



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
STATE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL
P.O. Box 500
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY 08625-0500

Chris Christie
Governor

Rochelle R. Hendricks
Acting Commissioner

November 9, 2010

Honorable Rochelle R. Hendricks, Acting Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Education
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0500

Dear Acting Commissioner Hendricks,

As members of New Jersey's State Special Education Advisory Council, we would like to share with you some of our thoughts related to the issue of measuring teacher progress. We recognize that this is an important component of current educational reform efforts, and would like to make sure that questions of how special education students will fit into this new system are addressed *as the system is being designed*, and not after it is put into place, when any substantive changes become much harder to institute.

The following are some of the concerns raised by SSEAC members:

1. How do we measure the progress of teachers who are responsible for educating those students with the most significant intellectual disabilities? Even with the best of teachers, these are students for whom the acquisition of academic knowledge may progress very differently than other students receiving special education services. In addition, there are those students who may struggle periodically simply to maintain the skills they have and who, while not measurably gaining new skills, would be at risk of regressing without a strong educational program in place. There are also disabilities for which regression is part of the disability, such as Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Rett Syndrome. We are in no way saying that teachers of special education students should not be held as accountable as teachers of general education students. However, there must be ways to measure the progress of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities so that the progress of their teachers can be assessed in ways that are accurate and fair.
2. There seems to exist an element of disconnect between the concept of group (class) assessments and the focus on individual need that is fundamental to the success of any IEP. How will the measurement of teacher progress take this focus on the individual student into account?
3. While of course New Jersey must adhere to federal regulations, SSEAC members would like to propose the idea of the state adding an evaluation of student progress in non-

academic areas (for example, those functional skills that are developed through community-based instruction). This would be in addition to, not instead of, any academic assessments, with the goal being a more comprehensive picture of the skills being taught and learned. In the same way that the Alternative Proficiency Assessment (APA) recognizes that students with the most significant intellectual disabilities need a different kind of evaluation process, so, too, must the assessment of their teachers' progress.

4. Unfortunately, research on evaluating teacher effectiveness of special education teachers working with students with the most severe disabilities is quite limited. However, there is a body of current research that examines what constitutes a highly effective teacher in general education vs. teachers of students with less severe disabilities (e.g. students classified as "learning disabled"). This research shows that there are distinct differences between the two, and any decisions about measuring teacher progress should take this research into account.

SSEAC members recognize and support the importance of assessing the quality of teaching in our schools and, again, are not in anyway advocating that students receiving special education services should be excluded from these efforts. Rather, we want to ensure that the processes put in place reflect the reality of *all* students, and that whatever system is developed, it does not have the unintended consequence of discouraging talented teachers from choosing to educate students with the most significant needs.

We appreciate your taking the time to consider these issues, and would be very happy to discuss them in more detail at your convenience. Additionally, a member of SSEAC would be happy to participate in discussions with the Governor's Task Force on the evaluation of teachers of special education students, including those with the most significant intellectual disabilities.

Sincerely,

Howard Lerner, Ed.D, Chairperson
New Jersey State Special Education Advisory Council

c Barbara Gantwerk