FEDERAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: A STUDY OF THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ASSESSMENT PROVISIONS OF IDEA 1997
AND NCLB IN STATE AND LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Thomas J. Ryan

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and recognize the importance of education: they have my love, gratitude, and commitment to pass it on.
ABSTRACT

FEDERAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: A STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ASSESSMENT PROVISIONS OF IDEA 1997 AND NCLB IN STATE AND LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Thomas J. Ryan
Margaret Goertz

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 1997) and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) have had significant impact on state and district accountability for results, and the way these agencies implement changes in special education standards and assessment. The purposes of this study are to understand local district implementation of assessment provisions of these laws within the context of policy implementation theory, and to identify changes in state and local school district special education policy implementation practices resulting from IDEA 1997 and NCLB. The study posed three research questions: 1) How has the state changed its special education assessment policies and practices to comply with IDEA 1997? 2) How have local School districts changed their special education assessment policies and practices to comply with IDEA 1997? 3) Can
policy implementation theories explain the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB in the state and local districts? Research methods included in-depth interviews with district directors of special education and state DOE officials in a northeastern state and document review. The study found that both the state and districts effectively implemented the policy, with the exception of the Alternate Proficiency Assessment. The state and districts did change their policy implementation strategies and plans in several areas. Local districts supported the need for accountability, standards, and assessment, but were concerned that the state was using policy to influence instruction. Policy implementation theory explained some aspects of the state and district implementation. Finally, the study raised the following questions: Does a standards-based educational system have to include all students? Is it appropriate to include students with severe disabilities in common standards when these standards do not reflect their unique needs? Are the assessment scores of these students relevant to the scores of non-disabled peers? This study suggests that there may be controversy surrounding this issue that may seriously affect future policy decisions.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

The Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (PL 105-17), commonly referred to as IDEA 1997, and the passage of the No Child Left Behind in 2001 (P.L. 107-110), commonly referred to as NCLB, have had significant impact on states' and districts' accountability for results and the way these agencies implement changes in special education standards and assessment. It is important to examine this issue, because it represents a significant shift in special education policy, from a system designed to help students with special needs gain access to public education, to a policy that now focuses on accountability for results. This broad policy shift has significantly affected the ways states and districts implement policy. It is reasonable to expect that these two major federal policy changes have had an impact on states' and districts' policy implementation. It is also reasonable to ask whether policy implementation theory can provide an explanation for the policy implementation practices of states and local districts.

The goal of this study is to provide a better understanding of standards-based reform in special education by studying the implementation of the assessment
provisions of IDEA and NCLB in one state, and several
districts within that state.

Spillane (2004) compares policy implementation to the
crudayhood game sometimes called "Whisper down the Lane":

Policy implementation is like the telephone game. The
player at the start of the line tells a story to the
next person in line, who then relays the story to a
third person in line. By the time the story is retold
by the final player, it is very different from the
original. (p. 8)

Spillane notes: "The story is morphed as it moves from
antagonists, and new plots emerge." Spillane comments that
this is unintentional and is "the nature of human sense
making."

Spillane's analogy is an appropriate description of
the implementation of standards-based education and
assessment policies in special education. There are several
stops along the lane where public agencies implement
policy.

Table 1 traces the development and implementation
sequence of federal policies such as IDEA 1997 and the
NCLB.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Policy Implementation Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Congress passes federal legislation and the President signs it into law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The United States Department of Education implements the policy by promulgating regulations through its Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>OSEP monitors, provides technical assistance, clarifies policy, and regulations and procedures for state departments of education to implement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>State departments of education, working through their departments of special education, develop regulations, policies, and procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The state department of special education provides technical assistance and clarifies policy, regulations, and procedures for local education agencies (LEAs) to implement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>LEAs, working through their departments of special education, provide technical assistance and clarify policy, regulations, and procedures for individual education planning (IEP) teams composed of parents, the child study team, and specialists as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teachers, related service specialists, and paraprofessionals implement the IEP.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Policy is subject to much interpretation along the way and may differ from one level to the next.

This study focuses on the relationship of levels four, five, and six of the policy implementation sequence, rather than all levels of implementation. The state and LEA interpret and set the parameters for the implementation policy and procedure between the macro-implementation at the federal level and the micro-implementation at the IEP Team level and below. By the time policy implementation gets to the teacher (level 7), there are fewer opportunities for interpretation of established state and LEA policies and procedures. Levels one, two, and three focus on national implementation, where policy clarifications are broad and intended to apply to all states.

The study is further limited to one state in the northeastern US and districts from one area of that state, where extensive, in-depth interviews were conducted with state and district officials.

The study poses three research questions:
1) How has the state changed its special education assessment policies to comply with IDEA 1997 and NCLB?
2) How have local districts changed their special education assessment policies and practices to comply with IDEA 1997 and NCLB?

3) Can policy implementation theory explain the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB in the state and local districts?

This study is significant, because it uses implementation theory as a framework to study state and local response to the implementation of the assessment provisions of IDEA 1997 and NCLB. There is still little research on the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB. This study may be useful to state and local policymakers and practitioners when developing assessment policies for students with disabilities.

The following comment on the lack of research on how students with disabilities are being addressed appears in Educating One and All: Students with Disabilities and Standards-based Reform-The Report of the Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities. It was relevant at the time this study was proposed in 2002 and continues to be relevant today:

The assumption that standards should and can apply to all students is of particular relevance to students with disabilities. Unfortunately, the information available on how students with disabilities are being
The enactment of the NCLB Act of 2001 and the reauthorization of IDEA on December 2004 should prompt more interest in the implementation of both laws as it relates to students with disabilities.

Chapter 2 reviews the changes in special education policy and law from its earlier focus on helping students gain access to public education, to a focus on state and district accountability for results. It includes a review of policy implementation theories that provide a framework for the study. Chapter 3 describes the research methods used in the study. Chapter 4 presents the state findings from interviews with state officials. Chapter 5 presents the findings from interviews with local district directors of special education and assessment coordinators. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations. The study concludes with a discussion of study limitations and suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The first part of the literature review traces the development of special education, from the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1974, which guaranteed access to public schooling, to the passage of IDEA 1997 and the NCLB Act of 2001, which introduced greater accountability in special education. The chapter includes a review of the accountability and standards-based education provisions in IDEA 1997 and NCLB Act of 2001 that have had driving force in special education policy implementation since they were passed.

The focus of special education changed from a system focused on gaining greater access to public schooling for students with disabilities, to a system that now focuses on state and LEA accountability for student progress based on a common set of standards and assessments.

The second part of Chapter 2 reviews policy implementation theories that provide a framework for the study and concludes with a series of hypotheses related to policy implementation theory. These hypotheses are based on eight major concepts that have been distilled from the large body of policy implementation literature.
Special Education: Shift from Access to Accountability

McDonnell, et al. (1997) comment that the issue of access was an important aspect of earlier policy designed to help students with special needs gain greater access to education:

The first goal for special education policy in the second half of this century has been access to education for all students with disabilities. (p. 53)

In its report, Twenty-Five Years of Progress in Education Children with Disabilities through IDEA, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, US Department of Education (2000), notes that in 1970, US schools were educating one in five children with special needs. At the time, many states excluded students who were considered to be emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, blind, or deaf. Over one million students were excluded from the education system, and another 3.5 million children with disabilities did not receive appropriate services.

The passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Education Act (Public Law 94-142) (EHA) in 1974 gave students with special needs the right to an education at public expense in the least restrictive environment. In their review of EHA, Pittenger and Kuriloff (1982) comment that when it was passed, EHA was one of the most important
pieces of education legislation. They note that it was a logical outgrowth of civil rights legislation extending equal protection to disabled students by requiring states to provide them with an appropriate education. They further indicate that this requirement of the Act:

...creates a presumption against the appropriateness of separate classes or facilities for handicapped children... The handicapped student was guaranteed "equal protection" in the form of "equal access" to the public schools of America. (p. 72)

Court decisions, federal laws, and regulations have driven enactment and clarification of special education policy. There were a number of landmark cases related to the importance of giving students with special needs access to public education. Table 2 lists important legislation, and cases and the issues involved:
Table 2
Important Special Education Access Cases and Law Prior to the Passage of EHA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At issue was whether school districts were required to fund special education.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Mills v. BOE (348 F. Supp. 866)</td>
<td>Mandated Special Education Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue in this case was whether school districts were required to fund and provide special education services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided the handicapped (language of the time) access to public buildings and transportation, provided vocational rehabilitation funds, and included section 504 that prohibited recipients of federal funds from discriminating against the handicapped.</td>
<td>Discrimination, Public Access Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>The Education of All Handicapped Act was passed.</td>
<td>Special Education is a Constitutional Right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two federal court cases decided in 1972 and 1973, respectively, bought the issue of educating children with disabilities into court. The first case, Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PARC v. Commonwealth C334 F. Supp. 1257) looked at the issue of whether school districts should be
required to provide an education for educable and trainable students. The court ruled that districts were required to provide such services. The second case, Mills v. BOE (348 F. Supp. 866) looked at the issue of whether school districts were required to fund special education. The court ruled that school districts were required to provide such funding.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided the handicapped (language of the time) access to public buildings and transportation, provided vocational rehabilitation funds, and in Section 504, prohibited recipients of federal funds from discriminating against the handicapped.

The Education of All Handicapped Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) (EHA) codified the rights of students with disabilities to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Walker (1987) noted that EHA incorporated the following six basic principles:

1) The right of access to public education programs; 2) the individualization of services; 3) the principle of "least restrictive environment"; 4) the scope of broadened services to be provided by schools and a set of procedures for determining them; 5) the general guidelines for identification of disability; and 6) the principles of primary state and local responsibilities. (pp. 98-102)
The guidelines for identification of disabilities and the individualization of services were important in defining the role of the individual education plan team and the development of an identification system. The principle that the student should be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) was intended to facilitate the placement of students in their local schools with their non-disabled peers. The determination of appropriate services was broadened, expanding the range of educational programs available to students and providing districts with procedures to follow when implementing these services. The definition of state and local responsibilities ended many state and local jurisdictional controversies.

EHA was the first large-scale special education legislation. Gartner and Lipsky (1987) trace the roots of EHA to Brown v. BOE (347 U.S. 483), indicating that the Supreme Court's decision in that landmark case demonstrated the importance of public education, pointed out the inherent inequality of separate education, and encouraged civil rights activities. The Brown v. BOE decision influenced legislatures and the legal system to recognize the importance of civil rights in education.
Gartner and Lipsky observe that the impact of the *Brown* decision can be seen in federal special education laws and cases decided from 1966 to 1973, which focused on the needs of students with disabilities. They further indicate that the effect of early laws was to pave the way for the special education bureaucracy:

Together these laws can be seen as capacity building: preparing personnel, launching a set of discretionary grant programs, establishing the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped in what was then the U.S. Office of Education, providing capital funds, developing regional centers for deaf-blind children, and establishing authority for research and demonstration projects. (p. 125)

Singer and Butler (1987) present a different perspective than that of Gartner and Lipsky (1987) and Pittinger and Kuriloff (1982) by observing that the implementation of EHA may have been rooted in civil rights, but it had not succeeded in providing access to public education programs and the placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Singer and Butler cited placement statistics that indicated the poor outcomes for students with special needs. They identified discrepancies in identification and placement rates among states and districts, indicating that students with disabilities continued to be educated in segregated settings. Later, the Seventh Annual Report to the Congress
on the Implementation of the Education of the Handicapped Act in 1993 confirmed that students with special needs continued to be excluded from the regular education system and continued to achieve poor outcomes, including high dropout rates and unemployment (Wagner et al., 1993).

Federal and state legislation in the 1970s and 1980s gave students with disabilities access to public education, but did not necessarily give students access to an education in the least restrictive environment. Federal legislation put the responsibility on states and local districts to identify and educate students with special needs in the least restrictive environment.

Berman (1978) would describe legislation that grants states wide latitude to interpret policy as a loosely coupled system. While this approach may be rooted in the states' constitutional authority to provide education, there were no specific federal guidelines for states to follow when identifying students with special needs. The "loosely coupled" federal policy gave states latitude in developing different criteria in classification policies and led to the disparities that can be seen today in the identification of students with special needs and the state-by-state provision of special education services.
Some states, for example, have been cited during federal monitoring for placing a disproportionate number of special needs students in state-approved, out-of-district private schools.

Despite this variation, McDonnell et al. (1997) comment that within the first decade of the passage of EHA, students with special needs were gaining access to the public education system; however, they were experiencing social isolation and high dropout rates. These authors further suggest that attention has moved away from issues of access, gradually beginning to focus more on the quality of special education.

There was a gradual shift in special policy from access to accountability. Legislation such as EHA, and court decisions mandating access for students with special needs, were successful in helping those students to gain access. The education system was growing to meet the needs of these children. The establishment of the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped gave even greater importance to special education, and increased funding for special education helped students gain access.

In 1993, the shift in the focus of special education received national attention with the publication of the
National Longitudinal Transition Study, commissioned by the US Department of Education (Wagner et al., 1993).

Whereas EHA guaranteed access to special education, IDEA 1997 and the NCLB Act of 2001 provided accountability in special education.

Armstrong (2002) defines an accountability model in the following way:

Accountability refers to the systematic collection of, analysis and the use of information to hold schools, educators and others responsible for student performance, Standards-based accountability refers to collecting and reporting information based on student progress on achieving established standards. (p. 1)

Accountability systems are based on the premise that when educators are given accurate data and results, they will be motivated to “remediate weaknesses” and “build on strengths.” Armstrong (2002) identifies seven enabling conditions that are needed for accountability systems:

1. The reported results are accurate.
2. The results are validly interpreted.
3. Individuals are willing to act and can motivate action by team members.
4. Alternative actions to improve the situation are known and available.
5. Individuals and team members possess the knowledge to apply alternative methods.
6. The selected action is adequately implemented.
7. The actions selected will improve results. (p. 1)

Armstrong further suggests that accountability systems ask a number of questions, such as:
"What level of accountability is to be provided?"
"Who is accountable?"
"To whom are they accountable?"
"For what are they accountable?"
"What are the consequences?" (p. 2)

These questions were important for the interview topics concerning state and district accountability. All five questions were important to state and district officials, as they are required to assume responsibility for outcomes. Armstrong (2002) notes:

There is an increasing trend to hold more stakeholders accountable for system performance and student learning. Currently students, rather than the adults in the system, are being held accountable for their performance. For example, state policymakers should be held accountable for adequate and equitable school funding and aligning policies to standards. State departments of education and the state board of education should be responsible for creating challenging academic content standards and supporting school improvement. (p. 4)

The state officials and district directors interviewed for this study expressed concern that states and districts would not be able to meet the provision of NCLB that requires states and districts to have all of their students achieve 100% proficiency in reading and math by the 2013-14 school year.

