The Inequity of Standardized Testing for Students with Disabilities

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EDTE 490 W: Liberal Studies Capstone

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19 May 2023
Abstract

This research critically examined the impact of standardized testing on students with disabilities and advocates for the implementation of alternative assessment methods within the framework of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provisions. Educational accountability falls short of addressing the diverse requirements of students with disabilities, which poses a significant challenge in achieving educational equity for all. Through a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this study highlights the inherent challenges faced by students with disabilities in meeting the AYP targets, as these assessments often fail to accommodate their diverse abilities and learning styles. By analyzing the unintended consequences of NCLB, this research emphasizes the urgent need for alternative assessment strategies that promote inclusivity and foster educational growth for students with disabilities. The study explores various alternative assessment methods, including performance-based assessments and portfolio assessments. It examines the potential benefits and challenges associated with modified assessments, emphasizing the importance of incorporating multiple measures of student performance to provide a comprehensive evaluation of their academic achievements. Furthermore, this research addresses the need for policy reforms that recognize the needs of students with disabilities to ensure equitable evaluation of practices. It calls for a shift in educational policies towards alternative assessments that provide meaningful and valid measures of academic progress for students with disabilities. In conclusion, this research advocates for the implementation of alternative assessments and more modifications to assessments in order to address the limitations and inequitably of standardized testing for students with disabilities. By embracing diverse assessment methods and promoting inclusive educational practices, policymakers and educators can enhance the educational experiences and
outcomes for this marginalized student population, ultimately fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

*Keywords:* students with disabilities, standardized testing, alternative assessments, modified assessments.

**Introduction**

Standardized testing is a major dilemma in public schools as these tests are geared toward students of dominant cultural backgrounds, leaving students with disabilities and varying ethnic backgrounds to struggle. Connor (2013) shares, “In order to come closer to understanding inequities around race and disability, it is necessary to troubleshoot the limitations of existing educational research in favor of a more diverse multilayered approach that incorporates many factors ignored or unaddressed in traditional special education studies” (p. 119). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 forced educators to implement high-stakes testing such as standardized tests which causes prejudicial and discriminatory ramifications; making standardized assessments inequitable for students with disabilities.

**Statement of Problem**

The United States educational system does not adequately serve students with disabilities. Students with disabilities experience a lack of equity through the process of inappropriate standardized testing. Students with disabilities are overrepresented and under-identified by the way standardized testing assesses the students, while schools are met with resistance for differentiated curricula that meet the needs of students with disabilities (Black, 2010). The problem is that standardized tests are inaccurate, inequitable, and often ineffective at gauging what students understand (Connor, 2013). The purpose of this project is to evaluate what standardized tests are, what the legislature states, what impact standardized testing has on
students with disabilities, and to find more effective and equitable alternative routes of assessing students’ knowledge.

**Justification of the Study**

The primary purpose of standardized testing is to evaluate students’ academic performance and compare their results to those of other students in their age group. Black (2010) argues “To promote equity educators have sought to address these diversities to ensure a) access to quality learning experiences and b) success for students who have traditionally been marginalized” (p. 39). While educators have sought to ensure equity by addressing the diverse needs of students and providing quality learning experiences, continuing the practice of administering standardized assessments to students with disabilities reproduces harm to these students. Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has contributed to the widespread use of biased standardized assessments, which disadvantage a large population of students and implement a race to the top. This act requires that test scores be disaggregated based on a student's disability, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and English language proficiency (Mehring, 2010). Bock and Erikson (2015) criticize this approach for creating potential biases in the test results, as it can lead to stigmatization and labeling of groups of students. Therefore, it is essential to consider the potential biases of standardized testing brought upon by NCLB and to ensure that they do not perpetuate inequities in our educational system.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Introduction**

This literature review aims to explore the widespread use of standardized tests for students with disabilities despite a large body of research that argues these tests unfairly
disadvantage this population of students. Standardized tests are non-inclusive and do not accurately measure the knowledge and/or the capability of a student. Black (2010) states, “Education and political leaders speak of, ‘the casualties of instruction’ which implies that large numbers of children are being underserved” (p. 39). Students with disabilities are underserved by the way our educational system evaluates and assesses its students. In the following review, I will explore the history of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, understand modified academic achievement standards, and identify alternative assessments to standardized tests.

