Principles and Characteristics of Inclusive Assessment Systems in a Changing Assessment Landscape

NCEO Report 400

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Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) revisited and revised its 2008 *Principles* for inclusive assessment systems to respond to the many changes in the current educational assessment context. The revised *Principles* reflect a broader perspective that acknowledges that the *Principles* should apply not only for students with disabilities but also for English learners (ELs) and ELs with disabilities, as well as to all types of assessments in assessment systems.

As before, the *Principles* provide a vision of an inclusive system of assessments. They address national, state, district, school, and classroom K-12 academic content assessments and assessments of English language proficiency.

This report presents six core principles, each with a brief rationale, and specific characteristics that reflect each principle. The principles are:

Principle 1: Every policy and practice reflects the belief that *all* students must be included in state, district, and classroom assessments.

Principle 2: Accessible assessments are used to allow all students to show their knowledge and skills on the same challenging content.

Principle 3: High-quality decision making determines how students participate in assessments.

Principle 4: Implementation fidelity ensures fair and valid assessment results.

Principle 5: Public reporting content and formats include the assessment results of all students.

Principle 6: Continuous improvement, monitoring, and training ensure the quality of the overall system.

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Need for Revised *Principles*

Educational reform continues to evolve in focus, with greater emphasis now than ever before placed on serving all students on their pathway to college and careers and 21st century skills. The renewed emphasis on **all** students includes students with disabilities, English learners (ELs), and ELs with disabilities, as well as other groups targeted for attention (including traditionally underserved students such as minority and low income students, students in juvenile detention and mental health facilities, and other students who are struggling in school). Rapid technological changes in instruction and assessment offer expanded opportunities for new approaches to providing access to all students in the nation's classrooms. The push to include all students comes at the same time as new and more rigorous, internationally competitive standards are being implemented, and greater accountability is required of administrators and educators who work within schools, of special education systems (through results-based accountability), and of students themselves.

Interim, benchmark, and other non-summative assessments now appear on the landscape with much greater frequency. Computer adaptive assessments sometimes are replacing traditional summative assessments. And, more is being asked of the assessments that are used. For example, assessments are being used to calculate growth of students rather than just the status of their performance. States are developing new technology-based assessments, creating a much more complex focus on accessibility. So too has the focus on assessment participation of all students become more complex. Increasingly, discontent is growing among parents, educators, and other stakeholders about too much testing and the desire to opt their children out of testing.

This document is the fourth in a series of *Principles* documents produced by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). Similar to previous documents, it is designed to identify the principles and characteristics of inclusive assessment systems. NCEO's previous principles documents were:

- *A principled approach to accountability assessments for students with disabilities* (Synthesis Report 70, December 2008)

- *Principles and characteristics of inclusive assessment and accountability systems* (Synthesis Report 40, November 2001)

- *Assessment guidelines that maximize the participation of students with disabilities in large-scale assessments: Characteristics and considerations* (Synthesis Report 25, October 1996)

An update was deemed needed at this time because of the dramatically changing landscape surrounding educational assessments over the past several years. This document identifies principles of an inclusive assessment system within the current educational context. Using this document,

states, districts, schools, and other stakeholders can develop and implement new assessments, or review and adjust their current assessments, in ways that ensure the inclusion of all students, especially students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities.

The six principles in this document are intended to offer a vision of an inclusive assessment system that aligns with the new educational context of college and career standards, greater use of technology, new uses of assessments, and new approaches to developing assessments. Each principle is further described through a set of characteristics that provide additional information on implementation and implications.

The six principles were developed to address students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities. Nevertheless, we believe that these principles also inform assessment development, assessment revisions, and decision-making processes for students who do not have disabilities or are not ELs.

A foundational premise of this document is the belief that students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities should achieve the same academic outcomes and be held to the same standards as their peers. It is grounded in the belief that assessments can be designed, implemented, evaluated, and improved over time to ensure that they support reliable and valid interpretations for all students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities. Although effective instruction and high-quality professional development are important components of this process, the purpose of this document is to focus on assessments.

The report addresses the application of the principles to national, state, district, school, and classroom K-12 academic content and language proficiency assessment systems. These are assessments of reading/English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and any other academic content that states or districts might assess. The principles also apply to assessments used to screen for and to determine the English language proficiency of ELs and ELs with disabilities.

The principles described in this document address standards-based assessments administered in classrooms, schools, districts, and states. The six principles described in the document also apply to K-12 academic and language assessments in groups of states with common assessments. Although the term "states" is used throughout this report, it applies to individual states, territories, districts, schools, and classrooms.

The six principles are:

Principle 1. Every policy and practice reflects the belief that all students must be included in state, district, and classroom assessments.

Principle 2. Accessible assessments are used to allow all students to show their knowledge and skills on the same challenging content.

Principle 3. High-quality decision making determines how students participate in assessments.

Principle 4. Implementation fidelity ensures fair and valid assessment results.

Principle 5. Public reporting content and formats include the assessment results of all students.

Principle 6. Continuous improvement, monitoring, and training ensure the quality of the overall system.

Figure 1 summarizes the six principles.