McDonnell et al. (1997) identify several assumptions that are the basis of standards. These assumptions are
consistent with Armstrong’s commentary on accountability in education:

Standards should apply to all students. Content and performance standards can be defined. Student performance can be measured validly and reliably. Instruction, consistent with the standards, can be implemented in individual schools and classrooms. Standards reform is one component of a broader strategy for school improvement (McDonnell et al., p. 44)

The assessment provisions of IDEA 1997 define the important accountability issues in special education policy implementation:

• To what extent should disabled students be assessed?
• Which students should be assessed and what accommodations should be provided?
• How should the scores of disabled students be included in aggregate score reports?

The assessment provisions of IDEA cover changes in the following three areas: assessment of children with disabilities, participation in assessments, and the reporting of assessment results. The first area of change in IDEA 1997 concerns the assessment of children with disabilities and requires states to establish performance indicators to be used when assessing the progress of
children with disabilities in at least three areas: dropout rates, graduation rates, and performance assessments. States are required to report the progress of the state and of children toward meeting the goals. Based on its assessment of that progress, a state is required to revise its improvement plan every two years, as necessary, to improve its performance.

The second area of change, participation in assessment, requires states to include children with disabilities in general state and district assessments with appropriate accommodations, to develop guidelines for the participation of children with disabilities who cannot participate in regular assessments, and to develop alternate assessments for these students. IDEA 1997 requires states and districts to conduct those alternate assessments.

The third area of change, the reporting of assessment results, requires states to make reports on the assessment of children with disabilities available as frequently and in as much detail as it reports on the assessment of non-disabled children. The required reports must include the number of children with disabilities participating in both regular and alternate assessments, and the performance of
those children in regular or alternate assessments. Reporting of scores must be statistically sound and not disclose performance results that would identify individual children. The act further requires that the data on these children be disaggregated.

The NCLB Act of 2001 includes stronger accountability and assessment requirements. The act is based on four principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and a focus on "what works."

It strengthens IDEA 1997 by requiring that assessments provide accommodations for students with disabilities, as defined in IDEA 1997. It further mandates that assessments must be accessible and valid, to include the widest possible range of students. Districts are held accountable and must report on the number of students not tested. Student achievement scores on statewide tests must be disaggregated by subgroup.

Alternate assessment must yield results for the grade in which the student is enrolled. The IEP Team then determines if a child cannot participate in all or part of the state assessments, even with accommodations.
Finally, the state must provide for one or more alternate assessments for a child with a disability, and services for children with disabilities must be consistent with goals in the child’s IEP.

Respondents consistently referred to the requirement to disaggregate scores, often noting that there was little room for interpretation. Disaggregating scores shows the progress of special needs students compared to the common standard and reveals any significant discrepancies. The performance of these students is not hidden in the aggregated scores.

McDonnell et al. (1997) outline two arguments for disaggregating the scores of regular education students and students with special needs. One of the arguments for disaggregating scores holds that the scores of students with disabilities are difficult to interpret and their meaning is often unclear; therefore, it is better to separate these scores.

A second argument holds that students with special needs have a greater and unfair challenge when faced with the task of competing with their non-disabled peers, which might affect the validity of their scores. Disaggregation would relieve this innate unfairness.
District directors and state officials interviewed for this study generally supported some form of disaggregation of the scores of some students with special needs.

A third argument for disaggregating scores presented by McDonnell et al. (1997) concerns the idea that separately reporting scores of students with special needs will pressure districts to focus on the education they are providing to these students. If the scores of these students are included with the entire pool of students in the district, their importance would be diminished and their scores would be diluted.

McDonnell et al. (1997) discuss reliability arguments for reporting all scores, indicating that the small number of scores and the distribution of disabilities create issues of reliability. The main argument is that it is difficult to measure district educational improvements when districts of different sizes may have different numbers of students with differing needs and classifications included in scoring reports. McDonnell et al. (1997) note: “the characteristics of the group with a disability may be quite inconsistent from year to year or from school to school” (p. 185).
District directors and the statewide alternate assessment coalition have expressed concern about this issue, making some of the same arguments. Their concerns seem to focus on two questions: “How many scores may be disaggregated?” and “Who should decide whether scores of students with disabilities should be excluded in reporting?”

The interviews conducted for this study focus on district and state strategies used to implement NCLB and IDEA, including issues of who should be assessed, accountability, alternate standards, who should be exempted, and the validity of comparisons. These issues will be revisited in the discussion of results in Chapter 4 for the state level and Chapter 5 for the district level.

Policy Implementation Theory

This study uses policy implementation theory as a framework for understanding how the state and district implement policy. There is a large body of literature in this area, but there are commonly recurring policy implementation concepts relevant to this study. Rather than using a specific theoretical framework, I have tried to identify some of the common characteristics of specific theories from those that were reviewed.
The literature review concludes with a series of hypotheses that are based on specific policy implementation concepts. I will test these hypotheses about policy implementation against the state and district findings. The data analysis and conclusion chapters consider the specific theoretical concepts reviewed in this section, in an attempt to explain the policy implementation data generated by the study.

I have relied on some recent organizing frameworks such as Sabatier’s “interacting elements” and the Advocacy Coalition Policy Diffusion Framework to trace the evolution of types of theories and identify major concepts. The frameworks discussed here appear to be the most promising in organizing overlapping concepts and seem to be the most useful in explaining assessment and standards-based special education policy. Some theories combine concepts from other theories. Theorists often use different terms to describe similar concepts, and theories vary in the importance they place on specific concepts. In some cases, there was a distinction without a significant difference.

The policy process is complex. Sabatier (1999) describes five interacting elements that account for much of the complexity. These interacting elements are relevant
to the policies examined in this study. The following is a brief summary of the elements:

1. There are often hundreds of actors involved in the process.

2. The process covers long time spans of ten years or more, from problem identification and clarification to policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

3. Multiple programs and agencies are usually involved in policy development and implementation.

4. The process typically involves debate, compromise, and public hearings, as a policy develops. Questions such as the severity of the problem, the need for a solution, and the extent of the policy change needed to address the problem, often involve participants' deeply held values.

5. Proponents of particular points of view use what Sabatier calls "authoritative coercion," where supportive documentation and research is presented to support their point of view. This is sometimes referred to as "spin," but it is supported by authoritative research and theory.
Sabatier describes the importance of complexity perception and presumption in policy analysis:

These factors make policy theory a complex undertaking, because there are so many participants and points of view supported by selective research that is used to support various points of view. (Sabatier, 1999, p. 4)

He also identifies the challenges faced by policy analysts:

Work in the philosophy of science and social psychology has provided persuasive evidence that perceptions are almost always mediated by a set of presumptions. (Sabatier, 1999, p. 4)

This issue is important for a research study that examines policy implementation by the state department of education and local school districts. As indicated in Chapter 1, Spillane (2004) uses the analogy of the childhood game "Whisper down the Lane," where an initial story is passed on from participant to participant. The final participant generally hears a different version of the original story. The process of federal policy implementation involves hundreds of participants from many agencies, with deeply held values and points of view that are often research-based. Public policy typically involves public input in the form of public hearings. This input can have impact and lead to changes in the policy along the way. Policy implementation can be similarly affected by
different participant perceptions and presumptions at every level of the process.

Spillane's work is relevant to this study because he traces the implementation of a statewide science and mathematics initiative, and the misunderstandings that occur as the policy is implemented at different levels within the state educational system. The science and math initiatives were part of a broader national movement toward clearer standards in all areas of education, frequently referred to as the "Standards Movement." It has had great impact in special education, through the inclusion of special education students in core curriculum content standards and statewide assessment as mandated in IDEA 1997.

The policy implementation section of the literature review examines four types of policy implementation theories: the stages heuristic (Brewer, 1974), change and consensus, (Van meter and Van Horn, 1975), micro- and macro-implementation, (Berman, 1978) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework, (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). These theoretical frameworks seem promising in the study of policy implementation on the state and local school district levels.
The earliest attempts to develop a theory of policy development and implementation proposed a sequential process of policy development. The stages can be generally described as agenda setting, policy formulation, and legitimization, implementation, and evaluation. The importance of this staged approach was to provide a framework for research during the 1970s and 1980s. Sabatier comments that staged theory divided the complicated process into discrete stages. Laswell (1956) proposed the following seven-stage theory of policy development, viz.: intelligence > promotion > prescription > invocation > application > termination > appraisal.

The stages heuristic has been criticized because it is not causal. The discrete stages provide specific areas for study, but the research in each area does not necessarily inform other stages. The interrelationships are not developed. Multiple pieces of legislation in a particular policy area tend to be studied separately. Policies in different policy areas interact and there is not always a model piece of legislation. Problems are often reconceptualized during the policy development and implementation process, making a policy cycle ineffective.
Other, more descriptive, theoretical frameworks have replaced the stages heuristic, but stage theories are useful, albeit limited.

The state-level interviews that are part of the current study contain questions about the methods policymakers use to promote policy decisions and communication. This is accomplished through feedback loops and prescriptive practices that stage theories propose as a continuous process of policy formulation, from implementation to appraisal or assessment. From their description of certain activities, it possible to loosely identify which stage the district directors or state official is describing.

Brewer (1971) proposed a more practical sequential process, including: initiation> estimation> selection> implementation> evaluation> termination. Brewer is still proposing a sequential model, one that is more practical and applicable to state-level implementation.

**Change and Consensus**

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) observe that there is no commonly accepted definition of policy implementation, and propose an explicit definition:

Policy implementation encompasses those actions by public and private individuals (or groups) that are
directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions. This includes both one-time efforts to transform decisions into operational terms, as well as continuing efforts to achieve large and small changes mandated by policy decisions. (p. 447)

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) indicate that this definition requires an established set of policy goals and objectives, and prior policy decisions in the form of legislation, judicial ruling, and decree, with a commitment of funds to implement the policy. Without these legitimizing events, there is no policy, but only a policy proposal that must be accepted and funded before it can be implemented. Van Meter and Van Horn conclude: "Therefore, the study of implementation examines those factors that contribute to the realization or non-realization of policy objectives" (p. 448).

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) distinguish between policy implementation and policy impact: "The study of impact searches for the consequences of a policy decision" (p. 448). Essentially, impact studies are studies of outcomes, whereas implementation studies study the processes used by individuals and organizations to implement policy. The current study is an implementation study that asks one set of policy implementers, district directors of special education, about the processes they
use to implement federal policy, viz. IDEA 1997. Policy implementation can be contrasted with overall policy impact. Policy implementation clearly affects policy impact, but it is only one aspect that contributes to a policy's overall impact. Implementation may actually have little effect on the impact on the actual problem that gave rise to the policy. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) are clear that their theory of policy implementation is designed:

...to measure and explain what we prefer to call program performance (i.e., the degree to which anticipated services are actually delivered). We recognize that some services could actually be delivered without having any substantial impact on the problem to which the policy is supposed to be related. A policy may be implemented effectively but fail to have substantial impact because it was ill conceived or because of the circumstances. Hence, successful program performance may be a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for the attainment of positive ultimate outcomes. (p. 449)

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) propose a conceptual framework for the policy implementation process. Drawing from the literature on planned organizational change, they classify policies according to two distinguishing characteristics: the amount of change involved in implementation, and the degree of consensus among implementers. These two characteristics are affected by:
1. The degree to which the new policy deviates from previous policies—the greater the deviation, the more difficulty in carrying out the change.

2. The extent to which the implementing organization is already engaged in similar activities.

3. The degree of consensus or conflict over the goals and objectives of the change.

4. The degree to which the change is congruent with the goals and objectives of the implementing organization.

5. Relationship changes required to implement the policy.

6. The extent of subordinate participation in the policy decision.

With regard to Point 6, it should be noted that greater participation leads to higher staff morale, greater commitment, clarity about the nature of the change, and reduction of initial resistance to change. Subordinates tend to resist superordinate-mandated change.

Summarizing the Van Meter and Van Horn typology, the degree of change and the extent of goal consensus affect policy implementation. The higher the levels of required change and the lower the levels of goal consensus, the less effective the implementation is likely to be, and vice versa. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) make the assertion...
that "...goal consensus will have a greater effect on the policy implementation process than will the element of change" (p. 462).

Berman (1978) discusses the similar concept of consensus. Applying the Van Meter and Van Horn model to the implementation of assessment requirements of IDEA 1997 indicates a policy that extends some practices already carried out by IEP teams would be simpler to implement. For example, districts are already required to assess students with disabilities and indicate in the IEP the assessment measures that they will use to evaluate student progress. IDEA 1997 formalizes and structures the alternate assessment process by requiring states and districts to adopt policies that specifically formalize and standardize the assessment process. The IEP is presently required by law, but will require some modification in order to comply with the assessment provisions of IDEA 1997. Existing personnel familiar with the IEP process will implement the changes.

This combination of factors would seem to place the implementation of the assessment provisions of IDEA in the category of minor change, but it raises several implementation questions. Among these questions are:
• Do the implementers view the assessment changes as minor?
• Is there consensus among school districts as to the value or importance of these changes?
• What is the extent of consensus among implementers within school districts?

The current study examines the issue of how district directors of special education achieve a degree of consensus.

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) include six variables linking policy and performance. These variables can facilitate performance to a greater or lesser degree. For example, resource availability can facilitate or hinder performance. The first variable is policy standards and objectives, sometimes referred to as performance indicators. These variables assess the extent to which a policy has been implemented.

The second variable is the influence of resource appropriation and availability that affect the implementation of federal policy.

The third variable is inter-organizational communication and enforcement activities related to the clear communication of performance standards' goals and
objectives. Implementers must have a clear understanding of what they will be expected to accomplish. Berman (1978) describes this process in terms of the multiple levels of understandings that must be developed to effectively implement a federal policy. Enforcement activities, including monitoring results and compliance activities, are necessary in the Van Meter and Van Horn theory, because these activities increase the likelihood that the performance indicators will be met. Berman goes further by indicating that in the absence of activities such as compliance monitoring, policies may be implemented piecemeal or not at all, depending on factors present in the implementing agency.

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) cite technical assistance provided by superior agencies, and positive and negative sanctions as follow-up or enforcement activities, as means of gaining compliance. Federal funding tied to large-scale program participation among states and districts is also cited as an incentive that may improve policy compliance. Soft dollars in the form of support services, staff loans, and research assistance are cited as effective incentives to states and districts to elicit compliance with federal policy initiatives. Further
examples of compliance incentives include statements of assurance progress reporting, accounting, required planning activities, written plans, and corrective action activities. Financial sanctions include withholding part or all of the funding for non-compliance. The federal bureaucracy rarely withholds funds. Federal audits and required accurate accounting of federal dollars are common tools employed by the federal bureaucracy to compel compliance by states and school districts.

The fourth variable concerns the characteristics of implementing agencies, which are important to the current study. Some relevant district and state characteristics are described in the Method Chapter.

The fifth variable, economic, social, and political conditions, affects implementers; this is particularly true at the local level. There may be differences in the responses of directors from districts in different socioeconomic areas.

The sixth variable is the disposition of implementers. This is similar to the concept of beliefs and values.