**History of NCLB and Standardized Testing**

Regulation of policies, social justice in education, and equitability for students with disabilities and varying ethnic backgrounds have been major ongoing crises since education began. Wright (2009) states, standardized testing began in 1920, but it wasn’t until 1946 that individual achievement tests were implemented. The mid-1980s brought about the first Educational Summit and the evaluation of social justice within education for students with disabilities. Social justice education encourages treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity (Nieto & Bode, 2007, as cited in Connor, 2013). The evaluation of social justice in education causes a deeper study of disabilities within education. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) depict disability as a complex and variable concept that sits at the intersection of biology and society and of agency and structure (p.18). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandates that all pupils, including those who had disabilities or are in special education, demonstrate proficiency in mathematics, reading, and science, and that schools demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on test scores. Failure to meet AYP can result in a range of consequences, including reduced funding, loss of accreditation, and even closure. Botzaki (2004) and Wright (2009) emphasize that the key component of the No Child Left Behind Act is
establishing an accountable education system. Being accountable means that the school is responsible for the results of standardized testing. However, further investigation reveals that many of the practices mentioned in the act cause more harm than good.

Governmental policies such as “NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 require all students to participate in their school district’s accountability system. Almost all (some 95%) of those with disabilities take the same statewide or districtwide assessment as their classmates without disabilities” (U.S Department of Education, 2007 as cited in Mehring, 2010, p. 76). These policies have created situations in which children with disabilities are “increasingly being held back (Davey, 2005), provided inappropriate alternative assessments (Kotrinsky, 2012, personal communication), encouraged to transfer schools (Oyler & Fuentes, 2012), and are not guaranteed admission to charter schools at the same rate as their non-disabled peers (Sweet, 2006)” due to the lower test scores on standardized tests (as cited in Black, 2010, p. 122). The implementation of government policies such as NCLB and IDEA has unintended consequences and led to various challenges and disparities for students with disabilities in the education system, despite efforts to create more accountability and social justice.

**Modified Academic Achievement Standards**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was revised to provide additional flexibility for states and facilitate an appropriate measurement of the achievement of students with disabilities. However, these standards are only intended for a limited group of students whose disability has prevented them from attaining high-level proficiency in standardized assessments. The California Department of Education (2023) states, “Once a student is identified for alternate assessments, they will then take the alternate assessment for all standardized state assessments"
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(para. 9). It is important to note that modified academic achievement standards are intended to be more challenging than the state's alternative academic achievement standards (Roach et al., 2010, p. 62). Alternate Assessments based on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) are designed to create assessment tasks that support rather than inhibit students' ability to show what they know and can do (Roach et al., 2010). The Consortium for Alternative Assessment Validity and Experimental Studies (CAAVES) made efforts to modify items to enhance accessibility and improve the measurement of intended constructions, particularly for students eligible for AA-MAS. They did this by making modifications, studying cognitive labs, making additional modifications based on the results of a large-scale field test, and conducting a follow-up survey of student perceptions. Modification strategies such as using visuals and other graphics, using bold font vocabulary or key terms, reducing the number of answer choices, and changing analogy formats were implemented. The results indicated that modifications were perceived as positive and helpful versus negative or not helpful, and students with disabilities reported that visuals were significantly more helpful. Modifications that enhance accessibility are not based on the individual needs of a particular student, but rather on the group of students with disabilities who have persistent academic difficulties. Bock and Erikson (2017) establish interventions which aim to support the development of emerging and conventional literacy must be multifaceted (p. 139). The standards for testing suggest that information about student response processes and test-taking behaviors can provide evidence to support the construct validity of an assessment. By examining different subgroups, researchers, and educators can assist in determining the extent to which capabilities, irrelevant or ancillary, differentially impact student performance.