Figure 1. Principles for Including Students with Disabilities, ELs, and ELs with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments
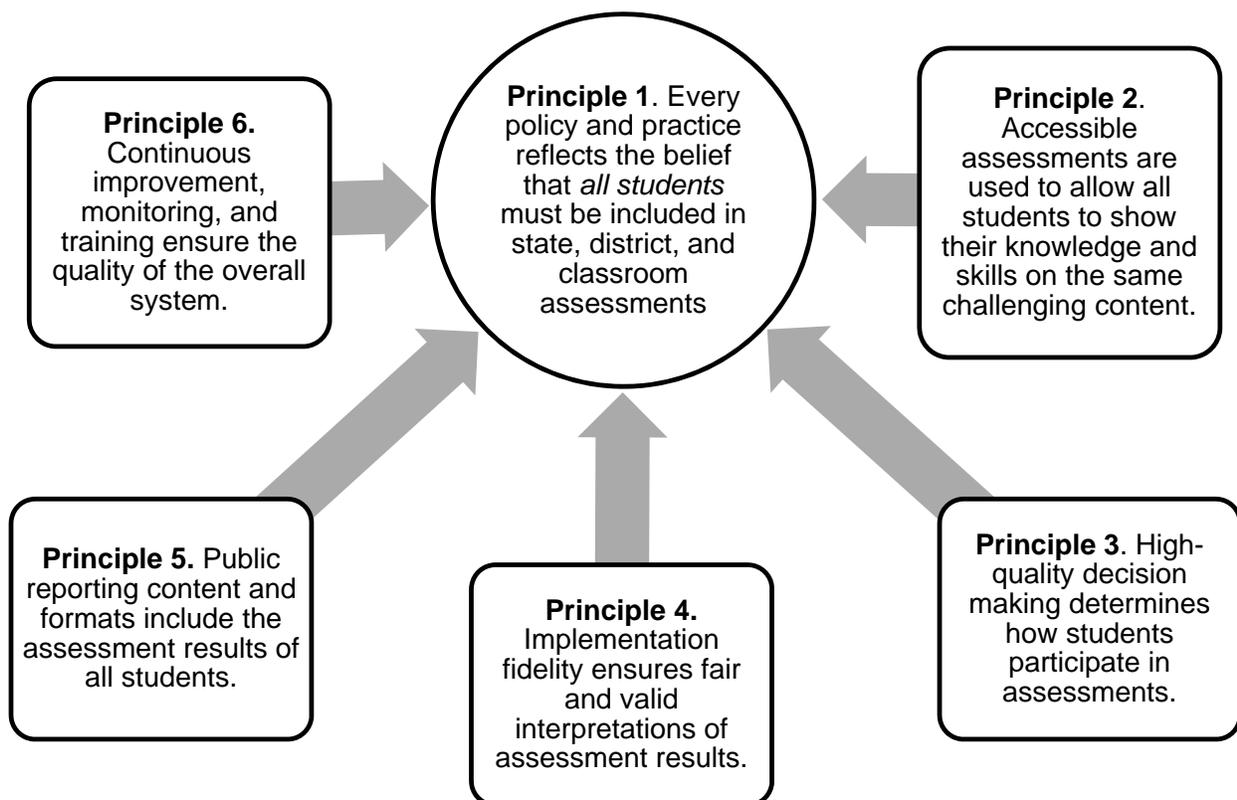
Each of the principles is described in this report, along with *characteristics* that support each principle.

Principle 1

Principle 1. Every policy and practice reflects the belief that all students must be included in state, district, and classroom assessments.

This principle addresses the core belief system that underlies inclusive assessment systems. With this belief system in place, every question that arises or decision to be made goes back to "what does it mean for how each and every student counts in our system?" and "what are the possible intended and unintended consequences for each and every student in our system?" Each and every student includes those students who have disabilities of all types and students who are developing their English proficiency, as well as all other students. Four characteristics support Principle 1 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Principle 1 and its Characteristics

> **Principle 1. Every policy and practice reflects the belief that all students must be included in state, district, and classroom assessments.**
>
> **Characteristic 1.1.** All students are included in every aspect of a comprehensive assessment system, including participation in the assessments, the reporting of data, the use of data for various purposes, and the improvement strategies that grow out of data reviews.
>
> **Characteristic 1.2.** The validity of the results from a comprehensive assessment system is ensured through technically defensible assessments that address the implications of varied student learning characteristics and needs.
>
> **Characteristic 1.3.** Stakeholders with expertise and experience in varied student learning characteristics, needs, and improvement strategies collaborate on all aspects of the assessment system to ensure that all students can show what they know and can do.
>
> **Characteristic 1.4.** Stakeholders collaborate to create systems where there is broad support throughout the system for inclusion of all students in the state's school reform efforts linked to assessments.

Characteristic 1.1. *All students are included in every aspect of a comprehensive assessment system, including participation in the assessments, the reporting of data, the use of data for various purposes, and the improvement strategies that grow out of data reviews.*

All aspects of a comprehensive assessment system should include each and every student, be they a student with disabilities, an EL, or an EL with disabilities. Every student is represented in one way or another in the assessment system, the reporting system, the curriculum and instruction system, the accountability system, and the school improvement process.

