Making Sense Of The Mandate For District-Determined Measures For Students With Disabilities: A Descriptive Single Case Study

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Abstract

Educational responsibilities to students with disabilities (SWD) in the US have changed continually over the last half century, especially guided through EAHCA, IDEA and NCLB. NCLB waivers were introduced in 2011 and, as one component, required states to develop evaluation systems for educators. In Massachusetts, the new educator evaluation system has two ratings for educators. One of those ratings requires development of District Determined Measures (DDMs) which measure trends and patterns of growth and learning for all students over time with a primary focus on content. For SWD, this required a shift in accountability from IEP compliance and participation in state curriculum and testing to development of growth measures. This descriptive case study looked at how one MA Collaborative public day school was making sense of this mandate of DDMs for SWD. Findings suggest that for students with significant disabilities, measuring growth must be examined beyond just the standard state testing. Many variables impact SWD’s learning and growth. Barriers to learning such as health issues, behavioral and emotional challenges, as well as significant cognitive and communication issues must be included in measuring progress. Special education teachers cannot only be held accountable for state testing scores, but must develop effective ways to measure progress related to the individual student needs. Suggestions for future research include consideration for more effective ways to measure the indirect measures (information on learning) for SWD rather than a priority focus on the direct (content related) measures. In addition, more research is needed to gather information related to measuring growth for specific disability type. Administrators will need support and training in ways to effectively evaluate special educators’ impact on learning for those working with students with the most significant special needs.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Massachusetts’ Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) re-defined the requirements for Educator Evaluation in 2011. One component of the new educator evaluation system was development of District Determined Measures (DDMs). DDMs must identify levels of student growth as “high,” “moderate” and “low” and are considered direct (content specific) or indirect (provide information on learning other than student work) (ESE6, 2013). DESE instructs school districts to develop DDMs to identify “trends and patterns in student learning, growth, and achievement” (ESE6, 2013, p.27). Measuring student growth rates, however, is a shift from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) focus aimed at student performance on grade-level academic content (Betebenner, 2009; McLaughlin, 2010).

Public schools are struggling to respond to the shift from accountability of content knowledge to development of growth models, especially for students with disabilities (SWD) (Drame, 2010). Although it is not a new idea for school personnel (e.g. administrators, regular education and special education teachers) to be held accountable for student learning and growth, the measures for this accountability have changed as new regulations and mandates unfolded in the field of education. For SWD, school accountability through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has been focused on participation in content instruction and state testing focused on measuring content knowledge (Karger, 2005). In addition, school accountability for students with disabilities has been monitored via the Individual Education Plan (IEP) which is a tool to demonstrate student achievement. The IEP also is used as a system-level accountability tool (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003). Changing the accountability measure from participation and access to the general curriculum over to growth measures for students with disabilities required
development of a new paradigm for special education teachers and educational leaders alike. Added to this new accountability was the problem that best practice for determining how to develop criteria to specify rates of growth as high, moderate, and low for students with disabilities does not yet exist in the literature.

The use of growth models for SWD as appropriate for accountability measures is not without concerns (e.g. Bilir, Binici, & Kamata, 2008; Buzick & Laitusis, 2010; Holdeide, Browder, Warren, Buzick, & Jones, 2012). As SWD are not a homogenous group, it is unclear how growth model measures will account for the variability of characteristics of SWD (Bilir, et al., 2008; Buzick & Laitusis, 2010; Ehlert, Koedel, Parsons, & Podgursky, 2014). “The heterogeneity of students with significant cognitive disabilities makes it difficult to identify and/or develop a standardized measure that takes into account the variance in learning trajectories” (Holdheide, et al., 2012, p. 14). Additional challenges regarding use of growth models for SWD are in understanding the multiple types of growth models that exist (Castellano & Ho, 2013; Ehlert, et al., 2014). It will not be effectual to compare growth within different model types (Ehlert, et al., 2014).

Evaluating teachers on the basis of student growth models is a complex idea (Ruppar, Roberts, & Olsen, 2014). Progress for SWD can be “incremental and the effects of various teaching decisions (e.g. functional vs. academic programming) are not well understood” (Ruppar, et al., 2014, p. 2). In terms of research and practice, little is known “about whether student growth can be adequately measured for students with disabilities and appropriately attributed to teachers for the purpose of teacher evaluation” (Holdheide, et al., 2012, p. 1). Literature on teacher evaluation offers little guidance to understand how general measures of growth for SWD (especially without specifics of type of disability, types of accommodations, and no
standardization for specific learning objectives) can be validly used and relied on as accountability measures in teacher evaluation (Noell, Brownell, Buzick, & Jones, 2014). Researchers Buzick and Laitusis (2010) suggest that to “ensure that high-stakes decisions based on growth measures for students with disabilities are appropriate” further research on growth measures is warranted (p. 541). Holdheide, Browder, Warren, Buzick & Jones (2012), authors of a summary from a forum of state special education, teacher effectiveness experts and researchers state:

Because of the limited research and the challenges involved with measuring the academic growth of students with disabilities, we caution against using results for high-stakes decisions until further research and practical experience support the validity of claims made from the various measures. . . . Not much is known about the quality of academic growth measures for students with disabilities, yet due to impending deadlines, states and school districts need to move forward. (p. 16-17)

This research contributes to the discourse on mandated educational policies. It also supports school leaders to gain new insight in developing a process for approaching new state mandates in education. In addition, this research offers new information in the field of assessment for students with disabilities and in educator evaluation. Determining and understanding varying levels of growth measurement for SWD may lead to improved instruction for SWD. Special education teachers who have the responsibility for assessment and learning for SWD may directly benefit from the information gained in this study. In addition, this research adds to information on preparing teachers for the field of special education.
Significance of Research Problem

As previously noted, a paradigm shift for students with disabilities exists in Massachusetts due to the new mandate to determine measures of student growth rather than a historical focus on participation and access to the general curriculum as an accountability measure. In response to this paradigm shift, two points are relevant to note related to the significance of this research. The first is in understanding mandate implementation in education, especially related to special education. The second relevant significance of this research problem is in understanding growth models related to students with disabilities.

Making sense of policy mandates requires planning (Dyer, 1999). A frequent error in planning is often “misjudging the ease of implementation” (Haddad, 1995, p.36 as cited in Dyer, 1999). A mistake commonly made is that “cumulative and comparative knowledge of successful and less successful implementation experience is not used in the design of new innovations” (Dyer, 1999, p. 46). Implementation mistakes, when known, can be avoided rather than repeated. It will be important for future educators to be able to use local knowledge as a critical resource for effectively adapting policies for local implementation (Peck, Gallucci, & Sloan, 2010).

The second relevant significance of this research problem is in understanding growth models related to students with disabilities. In education, growth models often refer “to a method of tracking changes (gains or declines) in student test scores or performance levels over time” (Furgol & Helms, 2012, p. 789). NCLB, for example, uses growth models to monitor a path towards proficiency (Furgol & Helms, 2012). This type of growth model towards a standard uses “a prediction of future achievement to make a determination about whether the student’s growth is adequate” (Betebenner, 2009, p. 44). Betebenner, a Senior Associate at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, writes that growth is deemed
adequate only if “it is sufficient to lead to future proficiency” (p. 44). A problem with the current NCLB growth model is that it “fails to adequately separate two essential qualities accountability systems wish to audit: achievement and effectiveness” (p.50).

Growth models offer affable points in education as well. Growth models can demonstrate the progression of skills and knowledge from one level to another and also take into consideration that SWD have different starting points (NCEO, 2010). At issue however is that “most growth models compare SWD to a statewide or local achievement growth target without taking into account that growth rates might be slower for SWD than their peers without disabilities” (Wei, 2012b, p. 38). Other limitations associated with growth models for SWD exist, as noted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (2010):

In special education, growth often refers to changes in performance on curriculum-based or norm-references measures designed to assess basic skills, regardless of the student’s grade level. Although important for diagnostic purposes, these measures may not be the best for growth models. . . . Similarly, measuring growth toward IEP goals is very different from growth models used for accountability. Standards-based growth models do not measure growth toward individualized student goals. (p.2)

This research is significant to the field of education and special education as it has a potential to add understanding related to educational policy on mandates handed down to schools. In addition, improved understanding of growth models in relation to students with disabilities will provide valuable information in improving instruction and learning for students with disabilities. This research may enhance understanding of DDMs. Enhanced understanding of DDMs becomes notably important as it is also a component of the Massachusetts Educator
Evaluation System. Every educator receives a summative performance rating and a student impact on learning rating (ESE3, 2014). “The student impact rating will be based on trends and patterns in student learning, growth, and achievement using at least two years of data and at least two measures of student learning. . . . These measures are referred to as district-determined measures (DDMs)” (ESE6, 2014, p.2). DDMs have become a “high-stakes” component necessary to understand by all personnel in education.

Positionality Statement

Understanding response to educational mandates and improving learning for students with disabilities is personally relevant and significant for this researcher. As a program director of a collaborative public day school my role includes dual responsibilities as a Principal and Special Education Director. Improved student learning and growth is a primary goal focus. I also serve on the MA DESE MCAS-Alternate Assessment Advisory Board and have been active state-wide in assessment for students with disabilities for over 13 years. My experiences over the last twenty-five plus years working with students with disabilities are that students learn at varying rates. Students with more severe and global needs can present with very slow rates of growth which are very different from, for example, students with learning disabilities. Growth for any student with a disability, however, is relative to that individual student. My bias and concern lie in how to improve the understanding of using growth rates as accountability for learning for SWD. In addition, the association as a high-stakes measure for educator evaluation (e.g. the student impact rating) is directly connected to my role as program director in that I am also the evaluating supervisor for special education teachers working in the public day school. I approach the idea of growth models for SWD linked to teacher education with trepidation as I worry the variables associated in teaching SWD will not be allowed enough consideration in a
growth model approach. As an administrator going through this process simultaneously with this research, I have put aside my biases to learn the viewpoint of others in addressing the mandate of DDMs. I have bracketed my assumptions and focused on the perspectives of the participants. In addition, the triangulation of data helped support validity of the participants’ point of view. It is hoped that improved learning and understanding through this research will advance my abilities as an effective program director of a public day school with the end result being—improved student learning and growth.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to make sense of the mandate for development of District-Determined measures for students with disabilities through the lens of one Massachusetts collaborative public day school working exclusively with students with disabilities.

**Research Question**

The main question for this research was: How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?

**Theoretical Framework**

Weick’s theory of sensemaking offered a framework for this research project. The concept of sensemaking is literal in its meaning of making sense (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) tells us that the theory of sensemaking is comprised of seven distinguishing characteristics. Sensemaking theory is: 1. Grounded in an identity construction; 2. Retrospective; 3. Enactive of sensible environments; 4. Social; 5. Ongoing; 6. Focused on and by extracted cues; and 7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (See Figure 1 for an overview of sensemaking...
characteristics). Each of these characteristics of the theory of sensemaking can be related to the educators (both teachers and administrators) responsible for responding to the mandates for DDMs for SWD working in a school environment. How these educators are able to make sense of this process was a primary focus and supported using sensemaking theory for this research.

Figure 1. Weick’s sensemaking theory characteristics

Identity construction, as the first characteristic, is how an individual notices, interprets and uses their experiences and beliefs to influence their understanding (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). “People learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences (Weick, 1995, p. 23). When feedback is positive about an accomplished task, a person may develop an identity as a good worker through his/her actions and observations of others (Seligman, 2006). Educators may develop their identity as
good and smart educators through their observations, comparisons to others, and feedback from colleagues. How an individual develops understanding (makes sense) of “something out there” is self-referential because what is sensed, and how it is seen, bears on the actor’s identity” (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1645).

The ability to observe and reflect requires a retrospective nature for educators (both teachers and leaders alike). *Retrospect* is the second characteristic of sensemaking theory. Reflective practice may combine the identity construction and the retrospective components that are key in the ability to “frame and reframe the practice setting” and respond with actions based on knowledge gained through this retrospection (Loughran, 2002, p. 42). What begins as ambiguous becomes clearer as events evolve and one is able to connect what is emerging with what experiences have occurred (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). One is constantly editing their own actions and connotations (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Where there is no set structure to approach implementation of DDMs, the process is similar to improvisation where decisions emerge and are only “visible after the fact” (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 66).

Weick (1995) refers to the *enactive of sensible environments*, the third characteristic, to lead one to an understanding that individuals actively make up their environment. This runs parallel to school environments which present with a school climate that is reflective of people’s experiences and patterns of behavior and is linked as a critical component to success for policy accountability (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Responding to the mandates for DDMs for SWD will be not only an individual response, but a response by the school community and influences occurring in the work environment (Seligman, 2006).

Schools are social entities. *Social* is the fourth characteristic, and sensemaking theory acknowledges that an organization (such as a school) has shared meanings with its members.
This shared meaning is sustained through common language and the everyday social interactions that occur (Weick, 1995). A social characteristic can reside in the “inter-subjective processes among actors” (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1643). How people make sense of the roles, actions and relationships of its members becomes the social framework of a school (Weber & Glynn, 2006). How leaders and teachers perceive the mandate for DDMs for SWD will link through the social interactions and social feedback that occurs.

The fifth characteristic noted is ongoing. Sensemaking theory acknowledges that sensemaking is ongoing. Weick (1995) notes that, “people are always in the middle of things” (p. 43). Schools don’t stop and start with ideas and actions. Mandates are introduced into what is already happening in a school environment. “Sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than on the influence of evaluation and choice” (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 409). “Sensemaking is ongoing because sense is continually being made and remade” (Seligman, 2006, p. 114).

