

Teaching to the Child or Teaching to the Test?

How Standardized Accountability Undermines IDEA's Promise of Individualized Education

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees students with disabilities an individualized education responsive to their unique strengths and needs. Simultaneously, federal accountability policy requires these same students to demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessments aligned to grade-level standards. This conceptual analysis examines the structural tension between these mandates and traces three consequences: (a) standardized instructional expectations contribute to the identification of disability among students whose developmental trajectories differ from uniform timelines; (b) Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) shift from instructional planning tools to compliance artifacts oriented toward test alignment; and (c) special education is reframed from specialized pedagogy to remedial support, contributing to professional devaluation and workforce attrition. Using illustrative case analysis grounded in observed instructional patterns, this paper argues that the collision between individualization and standardization reflects policy design rather than implementation failure. The analysis concludes with implications for educator preparation programs, emphasizing the need to prepare teachers to navigate structural contradictions while maintaining instructional integrity.

Keywords: *special education, IDEA, standardized testing, accountability, IEP, teacher preparation*

When Individualization Collides with Standardization: An Illustrative Case

The following vignette is presented as a composite analytic case, drawn from recurring instructional patterns observed across multiple special education contexts. Maya, a fifth-grade student identified in second grade with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and a specific learning disability in reading, exemplifies the tension between individualized education and standardized accountability. Her cumulative file documented years of well-intentioned intervention alongside stagnant progress toward grade-level benchmarks. Her IEP goals had remained largely unchanged across three annual reviews, focused on compliance behaviors and grade-level reading standards she could not meaningfully access.

Maya's performance on state accountability assessments placed her in the lowest proficiency category for the third consecutive year. Yet Maya was not disengaged from learning. She was disengaged from instruction that required stillness, linear processing, and prolonged text-based decoding as prerequisites for participation. In instructional contexts that allowed movement, visual representation, and hands-on problem solving, Maya demonstrated strong

reasoning skills and conceptual understanding. When permitted to move while thinking, she generated ideas with clarity and confidence. When concepts were presented visually, she grasped them quickly.

Maya's case illustrates an impossible bind facing special educators. IDEA promised her an individualized education responsive to her unique strengths and needs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Simultaneously, state accountability systems required her to demonstrate fifth-grade proficiency, on fifth-grade assessments, using fifth-grade instructional methods. Her IEP was legally required to be individualized, yet its goals were written to standards she could not meaningfully access. This collision between individualization and standardization sits at the center of contemporary special education practice.

The Policy Contradiction at the Center of Special Education

IDEA guarantees students with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) tailored to their individual needs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The IEP is the primary legal and

instructional mechanism through which this guarantee is enacted. In principle, the IEP is a collaboratively developed plan designed to reflect a student's strengths, needs, and learning trajectory over time.

At the same time, federal accountability policy has imposed a parallel and competing mandate. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind (2001), and continuing under the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), states have been required to assess all students, including students with disabilities, against grade-level academic standards through annual standardized testing (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). School performance, funding, and public accountability are tied to these outcomes. Although policy language emphasizes inclusion and high expectations, the practical message to educators is unmistakable: instruction must be individualized, but outcomes must be standardized.

These mandates are not merely in tension; they are structurally misaligned. IDEA is predicated on the recognition that students learn through diverse modalities, along variable developmental timelines, and through multiple instructional pathways (Yell et al., 2017). Accountability systems, by contrast, prioritize uniformity: common standards, common pacing, and common assessments administered on fixed schedules (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Within this framework, educators are required to write individualized goals while simultaneously aligning those goals to grade-level standards many students cannot meaningfully access. Disabilities are formally acknowledged, yet progress is measured using benchmarks designed for students without disabilities.

Importantly, this contradiction cannot be attributed solely to poor implementation or insufficient professional development. It reflects a design-level conflict between two policy logics that define educational success in fundamentally different ways. When standardized timelines and instructional methods are treated as non-negotiable, students who learn differently are positioned as deficient when they fail to conform to those expectations (Rose & Meyer, 2007). In these cases, disability is not simply identified; it is produced through mismatch between learner needs and system demands.

How Standardization Shapes Disability Identification

One of the most consequential effects of standardized accountability systems is how they shape the interpretation of student behavior and learning differences. When instructional expectations are narrowly defined and developmentally inflexible, differences in how children attend, move, and engage with learning are more likely to be framed as deficits rather than as indicators of instructional mismatch.

ADHD and the Context of Accountability

Between 2003 and 2023, diagnoses of ADHD among children ages 5 to 11 increased substantially (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Boys are diagnosed at nearly three times the rate of girls, and identification rates rise sharply at the point of school entry. These patterns have prompted researchers to examine whether increased identification reflects changes in neurodevelopmental prevalence or a growing mismatch between typical child development and contemporary classroom expectations.