This characteristic reinforces the need to provide concrete methods of linking performance

data reports for all students to the classroom and school improvement processes, as well as to the accountability processes defined at the state and district levels. The state and district should provide tools to allow school improvement teams to disaggregate performance data to answer specific questions about performance of groups of students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities. Improvement plans should recognize the needs of these students as well as provide improvement strategies that will have an impact on their performance and that of all students. Inclusive systems help to ensure that all students benefit from such strategies and supports.

Characteristic 1.2. *The validity of the results from a comprehensive assessment system is ensured through technically defensible assessments that address the implications of varied student learning characteristics and needs.*

This characteristic ensures that assessment design processes build not only on a clear definition of the construct being measured, but also on an understanding of how all students learn and show what they know and can do. It requires careful consideration of varied student learning characteristics in the design of assessment options that yield defensible inferences about the learning of all students regardless of their unique characteristics or needs. This view may require rethinking overall assessment design for fully accessible assessments and the development of improved accessibility and accommodation policies and alternate assessment options, all in light of the comprehensive assessment system.

When innovative methods of assessment for unique learners are considered, care is taken in the application of traditional measurement conventions. When traditional measurement conventions do not match the assessment well, analogous and rigorous technical strategies are implemented to ensure the validity of the assessment results.

Characteristic 1.3. *Stakeholders with expertise and experience in varied student learning characteristics, needs, and improvement strategies collaborate on all aspects of the assessment system to ensure that all students can show what they know and can do.*

Inclusive assessment systems start before the development of the instruments and the identification of consequences. Indeed, the very identification of standards and how they will be measured is part of the picture of fully inclusive systems. Stakeholder groups need to review all aspects of development for inclusiveness and accessibility, from the development of the standards, to the systematic alignment of the curriculum to the standards and standards-based instruction. They also need to review the alignment of the assessment system to desired results. That way all aspects of the educational system are aligned for every student.

Characteristic 1.4. *Stakeholders collaborate to create systems where there is broad support throughout the system for inclusion of all students in the state's school reform efforts linked to assessments.*

All students can be successful if there is a commitment to build the capacity for success in each school and each classroom in the state. States that are demonstrating best practices throughout their reform system have unified and committed understanding and leadership at all levels. This includes not only within the state department, but also in the governor's office, the state legislature, among professional groups, advocates for groups of students, parents, business leaders, civil right groups, the chamber of commerce, and many others. If that commitment is not present, states provide information to leaders and other stakeholders that will help to achieve that commitment.

Principle 2

Principle 2. Accessible assessments are used to allow all students to show their knowledge and skills on the same challenging content.

Assessment systems are designed and developed in ways that allow all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on the content and achievement standards for their enrolled grade. This principle indicates that all students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities participate in an assessment system that is appropriately designed and developed to measure enrolled grade-level content, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability or their needs related to English language proficiency. Aspects of the system include effective practices in the creation of accessible assessments, including alignment to state standards, flexible approaches to measuring intended constructs, application of universal design principles, and use of appropriate accessibility features and accommodations that do not invalidate assessment constructs. It also includes clear statements of when these cannot be accomplished, and the implications of that for students likely to be affected. These accessibility aspects should be reflected in classroom and district assessments, as well as in general, alternate, English language proficiency (ELP), and alternate ELP assessments. Four characteristics support Principle 2 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Principle 2 and its Characteristics

> **Principle 2. Accessible assessments are used to allow all students to show their knowledge and skills on the same challenging content.**
>
> **Characteristic 2.1.** All students in all settings who receive special education services, EL services, or both, are included in their enrolled grade-level assessments in some way (e.g., in general, ELP, or alternate assessment), regardless of the nature of disability, needs related to English language proficiency, or other special needs.
>
> **Characteristic 2.2.** All assessments are designed from the beginning with a focus on accessibility for all students who will participate in the assessment.
>
> **Characteristic 2.3.** Accessibility and accommodations policies are informed by the defined construct to be measured, available research findings, and the purpose of the assessment.
>
> **Characteristic 2.4.** Alternate assessments (including alternate content assessments and alternate ELP assessments) are used to assess the knowledge and skills of students whose disabilities are a barrier to demonstrating knowledge and skills in general assessments with or without allowable accessibility features and accommodations.

Characteristic 2.1. *All students in all settings who receive special education services, EL services, or both, are included in their enrolled grade-level assessments in some way (e.g., in general, ELP, or alternate assessment), regardless of the nature of disability, needs related to English language proficiency, or other special needs.*

The definition of "all students" includes every student who receives educational services in

any setting. This includes students in traditional public school placements, and students who change schools or placements, as well as all students receiving federally-funded educational services in non-traditional settings such as students in home schools, private schools, mental health facilities, charter schools, state-operated programs in the juvenile justice system, or any other setting where these educational services are provided, with no exceptions because of the nature of disability, English development needs, or specialized services and supports required.

Characteristic 2.2. *All assessments are designed from the beginning with a focus on accessibility for all students who will participate in the assessment.*

Creating an accessible assessment involves knowledge of needs of the full range of students to be tested along with careful scrutiny of intended constructs and design of assessments. Promising practice for accessible assessments includes reviewing assessments for alignment to standards and universal design elements, disaggregating assessment results at the whole-test and item level, and precisely defining constructs measured on assessments.