**Being focused on and by extracted cues** is the sixth characteristic of sensemaking theory. Cues help to develop a point of reference related to both the context and the social interactions occurring in an environment (Weick, 1995). Once the cues are evident, the process of sensemaking unfolds and frames what actions and further attention are warranted in any given situation (Weber & Glynn, 2006). What cues are identified by educators may be valuable in the process of making sense of developing DDMs for SWD. Sensemaking theory guides one to examine the thinking and acting as separate entities. The “near-automatic perceptual processes of action formation” are different from the “more deliberate reasoning processes” (p. 1646). It is yet unknown which cues will be relevant to improve educators’ understanding of developing DDMs for SWD.
The seventh characteristic Weick (1995) identifies as a distinguishing characteristic of sensemaking theory is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. Weick (1995) suggests that “accuracy is nice, but not necessary” (p. 56). When individuals are able to assess plausibility, this often prompts the partners to “go along with the interaction sequence” (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1652). Those involved must feel their actions are justifiable (Seligman, 2006).

Sensemaking is inherently connected to understanding that in order to become engaged in a change process, the change must be meaningful and be relevant to those involved (Kezar, 2013). For public day schools serving only students with disabilities, the responsibility to develop DDMs that are relevant and meaningful is a driving force.

Sensemaking theory provides “insights into how individuals and organizations give meaning to events” rather than only a focus on the outcomes (Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010; Weick, 1995). Although the mandate for DDMs is written the same for everyone in Massachusetts, sensemaking theory reminds us that there will be multiple perspectives and interpretations that occur (Mills, et al., 2010). Mills, Thurlow and Mills (2010) tell us that “at its most basic, sensemaking is about understanding how different meanings are assigned to the same event” (p. 183). Schools provide the environment for sensemaking processes (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking theory in return, will provide the framework for this research to better understand how one collaborative public day school will develop DDMs for SWD.
Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations encountered within this proposal:

AYP    Adequate Yearly Progress
ADA    Americans with Disabilities Act
CCSS   Common Core State Standards
DDMs   District-Determined Measures
EAHCA  Education for All Handicapped Children Act
ESEA   Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESSA   Every Student Succeeds Act
FAPE   Free and Appropriate Education
IEP    Individual Education Plan
IDEA   Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IRB    Internal Review Board
LRE    Least Restrictive Environment
MCAS   Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System
DESE or ESE Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
ERA    Massachusetts Education Reform Act
MOEC   Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives
MFB    Maximum Feasible Benefit
NCLB   No Child Left Behind
NEU    Northeastern University
PL     Public Law
PLG    Professional Learning Goal
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>PPI</td>
<td>Progress Performance Indicator</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLG</td>
<td>Student Learning Goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWD</td>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
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Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction: Path of Special Education Mandates

In order to gain a better understanding of the significance of this research, it was important to understand how the legal requirements for educating students with disabilities (SWD) has evolved over the last half century. This literature review examines the path of special education mandates and what requirements for accountability schools/educators have been responsible for from 1960 to the present day. This literature review first presents the federal focus (1-4) followed by the state focus (5-6). During the process of conducting this research study, new legislation occurred; therefore, a brief mandate update will be presented. A summary will then conclude this literature review. (See Figure 2 for an overview of the literature review sections.) The six sections create a timeline of the evolving legal requirements and expectations for educators supporting students with disabilities:

1. Civil Rights and access to education
2. Compliance for individualized education (FAPE & IEP)
3. Accountability for participation in the general curriculum and state testing
4. Student Outcomes
5. States Respond
6. Massachusetts responds

Understanding the changes that have occurred over time for educators and school leaders sets a framework for understanding why this research has the potential to provide needed input to the field of special education for both educators and school leaders.
**The Federal Focus**

The federal focus is what guides states through development of laws, regulations, and mandates. States may go beyond the federal requirements, but may not do less than the requirements. An overview of some of the civil rights and accessibility laws, required compliance and beginning levels of school accountability will be discussed and followed by guidelines focused on student outcomes.

**Civil rights and accessibility.** All states in the United States had compulsory education laws in place by the early 1900’s (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). Education laws would continue to unfold during the 1900’s affecting many key legal changes for students with disabilities (SWD). Early pioneers in special education were focused “on the development of formal pedagogical procedures to improve the educational and emotional functioning of exceptional children” (Johnston, 1984, p. 200). As the government became more involved in the
field of education and special education, educators and educational leaders’ focus would shift to the legal requirements of providing education to SWD.

The education of SWD in the United States has evolved as a result of legal requirements and mandates, especially since the mid 1900’s. Historically, SWD were kept separate from the general education setting, often in institutions focused on day-to-day care rather than education (Osgood, 2008; Trent, Jr., 1994; Yell, et al., 1998). As society changed in the United States, education changed. Education services for SWD began to improve as the responsibilities in education shifted and began to specifically identify SWD in the requirements and mandates.

The 1960’s brought about a focus on civil rights which would become a driving factor in the advancement for education of the disabled (Osgood, 2008; Trent, Jr., 1994; Yell, et al., 1998). In 1961, a President’s Panel on Mental Retardation was developed by President Kennedy. This panel compiled a report entitled *A Program for National Action to Combat Mental Retardation* that “constituted a milestone” for SWD and “advocated federal involvement” to set goals, plan services and fund research (Osgood, 2008). As a result, the Division of Handicapped Children and Youth was formed connected to the U.S. Office of Education in 1963 (Osgood, 2008, p. 100). This marked the beginning of federal government proposing legislations focused on projects related specifically to special education. In 1964, The Civil Rights Act was passed, and it would become the model for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) setting up those with disabilities as a minority group to be protected.

The time period between the 1960’s and 1970’s was about accommodations and accessibility and resulted in fundamental protections for the rights of the disabled. In 1965, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) took effect and established the federal
government’s role for funding public policy and executing executive decrees (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Osgood, 2008; Yell, et al., 1998). Martin, Martin and Terman (1996) noted that:

While the original ESEA did not provide for direct grants on behalf of children with disabilities, in the second year of that Congress, Public Law 89–313 provided that children in state-operated or state-supported schools “for the handicapped” could be counted for entitlement purposes, and special Title 1 funds could be used to benefit this relatively small population of children in state schools. (p.27)

Accessibility was spotlighted by advocates and legislative bodies which passed acts such as the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) (Best, Heller, & Bigge, 2005; Martin, et al., 1996; West & Whitbey, 2008; Yell, et al., 1998). School leaders and educators had to take notice of the changing requirements to educate those with disabilities. Schools would be required “to educate children with disabilities just as it does those without disabilities” (Hope, 2009, p. 2). It was intended that those with disabilities (of any age) would not be excluded or discriminated against in any setting, including the school setting (Hope, 2009; Thorton, Hill, & Usinger, 2006; West & Whitbey, 2008; Yell, et al., 1998).

Public Law 93–112, the Rehabilitation Act, at Section 504, was enacted in 1973 and stipulated that recipients of any federal financial assistance (including state and local educational agencies) had to examine its services to people with disabilities in order to end any discrimination (Martin, et al., 1996). This law applied to anyone with a disability (Aron & Loprest, 2012). As no funding or requirements for monitoring were included in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, it was “virtually ignored by local and state educational agencies for 20 years (p. 29). It was evident, however, that a move was happening in education identifying that
not just accessibility was important for SWD, but how and where SWD were educated would need to be examined.

**Compliance – FAPE & IEP.** Education settings by the 1970’s were becoming accustomed to the need to address the notions of accessibility and equal access for SWD. At the same time, the focus on equal access to education, however, was already beginning to make a shift from accessibility for SWD to attention to more individualized services. A pivotal law demonstrating this shift was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Public Law (PL) 94-142, enacted in 1975 and implemented in August, 1977 (Yell, et al. 1998). This law began the move from a previous focus on accessibility to education for SWD to mandates that states ensure SWD a free, appropriate, and public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with related services intended to meet the individual and unique needs of each student (Hope, 2009; Russo, Osborne, & Borreca, 2005; Smith, 2005; West & Whitbey, 2008; Yell, et al., 1998). Eleven categories of exceptionality were established for the purpose of providing education and related services to those with disabilities. (Two additional categories were added in 1990.) Prior to EAHCA, of the eight million SWDs in the United States, up to one million were excluded from public school services and an additional three to three and a half million were not being served appropriately (Martin, et al., 1996; Smith, 2005). The law was monumental in its effect for equitable treatment of SWD, but also outlined specific responsibilities and accountability systems for educators and school leaders to follow.

Included in EAHCA was a mandate that each student have an individualized education program outlining their unique needs related to their disability and that it be reviewed at least annually (Hope, 2009; West & Whitbey, 2008; Yell, et al., 1998). The individualized education plan (IEP) became the primary accountability tool for ensuring that SWD received their
entitlement and represented that a student received an “appropriate” education (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003; Yell, et al., 1998). There was also an emphasis that the “IEP must be something different than the normal school curriculum and something more than a generic, one-size-fits-all program for children with special needs” (Hope, 2009, p. 3). “The IEP [was] not designed to address overall academic achievement, however, as it addresses only the individualized disability-related needs of the students and not all of the academic areas” (West & Whitbey, 2008, p. 14). School accountability for SWD was “focused on whether the system has complied with legal procedural standards as opposed to whether a student has achieved specified outcomes” (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003, p. 437).

Federal funding was directly connected to EAHCA and targeted to assist states in the education of children with disabilities. States receiving funding would be held accountable to provide FAPE for all children with disabilities along with other requirements or risk losing the federal funds (Best, et al., 2005; Martin, et al., 1996; Yell, et al., 1998).

Much has occurred since the original passage of EAHCA. Amendments to the law occurred in 1986 and again in 1990, resulting in a change of the name from EAHCA to IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Along with the name change, the term handicapped student was changed to student or child with a disability. Traumatic brain injury and autism were added to the categories, and transition planning was required to be done by age sixteen (Yell, et al., 1998). The changes added yet more requirements to educate SWD.

**Accountability through curriculum & state testing.** As the legal changes and additions continued related to special education, Congress enacted The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 to work further on eliminating discrimination against Americans with disabilities. ADA played a foundational role in the education of SWD as it included the
responsibility to provide any necessary accommodations for those with disabilities in the school environments for both the physical environment and overall access to learning (Martin, et al., 1996; Schultz, 1999). In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized to “improve the performance and educational achievement of students with disabilities in both the special and general education curriculum” (Yell, et al., 1998, p. 10). As noted in Agran, Alper and Wehmeyer (2002), “IDEA regulations define the term ‘general curriculum’ as referring to ‘the same curriculum as for nondisabled children’” and note that it is expected that disabled students’ educational programs would be derived from this general curriculum “to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the child” (from the Federal Register, 1999, p. 12592).

The task to provide evidence that SWD were making effective progress in the general curriculum was becoming more embedded in education. The struggle of how to offer (the mandated) content instruction, but still provide instruction related to other areas (e.g. functional life skills) that SWD required resulted in conflicts over priorities (Browder, et al., 2004; Lynch & Adams, 2008). Educators were realizing “that while students with severe disabilities continue to need some separate, distinguishable goals (e.g. therapy goals, life skills), they also need goals that were aligned with the same academic content as their typical peers” (Browder & Spooner, 2006, p. 4). Due to the general curriculum focus, there were worries that there would be a narrowing of the curriculum for SWD along with the concern that the functional and social needs would no longer be met (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). IDEA required educators to be aware of the need to not just provide varying instructional methods for SWD, but to the necessity of content accountability, as well as a need for more research-based methods and supports to educate SWD (Patton, Polloway, & Smith, 2000; Zirkel, 2009).
The shift “from ‘access to education’ to ‘improving results’” continued for SWD (Rosenbaum, 2004, p. 27). As a part of the IDEA amendments in 1997, it was mandated that SWD be included in school-based reforms and part of the accountability systems that measured school accountability statewide (Agran, et al., 2002; Rosenbaum, 2004; Yell, et al., 1998). States could develop alternate assessments to be “fair and equitable”, but they had to be directly linked to the curriculum of regular education students (Karvonen, Wakeman, Flowers, & Browder, 2007; Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009; Zatta & Pullin, 2004). Further safeguards and process guidelines would be included in the 2004 re-authorization of IDEA, adding for the first time specific requirements for teacher qualifications, inclusive of special needs teachers (Russo, et al., 2005; Smith, 2005).

From a legal perspective, for example considering IDEA and ADA, the goals of equal opportunity, participation/integration, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency have served to improve rights for those with disabilities (Turnbull III, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Park, 2003). Schools were being held accountable to implement state and federal directives for all students, including those with disabilities. Outcomes for SWD could now be measured in two ways: the first being a student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the second being a “comparison to standard’s benchmarks” (Agran, et al., 2002, p. 124). Prior to the IDEA reauthorization, the primary focus in special education was on compliance with legal procedures and accountability for individual student performance based on the IEP review process. “The emphasis on compliance with specific procedures, timelines, and processes is a reflection of the rights-based policy foundations of special education designed to ensure that each individual student served under the law receives . . . FAPE” (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003, p. 436).
Although IDEA provided legal safeguards and access for students with disabilities, there were still concerns that ensuring due process did not completely ensure academic improvement (Rosenbaum, 2004). In 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 became law in the United States and required that schools and districts provide standards-based instruction to allow for all students to reach 100% proficiency in English and math by 2014, not just students with disabilities as IDEA addressed (Duran, 2005; Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hope, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2004; Thorton, et al., 2006). NCLB pushed schools and districts towards demonstrating accountability rather than just concentrating on equity in student learning (Jaiani & Whitford, 2011). Annual student assessments linked to state standards were used to identify schools failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the stated goal of proficiency, and sanctions and rewards were directly based on each school’s AYP status (Dee & Jacob, 2011). NCLB “required that states implement an accountability system to determine AYP immediately, which made it impossible to develop a method of accountability based on empirical evidence that clarified and justified the interpretations, uses, and consequences of results.” (Duran, 2005, p. 1). In moving from IDEA to NCLB there was yet another shift in that the target of instruction had moved from the standards themselves “to standardized test results, often exclusively” (DeSimone, 2013, p. 61).