**Micro- and Macro-Implementation**

Berman (1978) expands on the work of Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), but his can still be seen as a top-down theory
with modifications, such as the elements of macro- and
micro-implementation. Berman's (1978) policy implementation
theory refers to the multiple levels of understandings that
must be developed to effectively implement a federal policy
such as IDEA 1997. Implementation requires a series of
decisions and interpretations, as the policy is
communicated to and adopted by each level in the
implementation process.

Berman (1978) describes casual dependence between
different levels as a policy is implemented:

In a federal system, there usually is a temporal or
causal dependence on those organizations in a sector
that are responsible for implementing a policy. The
policy passes through the process and is implemented
by various subgroups. The output of one implementing
organization becomes the input for other
organizations. The final implemented program, the
policy's outcome, depends on these passages.

The problem in a loosely coupled structure is, of
course, that each passage creates difficulties and
uncertainties: the more passages, the more problems. Most
important, each passage transforms the input, as we will
discuss below. (p. 166)

Berman discusses a series of linked passages typical
of federal policy initiatives:
These linked passages—from policy decision to government program, from program to local project adoption, from adoption to implemented local practice, and from practice to local outcomes—represent basic types of coupling discussed in the literature. (p.167)

Berman (1978) hesitates to call the passages steps in a process, arguing that the process does not "proceed in a step-like fashion." The passages define and redefine the policy until the policy becomes the final implemented program or the policy's outcome.

Berman (1978) discusses the concept of ambiguity in intention. The enabling legislation, such as IDEA 1997, is partially clarified when the regulations relating to that legislation are promulgated; memoranda and position papers prepared by OSERS and the Office of Special Education Programs further clarify the intent of the law. An OSERS memorandum clarifying and answering frequently asked questions regarding the implementation of the assessment provisions of IDEA 1997 is an example of a policy clarification by a federal agency (Heumann & Warlick, 2000). In effect, agencies such as the US Department of Education and its subordinate agencies, such as OSERS, must take a piece of legislation or federal policy and translate that policy into a program that makes that policy subject to mutual adaptation or co-optation by the administrative
agencies (states and districts) that are responsible for final implementation. Similarly, states and districts clarify policy for districts and, finally, the IEP Team translates and incorporates the policy into the development of the IEP. The case manager has the additional responsibility to monitor its implementation with oversight from the district director of special education.

Berman (1978) discusses the local adoption of projects, indicating that slippage may occur between "programmatic guidelines and local response." This can occur between federal agencies and state agencies, as well as between state agencies, local education agencies, and the IEP team. Purely voluntary projects may not be adopted at all if compliance is voluntary; however, federal programs frequently come with strings attached. The strings may be financial, and the local agency may symbolically adopt the project or adopt a project that is only loosely related to the federal intent.

Slippage can be viewed in terms of compliance and consonance related to goal discrepancies. Consonance between federal, state, and local programs directly affects the degree of slippage; when there is a great deal of consonance between federal, state, and local programs,
compliance levels tend to be high. Slippage tends to be greater when programs are symbolically adopted or adopted piecemeal by state and local education agencies. The influence and the authority of the federal government also affect both slippage and whether the federal agency is willing to implement monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Berman (1978) cautions that the mere adoption of a project does not necessarily indicate implementation that is compliant with the original federal project. The term mutation has been defined as "...the adaptation of a project to its local organizational goal setting during implementation...It suggests that the more susceptible projects are to unique adaptations in their local setting, the less influence the "input" from a government program may have on locally implemented practices or their outcomes" (p. 171).

Generally, it can be said that macro-implementation takes place within a loosely coupled structure and involves four passages from policy decision to local outcomes: from policy decision to government program, from program to local project adoption, from adoption to implemented local practice, and from practice to local outcomes. Mutation occurs as different levels of the bureaucracy adopt the
policy. Berman indicates that the most important of the four passages is the transition to micro-implementation, which depends on local delivery.

Berman (1978) observes, "...the faithful execution of government programs typically requires changes in the standard operating procedures that define delivery organizations" (p. 172). Berman further observes that organizational members often adapt to demands for change in unpredictable ways. This variation and unpredictability of reaction by members of micro-organizations is at the heart of the problem of micro-implementation. Berman describes a process he calls "a mutual adaptation between the project and the organizational setting." Local practices are affected by the project and the implementing organization. Simultaneous to the project data adaptation or mutation is organizational adaptation that can be defined as follows: "...what happens to a project depends not only on a project and organizational characteristics, but also on what happens to the organization because of the project and because of the way the project is implemented" (p. 173).

Berman (1978) describes the sequence of decisions that are made on the local level as the "path of micro-implementation." He further observes: "The particular
micro-implementation path that is followed depends on the interplay of the project with the local organizational setting" (p. 174).

Berman (1978) also describes three institutional characteristics of local delivery systems. The first "consists of the continuing interactions over time between professional deliverer and a recipient of the services" (p. 175). This characteristic is present in the implementation of IDEA 1997 in the relationship between parents and professionals on the IEP team. The parents come to the IEP Team meeting as representatives of their child, unless the child is able to participate in the meeting.

The second characteristic of the local delivery system is the issue of "which output should be measured, how they should be measured, or indeed whether they are measurable at all..." (p. 175). In terms of the assessment provisions of IDEA 1997, this second characteristic is an issue that must be resolved by the parents and the professionals who participate in an IEP Team meeting. The output (the IEP) reflects the accommodations, compromises, and the consensus of the entire IEP team.

The third characteristic of service delivery organizations is that they are "open" to their local
environments. Berman gives the following example: "...decisions by administrators in public schools are never the last word; they can be modified, compromised, or reversed by school boards, whose composition varies over time and whose members are subject to special interest groups, anxious parents, and their own political ambitions" (p. 176). This characteristic can have an effect on IEP implementation as the availability of resources change, and guidelines and district policy are developed. While IDEA 1997 and its regulations, clarifications, and management by the US Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs is highly monitored, the local education agencies can and do incorporate and modify policy according to conditions in the school system.

Berman (1978) describes three phases of micro-implementation. They are mobilization, deliverer implementation, and institutionalization. The first phase, which Berman calls mobilization, is differentiated from other terms, such as initiation, selection, or adoption, because the term mobilization incorporates the political and bureaucratic activities associated with this phase of micro-implementation. Berman also discusses a component of the mobilization phase he calls planning, and makes the
point that the planning process may generate or discourage support within the entire delivery organization. This, according to Berman and the literature in this area, indicates the importance of broad participation in planning in order to generate commitment and the importance of coalition building and bargaining in order to secure the commitments of bureaucratic managers.

The second phase of micro-implementation is deliverer implementation. The third phase, described by Berman (1978), is the process of institutionalization of the policy or practice. Berman observes, "Effective implementation does not guarantee institutionalization." Institutionalization is necessary for the long-run effect of a policy, which Berman describes as a "cycle of decisions by managers to routinize the implemented practice so that it becomes incorporated into organizational procedures." The common IEP format used by school districts is an example of an institutionalized practice. "These decisions are similar to the adoption decision in the sense that they turn on local bureaucratic and political consideration...these authoritative decisions by local managers are like everything else in the complex
world of implementation, not self-executing; they too must be carried out by the delivers.” (Berman 1978, p. 178-179)

Summarizing Berman’s work to develop a framework to describe the process of policy implementation, Berman (1978) identifies certain concepts, including: “macro-and micro-implementation, loose coupling, implementation passages, mutation, mutual adaptation, and the phases of micro-implementation—that reflect current research and may contribute to the development of a framework” (p. 179). Berman distinguishes micro-implementation and macro-implementation, observing that differences arise from their institutional setting. He makes the following distinction: “micro-implementation is a local delivery organization” as opposed to the macro-implementation that occurs on a much higher level.

In this discussion of Berman’s (1978) work, I have identified several instances where Berman’s concepts may be helpful in understanding some of the participants’ responses to the issue of micro-implementation. This is important, because a study of district implementation of IDEA 1997 is, in fact, a study of micro-implementation on the local levels and may be understood within the context of a framework such as Berman’s that takes into account
many of the processes district directors of special education undertake in order to implement federal policy. The method section of this proposal details the qualitative research that is used to gain insight into this issue.

**The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)**

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) is one of the more recent theories that propose a coalition framework to explain much of current policy implementation. The current study of the implementation of federal policies such as IDEA 1997 and NCLB lend themselves to this theory because there are consensus-building components. This is especially true on the state level, given the political nature of special education policy implementation, involving multiple constituencies such as parents, advocacy groups, local districts, and the multi-tiered state bureaucracy.

ACF theory is based on five basic premises identified in the literature on traditional policy implementation, but emphasizes "the role of technical information on public policy." Given the technical aspects of special education policy implementation, the five premises of this theoretical framework have relevancy. These premises are:

1. technical information
2. longer timeframe
3. subsystems
4. multiple levels
5. implicit theories

Sabatier's first premise, technical information, predicts that complex policy decisions require an increasing degree of technical information, particularly in the area of funding. Sabatier (1999) comments that, "Many legislators want to have some knowledge of the severity of the problem and the probable benefits and costs of the proposed statutory or budgetary solutions before they impose those costs." He concludes that there has been an increase in the use of technical-analysis services for policymakers.

The second premise of ACF theory is that policy change and implementation take time, in some cases a decade or more, to complete a cycle to formulate, implement, and reformulate. All levels of the policy implementation process need the necessary time to initiate, evaluate, and reconfigure implementation strategies used by individuals on various levels of the process. Berman also discusses the interrelationships of different levels in the process.
The third premise concerns the subsystems or groups involved in the policy implementation process. Sabatier (1999) sees these subgroups involved in the policy problem as the most useful unit of study, and describes them in terms of subsystems and individuals, as opposed to larger governmental units and programs. One usually finds a multitude of programs initiated at different levels of government that local actors seek to utilize in pursuit of their own goals. Sabatier cites the work of Hjern, Hanf, and Porter (1978); Hjern and Porter (1981); and Sabatier (1986) to support this assertion (p.118).

The fourth ACF argument consists of two assertions. The first is that the traditional conceptualization of policy development and implementation should include journalists, researchers, and policy analysts, because they are instrumental in dissemination and evaluation of policy issues. In the context of this study, state education program development specialists are involved in policy analysis at the state level when they write drafts of proposed policies and provide input to higher-level policy makers. Secondly, Sabatier (1999) suggests the ACF process includes actors from all levels in the process:

Two decades of policy implementation research have conclusively demonstrated that sub-national
implementing officials have substantial discretion in deciding exactly how a national policy gets translated into thousands of concrete decisions in very diverse local situations. (p. 119)

The fifth premise is that subgroups and individuals have implicit theories of policy implementation. These are similar to the belief systems that participants bring to the policy implementation process. The current study looks at this premise with interview questions concerning the preferred strategies state education officials and local directors of special education use when addressing policy implementation issues. The five premises of ACF theory are summarized in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premise</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Information</td>
<td>1. Complex policy decisions require an increasing degree of technical information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer Timeframe</td>
<td>2. Policy change and implementation takes time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsystems</td>
<td>3. Subsystems and individuals, as opposed to larger governmental units and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Levels</td>
<td>4. Includes actors from all levels in the process and a wider array of participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Theories</td>
<td>5. Subgroups and individuals have implicit theories of policy implementation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The five premises can be seen in the descriptions of the four levels of policy implementation related to IDEA 1997. The following chart describes the federal, state, district, and IEP Team implementation responsibilities. An interesting aspect of these stages is the power and autonomy of the IEP Team. When special education legislation was passed, decisions regarding individual programs were individualized and left in the hands of the local-district IEP Teams. When IDEA was re-authorized, the IEP Team retained that autonomy in determining the student's appropriate assessment. The work of the IEP teams, under the direction of the local director of special education, is central to the current study because of the district's key role and autonomy. Related ACF premises are indicated in bold type. Table 4 includes IDEA 1997 stages of implementation and decision responsibilities in IDEA 1997 with the related ACF premises indicated in bold type.
Table 4
IDEA 1997 Stages of Implementation and Decision Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Federal Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The federal policymakers issue guidelines for the extent and frequency of special education assessment, develop federal regulations regarding assessment provisions of IDEA 1997, and broad guidelines for participation in regular assessments by special needs students, assessment accommodations, and the development of alternate assessment by the IEP Team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Technical Information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal policymakers also prepare guidelines for the public reporting of results. The Federal Office of Special Education Programs works with other agencies to develop a set of regulations that specify the requirements for implementing IDEA 1997.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Subsystems and Multiple Levels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finally, the federal policymakers provide ongoing technical assistance to states, districts, and the public on the issue of assessment requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Technical Information).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal policymakers and implementers have to decide how to communicate and effectively implement IDEA 1997 in the areas outlined above.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The State Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State policymakers issue guidelines for school districts within their states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Subsystems).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These guidelines are based on the state's interpretation of the federal guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Implicit Theories).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most states have developed core content standards as a basis for statewide assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Technical Information).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States such as New Jersey developed, but have now abandoned, a set of Core Content Standards for Students with Severe Disabilities. When the federal guidelines are very specific, the state guidelines tend to closely resemble the federal guidelines; however, there is variation from state to state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Subsystems).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States decide how to publicly report the scores of all students. States develop guidelines and provide technical assistance for accommodated and alternate assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Technical Information).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Department of Education officials must make decisions and rules regarding the implementation of IDEA 1997 in the areas outlined above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Multiple Levels, Implicit Theories, Subsystems).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The District Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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District policymakers further interpret the state and federal guidelines for use in their districts (Subsystems). Again, interpretation is affected by the specificity of the state and federal guidelines (Implicit Theories). Districts decide how to report assessment results for all students within the state compliance guidelines. Like the state, districts provide technical assistance to parents. District directors of special education assign Case Managers and other members who have evaluated the student to IEP Teams (Technical Information). District administrative personnel must decide how the district will implement IDEA 1997 in the areas outlined above and develop appropriate district-wide policies (Implicit Theories).

The IEP Team Level

The IEP Team (Subsystem) is the final stage in this process. The Team determines (1) the specific educational program the student will follow; (2) how the student’s progress will be measured; and (3) any related services the student will receive (Technical Information). The Team decides the extent the student will participate in assessment, based on the educational program they develop (Implicit Theories). Students may participate in regular assessments with or without accommodations, or may participate in alternate assessments developed by the Team. IEP Teams have wider latitude when making decisions regarding individual students. Relying on guidelines from higher levels, the Team must comply with the law, but is generally unencumbered by higher levels in determining the appropriate assessment plan for each student (Multiple Levels).

There have been several attempts to categorize the large body of policy implementation literature. As previously discussed, Sabatier [SF2] (1999) identifies five important characteristics and reviews a number of theories according to these criteria. The matrix that follows was designed as an organizing framework for analyzing policy
implementation in this study. This matrix is particularly suited to the analysis of the implementation of standards-based and assessment policies that are the focus of this study. The matrix is the basis for the hypotheses that arise from research question 3: "Does policy implementation theory explain the implementation of standards and standards-based assessment policies?" The matrix identifies the concepts that comprise the organizing framework, which is designed to link findings and theory.

The concepts are not all-inclusive. The identified concepts relate to the study of standards-based education and assessment of students with special needs. Other policy implementation researchers may find different concepts to be more relevant.