Research on accountability policy provides important context. Hinshaw and Scheffler (2014) found that states with more stringent accountability laws showed higher rates of ADHD diagnosis, particularly among low-income children in public schools. King et al. (2014) documented that children in states first exposed to consequential accountability through No Child Left Behind showed significantly increased ADHD diagnostic rates compared to children in states with preexisting accountability structures. Bokhari and Schneider (2011) found that accountability pressures affect both the probability of ADHD diagnosis and subsequent medication therapy among school-aged children.

Research on early elementary instruction provides additional context. Bassok et al. (2016) documented a substantial shift in kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 away from play-based, movement-oriented learning toward more sedentary, academically structured instruction. Opportunities for exploratory play, physical movement, and social learning declined, while time spent seated, engaged in direct instruction, and completing paper-

based tasks increased. These changes effectively narrowed the range of behaviors considered appropriate for learning. Developmental theory has long emphasized that young children learn through activity, social interaction, and play. Vygotsky (1978) described play as a central mechanism through which children develop self-regulation, language, and higher-order thinking. Bodrova and Leong (2007) extended this framework, demonstrating that make-believe play supports the development of executive function and intentional behavior. Contemporary developmental neuroscience suggests that children ages six to seven are still developing the executive functioning and sustained attentional control required for prolonged sedentary tasks (Diamond, 2013).

Within this developmental context, behaviors such as movement, restlessness, sensory seeking, and difficulty sustaining attention during extended seatwork are not inherently pathological. They may represent developmentally typical responses to instructional environments that exceed children's regulatory capacities. However, when learning is defined primarily through stillness, quiet compliance, and prolonged attention to decontextualized tasks, these behaviors are increasingly interpreted as symptoms of disorder rather than as signals of instructional misalignment.

Reading Instruction and the Single Pathway Problem

Following the publication of the National Reading Panel report (2000) and the implementation of Reading First legislation (2002), phonics-based reading instruction became the dominant approach to early literacy instruction in many states. These initiatives reflected an emphasis on evidence-based practice and sought to ensure systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Over time, however, this emphasis contributed to increasing standardization of early reading instruction.

This pattern raises a critical instructional question: When students do not respond to a particular method, does that nonresponse reflect a disability within the learner, or does it reflect the limits of the instructional approach itself? Research on learning variability indicates that students differ in how they process and integrate linguistic information, particularly during early reading development

(Shaywitz, 2003). While phonics instruction is effective for many students, it assumes relatively efficient auditory and sequential processing. For some learners, particularly those with language-based learning disabilities, decoding through linear phonetic analysis may remain effortful even when conceptual understanding is intact.

Research on dyslexia has increasingly documented heterogeneity in cognitive processing. Some studies have found associations between dyslexia and enhanced global visual-spatial processing (von Károlyi et al., 2003). While these findings are not universal, with some studies finding no difference or deficits in visual-spatial tasks (Winner et al., 2001), they caution against assuming a single optimal pathway to literacy for all learners. When standardized instruction fails to produce standardized outcomes, labels often shift more readily than methods.

Temporal Assumptions and Developmental Variability

Contemporary accountability systems are built on a fixed temporal assumption: students are expected to reach grade-level proficiency within prescribed instructional windows. Curriculum pacing, assessment schedules, and progress monitoring practices are organized around annual benchmarks, with success defined by whether students arrive at predetermined endpoints by the end of the school year. Within this framework, learning is treated as a race against time rather than as a developmental process. Foundational learning theories challenge this assumption. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development emphasized that learning depends on readiness, scaffolding, and social context, not fixed timelines. Developmental science documents substantial variability in the pace at which children acquire skills, even among typically developing populations (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When instructional time is treated as fixed and learning as variable, students whose development unfolds more slowly or unevenly are positioned as deficient rather than as developing.

Response to Intervention (RTI) models reflect this same temporal logic. Tier 2 interventions are commonly implemented for predetermined periods, often six to eight weeks, before teams determine whether a student is responding adequately to instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Students who do not reach expected benchmarks

within these windows are frequently referred for special education evaluation. These timelines are largely administrative rather than developmental. For some students, nonresponse does not indicate the need for different instruction or a different learning profile. Instead, it indicates the need for more time.

How Standardization Distorts Individualized Education

Although IDEA positions the IEP as the central mechanism for individualized instruction, standardized accountability systems reshape how that mechanism functions in practice. Pressures to document alignment, demonstrate rigor, and produce comparable outcomes influence not only how goals are written, but how individualization itself is defined and evaluated.

The IEP as Compliance Artifact

The IEP was established as the primary legal mechanism through which IDEA's promise of individualized education is enacted. In principle, it is intended to guide instructional decision-making by documenting a student's strengths, needs, and learning trajectory (Yell et al., 2017). In practice, contemporary IEPs increasingly reflect the priorities of standardized accountability systems rather than individualized instruction.