Accessible assessments are reviewed for the extent to which they:

* Adhere to universal design elements

* Use data-based decision making for the inclusion of specific items (including data from quantitative and qualitative studies on the impact of items on particular populations)

* Describe clearly the intended constructs of items, as well as "built in" accessibility features and accommodations students may use (such as defining which features, for example, calculators, are allowed for all students)

Transparency about constructs that reflect desired student knowledge allows for clear policy and practice about what types of technology, human assistance, or other flexible approaches to assessment will and will not affect the results and the validity of the interpretations based on the assessment results.

Characteristic 2.3. *Accessibility and accommodations policies are informed by the defined construct to be measured, available research findings, and the purpose of the assessment.*

States set policies that indicate which changes in testing materials or procedures can be used during state assessments, under which conditions, and whether the use of the accessibility features and accommodations might have implications for scoring or aggregation of scores. These may change by student characteristic but should be grounded in individualized approaches with input from all informed education stakeholders, including students themselves when appropriate.

For example, ELs with disabilities have access to allowable accessibility features and accom-

modations for both ELs and students with disabilities. It is the responsibility of state leaders to gather stakeholders and technical advisors to review the purpose of the assessment and the constructs to be measured, along with available research findings to determine which accessibility features and accommodations allow for valid inferences.

The same approach applies to classroom assessments. The teacher needs to be clear on the content the classroom assessment is designed to measure (whether an off-the-shelf assessment or an assessment developed by the teacher) and the purpose of administering the assessment. In addition, for classroom assessments, the teacher must weigh the need to measure skills that are being developed to scaffold to the grade-level content and the need to measure grade-level content knowledge and skills. It is also important for teachers to fade the use of accessibility features and accommodations on occasion as a way to check on the student's continued need for them as the student progresses toward grade-level content.

Characteristic 2.4. *Alternate assessments (including alternate content assessments and alternate ELP assessments) are used to assess the knowledge and skills of students whose disabilities are a barrier to demonstrating knowledge and skills in general assessments with or without allowable accessibility features and accommodations.*

A small number of students require an alternate assessment to the general content assessment or ELP assessment to demonstrate achievement. Data-based strategies are used to determine who the students are who cannot show what they know on the general content assessment or general ELP assessment, why that is the case, and how their instructional opportunities influence assessment decisions. IEP teams decide whether students with disabilities or ELs with disabilities should take an alternate assessment on a case-by-case basis. IEP teams for ELs with disabilities include an educator with expertise in second language acquisition.

Principle 3

Principle 3. High-quality decision making determines how students participate in assessments.

Decisions about participation and accommodation of students in the assessment system are based on knowledge of individual student characteristics and needs, including their English proficiency, combined with knowledge of the goals and purposes of testing. This principle reflects the need for thoughtful decisions about the ways in which (not whether) each student participates in the assessment system, whether in the general assessment with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment. An underlying assumption is the importance of high expectations while ensuring that each student can show what he or she knows and is able to do. Participation decisions for students with disabilities are made by the IEP team. Similarly, those making decisions for students with 504 accommodation plans or English learners consider the implications of their decisions about how these students participate in assessments. Established processes ensure that decision makers have access to training and knowledge needed to make appropriate decisions for these students, regardless of the nature or severity of disability or their English proficiency. Four characteristics support Principle 3 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Principle 3 and its Characteristics

Principle 3. High-quality decision making determines how students participate in assessments.

Characteristic 3.1. Decisions about the way in which students participate in assessment systems are based on how the individual student shows knowledge and skills.

Characteristic 3.2. Accessible assessments and accommodations are available to all students, and decisions about their use are based on an individual student's characteristics, needs, and experiences in conjunction with what the assessment is designed to measure.

Characteristic 3.3. Clear policies, guidelines, procedures, and training on assessment participation decision making are provided for all decision-making partners.

Characteristic 3.4. The IEP team or another decision-making team annually reviews and documents assessment participation and accessibility/accommodation decisions on an individual student basis for each assessment.

Characteristic 3.1. *Decisions about the way in which students participate in assessment systems are based on how the individual student shows knowledge and skills.*

Historically, students with disabilities, including ELs with disabilities, were excluded from assessments. That is no longer the case, with all students included in all components of assessment systems. As they participate in assessments, it may be tempting to try to protect students, keep

them in easy levels of instruction and assessment, or let low expectations guide decisions. These temptations are avoided in a high-quality inclusive assessment system. Educators recognize that their students will benefit from being encouraged to do more than before, and that assessments are one opportunity to do so.

Participation guidelines with decision-making criteria are developed to determine the ways in which individual students participate in the assessment system in order to show what they know and can do. The needs of individual students and the purpose of the assessment are considered when decisions are made.