One of the goals of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students through meeting the individual needs and tailoring instruction. NCLB required schools to report results by four subgroups, one of which was SWD (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hope, 2009; West & Whitbey, 2008). Although the rights of SWD to participate in the general curriculum were improved, this meant that the subgroup of SWD were “expected to maintain the exact same proficiency levels as their general education peers—a standard that has
proved problematic because special education students often start out with lower scores than
general education students” (Eckes & Swando, 2009, p. 2481; Rosenbaum, 2004). Students
with disabilities would be required to make progress at a rate faster than regular education
students in order to meet the goal of proficiency in 2014 (Eckes & Swando, 2009).

As a subgroup, SWD were not always evenly represented. Thorton, Hill and Usinger
(2006) noted that “as many as 30% of IEP students are excluded from the accountability process”
as a result of small numbers in proportion to a school size according to some state thresholds for
subgroup size (p. 119). SWD have also been identified as a reason for a school not making their
AYP towards proficiency (National Council on Disability, 2004; West & Whitbey, 2008).

According to Forte (2010), “AYP neither imposes expectations nor gives credit for increases in
school-level scores across time or for individual student growth” (p. 77). The resulting
achievement gap between special education and regular education students “sets the stage for the
conflict between IDEA and NCLB” (Eckes & Swando, 2009, p. 2483). Like the passage of
EAHCA, NCLB stipulated certain actions be done at the state level in order to receive federal
funding as a support (Hope, 2009). States not meeting AYP would lead to sanctions as extreme
as school restructuring.

NCLB also reiterated the requirement of states to develop an alternate assessment for
students unable to participate in their state testing even with accommodations (Towles-Reeves, et
al., 2009; West & Whitbey, 2008). An alternate assessment must still be linked to a state’s
general education standards. There are challenges with this mandate as states working
individually may not be developing assessments that are able to “be implemented efficiently and
Hope (2009) offers an interpretation to contemplate related to the special education requirement changes. If you consider that states have increased demands as a result of providing FAPE, there is an interplay between IDEA and NCLB in that IDEA’s focus on access has shifted to an outcome-based process aimed at successful transition from school to post-school based on a student’s interests and preferences. In this scenario Hope (2009) sees IDEA and NCLB as complementing each other. On the other hand, if the IDEA focus on access and opportunity refers to access to “specialized instruction and related services” individually developed and provided for educational benefit to a SWD, then there exists a direct conflict between IDEA and NCLB (p. 5). There is yet to be a definitive answer. West and Whitbey (2008) note that:

Framers of the legislation [NCLB] were not equipped to give thorough consideration to how school districts and schools would shift from a focus on ensuring access to education for students with disabilities to mandated accountability for the learning of students with disabilities to the same high standards as all other students. The transition has been challenging. (p. 13)

Congress attempted to better align IDEA and NCLB in the IDEA 2004 reauthorization to improve educational services to SWD by looking to improve student performance (Hope, 2009). Three significant changes in the reauthorization were aligning the IDEA definition of a highly qualified teacher to meet NCLB standards, defining performance goals for SWD to be measured by performance on state testing as is required for all students, and including all students in district and state-wide assessments. Where IDEA required a school district to ensure SWD receive educational gains via an IEP process, NCLB added a higher standard for SWD to demonstrate educational gain via general curriculum and grade-level content as measured by a state assessment (Hope, 2009).
**Student outcomes.** NCLB “changed the unit of analysis for educational performance and accountability from schools to students” (Derthick & Rotherham, 2012, p. 61). As time moved closer to the benchmark of proficiency for all by 2014, it was evident that NCLB was not meeting all its intended goals (Garda & Doty, 2013; House, 2013; Polikoff, McEachin, Wrabel, & Duque, 2013; Tienken, 2012). In 2011, the federal Department of Education offered waivers to states through a program called Elementary and Secondary Education Act- Flexibility, which is most often referred to as NCLB waivers (House, 2013; Polikoff, et al., 2013). These accountability systems had to include: Plans for college-and-career-ready standards and creation of guidelines for teacher evaluations in part based on student performance (e.g. linked to student achievement) (Derthick & Rotherham, 2012; House, 2013; Polikoff, et al., 2013; Tienken, 2012). The NCLB waivers also required states to develop measures of student growth that were to be a major factor in evaluation of teachers and principals (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaeffer, 2012).

The intent behind waivers was to allow flexibility and control to states and encourage innovation to develop comprehensive plans to improve instruction and advance student outcomes (Berry & Herrington, 2011; House, 2013; Polikoff, et al., 2013). Student outcomes often referred to higher test scores and higher graduation rates (Hocutt, 1996). Measuring student outcomes for SWD however, was much more “variable, reflecting the great diversity in the nature, degree, and co-occurrence of disabilities experienced by individual students” (Hocutt, 1996, p. 86). It was also intended that plans associated with the waivers would support aligning the differing approaches, performance definitions and diverse content standards across states (Furgol & Helms, 2012). This resulted in part with a movement toward collaborations among states for the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and common assessment programs (Furgol & Helms, 2012).
Policymaking in education generally unfolds at three levels – federal, state, and local (Furgol & Helms, 2012). There is an enormous variability and “complexity of institutional processes involved in implementation in education” (Furgol & Helms, 2012, p.780). States have had to respond to the federal mandates of IDEA, ESEA, and NCLB and then needed to make decisions as a result of NCLB waivers. Although the federal law outlines the laws and regulations in education, states must implement them within their own boundaries at an equal or higher level. State responses varied across the nation.

The State Focus

How quickly and in what ways states respond to the federal mandates was diverse across the country. A general overview of how some states responded will be presented and followed by a focus on Massachusetts.

States respond. Components of the laws such as IDEA and NCLB pushed states to examine educating students with disabilities. Educational reforms differed across states which contrast in “demographics, socioeconomic status, and educational resources” (Wei, 2012a). States’ responses to requirements such as development of alternate assessments, meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) and reaching proficiency for all students (including SWD) in math and English were not always equal.

By 2000, only “12 states had alternate assessment in place” as required through the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 25). The enactment of NCLB pressed states further resulting in all 50 states having some form of alternate assessment in place for reading and math by 2006. Alternate assessments were inconsistent in focus as some were based on the same content as regular education students and others based on alternate achievement standards (Cho & Kingston, 2011; Towles-Reeves, et al., 2009). In addition,
depending on the state, an alternate assessment could be a portfolio of student work, a checklist of skill performance, or a performance assessment (Towles-Reeves, et al., 2009). As peer reviews of state assessments began to occur, 38 states were identified as not able to demonstrate that their alternate assessments were able to meet all NCLB requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 26). This improved by January 2009 as only 13 states had not yet received approval of their alternate assessment. Development of alternate assessments proved challenging for many states.

The foundation of NCLB accountability was a state measure of AYP (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). All states had to report numbers of students proficient in reading and math and numbers of students participating in the state reading and math assessments. In addition, another indicator in the calculation of AYP was allowed to be chosen by the individual state. Attendance was the most common indicator, used by 35 states (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Seven states chose to use another achievement test such as science or writing, and four chose to include state test performance increases. Graduation rates were also a unit considered in AYP in 31 states (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Furgol and Helms (2012) reminds us that “NCLB was written to be flexible to the needs and culture of each state” but this resulted in production of very diverse responses (p. 802).

The goal of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading by 2014 was every state’s required target. States with proficiency data in place by 2001-2002 began to set targets to reach the proficiency goal right away. All schools within that state would need to use the same starting point for each subgroup, and these points differed greatly across states (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 36). Because states were not starting at the same place, “some have much farther to go to realize the goal of 100 percent proficiency” (p.36). One example is that in ten
states the mathematics starting point was below 20 percent compared to North Carolina’s starting point of 75% proficient (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As states continued to “make and revise choices about the interconnected elements of NCLB accountability, they create complicated policies that are unique from state to state” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 48).

States continued to struggle meeting all the requirements established through NCLB and “the number of states with schools in corrective action and restructuring status” increased from 37 in 2004–2005 to 48 in 2006–2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 122). States with schools in restructuring also increased from 29 states in 2004–2005 to 43 states in 2006–2007. States were beginning to acknowledge that the ambitious goals set forth by NCLB were falling short (Dee & Jacob, 2011).

In 2011, NCLB waiver opportunities were extended to states. By October 2013, 42 states and the District of Columbia received waivers “in exchange for creating new state accountability systems” (Polikoff, et al., 2013, p.45). States receiving these NCLB waivers were in the phase of responding and adjusting their accountability systems. Massachusetts was one of these states.

**Massachusetts responds.** Historically, Massachusetts has always been a leader in developing guidelines for education (Baron, 2006). Massachusetts developed the first State Board of Education in the United States in 1837 appointing Horace Mann as the first educational secretary and establishing the importance of leadership and guidance in the field of education (Cubberley, 1947). Massachusetts passed a compulsory education law in 1852, second in the United States only to Rhode Island (Yell, et al., 1998, p. 220).

Massachusetts continued its progressive ways and in 1972, prior to the enactment of EAHCA, PL 94-142, Massachusetts enacted Chapter 766 which some say was a model for the
first federal special education law, EAHCA, PL 94-142 (MTA, 2008; Task Force of Children Out of School, 1970). MA Chapter 766 (now also known as General Law Chapter 71B) addressed stigmatizing labels for SWD, required evaluations by teams of professionals, required involvement of parents, and oversight of special education programs. It required Massachusetts schools to provide “maximum feasible benefits” (MFB) for SWD in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Baron, 2006; Giordano, 2007). Chapter 766 also prohibited evaluation for special education services through only the use of standardized tests (Baron, 2006). The federal EAHCA, PL 94-142 (later renamed IDEA) would follow in 1975.

After the passage of Chapter 766, many SWD formerly educated in institutions now were entitled to educational benefits in less restrictive settings. In 1974, Massachusetts developed collaborative programs as a means for local school districts to meet the needs of low incidence populations of SWD in cost-effective and efficient manners by sharing resources and providing resources (Chapter 40, Section E and Chapter 71B). School districts would become the fiscal agents for collaboratives to hire staff and develop programs. By 1988 there were 35 DESE approved education collaboratives in Massachusetts (ESE5).

Massachusetts continued educational changes and passed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1993 denoting that schools and districts had the responsibility to “provide an adequate education for all children, rich or poor” (Baron, 2006, p.4; ESE1). ERA also set up mandates through legislation that educators, not students, were to be accountable for students’ success or failure. Statewide curriculum frameworks and learning standards were to be developed and state-wide testing requirements were put in place. Participation in the Massachusetts Comprehension Assessment System (MCAS) was required for all students, including SWD, in grades 3-8 and 10 in mathematics and English. In order to graduate high
school in Massachusetts, it became a condition to pass MCAS as part of the requirements to obtain a diploma starting in the class of 2003 (Baron, 2006; ESE1). This would have a dramatic impact on education for SWD unable to pass MCAS.

Further Massachusetts legislative activity in 1997-98 resulted in changing the special education requirement from “maximum feasible benefit” to the federal standard of “free and appropriate education” (FAPE). From 1999 on, Massachusetts began to deliver the state-wide standards, Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, in content areas and also began to develop an alternate assessment for SWD unable to take the MCAS, even with accommodations. All of this began to happen prior to the enactment of NCLB.

Massachusetts had put into place mandates addressing accessibility, equal access and student achievement. It was believed by the Massachusetts Department of Education that MCAS would satisfy “the assessment requirements of both the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, as well as the federal No Child Left Behind Act” (Baron, 2006, p. 5). Massachusetts also responded with language in the legislation allowing reasonable accommodations for SWD and for the most severe SWD to participate via an MCAS-Alternate Assessment, a portfolio-based assessment. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was the data used to monitor progress towards proficiency for NCLB and also to identify performing and underperforming schools (McQuillan & Salomon-Fernandez, 2008).

Massachusetts continued to do work regarding identification of underperforming schools, and in 2010, the Achievement Gap Act (M. G.L. Ch 69, Section 1J) was passed developing a plan for the state to restructure the most underperforming schools. Massachusetts was, in fact, operating “dual accountability systems: districts and schools are assessed based on both the
state’s five-level Framework for District and School Accountability and Assistance and the requirements of NCLB” (ESE4, 2012).

The MA DESE website outlines ongoing information (www.doe.mass.edu) leading to Massachusetts’ application and approval of a NCLB waiver, approved February 2012. A Mass NCLB Waiver Request Question and Answer pdf notes: “The U.S. Department of Education required states to address three main areas or “principles” within the NCLB waiver requests: (1) college- and career-ready expectations for all students; (2) state-developed differentiated recognition, accountability, and support; (3) supporting effective instruction and leadership (ESE4, 2012).

Massachusetts approached college and career-ready expectations through development of a Readiness Task Force that developed action steps focused on academics, personal/social development and workplace readiness. These efforts were focused on helping schools and educators better prepare all Massachusetts students to be ready for college and/or the workplace after high school (ESE2).

To develop differentiated recognition, accountability and support, Massachusetts had multiple components. Schools and districts were given one of five designated levels (“1” being highest performing and “5” being the lowest performing) of school performance. Progress in the Achievement Gap was one measure considered. Instead of the NCLB goal of 100 percent proficiency, Massachusetts created a goal of cutting in half a school’s path to proficiency; the distance between a school’s current proficiency rating and 100 percent proficiency was calculated. Closing that gap by at least 50 percent by 2017 was the new aim--a fixed goal requiring at least two years of data. A Progress Performance Indicator (PPI) was to be calculated annually. School percentiles were also calculated in comparison to similar schools utilizing at
least four years of school data. Associated with a school’s level was also a determination of special education technical assistance. There were again five levels identified from “meets requirements” to “needs substantial intervention” determined in part by special education compliance measures and by a district’s level (ESE1, n.d.; ESE4, 2012).

The third principle of supporting effective instruction and leadership was addressed by development of a five-step cycle for a new Educator Evaluation System for all DESE certified professionals. Demonstration of embedding Mass Curriculum Frameworks and also the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was a component of the evaluation system. Evaluation standards (rubrics) were developed as a framework for the evaluation. All educators receive two ratings: Summative Performance Rating (products of practice; multiple measures of learning; other evidence related to educator evaluation standards) and Student Impact Rating (trends in patterns in student learning, growth & achievement from at least two years of data and at least two different measures such as state assessments and District-Determined Measures) (ESE3, 2014).

Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the new educator evaluation system in June 2011. There was a year of early implementers followed by a year of required implementation for those school districts receiving federal funding through Race to the Top (RTT). By school year 2013-2014, all school districts and collaboratives were required to begin implementation of the now adopted educator evaluator system (ESE3, 2014). Because the Student Impact Rating required at least two years of data, this component for many districts and collaboratives across Massachusetts occurred during the 2014-2015 school year for the first time. Table 1 summarizes Massachusetts actions in relation to the Federal legislation changes and mandates.
Table 1
Federal Legislation and Massachusetts Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEDERAL LEGISLATION</th>
<th>GOAL/AIM</th>
<th>MASSACHUSETTS ACTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EAHCA PL-142 1975</td>
<td>• IEP Compliance</td>
<td>Chapter 766 (1972)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• FAPE</td>
<td>✔ IEP</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>✔ Maximum Feasible Benefit (MFB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDEA 1997, 2004</td>
<td>• Curriculum</td>
<td>✔ Mass Curriculum Frameworks (MCF)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• State Testing</td>
<td>✔ MCAS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Alternate Assessment</td>
<td>✔ MCAS-Alternate Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher Qualifications</td>
<td>✔ High Quality Teacher status (HQ)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔ MFB to FAPE</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCLB 2002</td>
<td>• Standards-based instruction</td>
<td>✔ MCF + Common Core State Standards (CCSS)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 100 Proficiency</td>
<td>✔ MCAS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• AYP</td>
<td>✔ AYP</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCLB Waivers 2011</td>
<td>• College &amp; Career Ready standards</td>
<td>✔ College &amp; Career Ready expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flexibility</td>
<td>✔ Differentiated recognition, accountability and support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Evaluation tied to student outcomes</td>
<td>✔ Educator Evaluation System</td>
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<td>✔ Summative Performance Rating</td>
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<td>✔ Artifacts/Evidence</td>
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<td>✔ State testing</td>
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**Mandate Update**

On December 10, 2015 President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which will replace the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). In a letter from US Department of Education (December 18, 2015) to State Education Agencies, it was noted that “ESSA requires States to ‘establish ambitious State-designed long-term goals . . . for all students and separately for each subgroup of students’ instead of AMOs.” (AMOs are annual measurable achievement objectives which have been in place for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years and part of the NCLB waivers.) The current NCLB waivers are set to expire August 1, 2016. Information was also included in the letter related to educator evaluation:

To help ensure that all educators have the necessary tools to be maximally effective, every State implementing ESEA flexibility is engaged in the challenging and critical work of designing, building, and operationalizing
educator evaluation and support systems. We believe that this hard work and leadership should be recognized and encouraged. As noted, the law provides for ESEA flexibility, including those principles related to educator evaluation and support systems, to continue to be implemented through August 1, 2016. Given that educator evaluation and support systems are not required under the ESSA, ED will continue to provide technical assistance, including feedback and support, but will not formally process amendment requests related to these systems, and will prioritize monitoring and enforcement on principles that are included in both the ESEA and ESSA.

Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Mitchell Chester, has noted on the state website ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/?update=12/11/2015](http://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/?update=12/11/2015)) that ESSA was signed and:

The act is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The White House and the U.S. Department of Education have released a number of materials to help educate the public about the ESSA on USED's [ESEA web page](http).

No further guidance has been given in regards to what changes, if any, will result in Massachusetts. It is anticipated that current requirements (including DDMs) and practices will remain until further direction is given.

**Summary**

The educational path nationally and locally has been a winding and evolving course for educating students with disabilities. From a focus on access to education to individualized and entitled education, and culminating in a current focus on student outcomes and achievement,
federal and state legislation has required educators and administrators to continually adjust to meet requirements and mandates to educate all children, including SWD. It is important to note that ADA, IDEA and NCLB regulations are much more detailed with many more nuances than outlined in this literature review. The purpose of reflecting on this path, however, is to provide a connection and trail of special education requirements over the last half century. Understanding the changing requirements and accountability measures sets the stage for identifying how educators and administrators are making sense of mandates aimed at improving instruction and learning for students with disabilities, as well as for all students. Gaining understanding from the past will help build understanding going forward.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will restate the research question posed and present the methodology that was used to develop protocols for the research project.

Research Question

The main question for this research is, “How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?”

Research Design Methodology

Asking the right question is important for good research along with “picking the most powerful method for answering that particular question” (Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1157). The method for answering the stated research question was a qualitative study. Qualitative research was a good fit for approaching research in the educational setting as it served to improve understanding “of the complexities of everyday educational predicaments” and allowed for the exploration of the social interactions that occur in these special sites (Cooley, 2013, p. 253). Weick’s theory of sensemaking reminds us that the interactions within the social environment of schools will offer cues to build understanding. Where little is known about development of DDMs for SWD, a qualitative approach was appropriate for examining this phenomenon as it situated the researcher within the activity being observed (Creswell, 2013; Hancock & Algozzine, 2013; Yin, 2011). Hoepfl (1997) provided a quote by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.120) that related to this research for educators by an educator: “If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it” (p. 49).
Qualitative research was the choice for this research rather than quantitative research. Where quantitative research tests hypothetical generalizations through experimental methods and measures, qualitative research “uses a naturalistic approach” to “understand phenomena in context-specific settings” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 47). Yin (2011) noted that qualitative research also presents the perspectives of the participants rather than that of the researcher. It is not just a diary of events, but “driven by a desire to explain these events through existing or emerging concepts” (Yin, 2011, p. 8). The researcher’s lens or viewpoint becomes that of the people who participate and review a study (qualitative) rather than based on scores or instruments used (quantitative) (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Qualitative research facilitates gaining new knowledge to answer questions about something happening in a particular setting (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Hoepfl, 1997). The interactions with educators living this experience in a collaborative setting provided this qualitative research project with input towards improving knowledge and best practice in developing DDMs for SWD.

**Research Tradition**

A qualitative single case study was chosen for this research as it used “contextually rich data from bounded real-world settings to investigate a focused phenomenon” (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2008, p. 329). Case study designs build thorough understanding of a case related to the context through asking “how” and “why” questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Yin, 2011; Yin, 2014). It is necessary to define the boundaries of the case in order to keep the study reasonable and not become too broad (Boblin, et al., 2013). The context of a collaborative public day school bound this case study utilizing the rich experiences in that setting related to understanding how to make sense of developing DDMs for SWD.
A case study methodology focuses on better understanding a contemporary phenomenon set in a real-world context (Barratt, et al., 2008; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2011; Yin, 2014). For this case study, the real-world context was a collaborative public day school where those working directly with SWD had the task of making sense of developing DDMs in their day-to-day practice. A real-world setting allowed the researcher to naturally gain understanding through interpreting the data as it was collected (Yin, 2011; Yin, 2014). Research conducted in a natural setting of a school may be helpful to others working in a similar setting with similar mandates as they may corroborate, modify or even reject a study’s findings (Yin, 2014).

For this research, the work of Robert K. Yin was utilized as a foundation for developing a qualitative case study. Yin’s approach outlines three conditions to consider when choosing to use a case study design: 1. The study is asking “how” or “why” questions. 2. The behavior of those involved cannot be manipulated. 3. The study focuses on contemporary events versus only historical events (Yin, 2014). Each condition is linked to this case study research:

1. The research question being asked focuses on how: “How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?”

2. This researcher was not attempting to manipulate the behavior of others, but sought to make sense of their perspective and approach to developing DDMs for SWD.

3. The phenomenon of developing DDMs was relevant to the current requirements for educators in Massachusetts at this time.

In delving beyond just the necessary conditions for a case study, it is noted that this case study was a descriptive case study. Yin (2014) defines a descriptive case study as “a case study whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon (the “case”) in its real-world context” (p. 238).
Describing the phenomenon, in this situation the development of DDMs for SWD, is the focus rather than the explanation of how or why some conditions exist (e.g. explanatory case study) or trying to identify questions or procedures that might be used in a future research study (e.g. exploratory case study) (Yin, 2014). Yin (2012) cautions that a descriptive case study should not be too broad, but must also not be too sparse. Deciding where to begin and end the descriptions must be carefully thought out (Yin, 2012). The focused concern of DDMs for SWD is best represented by selecting this one issue “and then selecting one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 246). This research focused on only the time frame of the fall of 2015 and the topic of developing DDMs for SWD.

**Participants**

The research site selected should be with “the intention of maximizing the data’s variation regarding relevant characteristics of the phenomenon under study” (Ghesquiere, Maes, & Vandenberghhe, 2004, p. 173). With this thought in mind, a Massachusetts collaborative public day school serving only students with disabilities was approached as a school community representative of one school with the responsibility for the development of DDMs for SWD. This research utilized purposeful sampling to select a site and individuals with the intention of a specific perspective or experience, in this case developing DDMs for SWD by those working directly with SWD (Creswell, 2013; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Yin (2014) cautions that using the term purposeful may mislead a reader to think the sample refers to a “population of like-cases” (p. 44) instead of the intent to define a population that will “illuminate the theoretical propositions” of the case study (p. 42). It is also important to have the participant sample be relevant in order to answer the research question and to be able to “generate rich information” on the phenomenon (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000, p. 1003; Rubin &
Rubin, 2012). Purposeful sampling fits well in a school setting which is one subset of a larger group demonstrating the targeted behavior on a regular basis (Trotter II, 2012).

The first step in identifying an appropriate Massachusetts collaborative public day school was to consider the number of possible candidates (Yin, 2014). Currently in Massachusetts there are 33 educational collaboratives (MOEC, n.d.). The researcher gave consideration to geography and the ability to access the participants/site (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The Massachusetts collaborative public day school chosen was accessible geographically for the researcher and became the critical case identified through clear criteria representing the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2014). This single critical case represented “a significant contribution to knowledge” related to developing DDMs for SWD (p.51).

Once the Massachusetts collaborative was identified, the second step was to identify the number of participants. There needed to be a sufficient number of participants to reflect the diversity of experiences and also enough to lead to a saturation of information (Seidman, 2006). Creswell (2013) recommends for a single case study no more than four or five. This number may provide “ample opportunity to identify themes” and look for cross-case themes as well (p.157). Others, such as Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) recommend that in qualitative research a sample size should not be so small that it is difficult to achieve saturation, but not so large that it is difficult to carry out a deep, case-specific analysis. The aim in qualitative studies is “not necessarily to predict or to generalize” but to represent the perspectives of the common experiences (Hodges, 2011). In this research project, five participants contributed, representing both administrators (program directors) and special education teachers.
Recruitment and Access

Approval from the Northeastern University (NEU) Internal Review Board (IRB) was sought to begin the processes necessary to conduct this research. Once approval from the NEU IRB was obtained, a Massachusetts collaborative program was approached by phone contact to the Executive Director inquiring about the possibility of conducting research to understand how the collaborative’s staff was approaching the mandate of developing District Determined Measures for their students with disabilities (Appendix A). A follow-up letter was then sent to the Executive Director (Appendix B). Obtaining prior approval was a component of protecting the human subjects involved in the case study (Yin, 2014).

The Executive Director was asked to send an initial email introducing the study to program directors and special education teachers within the collaborative to identify those that might be interested in participating (Appendix C). Those responding as interested were then contacted by the researcher and a follow-up email (Appendix D) was sent with a survey to gather demographic data and gather contact preferences. Potential participants were then contacted by email to review and/or clarify the expectations of participation and set up a time to meet to do an interview which was again confirmed via email (Appendix E). A copy of the consent that was to be required was attached to the email so that the participant had time to review the consent form (Appendix F) before signing.

At the interview meeting, expectations were again reviewed by the researcher, clarification that participation was voluntary was restated and the participant reminded that they could leave the study at any time. Participants were asked to read and sign the consent form (Appendix F). A second copy of the consent form was available for the participant to keep.
Participants that came forward included two program directors and three special education teachers. Their identities were kept confidential by providing pseudonyms in both the data gathered and in the final research reporting. There was no immediate or monetary gain for participants to take part in the research project; however, it was possible that some gained personal benefit through being heard and also having the opportunity to contribute to the field of special education. It was not anticipated that any physical or emotional harm came to participants willing to contribute to this research project. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time during the research project.

**Data Collection**

After all the approval processes were completed and the five voluntary participants identified, multiple measures of data were gathered and triangulated. Data collection included:

1. Individual, taped, semi-structured interviews with the program director(s) and special education teachers; 2. Observing participants’ gestures and affect and observations within the classroom spaces and materials presented during interviews; 3. Review of the researcher’s field notes taken during the research process.

Interviews were conducted individually with each voluntary participant as the primary data source (Appendix G). Interview locations were offered off-site of the collaborative or at a location identified by the participant to support confidentiality although all participants chose to be interviewed at their collaborative site. The individual interviews were scheduled to be no more than 60-90 minutes in length, and all were completed before that total time. Resembling “guided conversations rather than structured queries” semi-structured interviews were conducted (Yin, 2014, p. 110). Rubin and Rubin (2012) explain that “in the semi-structured interview, the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, prepares a limited number of questions in advance,
and plans to ask follow-up questions” (p. 31). Responsive interviewing is planned, meaning the interviewer (in this case the researcher) hoped to build trust and create a give-and-take within the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It was not the intent of this researcher to dominate the interview, but to “respond to what the interviewee” had to say (p. 36) in hopes of eliciting a comfort in sharing personal thoughts and perceptions in order to obtain “depth and detail” (p. 37). In hopes of making sense through the data, interview questions were guided by the characteristics of Weick’s sensemaking theory.

The individual interviews were taped using both an iPad audio recording app and an iPhone 6 app. In addition, the researcher took notes during the interview. Taking notes (e.g. field notes) along with the recordings forced careful listening “to get down the main points” and also provided back-up should the recording device(s) have failed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 100). Reflective notes after the interviews were used, as well as researcher notes jotted during analysis.