Goals are frequently written to mirror grade-level standards, progress is monitored using standardized or benchmark-aligned measures, and success is defined by proximity to grade-level expectations (McLaughlin, 2010). As a result, the IEP functions less as an instructional plan and more as documentation that a student has been exposed to the same academic targets as nondisabled peers. This shift reflects the evidentiary demands of accountability systems. Schools are required to demonstrate that students with disabilities are held to high expectations, that instruction aligns with state standards, and that compliance can be documented and defended.

The Structural Problem of Goal Writing

IDEA requires that IEP goals enable students to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum (20 U.S.C. § 1414[d][1][A][i][II]). This language is often interpreted to require alignment with grade-level content standards, even when students are

performing significantly below grade level. The distinction between access to the curriculum and alignment with it is frequently collapsed, creating a structural dilemma for educators (Etscheidt & Curran, 2010).

Educators are left with limited options. Goals aligned directly to grade-level standards satisfy procedural expectations but may be instructionally inaccessible, even with accommodations. Goals aligned to a student's instructional level are pedagogically sound but are often viewed as insufficiently rigorous or misaligned with accountability expectations. Although IDEA permits both accommodations and modifications, accountability systems strongly privilege the former, limiting educators' flexibility in practice (Thurlow et al., 2005).

Maya's case illustrates this dilemma. A goal aligned to fifth-grade standards might read: "Given a fifth-grade informational text, Maya will identify the main idea and two supporting details with 80% accuracy." This goal satisfies compliance expectations but asks Maya to demonstrate proficiency with text she cannot independently decode. A goal aligned to her instructional level might read: "Given a third-grade informational text with visual supports, Maya will identify the main idea and one supporting detail with 80% accuracy, progressing to texts with fewer supports." This goal reflects her zone of proximal development but may be questioned for insufficient rigor.

When Academic Alignment Displaces Functional Learning

For students with significant disabilities, IDEA explicitly emphasizes preparation for adult life through functional, vocational, and transition-focused instruction (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). However, accountability systems prioritize academic content standards and test-based outcomes, creating a hierarchy in which academic goals are treated as inherently legitimate while functional goals are positioned as secondary.

Longstanding outcome data reflect the consequences of this imbalance. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities frequently exit school without mastery of essential daily living and employment-related skills despite

years of special education services (Test et al., 2009). These outcomes persist not because functional instruction is unknown, but because it is systematically deprioritized within accountability-driven systems.

How Standardized Accountability Devalues Special Education as a Profession

Standardized accountability systems shape not only instructional practice but professional identity. As special education has become increasingly positioned as a mechanism for closing academic gaps and improving test performance, the field has been reframed in ways that obscure its specialized expertise.

The Scope of Special Education Practice

Special education is often framed as instructional support for students who are "behind" rather than as a distinct professional practice. This framing suggests that special educators primarily assist students in catching up to grade-level expectations. Under accountability systems that define success through benchmark attainment and gap closure, this misconception has become increasingly normalized.

In practice, special education is specialized pedagogy requiring expertise beyond that expected of general education teachers. Special educators operate at the intersection of instruction, health, behavior, law, and family systems (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Their responsibilities routinely extend beyond academic teaching to include medical response, behavioral assessment and intervention, and coordination with related service providers. Legal responsibility is central to the role. Special educators must understand and implement IDEA regulations, participate in manifestation determination reviews, navigate due process procedures, and maintain legally defensible documentation. Special educators also serve as primary advocates and guides for families navigating systems that can feel opaque and intimidating, helping parents understand their rights, their child's needs, and available supports. When special education is framed primarily as gap-closing support, this expertise becomes invisible. The work does not disappear. Accountability systems simply lack mechanisms to recognize or value it.

Teacher Shortage as Structural Evidence

The consequences of professional devaluation are visible in workforce patterns. Special education consistently experiences the highest teacher shortage and attrition rates across teaching fields. As of 2024, approximately 51% of public schools nationwide reported needing to fill special education positions, and approximately 55% of schools reported difficulty hiring special education teachers (EdResearch for Action, 2024). Special education teacher turnover rates substantially exceed those of general education teachers, with approximately 15% leaving their schools each year (Gilmour et al., 2023).

Research on special educator burnout has documented alarming rates of mental health concerns. In one study, approximately 38% of special education teachers met clinical criteria for generalized anxiety disorder and 38% met criteria for major depressive disorder, rates substantially higher than the general population (Ruble et al., 2024). While workload and paperwork are frequently cited as reasons for attrition, these explanations are incomplete. Educators leave not only because the work is demanding, but because it has been redefined in ways that obscure professional judgment and expertise (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Teacher preparation programs play a critical role in shaping how future special educators understand their professional responsibilities. Under current accountability conditions, preparation often emphasizes procedural compliance without adequately addressing the structural contradictions educators will encounter in practice.