Characteristic 3.2. *Accessible assessments and accommodations are available to all students, and decisions about their use are based on an individual student's characteristics, needs, and experiences in conjunction with what the assessment is designed to measure.*

All students have strengths and needs that result in the different ways they access instruction and assessment. The construct being assessed and the student's needs are the major determinants of whether accessibility features and accommodations are used with any student (with or without identified disabilities or English language needs), both for instruction and assessment. Reasonable decisions are made about accessibility features and accommodations that are used for instruction but may not be appropriate for assessments because they violate the construct being measured. In some cases, there may be accessibility features and accommodations used during assessment that may differ from use during instruction. For example, a student may use an online calculator during the assessment, but use a hand-held calculator during daily classroom instructional activities.

Characteristic 3.3. *Clear policies, guidelines, procedures, and training on assessment participation decision making are provided for all decision-making partners.*

Participation criteria have been developed to assist in making decisions about which assessments a student should take. These criteria are based on analyses of the characteristics of students and the measurement goals of each assessment. Policies, guidelines, and procedures for assessment participation decision making are developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, are written in plain language that communicates clearly, and are provided to all partners in the decision-making process (IEP teams, 504 teams, language development services partners, or any other stakeholders who contribute to these decisions for any student). There is clear articulation of specific issues that apply to classroom assessment and those that apply to large-scale assessment, with careful delineation of similarities and differences, and implications of specific decisions for the student and for the school. All of these policies, guidelines, and procedures reflect a commitment that choices being made for each student must promote both access to and high achievement in the student's enrolled grade level, and in a curriculum based on grade (or course-level) content and achievement standards.

These materials are supported by training designed to meet the needs of all partners, and emphasize the linkage of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Options for training are flexible and varied to allow all partners—parents, teachers, related service providers, and students as appropriate—to choose formats and schedules that meet the student's needs.

Characteristic 3.4. *The IEP team or another decision-making team annually reviews and documents assessment participation and accessibility/accommodation decisions on an individual student basis for each assessment.*

Decisions about participation in one particular state or district assessment may be different from decisions about participation for another assessment that has a different purpose or different format. The membership of every decision-making team includes people who know the student and are in the best position to understand the issues that affect assessment for that student. Parents and the student, when appropriate, are essential members of the team. Additionally, there may be other people not typically on the student's educational team who have insight into the student's needs; they should be consulted about decisions as well. These people may include the student (if the student is not already participating on the team), paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, caretakers, and others.

Decision-making teams make participation decisions each year, or more frequently if needed, such as when a new assessment is introduced. A rationale is provided for their decisions. Documentation of these decisions provides an important record of the individual student's needs, strengths, and progress. These decisions are reviewed and changed as appropriate with the development of each annual IEP to reflect changing student needs and skills, and to reflect changes in the assessment system. Although IEPs and other educational plans often are developed all year on a schedule that may not coincide with planning for state and district assessments, decisions are made at the meeting that most closely precedes each assessment so that the accommodations and other accessibility features a student is using in the classroom are reflected on the IEP and are available for testing.

Principle 4

Principle 4. Implementation fidelity ensures fair and valid interpretations of assessment results.

This principle recognizes that fair and valid interpretations of assessment results depend on the assessment being implemented as intended. This applies to all assessments, whether they are classroom, formative, interim/benchmark, or summative assessments. For implementation fidelity to be realized, all educators and other professionals associated with the assessment must receive appropriate training. Students must participate in the appropriate assessment, consistent with the participation criteria for each assessment. Further, when students participate, they must receive the accessibility features and accommodations that have been designated for them by an informed team or adult. Finally, when humans are involved in the administration of the assessment or the provision of accessibility features or accommodations, they must do so in an ethical and standardized manner so that the results obtained accurately reflect the student's knowledge and skills. Four characteristics support Principle 4 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Principle 4 and its Characteristics

Principle 4. Implementation fidelity ensures fair and valid assessment results.

Characteristic 4.1. Assessment administrators have been trained in policies and procedures for administering assessments to all students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities.

Characteristic 4.2. Students take the assessment that they are supposed to take.

Characteristic 4.3. Students receive the accessibility features and accommodations that are indicated for them.

Characteristic 4.4. Humans who provide accessibility features or accommodations do not compromise the validity of assessment results and interpretations based on them.

Characteristic 4.1. *Assessment administrators have been trained in policies and procedures for administering assessments to all students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities.*

Assessment administrators play a key role in ensuring that all students have the accessibility features and accommodations they need on an assessment. Adherence to the policies and procedures for administering assessments to students is essential to obtaining valid results from assessments, regardless of whether the assessment is presented via computer, tablet, or other device, or in a paper/pencil format. This is especially the case for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities, who may require additional support in taking an assessment.

Assessment administrators should be aware of the kinds of accessibility features available, which students can use the various kinds of accessibility features, and for what parts of the assessment the features can and cannot be used. Providing training to assessment administrators in the assessment administration policies and procedures will help confirm that all students are given the assessment in a fair and equitable manner.

Characteristic 4.2. *Students take the assessment that they are supposed to take.*

Ensuring that students take the assessments they are supposed to take requires diligent decision making by trained professionals. It also requires ongoing research and audits, and continued careful checking on the characteristics of those students participating in each assessment to see whether students are taking the assessments they should take or whether there is a need for additional training for decision makers.