Alternative Assessments to Standardized Tests
To receive accommodations or modifications, students with disabilities must be eligible for special education services under the IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. “When a student cannot participate even with accommodations an alternative assessment may be used to gather information needed to measure and document the students’ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)” (Thurlow, et al., 2003). Alternative assessments should be offered to more students, as approximately one percent of all students have their AYP data evaluated through alternative assessments, while the U.S. Surgeon General estimated that between five percent and eleven percent of all school-age children have mental health disorders (Bazelton Center on Mental Health Law, n.d. as cited in Black, 2010; Mehring, 2010; Walker et al., 2000 as cited in Black, 2010). Therefore, only a fraction of those who need interventions are served under IDEA, and students with disabilities are underrepresented in the educational system.

In a multiple case study, Brookhaven and Bronowicz investigated the relationship among three constellations of students' perceptions relevant to classroom assessment: a) responses related to the assessment task, b) responses related to self-efficacy, and c) responses related to personal goals (2003, as cited in Roach, 2010 p. 64). Teachers are increasingly required by educational establishments to focus on high-stakes testing using a lock-step curriculum and to adhere to standardizing children into performance categories of one, two, three, and four. They push relentlessly toward uniformity and are fearful of penalties, punitive measurements, and public humiliation via published ratings if their students do not sufficiently measure up to the AYP standards (Connor, 2013, p. 121).

Progress monitoring is a crucial type of evaluation utilized in the decision-making and administrative processes of educational policies. It has been proposed as a fair and non-discriminatory approach to the special education referral and identification process, known
as response-to-intervention (RTI). The use of curriculum-based assessments (CBA) is one of the most extensively researched progress monitoring approaches (Obiakor, 2010). CBA is an informative evaluation method designed to evaluate performance in the particular curriculum to which students are exposed. It was developed as a means of coping with “low-achieving” and special-needs learners who are mainstreamed (Obiakor, 2010). Similarly, Borich (2017) writes, “Performance assessments ask learners to show what they know by measuring complex cognitive skills” (p. 417). CBA and performance assessments are intended for teachers to use in determining student skills and various curricula taught in the classroom. Curriculum-based assessment is helpful for all students, specifically students with disabilities, and is inclusive for students with varying ethnic backgrounds. Borich (2017), describes Response to Intervention (RTI) as an initiative that evaluates students at the beginning of the school year with the intention of improving educational outcomes and including integrative assessments, instruction, and decision-making. RTI also addresses overrepresentation by focusing on a series of targeted interventions before special education referrals are made, while underrepresentation is addressed by implementing universal screening to identify all struggling learners and intervene before these children fall behind (Black, 2010).

Portfolio Assessment is another form of performance assessment that can be used to measure students’ growth and knowledge throughout the school year. Borich (2017) states, “A portfolio is a planned collection of materials that documents what a student has accomplished and what steps he or she took to get there” (p. 417). A portfolio shows a learner’s ability to think and problem solve, to use strategies, and procedural-type skills, and to construct knowledge. It also displays the students’ persistence, effort, and willingness to self-reflect and change. This is the only type of assessment that can measure these characteristics of the student and their work.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review reveals that social justice education is essential in treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity. While policies like NCLB and IDEA have aimed to improve the education of students with disabilities, they have also created unintended consequences like underrepresentation and inappropriate alternative assessments. The NCLB Act mandates that all pupils, including those in special education, demonstrate proficiency in math, reading, and science, based on test scores, which causes a negative impact on the students and the faculty. Students may know but are not able to show what they know and understand through one standardized test. Alternative assessments, such as modified academic achievement standards, create assessment tasks that support students’ abilities to demonstrate what they know and can do. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a more effective model that addresses these issues by providing targeted interventions before special education referrals are made. There is a call to provide modified assessments and alternative assessments that are more equitable for students with disabilities and those with varying ethnic backgrounds. The research concludes that progress monitoring, as part of a non-discriminatory, response-to-intervention approach, can help students with disabilities receive appropriate interventions before falling behind. In addition, portfolio assessments provide a holistic and individualized approach to assessing the progress of special education students. Finally, high-stakes testing and standardized curriculum can be detrimental to students and teachers; they do not accurately measure what students know and understand.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I used the Disability Studies Theory lens and a social justice pedagogy to examine the ways standardized testing affects students with disabilities. In this next section, I
will describe my own experiences, the experiences of a community partner, and the description of the Disability Studies Theoretical Framework.