Compliance Training Is Necessary but Insufficient

Most educator preparation programs emphasize compliance. Candidates learn to identify disabilities, write legally defensible IEPs, follow procedural safeguards, and implement mandated interventions. This knowledge is essential. Without it, educators cannot function within legally regulated systems. However, compliance training alone assumes that IDEA's promise of individualization and accountability's demand for standardization can be reconciled through careful implementation.

In practice, educators are often required to navigate incompatible mandates by making informal compromises. New teachers frequently enter classrooms believing the system functions coherently, only to discover that they are expected to reconcile contradictions quietly through documentation choices, instructional adaptations, and strategic silence. Preparation programs must therefore extend beyond procedural competence to prepare educators for ethical tension.

Teaching the Policy Collision Explicitly

Many preparation programs avoid naming the conflict between IDEA and standardized accountability. Coursework emphasizes alignment, fidelity, and implementation, reinforcing the belief that effective planning can resolve structural tensions. This approach leaves candidates unprepared for the realities of practice.

Teacher preparation must address this contradiction directly. Candidates benefit from case-based instruction grounded in authentic instructional dilemmas involving students whose needs do not align with standardized pathways. These cases require candidates to analyze situations through legal, instructional, and ethical lenses, recognizing that no option is fully neutral or risk-free. Learning to document, justify, and defend instructional decisions within accountability structures is a professional skill, not a deviation from best practice.

Teaching Advocacy as Professional Practice

Knowing how to follow procedures is not sufficient preparation for contemporary special education practice. Teachers must also be prepared to recognize when procedural compliance undermines instructional integrity or student well-being. Preparation programs should explicitly teach advocacy as a professional skill rather than an act of defiance. This includes preparing candidates to question referral patterns that reflect instructional mismatch rather than disability, to write goals that are instructionally meaningful even when imperfectly aligned, and to communicate concerns effectively within IEP meetings and school hierarchies.

Reframing Special Education as Expert Practice

Practice-forward approaches to teacher preparation offer a promising alternative to compliance-focused training.

Rather than emphasizing procedural knowledge alone, practice-forward models engage preservice teachers in authentic professional tasks that mirror the complexity of actual special education work, including navigating the tension between individualized instruction and standardized accountability. Preliminary evidence suggests that such approaches produce meaningful gains in preservice teacher confidence compared to traditional methods (Letchworth, 2025). When candidates rehearse the professional judgment required to design meaningful accommodations, interpret assessment data in context, and advocate for students within institutional constraints, they are better positioned to sustain both instructional integrity and professional identity upon entering the field.

Preparation programs also shape how the profession itself is understood. Candidates must be explicitly taught that special education is not slower, easier, or less rigorous than general education. It is specialized professional work requiring instructional, behavioral, medical, and legal expertise. Foregrounding this complexity counters narratives that frame special education as remediation and reinforces professional identity. When candidates enter the field with an accurate understanding of the scope and demands of the role, they are better positioned to sustain both instructional quality and professional commitment.

Conclusion

Maya's case illustrates a pattern that extends well beyond a single classroom. Students whose learning does not align with standardized instructional pathways are routinely evaluated through systems that privilege uniformity over variability. The tension between IDEA's commitment to individualized education and accountability systems' reliance on standardized benchmarks places students and educators in structurally contradictory positions. This tension persists not because of individual failure, but because of policy design.

As this analysis has shown, the consequences of this collision are predictable. Learning differences are reframed as deficits when students do not conform to fixed timelines. IEPs shift from instructional tools to compliance artifacts aligned with testing demands. Special education practice is reduced from specialized pedagogy to remedial support,

contributing to professional devaluation and persistent teacher attrition. These outcomes are not anomalies. They are the logical result of systems that define success through speed, sameness, and benchmark attainment.

Importantly, this collision is not inevitable. It reflects policy choices that can be reconsidered. Accountability systems can be structured to recognize growth, multiple pathways to competence, and developmentally appropriate timelines. IEPs can function as plans for instruction rather than documentation of alignment. Teacher preparation programs can prepare educators to recognize structural contradictions and exercise professional judgment within them.

The purpose of this paper is not to reject accountability or to romanticize individualization. It is to clarify how current policy frameworks operate and what they produce. Until greater coherence is established between the goals of individualized education and the mechanisms used to measure educational success, students with disabilities will continue to be evaluated through systems that do not reflect how they learn or what they need. Addressing this contradiction requires conceptual clarity and policy

honesty. Students with disabilities deserve educational systems designed around human variability rather than enforced uniformity. Special educators deserve professional roles that recognize the complexity of their work. The collision between individualization and standardization is real, but it is not fixed. Systems created by policy can be revised by policy.

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