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University Project Finds New Ways to Conduct Educationally Meaningful Assessments with Students with Disabilities

by Seth Warschausky, Ph.D.; Sunny Roller, M.A.; Marie VanTubbergen, Ph.D.; Heidi Lengyel, B.A.

ACSESS* Model Demonstration Project asks families and professionals how to fortify current testing for instructional planning purposes

Facilitating full participation in the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities is best accomplished through active collaboration among students, their families, and staff. These important individualized educational program (IEP) partners also need access to accurate and thorough information about the student's abilities. For students with communicative, motoric, and/or sensory impairments, traditional school testing practices often fail to give enough information to help identify the accommodations and resources that best promote a well-rounded education.

The ACSESS* Model Demonstration Project is working to address this need for information. The project brings together researchers from various circles to develop a new model of adapted testing procedures that will inform instruction. Led by University of Michigan (UM) Associate Professor Seth Warschausky, Ph.D., these collaborators are linking advances in rehabilitation engineering and assistive technology to improvements in ability testing for students with communicative, motoric, and/or sensory impairments. Their work will provide IEP teams with more accurate and comprehensive assessments of students' capabilities

and needs, so teams can more effectively plan instruction.

Two key commitments form the core of the project. The first commitment is to inclusive education. The second is to involvement of students and parents in all aspects of assessment and decision-making.

In early 2003, Warschausky and colleagues conducted focus groups and structured interviews with two groups of special education stakeholders:

- **School professionals**—school psychologists, transition specialists, assistive technology specialists, and disability-focused faculty and staff.
- **Parents/guardians** of students with severe communicative, motoric, and/or sensory impairments.

Each focus group was invited to share its experiences, concerns, ideas, and opinions about cognitive assessments and their usefulness when planning instruction.

School Professionals Speak Out about Assessment

A private firm specializing in conducting focus groups led 90-minute group discussions with the school professionals. Each group was asked to talk about current school testing practices, the needs that exist in light of

* ACSESS stands for Adapted Collaborative Strategies for Evaluation of Student Strengths. This should not be confused with MI-Access (Michigan's Alternate Assessment Program.)

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these practices, aids and barriers to meeting these testing needs, and specific recommendations for the ACSESS Project to build an effective testing laboratory.

Eight key themes regarding testing for instructional planning emerged from the discussions with professionals:

1. Traditional standardized testing fails to meet the assessment needs of students with severe disabilities.

There is often a mismatch between what is being tested and how it is being tested, because most standardized tests are not designed appropriately for students with severe disabilities. Traditional testing fails to capture fine distinctions in skill levels.

2. Assessment should be a process, not simply a snapshot in time.

The groups expressed real concern that assessments are often single-session evaluations that do not capture situational differences. In addition, evaluators for these types of assessments may not know the student well. Professionals in the groups strongly recommended a multi-disciplinary team approach to evaluation, with enough time for team discussions.

3. Evaluation should proceed from students' short- and long-term goals.

Before moving ahead with an assessment, everyone involved should know the purpose of the assessment and ensure that the tests are done in a way that is relevant to the desired results.

4. Informal assessments often provide more useful information than do formal assessments.

A person who really knows and understands the student should regularly interact with and observe the student to understand the student's capabilities. This person should then document the observations.

5. Assessments should assess strengths and how those strengths would contribute to goals for the future.

For assessment results to be useful, they need to answer the questions “What do these results mean for the child today?” and “How are these results related to the child's goals?” One group member exclaimed, “A lot of what we do is looking at deficits, deficits, deficits! And everybody knows what the child can't do. You have to know some of the things that [children are] capable of so you can build the strengths.”

6. A student with a severe disability should be assessed in her/his natural environment, preferably by a person with whom s/he is already comfortable.

A student with a severe disability often has difficulty transferring skills and behavior from one environment to another and from one person to another. Therefore, the student typically does not perform the same way when an unfamiliar person assesses her/him in an unfamiliar place. Potential cultural biases need to be controlled for as well.

7. Both content and format need improvement when reporting results.

Professionals involved with a student's assessment often find it hard to get copies of reports. When they do receive copies, they can find reports hard to unravel, because they contain many pages of text and few action- and future-oriented recommendations. The professionals expressed great interest in having reports available in multi-media compact disk (CD) format that could be viewed from a computer. The CD could contain video or audio clips, recommendations, and other pertinent information in addition to the basic results. As one focus group participant commented, “If you showed the things that a student is doing, anyone—an employer or whatever—could take a look at it and say, ‘Oh, I see, he has the ability to do this, or the ability to do that!’”

8. Current technology should be used in the testing process.

Allowing students to use assistive technologies such as switching devices and computerized presentations of stimuli could make testing

instruments more accessible to students. As a result, tests will give teachers better information about the student's skill level and educational needs. For example, instead of measuring a student's ability to talk or point, a mathematics test will reveal what the student knows about mathematics.