**Positionality**

I proposed this research topic because I have seen first hand what standardized testing does to students with disabilities. I worked as a paraprofessional in a moderate/severe classroom for a year and a half and gained a deep understanding of what my students were capable of and what accommodations different students would need. When it came time to assess the students in the Moderate/Severe classroom, I watched the dynamic of the classroom change. Students and teachers alike became stressed and anxious. When observing one of the students taking a test with a speech therapist, I noticed that the student would choose choices that he thought were funny, instead of the correct answer. I know that the student did know about this topic because I worked with this student daily. While observing another student being tested, the student was not answering the question quickly enough, and the test would time out without the option of being reopened. In both tests, the administrator was only able to provide minimal verbal cues and zero physical accommodations. In the end, all of the students in the classroom who took the tests did not score proficiently for their grade level, creating a potentially negative impact on the teacher, school, and district because of a low AYP score. After witnessing how biased the standardized tests are in special education, I decided to do more research on what I can do as a future special education teacher, what accommodations and modifications are legal, and if others are undergoing the same situations.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this research, I used the lens of the Disability Theory Framework and a social justice pedagogy to understand what standardized tests are, what the legislature states, what impact
standardized testing has on students with disabilities, and to find more effective and equitable alternative routes of assessing students’ knowledge. Disability Theory is the study of the intersectionalities of disability and other identities such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Furthermore, Disability Studies is a framework which, “By developing a social justice based proactive pedagogy educators can use Disability Study to teach against limited and oppressive understandings of disability and toward human diversity, disrupt notions of normalcy, challenge persuasive stereotypes, and provide alternative renderings of dis/ability” (Connor, 2013, p. 113). Social justice pedagogy is used in a classroom to provide equitable access for children of all identities. Through these lenses, I evaluated the ways that standardized assessments reinforce limited and oppressive understandings of disability, such as by using outdated or stigmatizing language, and by focusing too heavily on a narrow range of abilities and skills. I also considered whether these assessments are accessible to all students, regardless of disability, and whether they offer alternative renderings of dis/ability that challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion. Overall, using a Disability Study Theory Framework can help educators and researchers approach standardized testing assessments with a critical eye and advocate for more inclusive and equitable practices.

Community Partner Interview

While researching the impact standardized testing has on special education, I interviewed a professor who we will call Professor S, out of respect for their confidentiality. Professor S has a wealth of experience in special education, having worked in the field for thirty years in various capacities, including a mild/ moderate teacher, the senior director of special education, and a professor in the special education department at a California State University.
Regarding standardized testing in special education, Professor S argues that such tests are not effective in measuring a student's true understanding of a subject and should instead be used as a tool to inform instruction. They state, “State standardized tests do not show what they [the students] know. The tests have been turned into comparing other students to each other and are not meant for planning lessons. It should be used to inform instruction” (personal communication, 2023). Professor S then suggests that tests should be made more "real" and better reflect real-world scenarios and problems, as this can help students develop critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities, rather than just testing rote memorization or simple recall.

Professor S also recommends using alternative assessments, such as portfolio assessments or performance assessments, which can provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of a student's learning progress; “the nature of testing is that it should only be done one way; however, as time has passed educators have found that there are many forms of assessments” (personal communication, 2023). However, it's important to note that not all teachers may be aware of or use these assessment tools effectively, highlighting the need for greater access to various assessment tools and proper training for educators. Educators need to have access to a variety of assessment tools and be trained in their use so that they can provide the best possible education for their students.