Characteristic 4.3. *Students receive the accessibility features and accommodations that are indicated for them.*

Making decisions about accessibility features and accommodations is just one step in the process. It is also important that students receive the accessibility features and accommodations (including the use of assistive technology) that have been indicated for them whenever a test is administered to them. A good practice is to make sure that students are aware of the accessibility features and accommodations they need. Students should advocate for themselves if these access features are not provided. In addition, states and consortia should develop monitoring tools to ensure that the accessibility features and accommodations needed by an individual student are provided for the student to use during testing. Information about how students used accessibility features and accommodations should also be collected because this information can inform decision-making teams about the student's future use of these features or accommodations.

Characteristic 4.4. *Humans who provide accessibility features or accommodations do not compromise the validity of assessment results and interpretations based on them.*

There are many ways in which the validity of assessment results and interpretations based on them can be compromised. When humans are involved in administering assessments, there is a risk that results and interpretations can be compromised, especially when those humans are responsible for providing the accessibility features or accommodations a student might need. These may arise from unintended security breaches or intentional desires to improve a student's performance. It is the ethical responsibility of each human involved in the provision of accessibility features or accommodations to ensure that their provision meets requirements of the assessment. This may mean that additional training is needed in the provision of these accessibility features or accommodations. It also may mean that there need to be occasional audits of assessment administrations in which a human is providing accessibility features or accommodations.

Principle 5. Public reporting content and formats include the assessment results of all students.

The philosophy underlying this principle is that every student counts and in a well-functioning system, the system itself is held accountable for every student. This philosophy is reflected through the inclusion of student results in public reports. Regardless of how all students are assessed—with or without accessibility features or accommodations, with a native language version, or in an alternate assessment—their results are reported. Further, results are clearly described, so it is evident whether data from different assessments have been merged (e.g., general and alternate assessments) or student groups have been combined. If some students' results are not reported due to technical adequacy issues (for example, use of inappropriate accommodations, improper handling of tests, prolonged student absence), all students' participation is still accounted for in the reporting system.

A well-functioning system is flexible and allows for further disaggregation so that results for groups of students with multiple identifiers, such as ELs with disabilities, are clearly reported. Although the focus here is on public reporting, it is assumed that these characteristics apply as well to reporting that occurs internally within a state or district, and certainly apply to required reporting of districts to states, and of states to the federal government. Seven characteristics support Principle 5 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Principle 5 and its Characteristics

Principle 5. Public reporting content and formats include the assessment results of all students.
Characteristic 5.1. All students in all placement settings who receive educational services, regardless of severity of disability or level of English language proficiency, are accounted for in the reporting system.
Characteristic 5.2. The number and percentage of students with disabilities assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students without disabilities.
Characteristic 5.3. The number and percentage of ELs who are assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students who are not ELs.
Characteristic 5.4. The number and percentage of ELs with disabilities who are assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students who are not EL with disabilities.

Table 5. Principle 5 and its Characteristics (continued)

> **Characteristic 5.5.** The number and percentage of students not assessed or whose results cannot be aggregated are revealed in public reports, and explanations are given.
>
> **Characteristic 5.6.** Results from assessments administered in ways that raise policy questions are reported separately so that they can be publicly examined and discussed, as well as aggregated with other results.
>
> **Characteristic 5.7.** Reports are provided to educators, parents, students, policymakers, community members, the media, and other stakeholders with a clear explanation of results and implications.

Characteristic 5.1. *All students in all placement settings who receive educational services, regardless of severity of disability or level of English language proficiency, are accounted for in the reporting system.*

Every student is counted. The basis for the counting of students is student enrollment. For students who are receiving special education services, the child count at a time closest to the time the assessment is administered typically is the basis for the count of all students. For students who are ELs, the parameters defining who counts as an EL should be clearly outlined. For example, if a state includes students who are former ELs in its counts, it also separates these out from active ELs so that their performance is transparent. ELs with disabilities should be reported in public counts whenever possible.

"All students" includes not only students in traditional public school placements, but also students who change schools or placements. All students who receive federally funded educational services in non-traditional settings are included and reported as well. These students include those in home schools, private schools, charter schools, state-operated programs, mental health facilities, and in the juvenile justice system.

Counting every student regardless of the severity of disability or English language proficiency level, and ensuring that each student's progress is included, is fundamental to the success of standards-based reform. This characteristic also means that every student counts, even if the student received an assessment result that could not be aggregated or was exempted by a parent from participating in an assessment. These students still are part of the population and must count in the denominator when percentages of students assessed are calculated and reported.

Characteristic 5.2. *The number and percentage of students with disabilities assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students without disabilities.*

The reporting of the number and percentage of students assessed and not assessed, and the reporting of data on performance, by type of assessment, are provided as often as those data

are reported for students without disabilities. All of these pieces of information are arranged in ways that are similar to those used for students without disabilities, and are provided as often as they are for students without disabilities. The goal is to ensure that public reporting is transparent and accessible for students with disabilities, just as much as it is for other students. In this way, those reading public reports will better understand that students with disabilities are not a group whose information and results are being hidden, but rather the system is checking on how these students are faring so that they are not overlooked.