Policy implementation theories reviewed for this study have been organized into eight major concepts, with subthemes characteristic of many policy implementation theories. Some of the terminology used by policy implementation theorists identifies a distinction without a significant difference. The following concepts distilled from the literature review will be used in the data analysis and conclusions drawn from the findings (see Table 5, next page).
Table 5
Eleven Hypotheses Based on the Eight General Concepts of Policy Implementation Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Policy Implementation Concept</th>
<th>Related Policy Implementation Concepts</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Policy Development Activities      | - Degree of Constituent Stakeholder Involvement  
  - Efforts to Gain Acceptance  
  - Compromise and Adaptation to Conditions | 1. Respondents will indicate that the extent of stakeholder involvement affected successful policy implementation.  
  2. Respondents will indicate that the extent of compromise and adaptation affected successful policy implementation. |
| 2. Legitimizing Events                | - Enabling Legislation  
  - Federal and State Policy and Procedure  
  - Executive Order  
  - Regulations | 3. Respondents will indicate that the federal enabling legislation and specific regulations affected successful policy implementation. |
| 3. Policy Characteristics             | - Complexity  
  - Nature and Degree of Change  
  - Extent of Deviation from Previous Policies | 4. Respondents will indicate that the complexity and nature of the change and the extent of its deviation from previous policies affected successful policy implementation. |
| 4. Time Frames                        | - Mandated Long-term or Short-term Timelines | 5. Respondents will indicate that the implementation timeline affected successful policy implementation. |
| 5. Participant Characteristics       | - Type of Organizational Structure  
  - Internal Consensus  
  - Lines/Effectiveness of Communication  
  - Amount of Resources  
  - Experience/Expertise | 6. Respondents will indicate that the degree of internal consensus, effectiveness of lines of communication, amount of resources, and implementer experience and expertise affected successful policy implementation. |
| 6. Participant Interface Interaction of Various Levels | - Extent of Mutual Agreement/Consensus  
  - Degree of Organizational Congruity  
  - Loosely/Tightly Coupled Systems  
  - Mutual Adaptation  
  - Slippage | 7. Respondents will indicate that amount of mutual agreement and adaptation, consensus, and inter-organizational congruity affected successful policy implementation.  
  8. The respondents will indicate that there is a limited amount of slippage in the implementation of IDEA and NCLB. |
| 7. Enforcement Monitoring, Oversight, and Technical Assistance | - Monitoring and Oversight  
  - Formative and Summative Evaluations  
  - Progress Reporting  
  - Assessment  
  - Technical Assistance  
  - Dissemination of Technical Information  
  - Training  
  - Self-Study  
  - Policy Directives and Clarifications | 9. Respondents will indicate that substantial technical support was needed due to the complexity of the policy.  
  10. Respondents will indicate that consistent and regular oversight and monitoring were needed as a result of the complexity of the policy. |
| 8. Levels and Degrees of Implementation | - Monitoring and Oversight  
  - Formative and Summative Evaluations  
  - Progress Reporting  
  - Assessment  
  - Technical Assistance  
  - Dissemination of Technical Information  
  - Training  
  - Self-Study  
  - Policy Directives and Clarifications | 11. Respondents will indicate that the complexity of the policy and the number of levels involved in its implementation affected successful implementation. |
Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

The study employed three methods of qualitative research: in-depth interviews, fieldwork in the form of direct observation, and document review and analysis. In-depth interviews with state and local officials and observation at meetings of a statewide committee on alternate assessment generated the bulk of the data collected for this study. Document review provided triangulation with the interview responses, and the opportunity to compare and contrast the written assessment policies and the assessment policies as implemented by the district. Primary documents were reviewed, including federal legislation (IDEA and NCLB), the state monitoring report, the state self-assessment, and written communications from state officials and district directors.

Interviews were conducted with district directors of special education in six public school districts and two private special services sites with alternate assessment coordinators, and state department of education officials in one state. Fieldwork involved my attendance and direct observation of meetings with a statewide alternate
proficiency assessment committee composed of public and private school directors of special education.

Site Selection

The study was conducted in a northeastern state. Six local school districts located in one county were selected according to the grade levels served: K-12 or 9-12, socioeconomic level—lower to middle, number and percentage of classified students, number of students, location. All districts included students of every special education classification and included grades K-12. The resulting sample included one urban district, and five suburban districts of various sizes and socioeconomic levels. The district director of special education from each site was interviewed for this study.

Two private special services sites were selected, based on the large number and variety of students with disabilities who participated in alternate assessment. These sites drew from a wide variety of school districts, including those that participated in this study.

District characteristics are presented in Tables 6 and 7.
Table 6
District Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Census Data</th>
<th>Locate</th>
<th>Enrollment/ # Of Schools</th>
<th>Types of Schools</th>
<th>Classified Students</th>
<th>Socio-Economic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Urban/Suburb</td>
<td># School</td>
<td>Elem</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River City</td>
<td>79,948</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Regional</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1466</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashburn SD</td>
<td>25,763</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>4,079</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomtown SD</td>
<td>6,110</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1234</td>
<td>3</td>
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Table 7
Private Site Statistics

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Census Data</th>
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<th>Enrollment/ # Of Schools</th>
<th>Types of Schools Sp. Ed.</th>
<th>Classified Students</th>
<th>Socio-Economic</th>
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<td>Mid</td>
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The names of participants, the state, and districts are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection: Interviews

Onsite, in-person interviews were the primary method for data collection, following the recommendations for structured interviews in Denzin and Lincoln (1998). Pilot interviews were conducted with two experienced special-education directors from two suburban K-12 school
districts. Interviewees were presented with questions in an interview protocol and asked to respond as they would in an actual interview situation. Their responses were tape recorded, as they would be during the actual interviews. Following each question and response, interviewees were asked to comment on the questions, based on their perception of clarity, understandability and specificity, validity, and relevance to the topic. The tapes of their responses were then transcribed.

The pilot interviews indicated that a strict interview protocol limited the scope of the participant’s answers. Participants reported that they had additional comments but were unsure whether they should expand their responses. As the result of this feedback, questions were broadened and follow-up questions were developed for use if necessary. This change elicited more responsive answers.

Shared concerns about clarity, ambiguity, grammar, style, and relevance were noted, and those items were revised. Any colloquial or regional-specific references, as well as potentially unfamiliar technical terms, were identified and eliminated. The directors were candid in their responses and made numerous constructive suggestions. Each director offered to participate in the actual study,
but it was decided that their familiarity with the interview protocol and my follow-up questions concerning the format and content of the questions would influence their responses.

Given the expertise of the participants in the field and the complex nature of the interview issues, face-to-face interviewing is the appropriate method of data collection. Marshall and Rossman (1999) cite several strengths of interviewing as a data collection method germane to the current study, including the following:

- Fosters face-to-face interactions with participants
- Useful for uncovering participants' perspectives
- Facilitates immediate follow-up for clarification
- Useful for describing complex interactions
- Provides for flexibility in formulating a hypothesis
- Provides context information
- Facilitates analysis, validity checks, and triangulation. (p. 134)

Interview questions were divided into six general areas: accommodated performance assessment, alternate standards development, alternate performance assessment, public accountability, inclusion of students with disabilities, and public reporting of results.

The questions were designed as guidelines. The interviews were intended to be relaxed, confidential, and open-ended, permitting the respondent to feel a level of
comfort that would enable him or her to respond candidly about the assessment process. The questions were designed to help ensure that each respondent addressed all issues.

Directors of special education from the six sampled districts were interviewed to determine the district policies and practices regarding assessments. Districts are in a unique position regarding the assessment of students with special needs, because the IEP Teams make the determination of which assessment will be used. The director of special education was able to articulate the district's position regarding this issue. The directors provided information regarding the implementation of the assessment provisions from a broader perspective, as the district must work together with the state, and the director is the link in this area.

An area of interest was the district/state relationship in the assessment of students with special needs. The directors consistently reported that most of their students participating in alternate assessment were placed in out-of-district schools. In an effort to gather data on the issue of alternate assessment, I added interviews with two assessment coordinators: one from a private school for children with special needs, and one
from a public out-of-district school for children with special needs. The protocol was based on each of the four research questions for the study.

Two senior officials in the state department of education were interviewed regarding the department’s role in the special education assessment process. They are identified as Mr. Smith and Mr. Cole. They were questioned about the development of assessments for statewide use, the development of the core curriculum content standards for severely disabled students, the alternate assessment of students in the state, and the technical assistance the state provides to school districts: What does the state expect of districts? Has there been compliance? How have the state’s efforts at technical assistance been received by districts?

Taken together, the interviews were designed to examine policy implementation from the state to the local level, and the interaction of actors at these two levels.

The assessment coordinators are the closest to the policy implementation level. The interview protocol was modified slightly to encourage the assessment coordinators to reflect their daily work with students, and to encourage
the state officials to reflect their broader policy perspective.

Data Documentation

Data documentation consisted of field notes, transcriptions of audiotaped interviews, and hand-recorded, coded interview response notes. Data documentation included a review of documents maintained by the state, including copies of memoranda, notes, minutes, reports, and letters, policies, and procedures. Documents, (for example, interoffice memoranda, and district or state policies or notes) were catalogued by type and site. All interviews were recorded and extensive field notes were compiled during each interview. Selected vignettes were identified for possible presentation with the findings to illustrate particular themes and common responses. Key quotes were identified. Documents were coded and cross-referenced to relevant areas of the current study.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) discuss the process of identifying themes and concepts that begin to emerge as the data is analyzed. Once these tentative themes and concepts are identified, they will either be supported or refuted as more data is analyzed. Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to this process as testing emergent understandings. Negative
instances of the current understanding are used to modify the current understandings. This process was used to analyze the data in this study.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) also describe the process of searching for alternative explanations. While alternate explanations may exist, the data analysis will demonstrate why the explanations offered in the current study are the most plausible. Ideally, the data demonstrate a logical interrelationship among the assertions and their relationship to previous research and their implications for future research.

**Data Analysis**

Following the suggestions of Marshall and Rossman (1999), data organization and analysis was organized into the following six phases:

(a) Organizing the data; (b) generating categories, themes and patterns; (c) coding the data; (d) testing the emergent understandings; (e) searching for alternative explanations; and (f) writing the report. (p. 152)

**Organizing the Data**

The interviews generated voluminous data, due to the number of questions and the factors being studied. Responses were analyzed in relation to policy implementation concepts such as macro-and micro-
implementation, loose coupling, implementation passages, mutation, and mutual adaptation. Guba (1978) comments on the issue of generating categories, themes, and patterns, suggesting that categories are drawn from the comments of the participants and that the patterns of comments should be consistent within the data, yet different enough from one another to justify separate categories.

Marshall and Rossman further note:

Categories are generated through prolonged engagement with the data [citing Patton (1990)] who indicated that this: "describes the process of inductive analysis where the salient categories emerge from the data. The researcher may use "indigenous typologies" (p. 306) or "analyst-constructed typologies" (pp. 393-400) to reflect the understandings expressed by the participants. Indigenous typologies are those created and expressed by the participants and generated through analyses of the local use of language. (p.154)

Data Sorting

I used a modified version of the following data-sorting process described by Rubin and Rubin (1995). They describe coding data into categories as "...the process of grouping interviewees' responses that bring together the similar idea and concepts, or themes you have discovered, or steps or stages in a process." In the current study, responses to each item were categorized in accordance with each interviewee's responses.
The following is a brief overview of how the interview data were sorted. Comments and utterances from the interview transcripts were individually sorted according to frequency of response, forming the basis for a tentative list of themes consistent with the research and interview questions. This process roughly identified areas the respondents felt were important.

This list of tentative themes was then used as the basis for a master matrix designed to further sort and organize the responses. The left column of the matrix listed potential items for analysis and the top row contained headings with the titles of the state respondents and the names of districts. Each cell contained representative quotes and/or a brief summary of the response for that individual. Responses that did not fit a particular tentative theme were the basis for creating a new tentative theme. Additional tentative themes were added to the original tentative themes as each transcript was reformatted onto the master matrix.

Once the master matrix was completed, the cells were reviewed and collapsed into the major theme and sub-themes, such as accommodation, assessment, and standards-based education.
Chapter 4: State Findings

"I am from the State and I am here to help you." There is an element of disdain in the often quoted comment attributed to an unknown state DOE staff member who visited a district and allegedly said: "I am from the State and I am here to help you". It is said in a mocking tone as if it were an oxymoron. Whether is apocryphal or was actually said, it summarizes the attitude many district level staff have toward the state and the challenge the

I present state findings before district findings because the state has wider latitude in setting and interpreting policy. The state also has regulatory authority over district policy, procedure, and compliance, as it establishes the rules and regulations for districts to follow. District responses are directly influenced by the way the state implements policy.

Since the state began the process of implementing the assessment provisions of IDEA and later NCLB, school districts have had to develop implementation plans. A number of the school district officials interviewed for this study indicated that they expected wider accountability as they reviewed the requirements of IDEA 1997 and NCLB. They reported that their expectations were
confirmed when they attended information meetings sponsored by the state DOE. This occurred about the same time that the state DOE was assembling a statewide special education self-assessment steering committee to conduct the statewide special education self-assessment during the 1999-2000 school year.

Among other areas, the steering committee recommended performance requirements in the area of assessment, such as specific indicators of performance, data sources, and an analysis summary. The committee recommended that the DOE include alternate proficiency standards and assessment as an approved type of assessment. The committee also recommended broader assessment modifications for students with disabilities participating in statewide assessments.

As the state began to incorporate the recommendations into policy and procedure, districts gradually began revising their policies and procedures to include more students with disabilities in assessment.

In 2000 the state DOE began writing a set of core curriculum content standards for students with severe disabilities (CCCSSSD) with input from local education agencies and out-of-district providers. These standards were the basis for developing assessments for students who
could not participate in regular assessments. The state DOE subsequently abandoned the separate standards for students with severe disabilities in 2004 and assessed all students on the statewide common core curriculum standards. The state DOE assessment contractor developed an alternate proficiency assessment (APA) for students with severe disabilities, based on portfolios of student work. The state DOE introduced the APA in December 2001. State officials indicated that they introduced the APA in response to IDEA 1997, but the current study found that some districts have questioned the department's reasoning that federal legislation required all students to participate in statewide standards and assessments. The state officials indicated that they met with resistance when some districts argued that the alternate standards afforded more flexibility in assessing students with severe disabilities.

The state DOE established policies and procedures for districts to follow, including assessment procedures for administering statewide assessments to students with disabilities with criteria for acceptable modifications and accommodations. The state DOE, in conjunction with its assessment contractors, established performance indicators
for students with severe disabilities to assess the evidence presented in individual student portfolios of students participating in alternate proficiency assessments. The DOE created a statewide rubric to classify portfolios based on pre-established criteria for acceptable evidence that a student had demonstrated mastery.

The State Organizing Structure

It is important to understand the structure of the state DOE and how it develops, monitors, provides technical assistance, and enforces compliance with regulations. The state findings provide some insight into the processes and strategies that state officials use to implement standards-based education and assessment policy.