According to their personal opinion on standardized testing, the interviewee initially felt that introducing exit tests to students with disabilities was a drastic measure. However, they did observe positive outcomes as it pushed teachers to change their teaching methods and set higher expectations for their students. Professor S's argument shows the common criticism of
standardized testing in education. The tests should be used as a tool to inform instruction, helping teachers understand where their students are struggling and where they need additional support.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The No Child Left Behind policy requires educators to use research-based methods, such as lock-step and standardized curricula. However, these curriculums, which are used in forming standardized assessments, do not effectively accommodate the diverse learning needs and abilities of students with disabilities; leading to an exclusive and ineffective form of testing with inaccurate assessments of their knowledge and abilities. To better serve these students, it is essential for educators to consider individual students’ needs and determine the most appropriate accommodations and modifications. To address this issue, modifications should be made to standardized assessments, alternative assessments should be offered to more students with disabilities, and the “accountability” system that NCLB enforces should be altered to reduce the negative impacts on teachers and students with disabilities.

1. Modifications of Standardized Assessments Are Needed for Students with Disabilities

Understanding the significant variation in students' learning styles is crucial, and educators need to ensure equitable assessment methods for all students. To achieve equity certain modifications should be made to standardized assessments in order to promote fairness for students with disabilities. Brookhaven and Bronowicz (2003) suggest the modifications that should be enacted are incorporating visuals and other graphics, using bold font vocabulary or key terms, reducing the number of answer choices, and changing analogy formats (as cited in Roach,
These modifications promote accessibility, comprehension, and reduced cognitive load, fostering a more inclusive assessment environment and providing equal opportunities for students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. While Professor S did not provide specific recommendations for modifications to standardized tests, their discussion shed light on the inadequacies of these assessments in accurately measuring students' knowledge (Professor S, personal communication, 2023). By incorporating visuals, bold font vocabulary, reducing answer choices, and altering analogy formats, educators will address the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities by creating a more equitable, effective, and inclusive assessment.

2. Alternative Assessments for Students with Disabilities

According to Gagnon McLoughlin (2004), a mere 21% of the general education and special education teachers they surveyed reported utilizing accommodation-specified statewide testing manuals, while just 55% of these teachers had knowledge of allowable accommodations on statewide tests (as cited in Mehring, 2010, p. 81). It is imperative that educators implement alternative assessments to ensure accurate assessment of students' knowledge, educators can use alternative assessments like curriculum-based assessments (CBA), portfolio assessments, and Response to Intervention (RTI) to identify and support struggling students. Borich (2017) and Black (2010) assert that Curriculum-based assessments (CBA) evaluate a student's progress in relation to specific curriculum objectives, while portfolio assessments involve collecting and analyzing samples of a student's work over a period of time to measure their learning growth and achievements. Additionally, Response to Intervention (RTI) can be implemented as a framework to identify and support students who may be struggling academically (Black, 2010, p. 39).

Professor S also recommends the use of alternative assessments, such as portfolio assessments or
performance assessments, as they offer a more comprehensive and precise understanding of a student's learning journey. Professor S also emphasizes that testing should not be limited to a single format, stating that educators have discovered various forms of assessments over time (Professor S, personal communication, 2023). By incorporating these assessment strategies, educators can gain a better understanding of the knowledge of students with disabilities and provide a more comprehensive view of their learning progress; thus providing a more equitable form of assessment.