Families Ask for Changes in the Assessment Process

The parents of students with severe communicative, motoric, and/or sensory impairments who participated in the interview provided information regarding their past experiences with cognitive assessments as well as ideas for improving the assessment process.

Three themes emerged from conversations with parents/guardians:

1. Involving parents and staff in the assessment process would be helpful on a number of levels.

Fewer than half of the parents interviewed reported that they had been formally involved with their child's assessment. Parents felt they could provide valuable information about strategies and alternative techniques to more accurately assess their child's abilities if they knew more about the tasks of the assessment. Parents noted that staff members who work with their child daily could also provide evaluators with invaluable information. With the help of information gained through parent and staff interviews, the testing process could replicate the conditions under which the student performs best in school and at home. Finally, parents indicated it is important they talk with professionals who test their child. Parents expressed a desire for all parties—themselves, assessors, and consultants who are knowledgeable about the student's medical condition and needs—to communicate and share information that would create a better testing environment for the child.

2. The testing process itself could better accommodate a student's individual needs.

Parents were very excited about the possible uses of technology and computers to enhance their child's ability to participate in testing. Additionally, some parents suggested breaking the assessment process into smaller tasks with more time allotted for each task. Parents also proposed presenting the material in more than one modality, for example presenting information by speaking and in writing. Furthermore, they recommended rewording the questions one or two times and allowing parents to suggest phrases more relevant to the child. In general, the parents desired assessments that placed less emphasis on verbal skills.

3. The focus and delivery of assessment results need to change.

Parents reported a desire for assessors to focus on the strengths and optimal performance of the student rather than on the student's abilities relative to typically-developing children. They expressed a preference for reports written in descriptive language that avoids jargon. Parents also wanted recommendations that apply directly to classroom and learning goals, as well as information helpful in planning transitions for their child.

Conclusions: In summary, participants of the study recommended two priorities for the ACSESS Project assessment process:

- Individualize assessment to the specific child, taking into account the child's sphere of influence and different methods of trying to get the same information. Similarly, the assessment process must be child-driven—driven by the goals and wants for the specific child and her/his needs for the future.
- Additionally, many participants stressed the need for assessment results to be easily applicable to the daily functioning of the child.

What is the ACSESS Model Demonstration Project?

The ACSESS Model Demonstration Project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The project brings together researchers from the University of Michigan (UM), Washtenaw Intermediate School District, Western Michigan University, and United Cerebral Palsy Association of Michigan to develop a new model of adapted testing procedures. Led by UM Associate Professor, Seth Warschausky, Ph.D., these collaborators are linking advances in rehabilitation engineering and assistive technology to improvements in ability testing.

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If you would like to learn more about The ACSESS Project, visit the ACSESS Web site at www.med.umich.edu/pmr/acsess. You will find complete reports from the focus group and family interviews at the site. The site also offers an extensive list of related links and resources.



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Data Gathered Will Help Shape the Future of the ACSESS Project

Warschausky and the ACSESS team will use these ideas as they build the new Adapted Cognitive Assessment Laboratory (ACAL) at the University of Michigan Health System. During the next few years, qualified elementary and secondary school students with a disability will volunteer to help pilot the workings of the

lab. Results of customized capability testing will be given to students for immediate use in their schools. Their parents, teachers, physicians, and therapists will also be involved in preparations for the testing process.

To learn more about The ACSESS Project, contact Sunny Roller at (734) 936-7052, or visit the ACSESS Web site at www.med.umich.edu/pmr/acsess.

WEB LINKS

ACSESS Project Web Sites

ACSESS Project

www.med.umich.edu/pmr/acsess

United Cerebral Palsy of Michigan

www.ucpmichigan.org

National Special Education Web Sites with Assessment Information

National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO)

<http://education.umn.edu/nceo>

Federal Resource Center for Special Education (FRC)

www.dssc.org/frc

This site includes the publication *Special Education in an Era of School Reform: Accountability, Standards and Assessment* by Ronald Erickson, Ph.D.

<http://www.federalresourcecenter.org/frc/pubs/erickson.pdf>

Great Lakes Area Regional Resource Center (GLARRC)

www.glarrc.org

National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (NCAC)

<http://www.cast.org/ncac>

Enter "assessment" into the search site tool

Michigan Special Education Web Sites

Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education (CAUSE) Michigan's designated parent training and information center

www.causeonline.org

Center for Educational Networking (CEN)

www.cenmi.org

Michigan Department of Education

www.michigan.gov/mde

(Click on Administrators, then Special Education)

MI-Access (Michigan's Alternate Assessment Program)

www.michigan.gov/mi-access