The Division of Student Services includes the Office of Special Education Programs. The state defines the role of the Office of Special Education Programs and the office implements state and federal special education laws and regulations. It ensures equal opportunity for students with special needs. It provides guidance, technical assistance, policy and procedures for districts to follow when implementing special education programs. It provides these services to both parents and districts. It is also responsible for overseeing the distribution and fiscal
monitoring of federal special education funds for students ages 3-21.

One of its most important functions concerns the monitoring of special education programs in the state. It operates centers to provide technical assistance and resources to districts and parents. The office also resolves issues through mediation and ensures that cases of due process are appropriately referred to the judicial system, to ensure that the right to due process is protected in special education cases. It monitors compliance with state and federal law. Finally, it ensures that students are educated in the least restrictive environment by training district personnel in IEP development program planning and the general provision of services for students with disabilities.

The Division of Educational Programs and Assessment includes the Office of Evaluation and Assessment. The office administers the statewide testing system, which includes standardized testing in all grades 3-8. The office also administers the alternate proficiency assessments designed for students with severe disabilities who cannot participate in regular standardized testing. It ensures that all assessments are aligned to the CCCS.
The State Policy Framework

The state DOE deals directly with the federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) that closely monitors states for compliance with federal regulation. State DOE provides direction to districts on policy implementation by monitoring, and providing oversight and technical assistance to districts.

The DOE Office of Special Education Programs monitors state performance in the area of standards-based education. The following review of the (OSEP) 2001 report of standards-based related indicators in the state was intended to bring the broader discussion of standards-based education to the state level and help to put the state performance into perspective. State officials interviewed for this study frequently referred to the report and to the state’s performance plan, submitted in response to the report, as evidence of the state’s efforts to address issues of accountability and standards-based reform.

The state has included the major provisions of IDEA in its own legislation. OSEP completed its monitoring report of the state in 2001. OSEP cited the state’s core curriculum content standards as an area of strength that clearly defines what the state expects students to know as...
they progress through the educational system. OSEP noted that the state's standards-based system includes all students, including students with disabilities. The state also provides a comprehensive system of statewide assessment to monitor student progress at grades 4, 8, and 12. The CCCS covers language arts literacy; mathematics; science; social studies; and health/physical education; visual and performing arts; and world languages. OSEP further added that, "There is a set of cross-content workplace readiness standards that must be integrated into all of the content areas." The CCCS drive the general education curriculum.

In its monitoring report, OSEP commented that the state recognized the needs of children with severe cognitive disabilities by modifying the standards by developing the CCCSSSD as a subset of the CCCS. OSEP viewed the CCCSSSD as the basis of IEP development for students with severe disabilities.

The state developed curriculum frameworks to assist local districts to teach to the CCCS. Teachers were trained in specific instructional activities to assist them in teaching to the standards. The state developed instructional adaptations as part of the curriculum.
frameworks to further assist teachers in adapting the frameworks to meet the needs of students with special needs. The report also notes that the state monitors the inclusion of CCCS and CCCSSSD in student IEPs.

Statewide participation rates were high in 1999-2000, exceeding 90% on all assessments, but the state did not report the performance of all students.

At the time of the report, the state was using progress on the goals and objectives as the basis for the evaluation of students with special needs. §300.139(a)(2)(ii) of IDEA mandated the assessment of all children. The state issued a request for proposals to develop an alternate assessment system for students with severe disabilities, which included pilot tests in 2001.

The state administrative code was amended and now includes specific criteria for students with disabilities to participate in the statewide assessments. The IEP Team may exempt a student from general statewide assessment when the child has not received instruction in the area to be assessed, or would be unable to complete any of the items in a particular area. In order to comply with federal guidelines, the exemptions have been limited to one percent of students from the district. The state findings have been
grouped according to major topics that emerged from the data analysis. Two state DOE officials identified in this study as, Mr. Smith and Mr. Cole, were interviewed in February 2006 and March 2006, respectively.

**Standards-Based Education**

Mr. Smith and Mr. Cole indicated that they accept the tenets of standards-based education, but find the implementation to be challenging. As one might expect, the state supports its own standards-based education practices that are articulated in the CCCS. It has moved from a separate set of standards for students with severe disabilities by eliminating the separate standards and aligning the standards for students with severe disabilities to the common set of standards. Some directors interviewed for this study were upset by this decision and argued for a separate set of standards. The APA coalition also favors some form of separate standards for the most severely disabled students. Mr. Cole and Mr. Smith, however, indicated that the instruction and assessment are now aligned with the standards.

In a speech before the state legislature on May 9, 2006, the state commissioner of education confirmed the state’s focus on improving instruction. She also cited...
the accountability provisions of NCLB, which has the goal of having every student proficient in math and language arts literacy by the year 2014. The commissioner noted that ten years ago, there were "no CCCS to guide teaching in the state’s classrooms." The commissioner also cited the changes that have come about as the result of IDEA: "These changes also emphasize access to the general education curriculum and programs for students with disabilities” (The State Department of Education Commissioner’s address to the state senate budget committee, May 9, 2006).

Mr. Smith further expanded on the commissioner’s idea that standards alignment affects teaching practice by raising the level of expectation:

We have students with severe cognitive disabilities doing more. You don’t need to sort colors and shapes when you are 17 years old. You can look at the standards and see what are the goals and say, “What is an age-appropriate activity for what they need?” You have your standards and you make your modifications so that you are aligned. It doesn’t mean that you expect students with severe disabilities to be doing trig, but if you are looking at math, you’re saying, “Okay, we’re going to look at numbers and we’re going to learn addresses. We’re going to focus on whatever it is, but you are still aligned.” You are still trying to move them forward and you have not said: “Oh, for these kids we do not have to do that. We can play with blocks or we can have them holding toy transistor radios.” I think there has been a big focus on looking at what teachers are doing.
Mr. Smith added the following candid comment about the majority of special needs students:

In addition, I say that the majority of kids are not cognitively disabled and should be getting the curriculum.

Mr. Cole expressed frustration with district directors and assessment coordinators who do not “get” that there can be no “meaningful assessment” without a common standard.

There are tensions between the position of the state DOE and some district directors, assessment coordinators, and the APA committee, over the issue of which students should be assessed using the common standard as the criteria. Mr. Cole took what he refers to as the special education “folk” to task on this issue, indicating that many educators do not realize that the standards-based assessments measure a body of information and that even if a student is assessed on only five percent of the information, that student is in the assessment pool.

Students with special needs may be assessed on a small part of the standard, but Mr. Cole was adamant: “They have to be assessed with a general assessment against the common standards—not something else.” Citing complaints that students are not prepared to answer many of the questions (“How can the student take a test where the student can’t
answer all of the items?”), Mr. Cole indicated he reminds district personnel that “the same problem exists for general education students—there are no guarantees of success.”

Assessment

The state officials indicated that they find major policy implementation issues surrounding required assessment. Mr. Smith was questioned about the major assessment policy issues facing special education policymakers in the DOE. He cited special education student test performance and the quality of special education instruction as major issues, indicating that when districts fail to meet their AYP because of the performance of students with special needs, the state has to decide how to help schools improve the quality of instruction and the performance of those students. Later in the interview, he acknowledged that districts are sometimes resentful when the state offers to help improve AYP for students with special needs. The state wrestles with this issue. (District resentment is clear in the district director responses discussed in Chapter 5.)
At another point in the interview, Mr. Smith made a similar comment about the importance of outcome-based education, indicating that the state is actively moving away from its traditional role of ensuring procedural compliance to one of improving student performance and addressing the issue of the quality of instruction. This response was consistent with the commissioner's May 9, 2006 speech before the State Senate Budget Committee.

Mr. Smith commented in March 2006 on the friction that sometimes occurs between the state and district level staff, indicating the need for standards-based assessment, and underscoring the importance of basing everything on standards because the standards define the content of the assessment.

Mr. Smith also argued for consistency, saying that an assessment should not contain anything that is not in a standard. He further indicated that a standard is a subset of a larger body of knowledge, and when assessment is used for accountability, the rules are stricter.

Friction sometimes occurs when district-level staffs want to exempt students with special needs from assessment, arguing that the assessment does not focus on what the student knows. Mr. Cole responded that it is a matter of
what the student should know and concluded that, "It's a matter of saying, 'What does he know?' out of a group of information; that's probably one of the hardest things to get some district-level personnel to understand."

There are other areas of friction between state and local educators. Mr. Cole expressed strong opinions about who should design and administer assessment. He acknowledged that teachers traditionally provide assessment and report results, and indicated that teachers have difficulty sharing this responsibility when their students are required to participate in standardized testing. Consequently, he further commented that teachers and district-level staff frequently request exemptions for their students with special needs. Mr. Cole's response to this has been, "Why shouldn't these students be in the mix, even if they are assessed on alternate proficiencies?" He indicated he suspects that some district-level educators see the APA as extra work, with little relevance to their teaching practice.

During its meetings, the APA Coalition Committee has argued for assessment based on the IEP. In its position paper submitted to the state board of education, the committee argued: "The APA's additional skill dimensions
frequently conflict with what child study teams prescribe in the students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP)"

Mr. Smith commented on this concept:

The teachers would rather have us look at the IEP and have the teacher sign off on whether the student achieved it, and that does not meet the federal standard. It can’t just be. They have to be comparable for this group of students.

Mr. Cole also dismissed the concept of non-standards-based assessments, bluntly stating that the proponents of using standardized tests that are not aligned to the CCCS "...do not understand the concept of standards-based testing or they do not want to understand it." He further suggested that the idea of standards-based assessment is difficult for special educators to understand because it is different from their training, which emphasizes individualization. Mr. Cole cited the need to train an eighteen-year-old to use the toilet without assistance: "This is an essential skill and everything else is superfluous unless this skill is taught." In other words, he is saying that district-level educators cannot teach everything, and they have to focus only on critical skills presumably covered in the standards.

It was clear from the interviews with state officials that the changing role of the state and its efforts to
improve AYP is a major point of contention between the state and local districts.

**Policy Development**

State officials agree with district directors that policy implementation should be an inclusive process, but reserve the right to make the final decisions. Mr. Smith provided a detailed overview of the process used to develop the APA, citing the work of the statewide APA Taskforce that included representatives from all of the constituencies. The DOE then reviewed the taskforce recommendations. He described a statewide advisory council for special education and noted that the individuals involved in each area provide the most appropriate recommendations.

Mr. Smith also indicated that the policy development process included input from several divisions and offices within the department. Regular participants on formal and informal work groups and committees include staff knowledgeable in special education. He noted that this helps by providing input about special education issues “up front,” before the test or assessment is introduced. There is a vetting process that includes internal committees, taskforces, and public input. There are IDEA and NCLB
advisory committees. Finally, Mr. Smith noted that no department or office could work alone on complex policy issues, such as the requirements of NCLB and IDEA. He described an informal network that included directors from different offices to address compliance (cross-collaboration). He also indicated that it was important to “verify that the department has a good structure to ensure cross-collaboration.”

Mr. Smith stressed the need for the Office of Special Education Programs to be involved in all areas. This is done by funding positions in other divisions, including the office of assessment.

Mr. Cole provided a policy implementation perspective from the point of view of an official who works directly with districts. He emphasized the importance of interdepartmental cooperation as well, particularly when developing and implementing policy.

When asked how the policy development process works, Mr. Cole indicated that it depended on the stage of policy development. White papers are often the beginning stage of a new policy. The Department of Education attempts to anticipate the implications of future policy. Once a policy is in place, the department addresses the following
questions: "Are we willing to say to the feds we need an extra year? Are we willing to take a penalty?" Apparently there is a "delicate balance" when the department decides it needs extra time to prepare for policy implementation. Mr. Cole stressed the importance of internal consensus building. Finally, he pointed with pride to the positive feedback the department receives from other states that have commented that the office of special education programs and the office of assessment work well together.

State officials indicated that they understand the district director and committee concerns about IDEA and NCLB, but argue that the current system is necessary to comply with those federal laws and the state's federally mandated performance plan. The frequency of these references indicates that the state bases many of its policy decisions on its interpretation of federal mandates, laws, and regulations. While this is more of an extrapolation from the findings, it is nonetheless important in light of the discussion of implementation theory.

Monitoring, Oversight, and Technical Assistance

State officials indicated that monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance are challenging, because the
policies such as IDEA and NCLB are complex and there is a local district mindset deeply rooted in past policy and practice, which resists change.

State officials explained that the state prepared districts for the forthcoming common standards by offering mandated and optional trainings. The state DOE, the testing contractor, and a major university developed training materials for the 2001-02 school year. The materials were intended to help districts understand the purpose of alternate assessment, determine which students qualified for APA, and understand the APA requirements. These and other training materials stated that they were designed to answer the three most frequently asked district questions: "How does this affect me?"; "What do I have to do?"; and "How can I do it most efficiently?"

Though there was considerable planning and training, state officials reported district level frustration with APA, monitoring, and oversight. While district directors were somewhat complimentary about the technical assistance provided by the state, the officials reported strong reaction by districts and expressed frustration with the districts by suggesting that they were "killing the messenger." Since Mr. Cole’s office often handles
complaints about the assessment system, he admitted to possibly having a skewed view as a result of hearing frequent complaints. He went on to report a backlog of some three hundred emails, indicating that local officials are having difficulty understanding and implementing assessment, and also indicated the department has often received e-mails that are critical of the system. In terms of monitoring, Mr. Cole made the following tongue-in-cheek comment about monitoring and oversight: “The stick—nobody ever likes the stick—monitoring.”

When asked about technical assistance and feedback, Mr. Cole said that the districts often blame the product and the assessment office, in particular, becomes a lightning rod for complaints. He defended the department by saying that issues are often the result of poor teaching, not the assessment: “The fact that we are not teaching the standards is the issue here, not the fact that it came out through an assessment.”

There are frequent complaints from districts about “teaching to the test,” Mr. Cole noted, adding that, “We are the messenger and the measurement.” This was an acknowledgement of the district perception that the department drives instruction by developing standards that
indicate what is to be taught and then measuring student progress and district performance on those standards.

The department offers eight weeks of training throughout the year. The staff from each state-operated county office attends the training sessions, along with district staffs. Mr. Cole indicated that even with extensive training, the department's county special education coordinators cannot always answer the variety of technical questions that arise when the state has to implement a complex policy such as IDEA 1997 or NCLB.

Summary of State Findings

The state is a complex bureaucracy that includes many divisions and offices. This chapter began with detailed descriptions of the Division of Student Services and the Office of Special Education Programs, followed by a description of the Division of Educational Programs and Assessment, and the Office of Evaluation and Assessment. These divisions and offices frequently interact on issues of standards and standards-based assessment.

The findings began with remarks by the State Commissioner of Education emphasizing the importance of standards and accountability in education. On the topic of standards-based education, I found that state education
officials accept the tenets of standards-based education, but find the implementation to be challenging. Officials argued for common standards for all students, stating that the instruction and assessment must be aligned with the standard.

