disabilities (the 2% population). The findings of this study were similar to prior research cited and discussed. Evidence supported that standards-based IEPs were impacting classroom instruction and student achievement for students with persistent academic disabilities. Regular education teachers were reviewing the IEP documents to look for the present level of performance statements, measurable objectives, and the strengths and weaknesses of the student to better prepare for classroom instruction. Furthermore, the results of this research indicated that EC directors, principals, and regular education and special education teachers had higher expectations for students with disabilities because of the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs. As a result of higher expectations and the shared responsibility of educating students with persistent academic disabilities, the schools in these two school districts taught these students in inclusive or mainstreamed classrooms. In preparation for the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs, the districts in this case study mentioned the practice-based professional development sessions to train teachers to stay in compliance with IEP paperwork were adequate. However, teachers reported that further professional development was needed to address the curriculum support that special education teachers needed to improve their content knowledge.

The research evidence gained from this case study and the implications discussed support the need to continue to follow research in this field. Policymakers and

educators can make informed decisions, implement best practices, and determine next steps related to students with persistent academic disabilities by a) conducting or reviewing further research, b) establishing continuous monitoring of classroom instructional practices and progress monitoring of standards-based IEPs, and d) designing appropriate professional development to better prepare teachers for the development and implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Maintaining a focused direction to enhance teaching and learning opportunities for students with persistent academic disabilities should result in greater access to the general curriculum.

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APPENDIX A: FEDERAL LAWS

Legislation	Description
<u>Goals 2000: Educate America Act</u> (P.L. 103-227) – passed March 31, 1994.	The Act provides resources for states and communities ensuring all students reach their full potential. If more is expected of students, then they will reach higher levels of achievement. The act encourages state and local efforts to set challenging content and performance standards (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Retrieved on November 10, 2008).
<u>Improving America's Schools Act of 1994</u> (P.L. 103-382)	Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to ensure quality teaching and learning for all students. Funding resources are available for states, districts, and schools to support their efforts to help students reach high standards. These new programs promote the alignment of curriculum and instruction, professional development, school leadership, accountability, and school improvement (Riley, 1995).
<u>Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</u> (P.L. 94-142)	“The primary federal law that provides funding and criteria for the education of children with disabilities. Legislation enacted in 1990 reauthorize and changed the name of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to the IDEA” (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 251).

<p><u>No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001</u> (P.L. 107-110) (NCLB) signed into law on January 8, 2002 also reauthorized ESEA in many ways.</p>	<p>It is based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The Act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades, if those states are to receive federal funding for schools. The law also requires that states be held publicly accountable for individual student learning and it further mandates alternate assessments with guidelines as developed by each state (ED.gov, Retrieved November 20, 2010)</p>
<p><u>Section 504 Rehabilitation Act of 1973</u></p>	<p>"A federal law that prohibits discrimination in educational and other contexts against individuals with disabilities" (McDonnell et al., 1997, p. 253).</p>
<p><u>Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (Title I – IAAD) of 2003</u></p>	<p>Amendment to the Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 - "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state assessments" (ED.gov, Retrieved November 10, 2008).</p>

APPENDIX B: STANDARD III: TEACHERS KNOW THE CONTENT THEY TEACH

<p>A. Teachers align their instruction with the <i>North Carolina Standard Course of Study</i>:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teach the North Carolina Standard Course of Study - Develop and apply strategies to make the curriculum rigorous and relevant Develop literacy skills appropriate to specialty area
<p>B. Teachers know the content appropriate to their teaching specialty:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know subject beyond the content they teach - Direct students' curiosity into an interest in learning
<p>C. Teachers recognize the interconnectedness of content areas/disciplines:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Know links between grade/subject and the North Carolina Standard Course of Study - Relate content to other disciplines - Promote global awareness and its relevance
<p>D. Teachers make instruction relevant to students:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incorporate life skills which include leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal responsibility, people skills, self-direction, and social responsibility - Demonstrate the relationship between the core content and 21st Century content that includes global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health and wellness awareness

The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Standards (Standard III of V)

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER

The Impact of Alternate Assessments and Standards-based IEPs on Classroom Instruction and Student Achievement

Research Participants Needed

A doctoral research study focusing on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement will be conducted in three neighboring school districts in the northeastern region of North Carolina. Research participants who are either teachers or administrators since 2006 – 2007 are needed to provide the perception data and qualitative IEP data to investigate the affects.

Participation will consist of:

EC Director and possibly the Professional Development Director:

- Participate in 2-3 short discussions with the Principal Investigator to obtain data collection specifics, school district information, , select targeted participants, etc. Once data collection officially starts, participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)

Regular education teacher and building and district level administrator:

- Participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)

Special Education teacher:

- Participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)
- Participate in one 30-45 minute observation conducted by the principal investigator.
- Participate in a follow-up interview after the observation and document analysis. (approximately 20-30 minutes)

EC Director or Special Education teacher:

- Select at least 3 archival IEPs of students taking the NCExtend2 alternate assessment in which the special education teacher has facilitated the development of the IEP. An IEP must be selected from each school year beginning in 2006-2007 and ending in 2008-2009 in order to provide blind IEP data spanning the 3-year period for document analysis.