Data collection included that each interview was transcribed using an online service (Rev.com). Once the transcriptions were completed, they were shared with the participants to allow an opportunity for each participant to review the transcriptions for accuracy (e.g. member checking) (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2009).

Another source of data was observation during the interviews. Yin (2011) notes that observation is important as it allows a researcher to see with one’s own eyes rather than have information reported. Observations do not “produce sufficient evidence to support a qualitative study fully” but can serve to complement an interview or other data (Yin, 2011). The physical surroundings gave some insight and enhancement to the face-to-face interviews, especially for those interviews that took place in a participant’s classroom or office. In those cases, participants readily shared samples and work items that reinforced their shared interview and
perspective which Yin (2011) notes as “props”. Although observations can be considered inferential, they can be used with the interviews to “corroborate or challenge” one’s inferences and support triangulation that is “an essential part of qualitative data collection” (p.147).

Field notes provided additional data. Yin (2014) explains that field notes can take many forms. In this case, field notes were derived during the interviews from observations, main points made or short quotes, and following the interviews when reflecting on the interviews. Field notes were also gathered during the analysis phase of the study.

It was originally planned to request to review physical artifacts, in this case any District Determined Measures developed or identified and implemented by the research site (collaborative). It was thought that collected documents could offer information as the documents were created for reasons other than the researcher’s inquiry and therefore are not influenced by the researcher’s inquiry (Yin, 2011). This research site did not have specific DDMs artifacts available for review. It was reported that the collaborative has just started to work with an outside consultant that can support development of data and growth measures.

Using multiple sources of data (e.g. interviews, observations, and field notes) builds strength to case study research (Yin, 2014). “However, the most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry” (p. 120) (See Figure 3). This allows for triangulation of the data sources to aid in corroboration of the researcher’s findings as well as strengthening the construct validity of the case.
Data Storage

All electronic data collected (e.g. audiotapes, transcription copies, field notes) are stored on a home computer. The computer requires a personal login to enter and uses two web-based programs (also requiring personal logins) as back-up: Carbonite and Dropbox. Audio recordings on the iPhone6 and iPad were deleted once uploaded to the computer and transcribed through Rev.com. The other physical evidence obtained such as the researcher’s written field notes, copies of printed transcriptions and signed consent forms, are kept in a locked file cabinet and/or stored on the home computer. With the exception of the transcribed audiotapes, the researcher was the only one with access to documents during this research period. Participants had the opportunity to review their individual transcribed interviews if they chose. Once the study is completed, the dissertation written and accepted by the dissertation committee, the documents will be retained for at least two years and then destroyed.
Data Analysis

Data analysis for qualitative studies is a connected process rather than a “fixed linear approach” (Creswell, 2013, p. 182). The process can evolve through stages such as: data management or organization, reading through the data and making notations, describing and interpreting the data and ending in representation of the data.

Yin acknowledges that given the large amount of data collected in a case study, it is likely that a computer-based data analysis program may be necessary to organize and manage the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). This researcher utilized a computer-based program, MAXQDA as one such tool to help organize the data. Initial steps included beginning by hand as not to delay any process or learning curve involved by using a computer-based program.

Once the data was gathered and organized, reading and re-reading was done, memos noted and parts highlighted. As Creswell (2013) suggested, the first step was to gather the “big ideas” being presented in the data. The next step was to begin coding and develop categories that emerged from the data demonstrating the different perspectives or themes. Yin (2014) reminds researchers that data analysis is a challenging step in case study research as “there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the novice” (p. 133). A researcher must rely on his or her “own style of rigorous empirical thinking” and a “sufficient presentation of evidence” with “careful consideration of alternative interpretations” (p.133).

Initial memos were noted and other codes, such as in vivo codes were used. In vivo codes, highlighting “the exact words used by participants” was done (Creswell, 2013, p. 185). This was important to allow descriptive comments specific to the participants’ experiences to be heard. Maintaining that data converge rather than be treated independently or in isolation as the researcher digs more deeply into the data was critical (Baxter & Jack, 2008).
Throughout the analysis process, the data was re-read and reviewed until the data could be interpreted and linked to the main research question. As the themes and categories became more succinct in representing the case, the final step was to represent the data in both visual and narrative formats. Creswell (2013) refers to naturalistic generalizations as the final stage of analysis in a case study. Namely “generalizations that people can learn from the case either for themselves or to apply to a population of cases” (p. 200).

Yin (2011) guided this researcher of a qualitative research study through a careful consideration of five phases of overall data analysis. Compiling the data was the first phase. Compiling included sorting through the collected data and organizing it into a workable order, not necessarily the order it was collected. Once done, the second phase of disassembling began by creating codes through a trial-and-error process and pulling the data apart. Reassembling started as the data began to reveal themes and categories. Moving back and forth between disassembling and reassembling this researcher arrived at the interpreting phase. The data set in motion a new story which could be depicted in tables. The final phase of concluding lead this researcher to draw conclusions from the data related to the interpretations developed. The five phases allowed for an interactive experience rather than linear steps to analyzing this research data.

**Trustworthiness**

As the data was collected and analyzed for the qualitative case study, Yin (2014) suggests four design tests to judge the quality of a research design: Construct validity, Internal validity, External validity and Reliability. Each of these qualities has been considered in development of this research project.
Construct validity was addressed during data collection and in the writing and findings of the research study. Trustworthiness was built through bracketing biases and assumptions, and triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2012; 2013; Shenton, 2004). Triangulation of data was not only through multiple types of data, but through multiple participants in the study (Yin, 2011). Analysis included convergence of the data to “attempt to understand the overall case” rather than just the various parts (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 555). Transcriptions were completed and member checking facilitated (Saldana, 2009). Interviewees had the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy of their personal report. The collaborative public day school and participants were kept anonymous and engaged voluntarily. Participants were allowed to leave the study at any time.

Identification of a specific and purposeful site demonstrating the phenomenon being researched (in this case a collaborative program) was necessary for a case study research. Avoiding bias, however, was critical for consideration in identifying a site as it was not intended to “substantiate any pre-conceived notion” on the phenomenon by this researcher, but to seek knowledge and understanding of how the participants were making their own sense (Yin, 2014, p. 76). This researcher’s bias was previously stated due to the researcher’s current position as a program director responsible for implementation of DDMs for SWD. In an effort to improve internal validity, objective analysis of the data collected was the focus with a conscious effort to avoid any inferences. As mentioned already, bracketing was utilized.

External validity was supported through the research design process. Yin (2014) suggests a descriptive case study should start by posing a “how” question, which this research did. Yin (2014) further notes the validity of case study research through the idea that the behavior of those involved not be manipulated and the phenomenon be relevant and
contemporary. Collecting data using multiple sources and triangulation of the data supported the external validity.

The last quality Yin (2014) suggests for consideration is reliability. Presenting a strong protocol that makes “as many steps as operational as possible” may have allowed the opportunity for another researcher to follow the procedures as outlined and conduct the same case study over with limited errors and biases. Detailed data documentation and development of a database to organize and manage the data supported worked towards the reliability of the case study.

Limitations

This research study has many limitations. Yin (2011) reminds us, case studies involve inference and events are not directly observed. Participants’ perceptions create the findings. The small sample of one collaborative and only five participants limits input to the data. A second limitation is in choosing a collaborative program as the site. This was directly related to the researcher’s personal interest, but does not serve to address the varied settings where students with disabilities are educated. The study did not present a broad view of those working with students with disabilities and may not be able to be generalized. Another limitation is that profiles of SWD were used rather than specific disability categories, which may have provided more clarification to the category of SWD. Additionally, as a qualitative study, there is not objective statistical analysis to contribute.

Summary

This qualitative, descriptive case study focused on answering the main question, “How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?” This phenomenon is relevant to today’s requirement for educating students with disabilities. The site chosen (collaborative
public day school) was connected to this phenomenon and the participants were engaged in responding to this phenomenon naturally within their setting. It is hoped this case study provides valuable insight into understanding how to make sense of this current mandate through the sharing of experiences of one bounded case.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

Chapter four will present the findings gained through a qualitative case study to seek understanding of how the participants are making sense of the mandate for District Determined Measures (DDMs). This chapter will restate the research question posed, present the individual participants, share a thematic analysis utilizing the participants’ own words and conclude with a summary of findings.

Research Question

The main question for this research is, “How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?” As presented in Chapters one and two, many changes in the field of special education have been necessary to follow both federal and state regulations and mandates in education over the last half century. The most recent changes resulting from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and current NCLB waivers have pushed special educators to re-examine how their teaching impacts students’ learning and how students’ growth in learning is measured. District Determined Measures (DDMs) have been introduced in Massachusetts as a required component of the current Educator Evaluation System to look at educators’ impact on learning through data trends and patterns over time. This is a new requirement and this researcher is seeking to understand how one collaborative program makes sense of this new mandate for DDMs.

Participants

All participants for this study were chosen utilizing purposeful sampling with the intention of gaining perspective via specific experiences as special educators (teachers and program directors) working at a collaborative program (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2006). All
participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity: Anna, Bonnie, Cal, Donna and Ellie. (See Table 2 for overview of participants). Their individual perspectives related to teaching students with disabilities provided an up close and personal view of their lived experiences. Collectively, they shared thoughts within the boundaries of a collaborative program related to DDMs for students with disabilities.

### Table 2: Participants in research study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years working at collaborative</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Student population working with</th>
<th>Age range of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>Medical/multiple severe needs (cognitive/communication/physical)</td>
<td>Ages 3-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>Social/Emotional/Mental Health disabilities</td>
<td>Ages 5-14 (Grades K-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cal</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Social/Emotional/Mental Health disabilities</td>
<td>Ages 7-10 (Grades 2-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Medical/multiple severe needs (cognitive/communication/physical)</td>
<td>Ages 12-15 (Grades 6-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Social/Emotional/Mental Health disabilities</td>
<td>Ages 10-12 (Grades 5-6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Program directors.** Anna and Bonnie were program directors at the collaborative. They were familiar with each other’s programs and needs, and both referenced during the interviews administrative planning time together with other administrators at their collaborative for discussions such as educator evaluation and DDMs. There was an understanding of DDMs related to being part of the educator evaluation process, but almost as something they were “going to need to do” rather than a process that was in place. Both program directors expressed an understanding of the need for accountability, but also relayed a sense of frustration in meeting the DDMs requirement related to the work they do with their students. Anna and Bonnie both spoke on the notion that others don’t understand their students. Anna said, “People don’t understand that some of our kids go through a phase where medically, eating is the most important thing. Everything else is on hold. The general public doesn’t understand that.” Bonnie spoke about having to evaluate students that may regress and that measuring growth may
have “nothing to do with how she’s [the teacher] instructing them.” There was also a strong sense of having to protect their teachers from additional demands. Anna remarked, “You can’t keep adding, because it’s too much.” Bonnie supported her teachers noting, “[M]y teachers are, (pause) people are busy.” There was not a strong message of confidence from either program director that this process of DDMs would adequately demonstrate levels of growth for their students or show their teachers’ impact on student learning.

**Anna.** Anna was interviewed in a conference room off the administrative offices. She was passionate about her students who presented with medical, multiple, severe needs. Anna was confident in presenting the Program’s approach to curriculum, especially in the areas of English Language Arts and mathematics. Anna talked about literacy and the need for communication as a priority for her students. When talking of how her students learn, she shared her focus on language and communication as the foundation for learning: “If I don’t have language, and I don’t have a way to convey it, how do you know if I can even learn those things?”

When linking DDMs to educator evaluation and a student with a medical regressive disorder, Anna described a call she made to DESE to discuss her students’ needs related to evaluating teachers as “very concerning, because I’m not going to hold a teacher accountable for a position that there’s no way that child is going to make the progress that is expected.” Anna noted that it was important to “look at what you want to do and improve upon and use those as your measures.”

**Bonnie.** Bonnie’s interview took place in her office. It was observed that people were coming and going, often checking in for clarification and/or advice. Similar to Anna, Bonnie was protective of her staff and talked of DDMs as an aside related to all that had to be done. She noted that they were in the “early stages of figuring” out DDMs. Bonnie felt her “teachers are
nervous to have something tied to their performance rating be impacted to a degree by some things that we have no control over.” As Bonnie’s students presented with more social-emotional and behavioral needs, she was focused on the task of preparing the students for academic learning and continually needing to move them to a next level – wherever that might be. She noted, when talking about progress and growth that, “comparing them to themselves is what we try to do.” Bonnie related the reality of extreme struggles improving as demonstrated by “he’s not stripping down and peeing in the settling room” as he was when he first arrived.

Bonnie stated they were doing a good job with “good intentions” related to the educator evaluation. For DDMs, however, she expressed skepticism in a universal approach to DDMs. “It’s so hard because it’s something that captures . . . the spirit of what we’re trying to do, but that also then actually captures what the department wants.” Bonnie was the only one that made reference to the union and that the union “didn’t approve” of using the teacher evaluation, but she did not elaborate to the details.

**Teachers.** The teachers (Cal, Donna and Ellie) all presented an enthusiasm and commitment to working with their students. They identified with their students and the unique challenges of their populations that existed. Each relayed the necessity of making the choice to want to work in a collaborative setting versus a regular education setting. All presented an understanding of the educator evaluation system related to setting professional and student-learning goals, but in difference to the program directors, they were not as familiar with the concept of DDMs. They each spoke to the day-to-day need for data and improving outcomes based on where a student starts rather than in comparison to grade-levels or same-age peers. They each also spoke to what was most relevant and valuable for their students in learning. Their collaborative students were there because they presented with social, emotional, behavioral,
health, communication, cognitive and/or physical challenges that must be addressed first in order to even begin to measure any academic growth.