Characteristic 5.3. *The number and percentage of ELs who are assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students who are not ELs.*

The reporting of the number and percentage of ELs assessed and not assessed, and the reporting of data on performance, by type of assessment, are provided as often as those data are reported for students who are not ELs. This process includes specific reports of how many ELs participated (and did not participate) and their performance. All of these pieces of information are arranged in ways that are similar to those used for students who are not categorized as EL, and are provided as often as they are for all other student categories. The goal is to ensure that public reporting is transparent and accessible for ELs, just as much as it is for other students. In this way, those reading public reports will better understand that ELs are not a group whose information and results are being hidden, but rather the system is checking on how these students are faring so that they are not overlooked as they were in the past.

Characteristic 5.4. *The number and percentage of ELs with disabilities who are assessed and their aggregatable results are reported near to, as often as, and in ways similar to the reporting for students who are not EL with disabilities.*

The reporting of the number and percentage of ELs with disabilities assessed and not assessed, and the reporting of data on performance, by type of assessment, are provided as often as those data are reported for student groups. Similar to students with disabilities and ELs, this process includes specific reports of participation (and nonparticipation) and performance. The information should be categorized in the same way as it is for other student groups so as to attain a transparent and accessible public reporting process. In this way, those reading public reports will better understand that ELs with disabilities are not a group whose information and results are being hidden, but rather the system is checking on how these students are faring so that they are not overlooked as they were in the past.

Characteristic 5.5. *The number and percentage of students not assessed or whose results cannot be aggregated are revealed in public reports, and explanations are given.*

At a minimum, every student who is not actually assessed in the assessment system is detect-

able when results are reported. Typically, this identification is done by reporting the number of students not participating in the assessment system. Even if a state or district factors in students who do not take the assessment into the reported results (e.g., by giving them a zero), the number of students excluded from participation is still reported. In addition, the reasons for exclusion are reported for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities (e.g., parent request, absenteeism, cheating, testing procedure errors).

This characteristic does not preclude appropriate respect for confidentiality of individuals. For example, if reporting information on reasons for exclusion at the school level violates confidentiality, then the information is reported at the district level. If confidentiality is violated because a state is reporting information by disability category, then the information on reasons for exclusion is reported only at the subgroup level (rather than by disability category). Regardless of where the confidentiality issue arises—if one does—there are clear indications of where the information on students not assessed, or whose results cannot be aggregated, is revealed in public reports. Further, explanations are given of the reasons for why results cannot be reported.

Characteristic 5.6. *Results from assessments administered in ways that raise policy questions are reported separately so that they can be publicly examined and discussed, as well as aggregated with other results.*

When there are questions about a policy, such as when an accommodation is allowed even though its effects on the validity of results have not been determined, the results of the use of the accommodation are as transparent as possible. Additionally, data need to be reported in ways that inform the policy discussion, such as reporting the number and percentage of students using accessibility features and accommodations by group, and the specific features and accommodations used most frequently. Policy decisions about accessibility and accommodations or other administration considerations often must be made when the research literature is mixed in its evidence. Thus, policy decisions are made even though questions may remain.

Characteristic 5.7. *Reports are provided to educators, parents, students, policymakers, community members, the media, and other stakeholders with a clear explanation of results and implications.*

State and district staff members have a responsibility to ensure that data are used in ways that are consistent with the purpose of each assessment. Reports are readily available and accessible, and include cautions about misinterpretation of data. Particular care is taken to ensure that reports are available and accessible to linguistically- and culturally-diverse parents/guardians. This task entails making information available in hard copy and a variety of formats and languages. States and districts provide assistance interpreting the results. If tests are designed to yield the most accurate data at the classroom or school level, all student level reports will

specify the necessity of using data from multiple sources (e.g., from classroom assessments or specific diagnostic tools) for individual students.

Consideration is given to having community information sessions or special outreach to the media to help people use the reports responsibly. This process may be especially important when there are new approaches to data. For example, including assessment data for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities in growth models for accountability may be more difficult, in part because of their relatively high mobility rates. Clear reporting of these issues, including when students are lost to inclusion in the data reports because of mobility, and the characteristics of those students who are dropped, is part of public reporting.

Finally, for students in placements other than the local school, students are included in reports that will most directly affect the students' education—where their performance counts, and where public reporting can make a difference. For example, if a student with a disability is being served in a specialized setting outside of his or her home district (or school), the progress of that student is reported in the context where accountability and concern for that student most directly lie, in other words, in the student's home school (the school that the student would have attended if he or she did not have a disability). It is also a sound practice to report results for the specialized setting, including, for example, correctional institutions, in addition to the home school.

Principle 6

Principle 6. Continuous improvement, monitoring, and training ensure the quality of the overall system.

The value of the assessment system is documented and strengthened over time through continuous monitoring, training, and adjustments in all aspects of the assessment and accountability system. This principle addresses the need to base inclusive assessment practices on current and emerging research and best practice, with continuous improvement of practices as research-based understanding evolves. Because society is expecting more of assessments and often requiring multiple uses of test results, we must invest time and thought into improving them. It requires addressing potential threats to validity from the design of the assessment, development of participation guidelines and training, administration procedures, and monitoring of implementation practices.

