

The Downfalls of Accountability and the Importance of Outcome Data  
By Elizabeth Cohen

Establishing a collection of data on Deaf children to track their yearly progress is essential. With over 90% of Deaf children attending public schools, the number of Deaf children who are falling through the cracks is of great concern. These children are deprived of an education of comparable quality to their hearing peers because of the lack of state mandated data collection systems that track the individual Deaf student throughout his or her school years. With an ever-increasing emphasis on accountability in the schools in the past few years, it is important to know and understand how all students are performing and learning, especially those who need extra attention to succeed, to ensure that all students are receiving an education that is best suited for their needs.

In the last 20 years, there have been many federal initiatives proposed and implemented to catch up with other nations' ever-improving education systems. In the 1990s, the U. S. Congress, under the Clinton Administration, established "Goals 2000" with the aim that every child would start school "ready to learn." The goals also touched on increasing the graduation rate, improving the quality of education, and increasing parental involvement. In 2001, Congress passed "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), which created goals including 100% proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014 and that all students would graduate high school. Neither of the acts had attainable goals, which hindered their success. However, they brought to national attention the idea of accountability and demonstrated the value of valid and reliable outcome data.

The NCLB Act required accountability and measures to ensure accountability that were costly, but did not provide any way to pay for it. It also focused on increasing teacher quality without a reliable way of measurement. Another major downfall is that it required all children to be tested, including children with disabilities. Everyone was expected to perform on grade level with test scores affecting teacher salary and school funding in some cases. This left children classified under "special education," including Deaf children, being tested on subjects and grade levels inappropriate for their functional level.

I became interested in accountability at a young age. I remember knowing as early as elementary school that my test scores affected not only myself, but also my school as a whole. In college, after taking a class on standardized testing and accountability and another on language development in Deaf children, I started to wonder about the outcomes of Deaf children in public schools. \*Knowing that on average, 50% of Deaf students graduate high school at a 4th grade reading level or less and 30% leave school functionally illiterate led me to want to learn more about their outcomes in schools. Little did I know that my research would leave me with more questions and concerns than answers.

\*(<http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2007/06/12/deafed.enm020.full>)

My research entailed going to every state's Department of Education website and evaluating each on the availability of standardized test scores. During this process, I kept data on which states provided reports of standardized test scores for Deaf children and what information those reports provided. The results were abysmal. Only eight states had any data on Deaf children that was not aggregated under "special education," and when I revisited the sites recently, only six still had data available. What was even worse was that there was only one state, North Carolina, with current, detailed data on Deaf students.

With so much focus on accountability and the overall failure of NCLB, many wonder why accountability is important. Test scores are used every day to make decisions about children's futures. It helps teachers assess where their students fall in relation to other students academically and can help teachers personalize lessons for students who need an extra boost in certain areas. While individual scores of students are not available to the public, having the scores by gender, race, age, grade, and specific disability (not aggregated) allows the public to be aware of student performance. The lack of accessible data for Deaf students means fewer people are aware that many of these students are disadvantaged in the public school system, meaning there are fewer people advocating for systemic changes that could benefit these students.

Once I discovered that North Carolina was the only state with accessible data, I decided to dig further. The first thing I noticed was that North Carolina has a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program at the state level that serves as a resource for the public schools in the state. The program has six consultants that serve as contacts for schools throughout the state. Each consultant oversees two or three regions, and each consultant has at least one overlapping region with another consultant. I was able to get in touch with and interview one of the consultants, Dr. Rachael Ragin, to gain some insight into North Carolina's system.

North Carolina is a "Race to the Top" state, meaning they were awarded federal money to improve their education system through innovative changes while making their curriculum more rigorous. North Carolina has not only raised the bar for their students, but they have shown initiative in improving educational outcomes for special populations. In June of 2013, the General Assembly of North Carolina passed "An act to improve educational outcomes for North Carolina children who are deaf and hard of hearing" (<http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2013/Bills/House/PDF/H317v5.pdf>) which requires the State Board of Education to develop and implement procedures and protocols that will assess a deaf or hard of hearing child's language skills; use a Communication Plan Worksheet to document the child's language and communication needs and placement based on those needs; ensure that there are teachers and professionals who are qualified to teach these populations; and to ensure parents know all of their options, including the option of a residential program for their child and to provide them access to a representative from one of the schools for the deaf to serve as a member of the child's IEP team. The act also requires that databases be created for

use by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) containing information on children under the age of 22 who are diagnosed as deaf or hard of hearing that can be used as a tracking system in coordination with other agencies to ensure adequate outcomes in literacy achievement for children who are deaf and hard of hearing. This bill is an excellent model for other states to follow to better serve their Deaf students.

The most impressive part of the act is the emphasis on development of procedures and protocols to assess language skills in Deaf students. Language development influences literacy, and it is important to know a child's functional language to ensure later academic success. However, not all tests are appropriate, nor do they adequately measure the language abilities of Deaf children. Most people are unaware that the current standardized tests may not be the most accessible and appropriate tests for these populations. The current tests do not provide an accurate picture of a Deaf child's functional levels. The first step to accountability is testing, and without appropriate tests, it is virtually impossible to accurately assess Deaf students and create programs that fit their linguistic needs.

Given that data collected by states on Deaf students in school is for the most part non-existent, there is reason for concern. Without such data, it is impossible for states to hold schools and their educators accountable for the progress or lack of progress of their Deaf students. Schools have an obligation to educate Deaf students, yet the data to make improvements in Deaf education programs in public schools is not being collected to show where the breakdowns are occurring. This prevents necessary changes for improvement, and leaves Deaf students without an adequate education. Creating tests appropriate for Deaf students and actively collecting data in a way comparable to North Carolina's system is absolutely necessary to ensure the success of Deaf children in the public schools. If we want to ensure that all students are receiving a free, appropriate, public education as dictated by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), we need to do everything in our power to ensure that each student is getting the support they need in the schools, and the first step is accountability.

About the author:

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Notes

Here are links to two sources that mention the fourth grade reading level:

- <http://idiom.ucsd.edu/~rmayberry/pubs/GoldinMeadow-Mayberry.pdf>
- <http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2007/06/12/deafed.enm020.full>