**Cal.** Cal invited me into his classroom for the interview. Often during our discussion he would refer me to observe materials, visuals, and the set-up in the room when talking about his teaching and his students who display more social-emotional needs. He exhibited a joy for teaching and the love of his many years of experience at the collaborative. He spoke to the core of learning for his students and to teaching students respect. “They [students] respect the honesty between teacher and student. That you’re not going to [pause], not lie to them, but you’re not going to tell them stuff. . . . Helps them feel safe.” When asked about reporting growth and progress, Cal stated:

I think we’ve got to realize that this population they’re just not going to make the academic growth that another kid is going to make in a public school, and I think they [the State] need to learn to look at that and not always measure it by academic growth.

For DDMs, Cal explained, “We talked a little bit about that last year and we’re still talking about that and how much growth does a kid actually make and how much, . . . [and] whether it’s academic or behavioral.” Cal made reference to DDMs as another request in a long line of requests from the State that didn’t align to his students. “I just wish regular ed[ucation] and the State would get on board with this stuff.”

**Donna.** Donna was the newest to the collaborative of the teachers interviewed. We met in a conference room where she willingly shared her zest for working with students with multiple severe challenges. “I love this job, because I love these kids. They’re extraordinary. They make every part of my day excellent.” She spoke to the challenges of teaching at a level that was
motivating to students, but also relevant to her students’ needs. She spoke of communication needs and improving students’ quality of life. Donna talked of the time and effort to modify curriculum for her students and also their participation in MCAS-Alt at the lowest access level. She talked often of her students’ needs being different from typical students and the balance of meeting those needs, but also meeting the requirements for academics.

When discussing DDMs more specifically, Donna spoke in frustration:

I feel like we work so hard, and then we ‘re surrounded by a lot of people who are making these rules who have no concept of what our classroom looks like, what our typical day looks like. They’re saying, ‘Well, this needs to happen and that needs to happen’, but I have no idea what you’re actually doing; just fit it in somewhere.

Donna spoke to the importance of taking data and looking for incremental growth. When asked about growth measures, she expressed, “It’s more like they have met their goal, or they haven’t.” Donna referred more to comparing a student to where they started and where they were observed to be at a later date.

Ellie. Ellie was a teacher for students with social-emotional needs. She invited me to talk with her in her classroom. Often during our discussion Ellie brought out student work or materials and lessons for me to observe and used them to enhance what she was saying. Ellie regularly spoke to the high level of needs her students presented and spoke reflectively of students and requirements in the past compared to now. The increased requirements and the seemingly increased level of need of the students appeared to wear heavily for Ellie. “I don’t know why. It’s just become harder” she noted. She spoke to the reality of the collaborative as
very different to regular education settings. Ellie continued to express frustration often within her interview.

    I think we beat ourselves up a lot. I know myself; I beat myself up a lot. I try really hard to, [pause] but we have so many other things going on. One of my little girls is in psych hospital right now.

At another point Ellie shared, “You come back and the reality for us here is so different. Although my intentions are always good and I have everything I need to be doing here” her thoughts trailed off to a far-away look without finishing her sentence.

    When discussing DDMs more specifically, Ellie reported that, “It’s hard to stick with all of the expectations, state standards, formal assessments. . . . I guess I’m a little embarrassed to say I don’t know how we really do that. We’re trying.”

Participants’ summary. All the participants spoke to their students’ individual needs, outside of academics, as the reason for attending a collaborative program. Measuring progress was often incremental and a comparison of the student to themselves. The program directors held a more in-depth understanding of DDMs and the mandate along with understanding the responsibility as part of the educator evaluation system. The teachers, while familiar with the notion of DDMs, did not express any change in their current practice or relay a sense of urgency for doing things differently. There was not a differentiation in measuring growth and progress from developing growth measures for their students to support reflecting on the impact of their teaching.

Thematic Analysis

    The individual interviews, along with the researcher’s notes, memos and observations while in the classrooms painted a thematic picture of the participants’ perspectives in making
sense of the mandate for DDMs for SWD. Theming helped to see the perception of the interviewees as it evolved through the interview process, rather than just draw out a pre-existing meaning (Saldana, 2009). The three main overarching themes and eight sub themes derived from the data are outlined in table 3 and will be further discussed. The main overarching themes:
1. Our students are different; 2. How we measure growth; 3. Responding to the State.

Table 3 Thematic Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Theme</th>
<th>Sub Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our students are different. (Collaborative vs. regular education)</td>
<td>Transient populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heterogeneous populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How we measure growth</td>
<td>Documenting progress &amp; growth is ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect measures are priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standardized tests don’t show what our students are learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the State</td>
<td>Educator Evaluation (PLG and SLG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still a lot to learn about DDMs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Our students are different.** The interviews started by asking participants to describe the population of students they worked with. As the interviews progressed, descriptions of their students were often in comparison to other students or student groups. The researcher notes and memos supported the interview findings in that there was a distinct emphasis in the participants’ belief that collaborative settings were different than regular education settings. Three sub themes evolved from the participants’ perspectives within the notion that their students at the collaborative were different from regular education students: 1. Collaborative students are a transient population; 2. There is a lack of a norm in a collaborative setting; and 3. Collaborative students are a heterogeneous population.

**Collaborative students are a transient population.** Each participant made some reference to others not understanding the needs and challenges of the students attending their collaborative. The *others* referred to were DESE (the State), regular education teachers and/or the general public. One point of difference between what participants noted at their collaborative
compared to a regular education setting was the transient population. Students transitioned to the collaborative at any time during the school year. Ellie referred to these students as “starts”. She explained, “There’s more work to starts. There’s more meetings. . . . [T]he type of kids we’re getting are so complicated.” Bonnie also commented on new students starting, “The ones that come in are brutal. We start all over again.” Cal pointed out that,

It’s a drastic difference [from the regular education setting]. I see kids who come in here and their IEPs are saying that they can’t sit in the classroom, they can’t do work, they’re constantly in the principal’s office, they’re with the adjustment counselor, they’re here, they’re there. They come in here and granted it’s a whole different ballgame. There’s eight kids with them. They’re getting reinforced. . . . Am I going to get more out of them? Absolutely I am. Maybe not right off the bat, but I am going to get more because I can spend more time with that student. . . . So there’s a big difference and I think it has to be measured differently with these guys.

Just as students are noted to enter at differing times, they exited frequently and unexpectedly or at different times. Bonnie spoke to the shifting population, “We’ve got kids coming. The good ones go back. . . . The successful ones, the ones that were making great progress and they’re able to regulate into the things we want them to do, we lose that” as they go back to district when they’re doing well. Bonnie also spoke to precursors to doing grade level academics, “Available to learn versus actually learning, you know what I mean? In some ways, that’s our job. Once we get them available and ready to learn and able to be safe in school, we lose them.”
The underlying message was that it was difficult to rely on academic measures when those measures relied on students’ active participation in learning. Students often entered when in crisis, and exited when doing well. There was an implied belief that academic measures would not represent the total learning that had occurred for students at the collaborative setting while preparing the students for successful academic participation upon return to their home districts.

**Lack of a norm.** A second difference between collaborative settings and regular education settings that recurred within the discussions was the lack of a “norm”. The teachers touched on group size and student differences, but the program directors both noted this variable as important. Norms are used by educators to compare students across a large group. Anna thinks that:

> Because you have larger numbers [in a regular education setting] to look at, you can see trends much better in groups. You can track kids over time better, especially for school districts that have a certain level of consistency following the same third grade until they graduate actually gives you some very cool information.

Anna also expressed this thought:

> Two of my other coworkers talked about developing norms for classrooms, and I kept saying that is not necessarily possible with such diverse learners. In fact, that with absenteeism and the fact that we do have kids that do come in and out throughout the year-they go back to district, they come back, new kids come in. What is a norm? It’s not like you have 500 third graders that you could possibly get some good rates and measure their progress.
Bonnie also explained that students were coming from so many different towns there was not one main curriculum to base assessment on. She noted they often are “using teacher-generated curriculum versus having a standardized curriculum for this program because of the constantly shifting nature of the population of the kids that are coming to us and where they’re coming from.” The group size and consistency again impacted comparing students as a whole. The conversation always shifted back to the individual needs of students rather than students as a group or as a program. Anna remarked, “It’s very inaccurate if you think you have a norm when you don’t. You do individual growth models, but not group growth models. People have a hard time hearing that.”

Even within the collaborative itself, the participants talked about the difficulty in collaborating across programs to develop similar measures. Bonnie stated, “We struggle as a collaborative. . . . [D]o we have them [DDMs] program by program? Do we have them collaborative-wide?” Anna also commented:

[Given] the different populations across programs, we try, where we can, to be internally consistent. It just makes sense for this stuff. Again, that’s really hard because for [Anna’s] kids it looks really different than for our other high school students or even her kids that’s similar age with my population. That’s the biggest [challenge].

**Collaborative students are a heterogeneous population.** Participants compared their students not only against regular education students, but to other students with disabilities. Each person expressed at some point in the interview the diverse population of students at the collaborative and again connected to the individualized needs of the students and the intensity of the needs. One example shared was that students with extreme interfering behavioral needs do
not present with the same needs as students with learning disabilities. Several participants noted
the range that is implied when just noting the category of students with disabilities. There was
great concern for the students with medical, multiple severe needs. Anna said, “Just maintaining
could be good if they’re in a position where they’re starting to regress, as we do have kids with
very short life expectancy. You have to balance out what’s important . . . with some of them.”
Overall, each participant was passionate about addressing the level of disability. Cal noted:

Differentiation can be, [pause] it’s not always fair, but we’ve got to look at each
kid’s individual abilities and just say, Hey. This is what this kid can do. Let’s
move from there and see how much growth there is for what he can do by
knowing what he’s been able to do.

Participants expressed collectively that students referred to the collaborative were there because
they were not able to be successful in regular education settings. Their individual needs were too
demanding to be met through special education in a regular education setting.

Summary. The three sub themes presented a picture of participants’ perceptions on the
differences of their students compared to other students attending a regular education setting.
These differences resulted in the participants’ views that perhaps different considerations to
DDMs for their students with significant disabilities were warranted. First, the transient nature
of students attending their collaborative presented challenges related to high levels of need upon
entry, and when success was noted, students would transition back to district. This did not allow
for academic growth to be a primary measurement of success. Secondly, the small group sizes
also impacted the ability to look for trends and patterns across a norm. The third subtheme
important from the participants’ perspective was the range of different needs across their
collaborative. Considering a spectrum from intensive needs to mild needs for students with
disabilities, students attending the collaborative were presented by the participants as being on the intensive needs end. The range of medical and/or regressive disabilities to the extreme behavioral needs of their students presented different challenges as compared to students in a regular education setting. The participants’ consistently identified with their students and presented a belief that their students’ growth must be measured in ways other than just academics.

**How we measure growth.** All of the findings for how the participants were making sense of DDMs kept leading to their focus on the importance of demonstrating growth and measuring progress for the students. There was not a clear differentiation, however, between growth and growth measures. In analyzing statements as a whole, there was an unstated understanding that DDMs were to be related primarily to academic content. The reality of needing to focus on many other important details for learning was consistently defended. There were also correlations made as to what impacts a student’s progress and/or rate of progress. Cal reported:

Most of us get that growth is going to be limited. It’s going to be small and you got to learn to take those small chunks and be happy with those small chunks, and then when you get that, begin to move on and begin to add onto it and begin to give them a few more challenges.

Three sub themes were present in the topic of measuring growth and are discussed here to further outline participants’ perspectives: 1. Documenting progress and growth is ongoing; 2. Indirect measures are priority; 3. Standardized tests don’t show what our students are learning. Table 4 outlines types of assessment and monitoring tools mentioned as utilized by the collaborative program.
**Documenting progress and growth is ongoing.** Each participant spoke to taking data and monitoring progress as ongoing. Donna openly admitted that “I never realized how important taking data was until I worked here.” She also shared, “We are big on taking data, so we do a lot of data, which I'm working on getting better at. We do a lot of data [and] make sure it's written in all our IEP goals and whatever.” Bonnie pointed out:

- We're doing a better job every year of writing more measurable goals and having our IEPs be more data-driven. We're doing a better job over the last five or six [years], a really good job of collecting meaningful data. Now we're looking at how we use that behavior data. . . . [W]e're better at that.

The IEP was a primary tool mentioned to monitor progress by all participants. Bonnie stated, for example, “Obviously the progress on their IEP goals probably first and foremost” when asked about measuring progress. Observation skills were also mentioned by each teacher in monitoring their students’ week-to-week and noting what skills they were able to demonstrate. Ellie said, “I just follow it and I watch it.” From Cal, “Watch what they’re doing. I’ll make notes.” Taking data in the general sense was reiterated again and again. Anna explained,

- It’s mainly the individualized piece, and making sure people are good at taking the data, because we’ve been doing it for so long, but then understanding how to use that data more consistently. Some are better than others in terms of looking at patterns.

When participants were asked about determining high, moderate, or low rates of growth, one person noted work related to MCAS-Alt as high for those working at grade level, entry being moderate and low as access skills. Bonnie noted:
We haven’t even [looked at high, moderate and low]. I need to figure out a baseline before we can think about that. Again, it’s just so hard because, no, we haven’t. How do you measure that? Those less specific measures. The endgame, yes, obviously is the ability to report to make academic progress, but when you deal with the kids who aren’t making huge academic progress, but they are making social or behavioral progress.

One of the teachers, Donna, when asked about determining high, moderate, or low rates of growth, honestly said that she thought it was “more like they have met their goal, or they haven’t. I don’t know that I’ve ever really thought about it in those terms.”

**Indirect measures are priority.** As discussed previously, the individual needs of the students rang consistently as the priority for measures of growth. Massachusetts has explained DDMs as direct (content specific) or indirect (provide information on learning other than student work) (ESE6, 2013). Although those labels were rarely used by the participants, measures discussed during the interviews could be placed within those categories. The direct measures were usually identified as the IEP if content goals were included, MCAS and/or MCAS Alt as well as some benchmarking or skill-based checklists. These measures could show growth or progress, but as most expressed, not for all the students. Cal reported again the indirect focus: “We’re just working on getting the person to stay in class. Getting the person to sit in a group setting. Getting the person just to focus. I’m not worried about academics right this second.”