Even though participants have been purposefully targeted, participation in this study is completely voluntary and no one should feel obligated to participate. Furthermore, if a participant initially volunteers and subsequently changes his/her mind, he/she will be completely free to discontinue participation.

Individual participants and the students whose IEPs are reviewed will not be identified by name. Student names will be removed from the IEPs, and they will be coded by school, district, and grade level.

If are willing to participate in this study, please complete the form, which will confirm participation and return it to your EC Director.

Please note that I am conducting this study as a doctoral research requirement for East Carolina University. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

The Impact of Alternate Assessments and Standards-based IEPs on Classroom Instruction and Student Achievement

Please complete this form and return it to your EC Director.

Yes I would like to volunteer to participate in this research study.

No, I do not wish to volunteer to participate in this research study.

Print Name

School System/School

What is your role?

special education teacher

regular education teacher

administrator

Have you taught students with disabilities taking the NCExtend2 alternate assessment within the last three years?

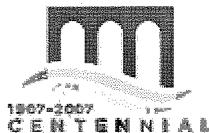
Yes No

How many years have you taught? _____

Yes, I am teaching students in Grade 8.

If you are an administrator, what is the grade span you are assigned? _____

APPENDIX E: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board
East Carolina University, 600 Moye Boulevard
1L-09 Brody Medical Sciences Bldg. • Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • www.ecu.edu/irb
Chair and Director of Biomedical IRB: L. Wiley Nifong, MD
Chair and Director of Behavioral and Social Science IRB: Susan L. McCammon, PhD

TO: Monica Smith-Woofter, Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership, ECU
FROM: UMCIRB *LCN*
DATE: February 15, 2010
RE: Expedited Category Research Study
TITLE: "The Impact of Alternate Assessments and Standards-Based IEPs on Classroom Instruction and Student Achievement"

UMCIRB #10-0068

This research study has undergone review and approval using expedited review on 2.8.10. This research study is eligible for review under an expedited category number 6 & 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this **unfunded** sponsored study **no more than minimal risk** requiring a continuing review in **12 months**. Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The above referenced research study has been given approval for the period of **2.8.10** to **2.7.11**. The approval includes the following items:

- Internal Processing Form (received 2.5.10)
- Informed Consent, version 2 (dated 2.7.10)
- Letters of Support
- Recruitment Flyer
- Interview Protocol
- IEP Rubric Protocols
- Research Study participant Response Form

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

The UMCIRB applies 45 CFR 46, Subparts A-D, to all research reviewed by the UMCIRB regardless of the funding source. 21 CFR 50 and 21 CFR 56 are applied to all research studies under the Food and Drug Administration regulation. The UMCIRB follows applicable International Conference on Harmonisation Good Clinical Practice guidelines.

APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT

East Carolina University
School of Education
Educational Leadership
Greenville, NC

INFORMED CONSENT FOR NON-MEDICAL RESEARCH CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Alternate Assessments and Standards-based IEPs: Their Impact on Classroom Instruction and Student Achievement

You have been selected to participate in research conducted by Monica Smith-Woofter, Ed. D candidate with faculty advisor Lynn Bradshaw, Ed. D, from East Carolina University. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you are an eighth grade special education or regular education teacher who has taught students with disabilities assessed using the North Carolina Extend2 alternate assessment OR you are an administrator who is directly or indirectly involved with this population of students with disabilities. Eight teacher participants and at least six administrator participants are needed to participate in this research. All participants work in one of the selected school districts located in or near the northeastern region of North Carolina. This research is being conducted solely as a Doctoral study under the auspices of East Carolina University, School of Education, Educational Leadership. Your participation is strictly voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about any information you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To explore how the implementation of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs are impacting classroom instruction and student achievement for students with disabilities within the 2% population (students with disabilities who are unlikely to achieve grade-level proficiency within the year covered by the IEP).

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask the following things of you:

EC Director and possibly the Professional Development Director:

- Participate in 2-3 short discussions with the Principal Investigator to obtain data collection specifics, school district information, , select targeted participants, etc. Once data collection officially starts, participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)

Regular education teacher and building and district level administrator:

- Participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)

Special Education teacher:

- Participate in an individual interview answering questions to obtain your perceptions on the impact of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs on classroom instruction and student achievement. (approximately 60 minutes)
- Participate in one 30-45 minute observation conducted by the principal investigator.
- Participate in a follow-up interview after the observation and document analysis. (approximately 20-30 minutes)

EC Director or Special Education teacher:

- Select at least 3 archival IEPs of students taking the NCExtend2 alternate assessment in which the special education teacher has facilitated the development of the IEP. An IEP must be selected from each school year beginning in 2006-2007 and ending in 2008-2009 in order to provide blind IEP data spanning the 3-year period for document analysis.