On the topic of assessment, state officials identify major policy implementation issues surrounding required assessment. Mr. Smth cited special education student test performance and the quality of special education instruction as a major issue. He indicated that when districts fail to meet their AYP because of the performance of students with special needs, the state has to decide how to help schools improve instruction and the performance of those students.

Mr. Smith identified a major issue of change, indicating that the state is actively moving away from its traditional role of ensuring procedural compliance to one of improving student performance and addressing the issue of quality instruction.

State officials reported friction between proponents of the traditional special education emphasis on individualization and the state DOE, which is charged with implementing standards-based education assessment and
accountability. State officials understand the district director’s and committee’s concerns, but argue that the current system is necessary to comply with federal law. Both state respondents described some of the difficulty in helping district level staff understand that the state is legitimately a messenger proclaiming the need for standards-based education as well as the measurer of progress.

The issue of who should be held to the standards and who should be assessed is a major issue for the state and local districts. The APA committee argues that alternate proficiency assessment is flawed and not appropriate for some students with severe disabilities. The state officials counter with the argument that, by law, all children must be included in standards-based assessment. District directors of special education were very vocal on this issue.

State officials indicated that they are well aware of district officials who are arguing for a different standard for severely disabled students, but indicated that they were unlikely to adopt an alternate standard, arguing that NCLB and IDEA were clear in their intention to establish common standards.
State officials agree with district directors that policy implementation should be an inclusive process, but reserve the right to make the final decisions. The state officials indicated that they were effective in their effort to include many constituent groups in their policy planning and implementation and further indicated that this improved implementation. Stakeholders were identified and recruited to participate on policy development committees and taskforces in an effort to identify potential policy implementation issues. These opportunities for stakeholder involvement led to greater goal congruence and a high degree of participation.

State officials reported that monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance are challenging, because the policy is complex and there is a mindset deeply rooted in past policy and practice, generating resistance to change. Despite these challenges, there was general agreement among state officials and district directors of special education that the state was effective in its monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance. It is likely that this is related to the state's efforts to study the policy and carefully plan implementation activities.
Many of the issues articulated by state respondents can be predicted by implementation theory. This will be examined further in the policy implementation discussion in the conclusion.

The state findings confirm the complexity of implementing standards-based education and assessment in the area of special education. It is challenging to implement IDEA and NCLB because these laws involve a high degree of cooperation between the offices of special education programs and the office of evaluation and assessment. State officials indicated that they have been able to develop consensus and cooperation between these offices.

The state findings provide a context for interpreting the district findings presented in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: District Findings

The district-level data collected for this chapter are drawn from interviews with district directors of special education and assessment coordinators, as well as from my field observations at the APA committee formed by the statewide association of private special education providers.

All of the policies and procedures had been in place for at least two years before the interviews were conducted, giving the districts time to incorporate the new assessment requirements into their policies and procedures and to reflect on the issue of assessment of students with special needs. When asked about the changes that were necessary to ensure the inclusion of all students in assessment, district directors provided a variety of responses that ranged from few—if any—to extensive changes in policy and procedure.

The district-level findings have been grouped into five general areas:

1. Standards
2. Assessment
3. Curriculum and Instruction
4. Monitoring, Oversight, and Technical Assistance

5. Policies and Procedure

**Standards-Based Education**

Research on issues surrounding standards-based education policy is complicated, because the policy calls for major shifts in beliefs around how best to educate children with disabilities. There has been a gradual evolution in special education policy. Before IDEA 1997 and NCLB, special education policy focused on achieving access to public schooling for students with special needs. There was a shift in focus after the passage of IDEA 1997 to develop an inclusive system that included accountability and quality based on educational outcomes measured against common standards. *Educating One and All—Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Reform*, published by the National Research Council in 1997, clearly outlined this issue and anticipated other issues that have arisen from the implementation of IDEA 1997 and later NCLB. The interview responses from district directors of special education and the Private Schools Alternate Assessment Committee provide contemporary data and analysis of this shift in special education policy. This study found that special education directors accept the tenets of standards-
based education with reservations. Also, they were conflicted about whether to individualize standards (the CCCS) vs. individualize instruction (the IEP), and generally support some form of alternate standards for students with severe disabilities.

The directors accept the tenets of standards-based education, but are concerned about the issue of common standards such as the CCCS vs. individualized instruction (the IEP) for severely disabled students. All of the directors stressed the importance of applying standards to all students. When asked about the importance of standards-based education, district directors agreed that there was a need for such standards for all students. However, they frequently complained about the difficulty of implementing standards-based education and raised a number of concerns about the relevance of standards-based education for some severely disabled students.

The Director of Special Services from Ashburn Township, a suburban K-12 district, indicated that standards for students with special needs was long overdue:

Twenty-five years later, they're finally realizing that they're wrong and that the kids should be held to certain standards and then modified. It used to be their standards weren't even identified.
The director from River City, an urban district, however, was vocal in criticizing common standards in special education:

One size does not fit all in special education. Tests drive the curriculum into areas that are not relevant to meet the needs of urban students with minimal social skills. Use some skills measured on CCCS but design programs to meet the needs of students in special education.

When asked about the reasons behind standards-based reform, there was consensus that the system needed broad standards for most students. The common responses supporting the need for standards included references to the failure of special education to adequately prepare students for the workplace and college. There were frequent references to the federal enabling legislation (IDEA 1997 and NCLB) as a driving force behind higher standards. The director from Holland SD stated this succinctly: "Higher standards are driven by NCLB and IDEA."

The Director from the Beemerville SD gave a typical response, questioning whether the previous standards were effective in preparing students for work or higher education:

It's very clear that we were not preparing our students over the last several years to go out into the workforce to be adequately equipped with the kinds of skills and abilities necessary to succeed, not only in the workforce, but I think in terms of going on to
college. When you look, for instance, at the number of students moving into freshman year who had to actually participate in remedial courses, it says something about what we were doing and were not doing in terms of preparation of our students. So, I think those are strongly contributing factors to the standards-based movement.

The statewide APA committee attempted to address the issue of standards, individualized instruction, and assessment for students with disabilities. The committee outlined two alternatives for applying standards to students with mild to moderate disabilities that could participate in standards-based education.

First, the committee agreed with directors that higher functioning students with special needs should be held to standards, with accommodations and modifications. The consensus among committee members was that districts should provide more remedial instruction to assist these students to meet the common standards.

Second, the committee recommended that standards for students with moderate disabilities should be implemented in accordance with the student’s IEP, but closely allied to the CCCS. This was an argument to retain the current standard, albeit with greater accommodations for students who could still meet the common standard.
District directors see implied standards emerging from APA and other assessments of special education students. They repeatedly indicated that these assessments created de facto standards by driving curriculum decisions and instruction to ensure student success on the assessments.

Respondents cited APA in particular as a reason for this phenomenon, arguing that the state sets the evidentiary criteria for students to demonstrate that they have mastered certain skills. There was a common perception among directors that the criteria established by the state do not reflect actual IEP-driven classroom instruction.

There was a consensus at a meeting of the APA Coalition Committee that instruction should be driven by the IEP. One participant framed the issue as all-or-nothing proposition, indicating that the teachers have to choose between teaching to either the standard or the IEP. At a committee meeting in April 2006, committee members agreed that the standards and assessment criteria do not always agree with the goals of the IEP.

One speaker presented the following example. Classroom teachers teach concepts and activities to demonstrate the student’s mastery of oral hygiene as indicated in the student’s IEP, but the APA rubric mandates specific
elements of oral hygiene that the APA developers have identified as evidence that the student has mastered the concept of oral hygiene. The assessment assumes a standard of oral hygiene and drives instruction, without regard to the student’s IEP, which sometimes interprets mastery of the standard with different, but equally relevant demonstrations that a student has mastered the standard.

The main supporting argument for individualization centers on the idea that the IEP Team is closer and has in-depth knowledge of the individual student. It therefore is in a better position to determine whether an individual student has successfully demonstrated mastery of a concept such as oral hygiene, even if the student cannot accomplish the task as detailed in the APA rubric. One director commented that “the state not only wants students to demonstrate mastery, they tell you how it must be done.”

Directors and committee members were troubled that the regular assessments and the APA rubric rely on limited, commonly generalized demonstrations of student mastery that may not be appropriate for all students with special needs.

APA committee members cited extreme examples of the use of APA. The director from a district represented on the committee shared copies of his testimony before the state
board of education, concerning the need to assess students with the most severe disabilities:

We have been required to assess children who were dying, in traumatic accidents, in hospitals in comas, and children with little more than reflexive brain activity. The result of the portfolio became meaningless and many times intrusive. This is also very upsetting to parents, who have more primary and legitimate medical concerns for their child, and do not want the intrusion of mandated state assessments at this tragic time in their child's life. (Director of Lindon SD, 2007)

District directors are troubled that the state is becoming more involved with special education curriculum and instruction, a role that has traditionally been the responsibility of the local school district.

There was frequent mention of a concern that the state, through its standards and its system of district accountability, was beginning to drive curriculum and instruction. Several directors indicated that their districts were modifying curriculum to align with the common standard and, as a result, local control was being diminished and rendered less important.

The director from Big Regional was particularly concerned because, with limited resources, his district is spending more money on remedial instruction to help special needs students in particular meet the standards. This
required his district to eliminate or cut back on life skills and pre-vocational programs that the local district had previously established because money was needed to pay for remedial and basic skills instruction.

Most directors were concerned that standards-based education initiatives and required assessment were under-funded or not funded at all. The director indicated that the district has had to hire additional staff in order to prepare students to master the standards, and this drives up the cost of instruction. The district also indicated that it must pay for additional staff time to monitor and administer assessments by eliminating or reducing funding for other programs such as life skills and social skills groups. All directors were concerned that these mandates were unfunded and they had to reallocate resources.

The director from River City, the urban district, was particularly concerned because his district had to cut back on social skills programs and was forced to provide the bare minimum of related services. He indicated that he had to cut back on supervision and reassign supervisory staff to monitor standards-based instruction and supervise remedial instruction. He had to cut back on innovative programs and also cut his staff development budget. These
budgetary concerns are related to his earlier comment about common standards for all children in special education:

One size does not fit all in special education. Tests drive the curriculum into areas that are not relevant to meet the needs of urban students with minimal social skills. Use some skills measured on CCCS but design programs to meet the needs of students in special education.

Regarding students with severe disabilities, many directors and APA committee members suggest that there is a need for alternate standards.

While directors generally support the need for common standards, there is concern that these standards are being implemented at the expense of individualization as the standards are applied to students with severe disabilities.

The issue is not new. McLaughlin and McDonald (1997) predicted the tension between applying common standards to all children versus the underlying premise of individualization in special education. District special-education directors and members of the APA committee expressed deep concern about the relevance of common standards to severely disabled students.

The state developed core curriculum content standards for students with severe disabilities (CCCSSSD) in an attempt to establish a set of alternate standards for students with severe disabilities. CCCSSSD has since been
incorporated into the CCCS, but district directors made frequent suggestions that there is a need for separate standards for students with severe disabilities. Directors argued that the CCCSSSD was more appropriate, because some severely disabled students are unlikely to even approximate the regular CCCS. Some directors argued that these students need “more appropriate” standards that reflect their functional skills.

The APA committee argued that there should be alternate standards for students with severe disabilities and the IEP Team should be able to modify these standards, as well as design instruction to fit the abilities of severely disabled students.

The APA committee described students with severe disabilities as “students who will never approximate the standard and for whom the common standard is meaningless.” Responses indicated that in severe cases, these students should have individualized standards as interpreted by the IEP Team and written into the IEP.

Directors raised several questions that the state would need to address before it develops alternate standards: What should be included in an alternate set of standards? Who would qualify for that set of standards?
In summary, the district directors of special education agreed that there is a need to implement standards-based education in special education, because in the past, the common standards were not applied to special education. There was a broadly based response that standards were needed and long overdue. The directors were cautiously positive about the current standards-based education initiatives. One director referred to the efforts and legislation as "a work in progress." All indicated that there was a need for higher standards in special education and indicated that before IDEA 1997, the rules were lax and the child study team was not required to justify accommodations and exemptions.

When asked the broad question about whether they had seen a change in standardization in special education, the majority of the special education directors indicated that the standards were higher. They also indicated that the standards are now applied more equally. Not surprisingly, all respondents concurred with the idea that standards are being applied to a wider range of students, since that is a major intent of IDEA and NCLB.

The issue of unfunded standards-based mandates and the need to reallocate resources to fund those mandates was a
major concern among directors. Suburban directors and the urban director reported that they had had to cut life skills and pre-vocational programs to fund remedial instruction and assessment requirements.

Directors thought that it was helpful and necessary to increase the standards for students with disabilities. However, regarding students with severe disabilities, they seem to feel that there is a need for some form of alternate standards. The district directors questioned whether all special needs students should be included in common standards, citing the functional levels of severely disabled students and whether the common standards were relevant to their future. They called for a return to an updated version of CCCSSSD or individualized standards developed by the IEP Team.

While the directors expressed support for the need for common standards for the majority of students, there were differing opinions about which students should come under the standards, and they raised a number of implementation issues. The directors were also concerned that the state was going beyond its role of setting standards and intruding on what they saw as the district's responsibility for instruction. Districts favored the IEP as the source
document for individualized standards. They argued that the districts should develop the IEP through the local IEP team. State and federal special education codes require IEP teams to align the goals and objectives of the IEP to the CCCS. District-level directors questioned the role of the state in the process, citing standards that affected instruction. They argued that the IEP provides a plan for individualized instruction and modification of the standards.

**Assessment**

Predictably, the assessment section was the largest in both the length and number of responses from district directors of special education. Responses focused on two questions: “Who should be assessed?” and “What is the most effective way to assess students with special needs?” These questions mirror the standards-based education debate, over which students should be held accountable to meet the standards and how that issue should be decided.

The directors expressed general concern over who should be assessed. As with the standards-based education findings, the directors focused on identification of students with moderate to severe disabilities. The directors raised three questions to be considered when
identifying students with varying degrees of disability: "Which students with disabilities should participate in general assessment?"; "Which students with disabilities should participate in general assessment with accommodations, modifications, and supplemental instruction?"; and "How should the state and districts assess those with severe disabilities?"

Regarding the issue of how students with special needs should be assessed, none of the directors agreed with the current system of assessing all students against the CCCS, but there was debate as to when and in what cases exemptions should be made. If the state were to adopt a separate set of standards for severely disabled students, it would logically follow that there would be a separate assessment for these students. Sub-themes included implementation of accommodations and modifications, and the extent of these accommodations and modifications, the value of alternate proficiency assessment, how districts handle APA, and whether some students should be exempted.

The discussion of assessment findings includes responses from public and private out-of-district assessment coordinators and an analysis of the position paper developed by the APA committee of the statewide
association of approved private special education providers. The paper “Alternate proficiency assessment for students with severe disabilities—problems and recommendations” was developed by a committee composed of representatives from over 30 out-of-district service providers, representing a cross-section of providers serving severely disabled students from all areas of the state. The paper published in May 2006 is the most recent document on the issue of APA.