The consistent majority of measures were related to helping students prepare for learning or to improve their quality of life – the more indirect measures. Cal noted, “We’re looking at that sort of a thing [behavioral data] as a measure of growth and can this person now sit and really learn?” The need for students to grow in relation to vocational and self-care skills was
also expressed as important. Donna remarked on the need to work on vocational tasks: “We start
doing all this non-academic based work that’s starting to allow them to build interests.” Ellie
gave examples of the importance of teaching appropriate social skills:

These kids [need to learn] the concept of eye contact. The concept of respectfully
shaking someone’s hand and not shying [away] and not pretzeled on a chair and
not being way off topic or not swearing at me because I asked you to put your
legs down off your chair.

Bonnie too, spoke to the indirect measures, “You have some data about self-regulation, time on
learning, and tracking things like motor breaks and things that use strategies in different stuff. I
feel like we have those indirect measures pretty well.” Donna remarked:

It’s just hard; I feel like to find that balance between finding things that are going
[to] allow them to really lead a successful [life] and [be] as independent as
possible [such as] working on daily living skills, things that are important.

The struggle of what and how to measure seemed connected to thoughts related to what and how
to teach. As Ellie noted, “What is the most important thing in our whole school? [Be] Safe.”
The reason students attend a collaborative program was stated over and over as reasons not
related to academics. Participants were clear, once again, on the individualized needs of their
students and the individualized process for measuring their progress.

**Standardized tests don’t show what our students are learning.** When asked what tools
their teams might have considered for DDMs, many various possibilities were mentioned – all
related to what they were already utilizing in some capacity (see Table 4). The questions about
growth measures were intended to be in relation to DDMs. The responses to the questions
appeared related to showing student progress rather than related to developing growth measures.
Table 4  
Overview of Some Tools Used or Mentioned by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Helpfulness/Usefulness Identified As:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Behavior Scales (ABS)</td>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aimsweb</td>
<td>Somewhat useful for benchmarking for some students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior counts &amp; frequencies</td>
<td>Very helpful for most students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigance Assessment of Basic Skills (ABS)</td>
<td>Somewhat, but still not for the lowest functioning students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills (CIBS)</td>
<td>Somewhat, but still not for the lowest functioning students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)</td>
<td>Not helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative Assessment System for Teachers: Adaptive Reading (FAST)</td>
<td>Somewhat useful by 1 teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Records (e.g. seizure charts, medications)</td>
<td>Somewhat helpful for some students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Education Plan (IEP)</td>
<td>Identified as Helpful by all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)</td>
<td>Identified as Not helpful by most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCAS Alternate Assessment</td>
<td>Somewhat helpful for a small percentage of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Motor Breaks</td>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Sensory Breaks</td>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restraints</td>
<td>Helpful when showing decrease as measures of better regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego Reading Assessment</td>
<td>Identified as Helpful by 1 teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Function Assessment (SFA)</td>
<td>Somewhat helpful by 1 teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Regulation</td>
<td>New, but somewhat helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time out of class</td>
<td>Very helpful when showing decrease in time away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Portfolios/Work Samples</td>
<td>Very helpful for those able to provide work samples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IEP and MCAS (regular or MCAS-Alt) were each mentioned by all participants. The IEP was the main tool utilized by all to show progress in meeting specific goals. All students attending the collaborative program were on an IEP. For students in the social-emotional program, both the program directors and teachers mentioned not all students even have academic goals. MCAS was noted to provide some information, but due to the social-emotional needs of many of the students, the teachers expressed it did not serve to demonstrate
their students’ knowledge. It was explained that their students often presented with high anxiety about testing and some even tore the assessment rather than participate. “I’ve found with the MCAS I have more meltdowns” Cal reported. For the students with more significant medical needs, Donna shared the challenge of modifying the Common Core State Standards to meet the level of her students when completing some MCAS-Alternate assessments.

For students that were verbal and could read or do math, several tools and assessments were identified to help show beginning levels of students and then used to compare at a later date (e.g. Pre and Post testing). (See Table 4) The following tools/assessments were identified only by one teacher each (or in one case by two teachers): Aimsweb (two teachers), Brigance, DIBELS, FAST reading assessment, San Diego Reading Assessment, and School Function Assessment. The challenge of student anxiety came up again related to assessments. Ellie shared, “Because of the anxiety of we're taking a test, we're having a quiz, you're going to sit with me [instead; so] I do a lot of quick measures.” Even using some of the benchmarking assessments such as Aimsweb, Bonnie said, “Our teachers like it because it gave them some place, some benchmark information, but it's too much. It's too cumbersome for our kids. They don't like tests.”

For the students performing significantly below same-age peers, there were not a lot of standardized tests that the participants mentioned as very helpful in assessing growth for their students. For example, Anna mentioned the Brigance as one possible standardized assessment:

Even though that was supposed to be targeting more significant disabilities, it is still on the high end for us. In order to use it for some of our kids, we actually have to put a different age in. It won’t allow us to put in our [student’s] age. We have to knock it down in order to get some scores. . . . It’s not a bad tool, but it
was just disappointing that once again, it’s not so accurate. For the younger kids, we can use some of the more traditional ones, but very quickly, those will be very inappropriate. A lot of times it’s the school functional assessment [or] the Vineland, and those kinds of things that we’re using.

For the students in the social-emotional program, all participants mentioned the value in student work samples to show growth. Cal noted the progression students can make from being able to write only one sentence on a work sample to then being able to write a paragraph. Related to math, he remarked that students’ work samples could show single digit addition and later demonstrate doing two and three digit addition with regrouping. Both Cal and Ellie mentioned doing lots of hands-on work, using the white board, using manipulatives, and doing projects, etc. that they could observe and make their own anecdotal notes or take classroom data. They found this much more valuable to show how their students were progressing academically.

Health data was mentioned as an important method to correlate if a student was not making progress. Both program directors mentioned the variables of student hospitalization or medication changes as important factors related to progress. Students with medical needs such as seizures and overall health were also noted as important information related to progress.

Students with social-emotional needs consistently were identified as making progress or not making progress, related to behavioral data. Bonnie discussed number of holds (restraints) going down as making progress. She also spoke to the student experiences as important. “I know we’ve got kiddos that are coming from really horrible home lives and trauma histories. Or they've been in really terrible experiences.” Both Cal and Bonnie mentioned recording number of time-outs and breaks as important information related to how much time a student spends in the classroom. Cal shared he uses a behavioral system for charting:
[W]e have to log everything in. We've got sensory breaks, motor breaks, teacher timeouts, [and] kid timeouts. Even just taking a walk to take a motor break . . .

We have to log it all in, and then if we need the data which we will at IEPs and progress meetings [it is available].

Ellie also mentioned they just started looking at self-regulation data, but she said it is new and she was not sure how it will be used.

**Summary.** The need to measure growth and progress was validated throughout the interviews by all participants. There was not a clear differentiation between participants’ understanding of a difference in growth measures (as DDMs ask for) and measuring growth and progress (current practices). Participants offered several sub themes related to measuring growth.

First, the documentation of progress and growth was ongoing. Participants took data daily and were always looking for ways to show their students were making progress. Second, the progress was demonstrated through many indirect measures (learning readiness skills) rather than primarily direct measures (content-based). Third, standardized tests did not serve to accurately demonstrate the incremental successes their students were making. The IEP and work samples were deemed more useful in conjunction with behavioral and health data to consistently measure student growth and progress. There was an unspoken understanding that the State message of responsibility for academic focus of DDMs was heard, but the indirect measures were defended as the priority measures necessary to demonstrate how their students were growing and progressing.

**Responding to the state.** Evident was an overarching understanding of the responsibility to follow the guidelines and mandates from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Responsibilities such as utilizing IEPs and doing MCAS
and MCAS-Alt were now embedded practices within the collaborative program. Two sub
themes commonly related by the participants in response to the State mandate for DDMs were: 1. 
Educator Evaluation and 2. Still a lot to learn about DDMs.

**Educator evaluation.** All participants were familiar with the educator evaluation process.
Bonnie felt they were doing a good job, “with a good intention”, and she shared that they spend a 
lot of administration time on the educator evaluation system. Several participants talked about 
setting professional learning goals (PLG) and student learning goals (SLG) and now being actively involved in the process. Cal, for example, stated, “We’re beginning to do that more seriously this year. We kind of did a practice run last year with that and are measuring how our progress is and where the kids are at by our professional goals and student goals.” This illustrated an acceptance of this initial expectation of the Educator Evaluation System.

When asked about the connection of DDMs to the educator evaluation process, the teachers did not provide any clear examples of understanding DDMs as directly related to their evaluation whether positive or negative. Both of the program directors, however, expressed concern around evaluating teachers based on student growth due to the intensity and level of their students’ needs. The conversations included the beliefs of fairness and undue consequences. Anna defended her teachers working with students with medical/multiple severe needs in that she would not “hold a teacher accountable” for a student with a regressive disorder or a severe medical need impacting participation in the school day. Bonnie maintained the concern for her teachers working with students with mental health needs and stated that “teachers are nervous” that performance ratings could be impacted by students experiencing hospitalizations or medication changes which would in turn impact student progress. Although Anna appeared to see the educator evaluation system as initially helpful, when the discussion included DDMs she
was worried what the consequences would be. She noted, “What comes across as positive sometimes ends up being very punitive.” Anna felt there were too many “unknowns” related to DDMs and their student population.

*Still a lot to learn about DDMs.* The program directors, again, were more able to discuss DDMs as a separate but connected component of the Educator Evaluation System. Anna explained her understanding of DDMs:

> It’s basically accountability, making sure that from the top down or the bottom up, people are actually tracking what they do in some manner to continue to improve upon their practice, and to improve upon student outcome . . . I think we can open the door to really improving what we do and collaborating more with our students and being better listeners and responsive to their needs, versus always thinking we are the dictator of knowledge.

Bonnie acknowledged the need to have DDMs. “[F]or my kids I need to have math and ELA for the elementary school population and then something that’s a non-academic measure too. For us, it’s the regulations, things like that.” She said they would likely end up using “growth percentiles [from MCAS] and progress on IEP goals” as their measures for this school year.

When the program directors were asked if they thought their teachers understood DDMs both referred to the Educator Evaluation System and replied their teachers understood it. When challenged to consider DDMs directly, both referred to their teachers’ emotional responses directly tied to DDMs as “nervous” and “stressed”. Anna elaborated, “They [teachers] feel stressed by what the consequences will be to everything. Those are unknowns in the future. That information has to be given to the Department of Ed and it’s hard to know what happens at that point.” Bonnie admitted her teachers were nervous, but also conveyed that teachers may be
less nervous as there was intent on the part of administration to let the teachers know “they get it” implying the understanding of the collaborative students and their needs.

The teachers were less familiar with the DDMs mandate. When asked what their general understanding of DDMs were, Cal asked, “Give me a definition of District Determined Measures? I'll be honest, I briefly heard it, I've briefly done [pause]. Give me what you're looking for?” Ellie referred to the program director keeping everyone up to date but then went on to talk about curriculum training. Donna talked about the difficulty of motivating the students and the need for understanding incremental learning. There was recognition of hearing about DDMs, but there was no detailed understanding of DDMs and the mandate requirements.

**Summary.** All participants are aware of DDMs at differing levels. Participants seemed to perceive them as needing to become a new reality, but were not quite sure what that would look like or how exactly it was to be accomplished. In responding to the State, both teachers and program directors were involved in the process of the new Educator Evaluation System, primarily in the first stage of developing student learning and professional goals and being rated on the rubrics. The second stage of the Educator Evaluation System of implementing DDMs was still in an awareness versus an action stage. All expressed a level of unknown consequences and were questioning how it relates to their world. There was no differentiation between documenting growth and progress and developing growth measures for the students.

**Thematic Summary**

Findings of this study produced three overarching themes that described the participants’ perspectives related to DDMs. Participants of this collaborative setting identified strongly with their students and defended their practices. Participants challenged others to accept the reality of the many variables existing for their students which directly impact academic progress. The
participants strongly identified with working with this special population and acknowledged the need to teach differently, accept a student for who they are, and also measure progress differently. The idea of developing growth measures for students with disabilities is not clearly discriminated from measuring growth and progress.

The State presents their requirements for DDMs that in turn must be interpreted by those doing the work. All participants agreed that measuring student growth was necessary. All participants agreed that accountability in education was necessary. All participants were aware and beginning to learn about DDMs. What the findings did not demonstrate was an active incorporation of DDMs into the school environment. There has not yet been a noticeable shift in practice at this collaborative public day school as a result of the mandate for DDMs for students with disabilities. There also did not appear to be a worry related to any possible consequence for no current action in implementing DDMs.

This case study is significant as the participants present a perspective in a real-world setting through first-hand experiences related to understanding DDMs for students with disabilities. The findings from this study will be discussed further in chapter five via the lens of Weick’s sensemaking theory, and discussion of the significance of the findings and ideas for future research.
Chapter Five – Discussion of Research Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand how one Massachusetts collaborative program made sense of the mandate for DDMs for students with disabilities. Accountability measures were not a new idea for educators working with SWD as federal laws of EAHCA PL-142, IDEA, ESEA and NCLB have directed educators to be accountable for educating students. A shift, however, occurred with NCLB from ensuring SWD not just access to education, but to an equal education with all students. Educators were responsible to ensure their SWD participated in the same content instruction and state testing as all students. States were responsible to develop mandates to measure and demonstrate proficiency towards the content by SWD as measured by the state testing. As the deadline of 2014 approached, it was clear SWD would not meet this proficiency standard. NCLB waivers (ESEA flexibility) were introduced for states to make adjustments. Massachusetts developed College and Career Ready Standards (CCSS) and an Educator Evaluation System in response to receiving a waiver. The Educator Evaluation System included two ratings: Summative Performance Rating and a Student Impact Rating. The Student impact rating included District-Determined Measures which should show trends in patterns in student learning, growth and achievement from at least two years of data and at least two different measures (ESE3, 2014). The DDMs mandate began implementation in school year 2013-2014. DDMs created another shift from not just demonstrating a student’s equal participation in content instruction and state testing, but to development of growth measures which would then be reflected within an educator’s evaluation. One research question has guided this study: “How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?”
Chapter five will consider the findings through the lens of Weick’s theory of sensemaking and further interpret the findings through two summary thoughts. The implications for practice and recommendations will be discussed along with considerations for future research. A final conclusion will be presented.