By working together on improvement of inclusive large-scale assessments for system accountability, stakeholders can sustain commitment to keeping the standards high and keeping the focus on all students being successful. Ongoing training of decision-making team members and other key partners is an essential component of this effort. Four characteristics support Principle 6 (see Table 6).

Table 6. Principle 6 and its Characteristics

> **Principle 6. Continuous improvement, monitoring, and training ensure the quality of the overall system.**
>
> **Characteristic 6.1.** The quality, implementation, and consequences of student participation decisions are monitored and analyzed, and the data are used to evaluate and improve the quality of the assessment process at the school, district, and state levels.
>
> **Characteristic 6.2.** States and districts provide training to multiple stakeholders to improve their assessment literacy, which in turn improves decisions about the use of available assessment options.
>
> **Characteristic 6.3.** The use that is made of reports on assessment results and the impact that accountability decisions have on educational processes and student learning are monitored to determine the adjustments needed to improve the accountability system.
>
> **Characteristic 6.4.** The quality of assessment features is continuously evaluated and improved by applying information gathered about the use and impact of assessment results and by responding to developments in the field of measurement.

Characteristic 6.1. *The quality, implementation, and consequences of student participation decisions are monitored and analyzed, and the data are used to evaluate and improve the quality of the assessment process at the school, district, and state levels.*

Identifying methods to use at the school level to check on decision-making patterns, and providing feedback to decision-making teams on appropriateness of decisions, improves the quality of assessment data in the long term. Likewise, if teams make good participation, accessibility and accommodations, and alternate assessment decisions, but the information is poorly documented, not communicated to instructional settings or to assessment personnel, the validity of the assessment results may be affected. By monitoring these decisions, and ensuring the decisions are implemented appropriately, schools, districts, and states ensure the best possible measurement of actual student progress toward standards.

The development of test administration procedures and forms that capture data on student characteristics and use of accessibility features and accommodations for all or parts of the test yield essential data in determining the validity of the test results for these students specifically, and contribute to the research base on effects of accessibility features and accommodations on the validity of the interpretations from results more generally. Understanding the characteristics of students who participate in alternate assessment options assists in validation of the assessment approach for the participants, as a group and as individuals, and in identification of a need for adjustment of the approach. For states and districts, this understanding also provides a profile of patterns of decision making and use of participation options and leads to systematic intervention with schools where unusual patterns of participation are occurring.

In developing systems, the view of consequences often depends on the perspective of the viewer. For that reason, the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of consequences require stakeholder involvement to determine which consequences are intended or unintended, and which are positive or negative. A systematic process for consequential validity studies is built into state procedures. This provides support for changes in the system as they are needed.

Characteristic 6.2. *States and districts provide training to multiple stakeholders to improve their assessment literacy, which in turn improves decisions about the use of available assessment options.*

All decision-making teams and other key personnel have access to ongoing training and technical assistance. State departments of education make connections, provide leadership and incentives, develop written materials, and present introductory workshops, but day-to-day support is built into a district's comprehensive system of professional development. In addition, states and districts partner with institutions of higher learning to rethink basic teacher competency and licensure requirements in light of the new emphasis on measuring the progress of all students

toward high standards. Parent training organizations and other advocacy groups are essential partners in reaching parents and the students themselves.

Increasing the assessment literacy of all decision-making team members improves the quality of the assessment decisions made by each team. Increased assessment literacy, in turn, improves how well assessments measure progress toward standards for all students, regardless of how they participate (with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment). Ultimately, the validity of the assessment results for use in reporting and system accountability rests on these individual student participation decisions.

Characteristic 6.3. *The use that is made of reports on assessment results and the impact that accountability decisions have on educational processes and student learning are monitored to determine the adjustments needed to improve the accountability system.*

Information is gathered from districts and schools indicating how reports have been used and what actions have been taken in response to reports. Such information is reviewed when new test results are obtained and it is related to the performance of students with disabilities. Evaluations of educators' responses to the accountability reports and decisions and their impact on student learning are used to determine the need for additional staff development or supports, or other changes in the accountability system, to continue improving student learning.

Characteristic 6.4. *The quality of assessment features is continuously evaluated and improved by applying information gathered about the use and impact of assessment results and by responding to developments in the field of measurement.*

States monitor how schools implement assessments and how they use and respond to assessment results to see where assessment practices and tools need to be improved. States also remain informed about federal requirements, guidance, and options. States seek solutions to improving assessment tools and practices by working with other states and with experts in the fields of assessment, curriculum and instruction, and special populations.

States help districts understand the data being collected through district and state level assessments. This includes continually checking on the variety of assessments being used at the district and school levels that may make testing a burden rather than useful as is the aim of a comprehensive and coherent assessment system.

Summary Comments

The *principles* and *characteristics* included in this 2016 version reflect guideposts for inclusive assessment systems within a changing assessment landscape. At the core, they reflect the same fundamental assumptions that NCEO has highlighted in previous versions. Still, they make more evident the belief that an inclusive assessment system applies to all students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities, and that they apply to all types of assessments in assessment systems.

The *Principles* provide a vision for how things should and can be to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or characteristics, are included in assessment systems.