Individual participants and the students whose IEPs are reviewed will not be identified by name. Student names will be removed from the IEPs, and they will be coded by school, district, and grade level.

To ensure accurate data collection for review, all interviews will be audiotape recorded. The Principal Investigator will develop a written script of the participant's responses in order to review, analyze, code and correlate participant responses. If the participant wants a copy of this transcription, one may be provided for him/her.

Even though participants have been purposefully targeted, participation in this study is completely voluntary and no one should feel obligated to participate. Furthermore, if a participant initially volunteers and subsequently changes his/her mind, he/she will be completely free to discontinue participation.

Thank you for participating in the further research of alternate assessments and standards-based IEPs. Your cooperation is appreciated.

APPENDIX G: OPEN AND AXIAL CODING OF EMERGING THEMES

Open/Axial Coding Notes

This is an example of the coding used within the table showing the key comments extracted from interview transcripts, which are organized by theme.

Codes:

- Classroom Instructional Planning (CIP)
- Classroom Instructional Practices/Strategies (CIPS)
- Classroom Instructional Resources (CIR)
- Student Achievement – Expectations (SAE)
- Student Achievement – Performance (SAP)
- Teacher Behavior Interactions (TBI)
- Teacher Behavior Observations (TBO)
- Principal Behavior Interactions (PBI)
- Principal Behavior Observations (PBO)
- Professional Development Curriculum-Based (PDCB)
- Professional Development Practice-Based (PDPB)
- IEP Development – Content (IEPC)
- IEP Development – Teacher Behaviors (IEPTB)

Theme Category	Sample Evidences from Interview Transcripts
Instructional Strategies for SWD District Two –Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Total inclusion (CIP)/(CIPS) - Sheltered Instructional Operational Protocols (CIPS) - Cooperative Learning (CIPS) - Differentiated Instruction (CIPS) Analyzing Data which drives instruction (CIPS) - Study Island (CIR) - Regular education teachers are using modifications in the classroom more to address student needs, in addition to them reviewing the IEP more (TBO) - Regular ed teacher works with the EC teacher more and gets pointers from them to better help the SWD in the regular ed classroom (TBI) - analyzes individual student work on assessments to see what SWD have mastered and areas of weakness (CIP & CIPS) - Uses benchmark assessments to guide instruction (not necessarily the alternate assessment) (CIP & CIPS) - teachers look at the disaggregated data of the SWD throughout the school year using SI (CIP) - SWD are pulled out of non EOG elective courses such as PE, Art, etc in order to have additional remediation (CIPS) - look at EOG scores for historical purposes not to guide instruction, only for placement in additional courses that provide intervention opportunities for the students with disabilities (CIP)
Instructional Strategies for SWD District Two Apple Middle	<p>Reg ed teacher moves at a slower pace and stays closer to the students during instructional presentations in case SWD need extra help or clarification (CIPS)</p>
Impacts on Student Achievement Pitt Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in culture, instructional practices, use of assessment data - Expectations have increased for students with disabilities (SAE)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus is on growth for all students not prof.
IEP Development Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers are more collaborative (TBO) - Reg Ed. Tchrs have more input on the goals and obj. (IEPTB) - Conversations productive and focused (IEPTBO) - Write IEPs differently to include standards (IEPC) - Regular ed teachers are reviewing the IEP more (IEPTBO) - Regular teachers and EC teachers are talking more, giving each other feedback, helping to determine strengths and weaknesses to note on the IEP as well as giving input on strategies. (IEPTBI&TBO)
IEP Development at Apple Middle	Regular educ. Teachers have always been a part of the IEP development – no difference, regular ed teachers have always been asked what were the students strengths and weaknesses (IEP)
EC Teacher Knowledge District Two Maple Middle	Strong content knowledge in one area or another
Noted Differences in role of EC Teacher District Two Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some places the EC teacher is not the teacher of record (CIPS) - Use of the curriculum assistance model (EC teacher provides intervention and helps the SWD work that student has received from Reg. Ed tchr) (CIPS) - EC Teachers are providing staff development for reg ed tchrs (in who to teach and work with SWD they are the “expert” teacher) (TBI & TBO) - Zoning in on more specific skills related to content (CIP) - Providing Tips that help Reg. Ed teachers work with EC kids (PDPB)
Noted Differences in role of Reg Ed Teacher District Two Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working more closely with EC teachers,(TBI) - Open to allowing EC teachers to share their expertise (PD) - EC teachers notice that regular ed teachers work harder to see that the SWD gets the curriculum/understands what is being taught (TBO)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular ed teacher's mindset is different (TBO)
Noted diff in role of reg ed teacher in Pitt Co. –Apple Middle	Reg ed teachers are expecting more out of EC SWDs – (SAE)
Communication District Two – Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emailing, Conversations throughout the day, during planning periods (TBO)
Professional Development District Two –Maple Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Completing Paperwork (PDPB) - How to write Appropriate standards-based IEPs (PDPB)