



Focus Group 2014 Survey Report

PURPOSE:

DRA conducted a Focus Group Survey on May 21, 2014, to gather feedback from Qualified Trainers (QTs):

“An annual follow-up focus group is to be designed for a subsample of teachers, randomly choosing them from the pool of test administrators in any given year. The focus group is designed to elicit explanations for extreme results noted in the consequential survey. The focus group will be held with results from the survey presented to teachers using a webinar format and then a prompt for teachers to provide their interpretations for explaining why such results may have been obtained or under what conditions they may apply.” (2011-2017 RFP, pg. 32).

PARTICIPATION:

Eight QTs from small, medium, and large Alaska school districts participated.

SUMMARY:

1. **Timeline to require Integrated Model (Instructionally-Imbedded) implementation:** The participants were not aware that this component of the DLM system has been pushed back to the 2015-2016 school year. They were relieved at this decision.
RECOMMENDATION: Inform all QTs of the timeline for the Integrated Model component.
2. **Functional vs. Academic Instruction and Assessment:** The participants shared their teachers’ concerns, especially at the middle school and high school ages, at the lack of curriculum and assessments in functional, life, and career/vocational transition skills as the students are preparing for post-school environments. The participants understood the requirements for academic skills instruction and assessment.
RECOMMENDATION: Acknowledge this tension in training.
3. **IEP-writing programs:** Several districts use software programs for IEP development. These districts are writing the Essential Elements and Nodes into their databases for selection in IEP goals and objectives. Districts would like EED to assist in a statewide effort to create the databases and to work with the districts and the IEP-development software companies to upload the Nodes. Alternatively, districts would like DLM to make the nodes available to

EED in a manageable format for district inclusion in their respective databases.

RECOMMENDATION: EED might consider funding a workgroup from representative districts (Anchorage, Kenai, Yukon-Koyukuk) to develop an database of the Essential Elements and Nodes for in-state use. The group would need to meet again as DLM develops additional Nodes.

4. Training for 2015-2016: All participants agreed that training for the 2015-2016 year should occur in the Spring of 2015 (April or early May), to allow the QTs to learn about the Integrated Model and formative assessment system(testlets). The QTs could then spend the summer developing their own training for the August staff training sessions.

RECOMMENDATION: Hold the Annual Mentor Training for SY 2015-2016 in late April or early May, 2015.

CONTEXT:

The AKAA has received positive comments in the Consequential Validity Survey. EED and DRA are seen as responsive to the needs of the field. However, there are recurring Consequential Survey comments over the years indicating concerns. The Focus Group was convened to review both the positive and concerning aspects of the Alaska Alternate Assessment, as well as to look forward to the combined DLM/DRA testing system for next year and beyond.

Positive comments seen in the Consequential Validity Survey:

" Excellent training to deliver test"

"I appreciate that our feedback is always taken into consideration...shortened training, shortened practice tests, etc.. The responsiveness from the State and DRA about problems encountered or suggestions made is very much appreciated. The test has certainly improved over time."

"I like that it is very specific with skills and doesn't take an undo about of time to administer. Also, these students can get results like the other students."

"Appreciate that writing scoring was updated to be more user friendly."

"I think it does a good job of assessing these students."

The Focus Group was asked to expand some ways in which the AKAA might be improved. Responses to Questions 1 and 2 are recorded with Question 3.

1. Recurring responses to the Consequential Validity Survey include some concerns that cannot be directly resolved by EED. Please help us understand the degree of impact these issues have in your district, ways that your district addresses these

issues, and tools or strategies that EED or the AKAA vendor can provide to assist you...

- a. There are two predominant critiques related to the AKAA (and other alternate assessments).
 - i. First, the field wants the AKAA to focus more on functional/life skills and not as much on academics. The following comment is representative:
"My students need to learn how to live as independently as possible and not be so focused on academic goals."
 - ii. Second, the AKAA takes too much time to administer/prepare for (though it is much better than the portfolio that it replaced). The following comments are representative:
"I believe this may have already been solved by the anticipated switch for next year. The current assessment system is time consuming (preparation) and not rigorous enough for some students."

"We consistently hear complaints from teachers about the time needed to train, prepare, administer, and score the assessment. It takes exponentially more time than proctoring the SBA, which creates inequality issues in schools and positions. We also hear complaints about the tests not being prepared, which also contributes to the amount of time needed. Most teachers would much rather receive a booklet than to print and prepare multiple copies of a test. It would also be helpful to have leveled tasks that increase in complexity from very basic to more advanced to give an accurate reflection of what students know and can do, rather than starting with the regular test and then switching to ELLOS, which, by the way, isn't always useful information on student progress. Thanks for hearing our concerns."

"I think it is about as good as it can get.... we have come a long way from portfolios!"