Two themes emerged in the analysis of the assessment data: (1) special education directors debated who should participate in standard and alternate assessment and which students should be exempted, and (2) special education directors did not always agree about how students should participate in standard assessments.

The assessment discussion highlighted four categories of students with special needs:

1. Higher functioning students with special needs who can be assessed on standard assessments, with accommodations and modifications. Districts provide more remedial instruction to these students to help them to "pass the test."
2. Students for whom the assessment is modified, but closely aligned with the CCCS for students with moderate disabilities. Modifications of the standard are included in the student’s IEP.

3. Students with severe disabilities who are alternately assessed using APA.

4. Students whose disability is too severe, to justify exemption from any assessment.

Committee members and directors were unanimous in their opposition to the idea that common standards should apply to all students, arguing that there should be broader accommodations and more exemptions for students with severe disabilities.

Directors and committee members described students with severe disabilities as “students who will never approximate the standard and for whom the common standard is meaningless.” Responses indicated that these students should also be subject to the individualized standards, as interpreted by the IEP Team and written into the IEP.

The findings as to who should be assessed closely mirrored the standards-based findings on who should participate in the standards. While there was consensus about the need to assess students with special needs, there
was disagreement over the benefits of assessing students with severe disabilities using assessments based on core curriculum content standards. Several directors noted that the assessment does not measure the needs of the individual child as identified in the IEP. For example, the Director of Special Education of the River City SD noted that, “The nature of assessment has changed, yes. So the test does not always measure the needs of that child.”

This statement aligns with the concerns expressed regarding standards and whether the IEP is a better place for identifying individualized interpretations of those standards.

Proponents of individualized assessment based on alternate standards argue for an assessment based on the IEP Team’s interpretation of the standard and the criteria, to demonstrate mastery. Proponents of more standardized assessment argue for tighter controls to ensure consistency. The challenge is how to implement standards for students with severe disabilities who can be meaningfully assessed. A small percentage, between one and three percent of students with disabilities, may be exempted. These are typically students with the most severe disabilities.
The directors expressed concerns about accommodations and assessment modifications; there was general agreement among the directors, assessment coordinators, and committee members that the criteria and documentation, and the rationale for accommodations and assessment modifications, have become increasingly more rigorous. Several of the directors commented that the previous requirements were not rigorous enough and assessments were worse than those currently used.

Directors agreed that students do not receive modifications and accommodations unless the district is able to clearly justify them. It was interesting that although the directors complained about the increased workload involved in the new assessment requirements, there was general agreement among all three groups that the reforms were necessary and were being implemented fairly. The perception that the new regulations were being fairly implemented was attributed to the improved technical assistance and training provided to district personnel by the state.

The director from Big Regional SD raised an interesting point regarding the impact of identifying
students who need assessment accommodation and modifications:

Many of our children need accommodations. This affects their self-esteem when they are pulled for modification...Everyone knows why...Is this needless public labeling within the school?

Districts report that the need to provide APA influences the decision to place severely disabled students out-of-district in approved private and public special education schools. While this seems to be a commonly accepted practice among districts, when asked about this practice, Mr. Smith indicated that the state did not have any data, but that it was an area of interest.

During an interview conducted in October 2006, the assessment coordinator from the Margaret School for Children with Disabilities was quite frank:

Some districts have a policy within their district that they will not implement APA. Their policy unofficially is that for their students, they'll do the standard assessment no matter how disabled or how appropriate or inappropriate it is for the student to do the standard.

In a follow-up question about how APA affected district decisions to place students in out-of-district placements, districts indicated that they referred some students with severe disabilities to out-of-district schools to avoid hiring extra staff to assist with complicated APAs.
Districts attended trainings to be able to assess the quality of APA, but rarely conducted these assessments within the district.

It is impossible to assess the amount of influence APA has on the decision to place students with severe disabilities in out-of-district facilities. This seems to vary from district to district, but it is a consideration for many districts. The APA committee argued in its unpublished position paper, "Alternate proficiency assessment for students with severe disabilities-problems and recommendations" (2006) that the current system of assessment penalizes students who are not in inclusive settings and identifies a conflict between the IEP and standard assessment:

The APA’s additional skill dimensions frequently conflict with what child study teams prescribe in students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). While education with non-disabled peers is desirable, for example, child study teams make placement decisions based on the unique needs of the students. The APA, in its social interaction skill dimension, currently penalizes children with disabilities who are not placed in inclusive settings. Moreover, teaching strategies and curriculum modifications are normally decisions made by child study teams. By scoring school curriculums with APA portfolios, students are being penalized because of directives in their IEPs. Standard assessments do not directly assess the school curriculum, only whether students have achieved state standards.
District directors questioned the value and validity of APA with comments such as these: "APA is horrendous. I think it’s a lot—too much for too little in terms of the portfolios"; "The other thing about the alternate proficiency assessment is the portfolio. It is just too much. The state needs to refine how they evaluate these students."

The assessment coordinator from Margaret School for Disabled Children, which serves students with disabilities, commented that the assessments do not always reflect the developmental age of students with developmental disabilities: "They'll be old enough to be in eleventh grade, but perhaps developmentally they're more on the sixth year old level." She commented that it is difficult to assess their progress on the CCCS: "It is really hard to look at, you know, these, these... the regular core curriculum standards and plug a kid into a performance indicator [that reflects his actual grade level]."

The interviews with assessment coordinators confirmed several of the district director responses to questions about APA. The APA committee raised the issue of validity in its 5/215/07 position paper on APA for students with
severe disabilities-problems and recommendations, arguing that the APA measures dimensions that are not assessed in regular standards-based assessments:

The scope of APA goes well beyond the state’s core curriculum standards. The skill dimensions of social interaction, independence, self-determination, and generalization are closer to being outcome indicators than content indicators, leading to the proverbial “apples and oranges” dilemma when comparing the APA with standardized testing. The additional indicators increase the testing workload on both students and staff and contribute to the highly subjective nature of the test. (APA committee position paper, 5/15/06)

In contrast, Mr. Smith acknowledged in an interview that the state wants to influence the quality of instruction by defining educational outcomes in assessments. During a meeting with the APA committee, representatives, Mr. Cole acknowledged that the APA was not an ideal measure of the standards for students with disabilities, and that APA has to be related to the standards, albeit sometimes far from the standards. The tension between the state and the committee seems to be threefold. First, may the state exceed its own standards when assessing students with severe disabilities? Second, can the APA be validly compared to the statewide standard assessment? Third, is the comparison valid or fair?
The APA committee, districts, and assessment coordinators voiced additional concerns about the current system of APA:

1. Preparing APA is a time-consuming assessment activity covering a four-month period for data collection and reporting. These activities reduce instruction time.
2. Extensive evidence of mastery is required, such as student data sheets, charts, samples of student work, videos, captioned photos, etc. The regular "pen and pencil" statewide standards-based assessments do not require as much detail.
3. There are mandated formatting and data collection requirements that often require district staff responsible for APA to reformat existing data to comply with state-mandated formats.
4. The assessment contractor evaluates the portfolios, assigning a rating of advanced proficient, proficient, or partially proficient. One portfolio can be rated proficient, while a similar portfolio can be rated partially proficient. This raises the issue of reliability and subjectivity of the scoring procedure.
5. The assessment contractor assesses school curriculums as "commendable," "satisfactory," or "needs improvement."
6. The committee was concerned about the perceived disparity between standardized assessment and APA, noting that:

The APA's emphasis on collecting and presenting evidence also places a much higher burden of proof on disabled students than on those who take standardized tests. Extraordinary measures must be employed to document the disabled students' generalized learning across a variety of persons and settings. Documents, narratives, videos, photos, and field trip information must be submitted. By contrast, standardized assessment scores are determined solely by the student's test performance." (APA Committee, 2006).
The committee and several assessment coordinators noted a variation in the quality of assessment teams from district to district, scorer bias as evidenced by divergent scores for similar or even the same portfolios, and stringent clerical rules that were designed to provide consistency from district to district, but that actually surfaced non-performance-related reasons for downgrading a portfolio. These factors led the committee and assessment coordinators to conclude that the APA process was too subjective to compare with paper and pencil standards-based assessments.

Directors, assessment coordinators, and the committee agreed that the staffing requirements to effectively conduct APA were expensive, and that the few APAs that were conducted in-district actually drained district resources from other areas of instruction. As districts have indicated, they have to provide increased resources for remedial instruction and additional staff to monitor assessments. All three groups frequently made this "zero sum game" argument. Districts establish fixed budgets before the beginning of the school year. They apparently failed to allocate enough resources to implement required assessments. Directors concurred with several of the
concerns about the lack of sufficient resources to implement assessment provisions when teachers need assistance in implementing multiple standards with different students in a self-contained special education class. The director from Big Regional commented that this means there might be eight different standards that have to be measured over a period of time, a situation that requires “some kind of a system of additional comp time or days off, additional assistants, or something like that”.

Several districts commented on the increasing number of APA students. The director from Ashburn indicated that the number of APA students varied from year to year, pushing his district over the one percent allowable exemptions. One class went from four to eight APA students in one year, creating additional work for the teacher. The number of in-district APA students is increasing as districts include more students and open more in-district self-contained classes.

The assessment coordinators focused on the logistics of implementation. This quote from the October 2006 interview with the coordinator at Margaret School was representative of many comments made by directors and committee members:
Well, the focus before, and this is just my opinion, was very much on the individual. You looked to see where was this person and what were their most pressing needs right now. And from there, you developed some objectives for him to work on and if you could you overlap them with some of the normal developmental types of objectives that students in regular classes would be working on. So, and kids who were severely disabled and who were still in the teenage level, were still working on basic hygiene, clothing, extremely basic communication. I mean, just even responding to somebody who’s even trying to communicate with them...it’s really hard to incorporate it into other areas, you know the skills that now the standards reflect. But with the standards, you know, you’re looking at a list of standards. They’re trying to find among them skills that have to do with that child. So say, you’re working backwards in some ways, you know. It’s a different shift in your thinking. (October 2006 interview with the assessment coordinator of Margaret School).

The Margaret School coordinator further commented on the difficulties teachers have when changing their planning and assessment perspective from one of individualization to a more standards-based approach:

It’s hard to do the APA if you are still mentally conditioned to writing IEPs from the old perspective, because then you’re sometimes having difficulty fitting in what you did write as objectives into the format for the APA. You know, I’m trying to get more teachers to look at the standards and write just what the need for APA purposes [SF6] from that and then maybe do the other objectives where they’re coming from the reference of the child. But you need to, have to take, two different positions, and you’re wearing two hats almost, depending on how you’re approaching the issue. You know, we still have kids who have some very, very low skills and we can’t ignore those needs, you know.
This seems to lead to teachers’ frustration:

I’ll be frank with you. There are some teachers who think that some of the standards are ridiculous for some of the kids in our population, now particularly, since the APA started including science. Some people feel that science standards are absurd for some of our kids to work on. I’m not taking a position myself on that...so, sometimes you’re up against a lot.

The challenges the Margaret coordinator faces were also raised by the committee, and informal conversations with committee members bear this out. Many members voiced the same concerns.

The issue of who should be exempt from assessment is evident in the following response from the Special Education Director in Boomtown, a suburban K-12 district, concerning the reduced percentage of severely disabled students the DOE permits districts to exempt from statewide testing:

When I got into the business, we had our own separate curriculum. Students were assessed or evaluated—statewide changes over the last few years reflect the fact that they have to take the state exam: 5% were exempted from the 3rd, 4th, 8th, and 11th grade evaluation/assessment, but the 5% in exemption is now down to 1%. The state curriculum, the students are evaluated as to how they achieve on those tests now as compared to individual improvements.

**Summary of Assessment Themes**

Although the criteria and documentation have become increasingly rigorous, several of the directors commented
that the DOE was right in requiring a more precise justification for student modifications, accommodations, and exemptions from standard assessments. Fewer students receive modifications and accommodations unless the district can justify the reasons. It is interesting to note that although the directors complained about the increased work involved in the new assessment requirements, there was general agreement that the reforms were necessary. The perception that the new rules were being fairly implemented was attributed to the improved preparation and training provided by the state. There were comparisons to previous policy implementations that were top-down and poorly communicated.

The findings on APA showed that a large percentage of APA students are placed in out-of-district private and public special education schools, but as more students are included in their local schools, districts are conducting more APA assessments. Most APAs are still conducted in out-of-district schools. Additional interviews with assessment coordinators were conducted. Assessment coordinators in public and private schools, and directors, all indicated that the process is time-consuming, requiring a great deal of resources. There is some question about the usefulness
of APA with severely disabled students, extra expenses associated with assessments in general, and in particular, APAs are not generally funded, and respondents and APA committee members reported that they have had to reallocate resources to provide the mandated assessments. These findings are similar to those regarding the unfunded costs of standards-based initiatives in special education.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

The findings on curriculum, instruction, and educational planning reflect strong feelings regarding the IEP and educational planning process. Most directors noted that the IEP process has become more precise and somewhat limited by the increase in standardization. The directors were also concerned about the impact of standardized planning on instruction, i.e., "teaching to the test."

The concerns about the IEP process were summed up by the director from Beemerville, who indicated that some directors in his county were concerned about whether the new system that required the IEPs to be aligned with the CCCS limited the discretion of the IEP Team in setting goals and objectives. Directors who favor the standards-based system seem to be more comfortable with common standards for all students and are more willing to include
those standards in the IEP, while proponents of separate or tiered system of standards are less willing to include a common set of standards in the IEP and favor greater IEP Team discretion. The director from Beemerville provided a perspective based on countywide meetings on the issue of incorporating standards in the IEP:

The IEP is more standardized. Well, the impact was that we needed to—thinking back to the old IEP, which in some ways was probably more beneficial than they ever claimed to be. Really, the old IEP really did not address core content standards in any way. I think it became necessary for all of us to take a look at what we were doing in terms of IEP and to make decisions as to whether we were going to go with core curriculum standards or we were going to remain with the system that we had. There was a significant debate that went on, particularly in this county, here in our county, as to which way we ought to go, and my decision was to go with the core curriculum content standards so that all of our IEPs are currently—well, they're currently aligned with the core curriculum content standards, so when we specify a particular goal, that goal is usually one of the core content standards and we go that way with it.

The director from Holland noted that individuality has been lost with the new system, and the director from Boomtown thought that there was individuality allowed in the past system.

Directors made several similar observations about the impact of the changes they had to make, indicating that IEP meetings are longer, due to the increased paperwork and
required planning, and increased participation by school staff.

Several directors thought that the IEP Team had less authority/discretion and that standards were increasingly driving the process. The director from Boomtown joined several directors in asserting: "Some districts are just using them [CCCS] as the objectives for the IEP...the standards are driving special education."

The director from River City articulated a concern; when he indicated that most districts are not teaching the "whole child" in order to teach to the test.

The director from Boomtown, however, noted that teaching to the test was not necessarily a bad thing, in light of past lower standards:

In the past, the standards were lower for students with special needs. Those kids who were in special education class with a watered down curriculum were not being challenged enough, not being given the same type of curriculum that the other kids were getting, the regular kids were getting.

