

PREPARATION FOR ACADEMIC ASSESSMENTS

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) established a tough standard for academic accountability in public schools. Educators have no choice but to address academic deficiencies identified by assessment instruments. Teaching-to-the-test is a reality if schools are to remain operable. Low performing schools (as measured in part by assessment scores) simply will not be permitted to continue operating in the pattern of status quo. Teachers are required to set up academic programs to prepare students to meet assessment standards through regular classrooms and/or individualized learning programs.

STATE STANDARDS AND PRACTICE TESTS

Each state department of education publishes academic standards over which students will be assessed. In most states, schools are allowed to use previous state assessment instruments as guides by which to prepare students for exams. The state standards and previous tests are usually available on the state department of education web site.

Independent publishers also provide sample tests and assessment-preparation books and software to assist teachers in preparing students for specific state exams. Experience demonstrates that “these tools are a must” if students are to prepare adequately for state assessments. Without them, students do not become sophisticated in test-taking skills, nor do students become familiar with the cognitive-based format of most test questions. School administrators should build into annual budgets the purchase of supplemental test-preparation materials. Teachers and students will benefit, and ultimately so will the school.

TEST PREP AND TRANSCRIPT CREDIT

Some teachers begin to address assessment standards early in the fall semester and then put textbook or computer-based lessons on hold for four to six weeks in the late winter or early spring to address assessment criteria through application of supplemental educational material designed by publishers for specific state standards. Student report card grades for the applicable four to six weeks period of assessment preparation are usually based on lessons which include textbooks and/or computer-based software and/or specialized assessment-preparation materials purchased by the school.

Students who know that their assessment-preparation efforts “count” toward report card grades are much more likely to “tune in” and learn the knowledge and skills over which students will be assessed. Teachers who simply add assessment preparation but do not count lessons for report card grades usually experience student resistance and “foot-dragging.” That, of course, is reflected in low assessment scores for students and the school.

TEST PREP AS PART OF COURSE CREDIT

Each fall when teachers plan specific lessons to be covered during the school year to satisfy requirements for transcript credit, assessment-prep material should be incorporated. Schools which implement individualized learning programs (paper and/or computer-based) should build assessment-prep materials into each student's academic contract (individual education plan). This requires a bit of strategic planning to make sure state standards are addressed (assessment items) and local school requirements are met for specific course content to be completed for transcript credit.

MERGING TEST-PREP WITH REGULAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

The biggest challenge to teachers is to merge assessment-prep materials (print and/or computerized) into the local classroom procedure: lecture-based or individualized self-paced programs. Some providers of supplemental test-prep materials claim that their material adequately prepares students. That may or may not be true for specific student populations. The assumption is that students function on/at grade level in reading/language proficiency. Students identified with reading/language deficiencies require concentrated assistance to build reading/language proficiency before attempting to pass state assessments in reading, writing, math and/or core content. Such students need to experience pull-out recovery programs designed to equip students with phonetic-based reading skills.

Standard classroom teachers usually accommodate test-prep by simply putting regular classroom materials and procedures temporarily on hold for four to six weeks while teachers merge (or wedge in) assessment prep materials provided by a supplemental provider. Weekly lesson plans simply include assessment prep goals, objectives, skills and knowledge.

For individualized learning programs, the merge (or wedge in) process can be accomplished through a combination of individualized lessons (paper and/or computer) and/or daily or weekly seminars in which a skilled teacher tutors students who need additional help beyond exposure to supplemental test-prep materials. Students who do not need additional help beyond the regular classroom experience and/or supplemental test-prep material should be allowed to proceed with individualized studies without interruption to attend seminars. ("If it isn't broken, don't fix it.") Students who score below the threshold on practice tests or "old" state exams should be assigned supplemental material and/or seminar participation only in the low performance academic areas identified on the practice test.

Students who need "serious help" should be lock-stepped in daily/weekly seminars for four to six weeks prior to the date of the state assessment exam. Instruction should be based on supplemental material specifically related to the students' academic skills and knowledge which are below the state threshold. The teacher should guide students daily through specific individualized lessons (print and/or computer). Daily lessons should be

graded by the teacher, who then will prepare a seminar the next day to address specific academic skills which students did not master the previous day. The teacher and students progress through the supplemental test-prep material as a group and stop to “seminar” only when students demonstrate lack of understanding of items which will be assessed on the state exam.

DAILY ACADEMIC GOALS AND SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Students enrolled in individualized learning programs do best when required to set and complete specific daily academic objectives (goals) in courses. Goals should be set in such a manner and quantity that assures satisfaction of state standards and completion of all lessons prescribed for transcript credit. Moreover, daily academic goals should be set according to the student’s performance on assessment pre-tests. Some students may need to direct only an hour per day for the four to six weeks of time set aside for assessment preparation. Other students may need to “drop everything else” and focus all energy and effort daily on preparation for the state assessment exam. In such a circumstance, all academic goals related to assessment-preparation should be incorporated in the student’s academic prescription for transcript credit for the course on which the student will be tested on the state exam. In some situations, students who perform low in reading/language skills may need to be enrolled in “Remedial or Reading Enhancement Courses for which transcript credit can be applied. Check with the state department of education list of acceptable local- or state- recognized high school courses.

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