Teachers should not have to print and prepare all of the materials for the AKAA. The following comment is representative:

"Preparation and downloading of the materials from the website is good but it would be more convenient if the tests and supplies were premade either on a disc or emailed/mailed to us directly already prepared. It took a lot of time and paper to print numerous pages most of which are not needed; only the score sheets are really needed. Instructions for all tests could be included on 1 sheet to save on printing time and expenses. A cover sheet is not needed for each test, it should just be 1 for each student with the tests given: Reading, Writing, Math, (checked off on the front). Most of the paperwork printed will be thrown away except the scoring sheets. Student Materials that are prepped could be recycled somehow, perhaps shared by a

"pod of schools" like the kits provided by the district. Each assigned the AKAA kit for a certain period of time then inventoried and sent on to the next school."

- b. Writing is difficult to score and is scored too harshly. The following comment is representative:

"The scoring for writing is too complex - should be simplified."

- 2. There are also a few recommendations that are not necessarily common, but might be actionable as we move forward with DLM:

"I don't like that there is no in between. The AA is extremely low, and students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities easily pass the standards for the AK AA but fall way short of the SBA's, which they cannot even read for the most part."

"9-12 Grade band / / Reading / The students only read sight words. There is nothing showing the development of fluency or grade level. The comprehension is listening comprehension, not reading comprehension. The sequencing of events should be graded similar to correct word sequence. It is not possible to get a score of 3 and if one point is out of place, the whole sequence can be wrong. / / Writing / There needs to be room to grow for students who are writing more than one sentence to be scored so that their scores reflect longer passages with a focus on sequencing of ideas who should receive a higher score than someone who writes a simple sentence all spelled correctly. The scores don't reflect how advanced the passages are. / / Math / There should be more applied mathematics problems and also basic math problems. 6 problems is again not a good indicator of academic ability."

"Lower functioning students never can be proficient. That's unjust."

"I found that my echolalic students with autism would often choose the last response option for the three choices given for the questions about the reading passages. On most of the questions, they would get at least 1 or even the full 2 points through selecting this final answer without any comprehension of what was asked of them. I am not sure that this portion of the assessment truly assesses their skills or abilities."

"The ELOS sections were too difficult for some of my students. They did not appear to align with the Early Entry Points in the Extended Grade Level Expectations. This survey did not allow for full explanation. I would have appreciated a comment section under each question. For example, Teachers had to indicate that they either focused on academic skills OR functional skills. There was not the option to report that a teacher focuses on both. There are some general questions that we'd like to ask your opinion on to help us plan for next year."

"There is a big academic jump from the 3/4 test to the 5/6 test. This gap between ability and the test increases as the students get older. The test needs to measure smaller steps in

order to measure student growth and academic achievement. Students and teachers work very hard and the students make gains that are not measured. The students continue to score below proficient even though they are making gains. The parents and administrators cannot see the gains that are being made. Students that score proficient in 3/4 often score below proficient in 5/6 even though they have made progress! The test needs to take into account that we are teaching students with IQs below 70 with significant disabilities. I agree that many of these students can make more academic progress than many would believe and the test has increased focus on academic learning. However, the test needs to start at a lower level and measure smaller steps. For example, a student starts writing with scribbles then scribbles on a line then starts making letters on a line...none of this is measured as progress in writing. The test goes from write your first name to write a complete sentence using the word _____. Most students who could score proficient on the 5/6 writing test would be moved out of my program to a higher level program."

"Look at the population of kids being tested and re-evaluate what test results do for any of them. Parents share that these test scores only make them more aware of what their child can't do. Nine years ago, students were assessed on meeting their objectives in different settings around the school. Their abilities are so unique that it is hard to imagine finding a standardized test that is meaningful."

We then shifted gears and asked questions that may help us build better training systems as we grow with DLM and the new alternate assessment program.

3. What differences do you use to define Functional Skills, Life Skills, and Academic Skills?
 - QT1: Functional skills are those related to self-help skills.
 - QT2: Difficult to access functional and life skills. What would we assess in these two areas? Some diagnostic tools are available for this population.
 - QT3: Both are important. Understands the comments that the test doesn't directly assess functional skills. Maybe consider functional in same way as transition skills, geared toward application to careers or transitioning to post-school environments.
 - Dan Farley: It makes sense that teachers are concerned that the federally mandated tests are ONLY academic, we don't have any flexibility to make these tests directed toward functional skills. But also aware that there aren't effective measurement tools for functional skills in the districts.
 - QT2 & Dan Farley: The DIAL-4 is a tool used in vocational rehab centers for post-school skills and environments. Perhaps the need exists to develop or adopt statewide resources.
 - Connors Rating, Vineland, McCarron-Dial (old career evaluation system, developed in the 60s)
 - Functional checklists, used in evaluation reports
 - The IEPs are essentially a curriculum and assessment guide