Monitoring, Oversight, and Technical Assistance

The state has changed its monitoring approach in recent years to a system designed to help districts achieve compliance through self-study. The system is similar to the federal monitoring system. District directors of special education agreed that the new system of monitoring and
oversight was needed for effective policy implementation, but indicated a need for more consistency. The concern about consistency may be related to the fact that the system of monitoring and oversight is new. Directors agreed that the basic structure has been clearly defined by the state DOE and felt that implementation would become more consistent with time.

Monitoring is defined as the process by which the state DOE evaluates the process of policy implementation, while oversight is defined as the process by which the state DOE ensures district compliance with policy.

The directors were generally positive about the new system of monitoring. The director from Holland stated: "The new process is less intrusive and self-assessment is helpful to identify issues that need to be addressed." The director from Boomtown noted: "Monitoring is more positive. It looks at good and bad. It is more informative—a softer approach. It may be a more effective approach."

Several longtime directors compared the new system to the previous monitoring approach, indicating that they thought the previous system was designed to identify deficiencies, rather than assist with remediation. They observed that the new system is just the opposite.
There were some criticisms of the new system. One of the directors indicated that the greater documentation requirements took time away from instruction. Some directors mentioned that there was stricter enforcement of certain requirements, such as timelines and documentation of performance. They indicated that they had identified some of these areas where non-compliance could cause significant problems and mandatory corrective action.

Longtime directors [more than 10 years] complained that the former system was punitive and designed to catch districts in non-compliance. The directors agreed that the new system of self-study provided an opportunity to self-correct and, even if the district was found to be non-compliant, the state offered more technical assistance. These directors indicated that the new system of oversight and monitoring was softer on the surface, but the state still maintained the power to enforce compliance. There was skepticism about the state's "new approach." One director commented that he was waiting for "the other shoe to drop."

There was general agreement that the state has been helpful in providing technical assistance. As previously stated, when asked about the new system of monitoring and oversight, the directors were generally positive. Here
again, they say the state intended to provide additional technical assistance in its policy implementation plan. (See chapter 6, State Findings).

Special-education directors, assessment coordinators, and committee members agreed that effective monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance are necessary when implementing any new policy. Citing their own use of monitoring oversight and technical assistance to implement policy on the district level, the directors were in agreement that the state has improved its practices in this area.

Technical assistance is the process by which the state assists the districts with advice and information regarding policy implementation. District directors were unanimous in their responses, indicating that the state provided greater technical assistance and training when implementing the new changes in assessment. The Holland director summed this up as follows: "Responsive monitors assisted with corrective action."

Several directors indicated that technical assistance was often not as available in the past and not all DOE staffs were well-informed about new policies and
procedures. This is apparently not the case with regard to the assessment provisions of IDEA 1997.

**Policy and Procedure (P&P)**

District directors did not always realize the extent of the changes they made as a result of the changes in assessment district directors, indicating that the changes in policy and procedure were incremental and were gradually introduced by the DOE. One director described the state’s efforts as seamless, and another indicated that the state was responsive to questions about newly mandated policy and procedures. The longtime directors, who had been in the system for more than ten years, compared the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB to the state’s previous efforts to implement policy and reported that the new process was more effective.

The success of the state’s efforts with districts may be attributed to its preparation and technical assistance. State officials indicated that while IDEA 1997 and NCLB were complex policy changes, the department was well prepared to introduce the changes. Several of the policy implementation theorists discussed in Chapter 2 pointed out the need for extensive preparation when introducing complex
policies. The DOE did this and achieved a greater degree of congruence with districts.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

There are four major findings regarding policy implementation.

1. IDEA 1997 was a complex and prescriptive law that led to a more tightly coupled system.

2. The state department managed this more tightly coupled system and policy complexity through outreach and communication, technical assistance, and monitoring, all of which facilitated implementation of the assessment provisions.

3. The implementation was also facilitated by general goal congruence around the need for standards-based reform, with the exception of severely disabled students, and that incongruity led to the disagreement about common standards and the APA for these students.

4. There was a continuing tension between individualization and standardization for students with severe disabilities.

The study began by proposing three research questions:

1) How has the state changed its special education assessment policies to comply with IDEA 1997 and NCLB?

2) How have local districts changed their special education assessment policies and practices to comply with IDEA 1997
and NCLB? 3) Can policy implementation theory explain the implementation of IDEA 1997 and NCLB in the state and local districts?

The answer to the first question, as to how the state has changed its special education assessment policies to comply with IDEA 1997 and NCLB, is complex. It is clear that states have had to change policies and procedures in response to IDEA 1997 and NCLB. This was expected; however, the degree to which the state had to adapt to and prepare to implement this change was extensive.

Faced with a complex and tightly coupled policy that left little room for interpretation or discretion, the state DOE developed policy implementation strategies that included greater stakeholder involvement, increased technical support, and training with its own and district staff. The state findings confirm the complexity of implementing standards-based education and assessment in the area of special education. Mr. Smith pointed out that in addition to the complexity of the law, standards-based education and assessment require cooperation between the office of special education programs and the office of assessment.
The state officials indicated that they were successful in their efforts to include many constituent groups in policy planning and implementation. They further indicated that they took care to identify internal and external stakeholders that would participate on committees and taskforces, noting that their careful attention led to a high degree of participation. Both state officials reported that the DOE seriously considered and adopted many stakeholder recommendations as part of the policy implementation process.

The state had to design standardized assessment instruments and alternate assessment rubrics and disseminate them to districts. State officials reported that NCLB’s emphasis on accountability supported and strengthened the provisions of IDEA and further spurred the state DOE to pay close attention to implementation strategies.

IDEA and NCLB contain specific monitoring and oversight requirements, including a yearly report of progress (AYP) and biannual performance plan review. State officials reported that the strict requirements and timelines for implementation prompted the department to take extraordinary preparation before implementing these
policies. Mr. Cole indicated that IDEA and NCLB had the potential to be an implementation “nightmare,” with tight timelines and high performance standards for all students.

These complex changes were particularly challenging when applied to students with special needs. There were major disagreements between districts and the state DOE on this issue. The state argued that it is required to implement some form of APA and that virtually all students must be included in standards-based assessment, and mandated that local districts must assess all students against the standard. District directors and APA committee members countered this argument by arguing that it was often inappropriate and unproductive to assess students with the severest disabilities.

With regard to standards-based education involving students with special needs, state education officials accept the tenets of standards-based education, but find the implementation to be challenging. State officials argued for common standards for all students, stating that the instruction and assessment must be aligned with the standards.

State officials reported major policy implementation issues surrounding required assessment. The performance of
students with special needs and the quality of special education instruction were major issues. When districts fail to meet their AYP because of the performance of students with special needs, the state has to work with schools and districts to improve instruction and the performance of those students.

State officials reported friction between proponents of individualization and the state’s efforts to implement standards-based education assessment and accountability. While state officials recognized these concerns, they argued that the current system is necessary to comply with federal law. State officials agree with district directors that policy implementation should be an inclusive process, but reserve the right to make the final decisions.

State officials reported that monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance are challenging because the policy is complex and there is a mindset deeply rooted in past policy and practice that generates resistance to change. Despite these challenges, there was general agreement among state officials and district directors of special education that the state was effective in its monitoring, oversight, and technical assistance. It is likely that this is related
to the state’s efforts to study the policy and carefully plan implementation activities.

The issue of who should be held to the standards and who should be assessed is a major issue for the state and local districts. A committee of private and public school directors of special education argues that the APA is flawed and not appropriate for some students with severe disabilities. The state officials counter by arguing that, as a matter of law, all children must be included in standards-based assessment. District directors of special education and committee members were very vocal on this issue, citing extreme examples where the APA was inappropriate and counterproductive.

While the directors contested issues of standards-based testing, state officials did not support efforts to develop a separate set of standards for students with severe disabilities. State officials did indicate, however, that they were taking a hard look at the number of students who qualified for exemption from assessment, while mandating alignment to the common standards for students with special needs.
The second research question was: How have local districts changed their special education assessment policies and practices to comply with IDEA 1997 and NCLB?

District directors complained that they had to make extensive changes in district policy and procedure, but were complimentary of the state’s efforts to provide technical assistance to help districts manage the change. Several district directors thought that the state DOE had done a good job implementing changes in standards-based education and assessment, when compared to the way it had implemented past policy changes.

District respondents referred to the adaptations and changes (Berman, 1978) they had made to implement the provisions of NCLB and IDEA. District directors reported reallocation of resources, and frequently mentioned increased staff training. Many indicated that there were limited resources in their districts, and they were concerned that they were being forced to cut back or eliminate programs to fund federal and state mandates associated with NCLB and IDEA. Some complained that the state was using its oversight responsibilities and the CCCS to influence curriculum decisions that have traditionally been the responsibility of local districts. They were
concerned that teachers were teaching and neglecting other instructional areas that were important to their students. Districts have gradually tested more students in grades 3-8 and have had to change their methods for developing IEPs to reflect the CCCS.

Research question three asks: Can policy implementation theory explain the implementation of IDEA 1997 by district directors of special education in local districts?

This question is best answered by looking across the eleven hypotheses presented in Table 5 to identify key factors. Certain factors emerge.

Policy complexity is an important factor in the case of IDEA and NCLB. These federal policies have been controversial from the start and have been the topic of much debate in the popular press, in part due to their complexity and far-reaching impact on so much of the schooling system in the United States. The degree of complexity prompted the state to examine IDEA 1997 even before it was passed. The state officials noted that the state prepares for complex policy implementation years before it is required to implement those policies. The state’s preparation that was prompted by the complexity of
the policy accounts for some of the success the state has had implementing IDEA 1997 and NCLB.

State officials and district directors agreed that policies related to the implementation of IDEA, and later NCLB, was complex, and implementation would involve multiple levels. Both the state and local respondents frequently mentioned their concerns about anticipated issues of complexity, based on the nature of the policy and the number of levels that would be involved in its implementation. As a result of these concerns, the state prepared for implementation by soliciting input from many constituencies that would be involved in the implementation, carefully listening, as Mr. Smith put it, in an effort to better understand anticipated concerns by those involved with implementation. This could be described as an attempt to manage the "Whisper down the Lane" phenomenon by soliciting input and clearly communicating the state's intent. This enabled the state to clarify the intent of the policy by identifying and clarifying areas that may have been ambiguous. This is consistent with most of the policy implementation theories that discuss the need for clear communication of a strategic and tactical plan for implementation. For example, Berman (1978) discussed
the importance of broad participation in planning in order to generate commitment and the importance of coalition building and bargaining, in order to secure the commitments of bureaucratic managers.

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) discuss the extent of subordinate participation in the policy decision. Greater participation leads to higher staff morale, greater commitment, clarity about the nature of the change, and reduction of initial resistance to change. ACF theory proposes multiple levels of understanding that are affected by the implicit theories of sub-groups and individuals. The interview data clearly suggests that the state has been effective in this area. District directors gave the state high marks regarding its efforts to manage implementation of a complex policy by soliciting input from all levels.

Goal congruence is an important factor and can be seen in almost all of the findings. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) indicate that successful policy implementation is directly affected by the degree to which the change is congruent with the goals and objectives of the implementing organizations. There was significant goal congruence supported by clear communication between the state and local levels. Policy implementation was successful in large
part due to the state outreach efforts, such as stakeholder involvement from the beginning and responsive technical assistance and training. Districts were a part of the process from the outset. State officials confirmed that they anticipated the tight timelines and rigorous accountability in IDEA 1997 and NCLB, and made a concerted effort to include the districts in the process. Districts were almost unanimous in agreeing that the state had been effective in implementing most of the requirements of IDEA 1997 and NCLB.

There was one area where the lack of goal congruence and fundamental disagreement was APA itself. For members of the APA committee who have come together in serious opposition to the current system of APA, and some of the directors, the issue is deeper than simple policy implementation. The opposition to APA raised the question of whether standards-based education should apply to everyone. Ideally, in a democratic educational system, everyone has to “get into the pond,” as Mr. Smith tried to explain when she argued for common standards and assessments based on those standards. The committee, on the other hand, saw the issue as individualization vs. standards, particularly as the concept applies to students.
with severe disabilities. The state officials pointed to the federal requirements, saying in effect, "the feds made me do it" and blaming the tightly coupled legislation.

The state abandoned its separate set of core curriculum content standards for students with severe disabilities several years ago, and now relies on the core curriculum content standards as the only standard. Opponents argue for some flexibility in applying the standards to students with severe disabilities, suggesting that there are students for whom the standards are meaningless. How does policy implementation theory address fundamental disagreements? If IDEA 1997 or NCLB were loosely coupled, the lower-level implementers, so-called "street level bureaucrats," would have greater flexibility and discretion when implementing the policy. IEP teams have had a great deal of flexibility and discretion when they were created in the education of the All Handicapped Act. The state had wider latitude under EHA. The focus was on helping students with disabilities gain access to the system. The debate boils down to the question: Should severely disabled students be assessed on the common standards when their instructional goals are significantly
different from the common standards, or should they be
assessed on an entirely different set of standards?

The discussion of special education, from access to
accountability, outlines the historical perspective on the
degree of change that would be required to move special
education from a system designed to gain access for
students with special needs to a system that focused more
on state and district accountability for results. The
degree of change is significant and, as McDonnell et al.
predicted, would be seen in changes in the IEP. District
directors commented on the changes in the IEP process,
noting that there was less flexibility and more
accountability.

IDEA 1997 and NCLB are tightly coupled policies that
do not give policy implementers much discretion. NCLB was
clear in its intention to include all students in standards
and assessments by 2014. This requirement fuels the debate.

In summary, the chapter began with four major findings
regarding policy implementation:

1. IDEA 1997 was a complex and prescriptive law that led
to a more tightly coupled system.

2. The state department managed this more tightly coupled
system and policy complexity through outreach and
communication, technical assistance, and monitoring, all of which facilitated implementation of the assessment provisions.

3. The implementation was also facilitated by general goal congruence around the need for standards-based reform, with the exception of severely disabled students, and that incongruity led to the disagreement about common standards and the APA for these students.

4. There was a continuing tension between individualization and standardization for students with severe disabilities.

The issue of individualization vs. standardization for students with severe disabilities is seminal. This concern gets to a core issue of standards-based education and assessment that McDonnell et al. articulated in 2000, namely that the system has changed from an individualized goals, objectives, and instructional strategies articulated in the individualized education plan, to a system that emphasizes accountability for results. This study again raises the questions of: Does a democratic, standards-based educational system have to include all students? Is it appropriate to include students with severe disabilities in common standards when these standards do not reflect their
individual needs? Are the assessment scores of students with severe disabilities relevant to the whole? This study has highlighted the controversy in its early stages, but it will seriously affect future policy decisions.

**Recommendations**

More research is needed to understand the issue of individualization vs. standardization for students with severe disabilities as a major shift in special education policy. The controversy over alternate assessment and who should be included in such assessment is growing and will spur debate as standards-based education and assessment gain wider acceptance and influence public schooling.
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