3. The Importance of Reducing Negative Effects of NCLB and AYP Data

The current "accountability" system enforced by NCLB requires significant alterations to mitigate its negative impact on students and teachers. The aim of educational accountability is to hold schools directly responsible for the proper education of children. Yet, a large amount of attention is set to focus on the penalties, punitive measurements, and public humiliation via published ratings should their students not sufficiently measure to high-rating standardized AYP results (Botzakis, 2004; Connor, 2013, p. 121). Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data recorded from the results of standardized tests should be utilized as a valuable tool for informing instruction, enabling teachers to identify areas where students struggle and where extra support is needed. Professor S asserts that these tests should primarily serve as a tool to inform instruction (Professor S, personal communication, 2023). AYP data derived from assessments should be leveraged to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and its comprehension by students. This information will guide adjustments to the curriculum in order to better accommodate the needs of both educators and learners while avoiding the detrimental consequences that arise from a standardized approach. Currently, standardized assessments create a negative impact and high-stakes environments. By readjusting NCLB and AYP data, facilitators and students will be
better accommodated. Such a move will transform from instruments of comparison among students to valuable resources for planning effective lessons, improving overall instruction, and providing a more equitable platform of assessments for students with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Standardized assessments should serve as a resource for informing instruction and providing insight into areas where students need further assistance, but they do not fully capture the abilities and potential of students with disabilities. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of a student’s knowledge and capabilities, it is vital to consider a broader range of assessment approaches that align with the individual needs of students with disabilities. Educators and policymakers must acknowledge the limitations of standardized tests and actively seek alternative assessment methods that can genuinely gauge the skills and potential of students. By providing modifications to assessments, alternative assessments, and a change in the accountability system, educators can begin to strive for fairness and inclusivity in assessment practices, which will result in a more equitable educational system that supports the diverse learning needs of all students.

Implications and Recommendations

Potential benefits of studying the bias and inequity of standardized tests for students with disabilities include improved assessments, better outcomes for students, reduced stigma, and increased accountability. Identifying and addressing biases can help create a more accurate and fair assessment of a student's abilities and better outcomes for students by reducing the impact of standardized assessments. Students with disabilities will also have a greater chance of receiving
an accurate assessment, which can lead to more appropriate educational support and opportunities. If standardized tests are changed to include more modifications and alternate assessments, students with disabilities may be less likely to feel stigmatized or singled out. When potential biases are identified and addressed, it can increase accountability for test developers, educators, and policymakers to ensure that students with disabilities are receiving equitable and accurate assessments. Arzubiaga et al. (2008) argues, “Researchers have neglected to ask questions or to document and/or analyze data that would shed light on the role of culture and human development and provide alternative explanations for student achievement and behavior other than student deficits which are often assumed with minority group status (as stated in Connor, 2013, p. 311).

However, there are also limitations to studying the inequity of standardized tests for students with disabilities. Measuring the inadequacy of standardized tests can be difficult, as it involves comparing results between groups with different characteristics. There will likely be pushback from test administrators and government policymakers because the changes that need to occur will require significant changes to the test development and administration process. In conclusion, it is imperative to scrutinize the biases and inequalities present in standardized tests for students with disabilities. Nevertheless, it is critical to question the reasoning behind the continued use of standardized assessments implemented by the No Child Behind Act of 2001 in the US education system; given that a multitude of data indicates inaccuracy and inequity in measuring students’ knowledge.
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https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452243887.n9
Community Partner Interview Questions

Question 1. What experience do you have in special education?

Question 2. What credentials have you obtained?

Question 3. Do you have experience with standardized testing in special education?

Question 4. Can you expand on those experiences more?

Question 5. How have you observed standardized testing impacting students with disabilities in terms of educational equity?

Question 6. In your experience, what specific challenges do students with disabilities face when participating in standardized tests?

Question 7. Can you share any examples of how standardized testing may fail to account for the diverse abilities and learning styles of students with disabilities?

Question 8. Have you noticed any unintended consequences of the emphasis on standardized testing, particularly in relation to students with disabilities? If so, what are they?

Question 9. What alternative assessment methods or accommodations have you found effective in promoting a more equitable evaluation of students with disabilities?

Question 10. How do you believe standardized testing impacts the curriculum and instructional practices for students with disabilities?

Question 11. Can you provide examples of how standardized testing may contribute to increased stress levels among students with disabilities?

Question 12. In your opinion, what changes or reforms would you suggest to address the inequities and limitations of standardized testing for students with disabilities?
Question 13. Have you witnessed any disparities in resources or support provided to students with disabilities in preparation for standardized tests compared to their non-disabled peers? If so, could you elaborate on these disparities?

Question 14. How can policymakers and educators work together to ensure that standardized testing is more inclusive and fair for students with disabilities?