- QT1: Wasn't surprised by this comment in the survey, he runs in to this concern too. Some of his Assessors are concerned about the time spent on academic skills when they realize how extensive their needs for self help skills.
 - Dan Farley: Grade level matters, too. Teachers of older students have more of a sense of urgency around developing functional, self help, and career skills due to the pending post-secondary transition issues. If it is a common need across AK, assessing life skills and functional skills might be possible to address at the state level.
4. How are you and your colleagues trained to integrate the academic skills assessed in the AKAA into your daily lesson plans with your students? Is the training sufficient?
- QT2: Background is learning disabilities and ED. Doesn't have the background with this population of students. Works with colleagues for their inputs.
 - QT4: Some teachers at middle and high school start to drift toward the post-school transition strategies and away from the academic. His district is pulling these teachers together about six times a year to talk about this question. Developing curriculum ideas ([Unique Learning Systems](#): Curriculum for this group, 30 lessons per month of connected integrated lessons). Their discussions are around how much academics vs. community instruction, and how does it shift in the upper grades. Balance between middle school and high school teaching topics. ULS offers 30 lessons per month that are thematically integrated. Not necessarily to teach the skill of reading per se, but offers three levels of differentiation in lessons that include reading, writing, math etc.
 - District 1 still uses ULS as the main curriculum for the students who participate with the AKAA. Most of the training time is on how to administer the AA, not on how to integrate the academic skills into a functional skills curriculum.
 - Dan Farley: Is the ULS group going to help make adjustments to their curricula to reflect the Essential Elements?
 - QT1: Intensive needs collaboration with the staff, moving one way with DRA, now looking to next year and DLM. Thrown us for a loop about how to use the Map, Nodes, Essential Elements, doing the modules and trying to figure out what is expected. One of the challenges we are facing as mentors is that we've always been mentors to help people get ready to administer the assessment, and now so much of the training has to do with training the teachers in IEP development and lesson planning. This has not been part of our job in the past.
 - Dan and Kim: It seems that many of the IEP and teaching modules are skills that should be addressed in the teacher preparation programs at the University, and teachers should come to your districts with those skills. But if they don't have

those skills, the modules are a place for them to go. Many of those PD modules on the DLM site will not be required.

- QT1: Districts are expecting the QTs to know all of these skills and lead the district training efforts.
 - QT3: Lots of new things, new vocabulary, Essential Elements, revised goal banks, training to prepare people for the new checklist. These are not part of the University curriculum for teacher preparation, too new. Many little pieces along the way that we need to be prepared for, and the Mentors are expected to shoulder much of the work. This is a pretty big task with a lot of pieces.
 - QT1: And we are being told by the state that all this needs to be in place in the fall of this next year.
 - QT5: An idea: SEAS program, shortcut could be to have those IEP services add the essential elements as a goal bank as part of their system.
 - QT3: District 1 is trying to do this with their IEP system (TyNET).
 - QT5: The commercial companies can take on that task. State might need to pay for it, upload the database to the commercial IEP services, rather than the individual districts creating their own. That way, everyone would have access to the same database of Essential Elements and nodes.
 - District 2 uses its own IEP-writing system, but the upload of the nodes (≥ 5000) is more problematic.
 - Dan Farley: The IEP-writing services may have these already. It may take some thinking around how to structure the database into grouping of skills. A group of professionals could look at the Essential Elements and nodes into groupings.
Kim: DLM may have the nodes in a database for use in districts. We'll bring this up with EED.
 - QT3: The nodes are the entry point for the IEP.
 - QT1: Very few nodes developed by DLM at this point.
5. What curricular materials do you use with your students?
Answered in Question 4 above.
6. Further questions regarding the transition from DRA AKAA to DLM assessments:
- a. What are your most pressing support needs, and hoped-for timeline?

- Dan and Kim: Formative assessment (testlets) and imbedded instruction postponed to 2015-2016.
 - QT1: Online training for the teachers. Summative assessment online: what does that look like, how will kids access the assessment, online testing.
 - District 2 does training in the fall.
 - District 1 has a December or January timeline for training QAs in the Alternate Assessment. Will train Anchorage assessors on the new goal bank and essential elements in August and October.
 - District 3 has a similar training timeline as District 1.
- b. What is your availability for training in August in future years (not this August)? Would your colleagues likely also be available in August?
- QT4: August has lots of training, always loaded, may not be able to load any more in August.
 - QT1: Concern is that the testlets are supposed to be done in the fall, and need to train earlier than early fall. Consensus was that April/May of 2015 is better for training the QTs around imbedded instruction, testlets, and formative assessment.
 - QT1: The QTs need the training in Spring 2015 so they can develop their trainings for their Assessors in August.
 - District 1: Teachers who will do the DLM assessments next year will be familiar with the testing, but Anchorage has 20 to 25 new AA teachers and need to train them in August.
 - QT2: Holds a week long in-service for her staff August 18-22. Kim suggested that might be a good time for her to train her staff on the formative assessments and imbedded instruction in August 2015. She would want to be trained in April/May so she can train her people in August during their training week.
 - QT6 (by email): The biggest thing I would like to get out of the training in the fall will be a timeline that will show when everything should take place during the school year. I really like the idea of having the training in the spring this next year (2015) for the following year's testing. This way we can train our teachers at the beginning of the school year and it will give us time over the summer to prepare. One complaint that I have had in the past from teachers is that it is frustrating to receive information two months into the school year about something that they should have been implementing the entire school year (as a general example).