**Interpretation of Primary Findings**

Participants in this study appeared honest and genuine about their understanding of DDMs. They presented an acceptance and necessity to measure growth and show progress for their students, but did not offer clear differentiation of their current practices for measuring progress as different from development of DDMs. An analysis through the lens of Weick’s sensemaking theory along with a general discussion of findings will be further presented.

**Findings through sensemaking theory.** Weick’s sensemaking theory has provided a framework throughout this study. Yin (2014) has suggested that using a theoretical proposition that shapes a case study development may also guide a researcher in analysis and reflection of the case study data. In Chapter one, the seven characteristics of Weick’s sensemaking theory were introduced. The characteristics, in turn, aided development of interview questions. The seven characteristics of Weick’s sensemaking theory were then used to better analyze how the participants in this study have made sense of the mandate of DDMs. Sensemaking theory offered an understanding that different meanings can be assigned to the same events (Mills, et al., 2010). When an interruption in a normal routine occurs (such as introduction of a new mandate), an individual has “to make sense of what is occurring now and . . . consider what should be done next” (Mills, et al., 2010, p. 184). DDMs have directed a change in the normal routines for measuring student growth over time for students with disabilities.
The seven characteristics of Weick’s sensemaking theory help to examine more closely the findings interpreted from this study. Each characteristic connects the dots to understanding more clearly how the participants have made sense of the mandate of DDMs for SWD. The seven characteristics considered are: Grounded in an Identity Construction, Retrospection, Enactive of Sensible Environments, Social, Ongoing, Focused On and By Extracted Cues, and Drive By Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy.

**Grounded in an identity construction.** Individuals influence their understanding of their own identities through their experiences and beliefs (Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). A strong theme of identity through each interview was the connection to their students. Each recognized the individual characteristics of the students and their level of need, especially needs in comparison to students in the regular education setting. Individuals saw their own identity in correlation to their students’ needs and struggles. The job of teaching these students was not just a job, but a vocation. In addition, the teachers often elaborated on the how they approached teaching SWD and their passion for teaching. They referred to how they modify and help their students’ access content. They referred to their presentation of lessons as hands-on, visual and multi-sensory modes. Their excitement for talking about their students was their identity: “It’s so individualized.” “It is the challenge for what we do.” “I’m like, No; I really can’t work anywhere else.” Weber and Glynn (2006) note that identity construction is self-referential. This rang true from the perspectives presented by the participants within this study.

**Retrospective.** Individuals reflect and respond based on knowledge gained over time (Loughran, 2002; Weick, et al., 2005). Because DDMs are still a relatively new process, participants seemed to reflect on being in education or being at the collaborative for periods of time rather than to the ability to reflect on DDMs. The reflection was often focused on asking
others to consider the individual student growth related to their setting. In reference to working with students with medical/severe needs, Donna reflected on being at the end of the school year and looking back: “Remember at the beginning of the year when you couldn’t even hold your fork to feed yourself? That is so exciting you can do that now.” For the students with more emotional needs, Cal shared, “This kid couldn’t do two-digit addition now he can do two numbers, three columns, without regrouping. But look at what he was doing six months ago; he wasn’t even sitting in his seat.” The observational reflection of a student over months or over a school year was consistently evident within interviews as opposed to scores or specific measures. When pushed to reflect directly on the topic of DDMs, comments often presented a short-term view of where they stood related to DDMs now. Retrospection was tied to the identity construction: Their students, the students’ needs, and being in education. The short-term retrospection was the challenge of integrating this new idea into the environment.

**Enactive of sensible environments.** Responding to an idea such as DDMs is both an individual and a school community action influenced in the work environment (Seligman, 2006). The program directors both expressed an understanding of the responsibility as administrators related to DDMs. The influences from the state were received by the program directors, but for the teachers, a full influence within the work environment was not evident within the interviews.

The characteristic of Enactment of Sensible Environments was an area of inconsistency between program directors and teachers. Both presented with some awareness, whether accurate or inaccurate, but program directors expressed a stronger sense of responsibility or ownership for development and or implementation of DDMs than did the teachers. Brown, Colville, and Pye (2015) note that sensemaking is not only interpretation and understanding, but “the active
authoring of the situations in which reflexive actors are embedded” (p. 267). It may be that there is not yet a strong enough influence in place within the environment.

**Social.** As noted in the Enactive of Sensible Environments, the social framework of school has not yet fully changed related to the mandate for DDMs either. Sensemaking acknowledges that an organization (such as a school) has shared meaning sustained through common language and everyday social interactions (Weick, 1995). The shared meaning of the school is clearly focused on understanding the individual needs of the students and noting progress rather than concerned with a shift to development of growth measures. There was a shared perspective that their students are different (than regular education students) and therefore may need to be measured differently. Ellie summarized by noting, “[T]he reality for us here is so different.”

The common language and interactions of the participants were focused on the individual and unique needs of their student populations. Each person shared a perspective aligned with creating foundations for learning (e.g. attending, regulation skills, and communication skills) for their students before any (academic) learning could even be measured. Cal remarked, “It’s about learning how to get to do the academics.” Donna shared that her students were “capable of learning and talking and being people. You just need to understand them. Take the time to understand them, and that’s hard too.”

The shared language and interactions had not shifted, but remained focused on preparing students for learning and acknowledging the priority needs of the students. There was a shared frustration presented by participants that also seemed to question why there would even be a need to shift. The collective perception seemed to be that their work was important work, and the focus was different because it should be different.
**Ongoing.** The notion that sensemaking includes that “people are always in the middle of things” was clearly conveyed by each participant (Weick, 1995, p. 43). There was an overall view expressed by the program directors of all there was to do (e.g. Educator Evaluation, Coordinated Program Review, facility management, moving the Program, staff training, writing IEPs, student evaluations, MCAS, etc.). For the teachers, the view was trying to keep up with the day-to-day demands coupled with the intensity of the student needs. Donna mentioned, “It’s funny because you can work it and do different things to make it fit some sort of whatever. Then sometimes the day falls apart and you’re like, Oh God, we got nothing done today.” Ellie commented on the challenge of balancing having to deal with behaviors while executing different lessons through a day, “Looking at eight students, and then I have six spelling groups, I think this is too hard.” Donna summed it up when she said, “There’s an overwhelming amount of work to do. I feel like I have this to-do list, and I check a couple things off, and add about 10 more things . . . trying to breathe.”

There was exasperation and a sense of frustration conveyed related to the amount of work to do each day. Although there was the dedication to their teaching as noted in Identity Construction, there was the acknowledgement of ongoing demands and expectations – both from external agencies (e.g. the State) and from internal agencies (their own personal expectations).

**Focused on and by extracted cues.** Cues can frame action and guide what warrants further attention leading to the unfolding of sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006). For the participants, their perception stayed focused throughout each discussion to their individual students’ needs and their current practices. Even though the State was requiring that changes occur in reference to the DDMs mandate, there was no clear evidence presented that the implementation of DDMs was specifically occurring within the program. In reference to the
State Cal commented, “I think they [the State] need to learn to look at that [growth measures] and not always measure it by academic growth.” There was an implied message that they believed they were not doing what was being asked.

All participants in this study collectively approached DDMs based on what they were already doing. Use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), MCAS and MCAS–Alternate assessments were mentioned by each participant as ways expected to measure and demonstrate growth. Benchmarking tools (e.g. Aimsweb) or portions of standardized tests (e.g. Brigance or ABAS) were commonly identified by the participants. Classroom data, behavioral data, work samples, and observational data taken daily provided a strong picture of how participants viewed measuring their students’ progress and growth. There did not appear to be any interruption in the cues within the environment to warrant doing anything different at this time.

Sensemaking theory outlines that the thinking and reasoning processes are separate from the acting process (Weber & Glynn, 2006). All participants appeared to be aware and beginning the thinking process of what implementation of DDMs meant. The program directors were further along in the reasoning process and made reference to working towards a plan of action. Day-to-day actions that were shared by the participants, however, did not yet demonstrate moving to any concrete actions that were any different than their current steps.

Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Kezar (2013) reminds us that sensemaking is inherently connected to understanding the meaning and relevance of any change. Throughout every interview/interaction with participants in this study there was a suggestion that DDMs, as they understood them, did not have direct meaning for their students. There was a sense of disagreement that DDMs would be able to show if they as educators were doing a good job. It
was expressed by most that students attended the collaborative program due to reasons other than academics. Those other reasons were what should be measured.

In departure from academics, the behavioral focus, the social focus, the self-care and/or vocational focus for their students were repeated throughout the interviews. Although all agreed academics (direct measures) were important, it was not the primary reason for students attending the collaborative program. The more indirect measures of behavior and social changes, for example, were always talked about as the priority. There was no clear message through the interviews, however, whether these indirect measures could be utilized as DDMs going forward – only that they were relevant. Anna reiterated, “It’s all about those skills needed to access all this learning. If they don’t have those foundational skills, we never know what they can do. It’s such an important piece.” All participants believed that what they do is relevant and meaningful, but they did not seem to believe the indirect measures were accepted by others outside their setting as meaningful DDMs.

**Characteristics summary.** Sensemaking happens through identity, ongoing communication, decision-making and the significance of any given situation (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Weber & Glynn, 2006). For the individuals participating in this study, there was a strong identity with the students’ individual needs and the intensity of those needs. The communication was around their day-to-day survival and the decisions needed to meet the current requirements already in place. Measuring student progress and growth was identified as important and interpreted as already occurring. There was an awareness beginning of interpretation of DDMs, but no clear enactment within the environment that the individuals themselves were labeling as DDMs. There was not yet evident a strong influence within the environment that was pushing a shift in thinking to a shift of action.


**Significance of findings.** The findings of this study point to two areas for consideration: There exists a lack of understanding the DDMs mandate and there is a need to better understand growth models for students with disabilities. Both will be discussed.

**Lack of understanding the DDMs mandate.** The findings show the participants’ passion for teaching students with disabilities and the challenges of their day-to-day responsibilities. In this narrow look at one collaborative program, educators were struggling to make sense of this new mandate for developing DDMs for SWD and are not yet directly engaged in this process. Missing is knowledge of a purpose or need for developing DDMs. Educators remained focused on the day-to-day responsibilities for educating their students and did not yet see the necessity to change their current practices. Legislation may have created a broad outline for implementation, but there is not a focused plan evident to shift existing systems of practice. To make sense of the mandate, educators must believe in the importance and connection to their work. This association was not yet evident and as a result, no direct changes have occurred.

Participants consistently shared their perspectives related to the students they served in the collaborative program. They considered their students to have challenges that significantly interfered with their ability to participate in regular education opportunities and typical classroom instruction. As a result, for students in the collaborative program there was a shift in focus from content instruction to addressing the barriers impeding success in the content instruction. As participants did not see content as their main priority, there has not been buy-in to DDMs that have their focus on content knowledge. Aligning with the new mandate for DDMs may be an unspoken message that what they are doing is not important. It is easy to see there may be resistance given that the educators were passionate in their work with SWD.
There appeared to be confusion in how to prioritize needs for the SWD, especially those SWD with more significant needs. Findings from this study suggest an underlying question presented by the participants, “Should students with the most significant challenges in learning have different measures (other than only academic) to demonstrate growth?” The intensity of the students’ needs were believed as important and more relevant when discussing what and how to measure their students’ growth.

Findings also suggest consideration for different types of measurement for SWD with the most significant needs. Students with disabilities is a very broad group. Massachusetts requires that SWD be eligible for services under at least one of the following categories (MA 603 C.M.R. 28.02(7)): Autism, Developmental Delay, Intellectual Impairment, Sensory Impairment-hearing, Sensory Impairment-vision, Sensory Impairment-Deaf/Blind, Neurological Impairment, Emotional Impairment, Communication Impairment, Physical Impairment, Health Impairment, or Specific Learning Disability. Students with similar labels can still present with very different levels of need in a school setting. There have been “relatively few studies [that] provide an in-depth examination of the achievement growth of students with various types of disabilities“ (Elliott, 2015, p. 62). Identifying student characteristics and exceptionalities are important when looking to determine what the reasonable expectations for student achievement could or should be based on disability (Bouck & Satsangi, 2015; Stevens, Schulte, Elliott, Nese, & Tindal, 2015 in Elliott, 2015). Little is known about specific growth trends for SWD as a whole nor for specific disabilities (Stevens, et al., 2015; Wei, Lenz, & Blackorby, 2012). While considering the impact of specific disabilities can be informative, determining what to measure for growth is also still in question.
As mandates and regulations have changed over the years, the balance of what to teach and prioritizing what to teach SWD still remains in question. Necessity and obligations for providing content instruction and accountability for measuring progress in content knowledge are understood. Individual and direct instruction needs for SWD must be woven into the requirements. When the individual student needs, such as medical, physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral, far surpass typical academic needs, however, special educators are driven to address the individual needs before content instruction will be successful on its own. There does not have to be an “either/or” scenario, but the scales are often tipped drastically for students with the most significant needs. There still must, however, be measures of both the individualized skills and of content knowledge. Outside of the eligibility categories, there is not a simple way to differentiate a student’s level of need except for placement type.

DDMs are meant to be focused on “measures of student learning growth, and achievement related to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks . . . or other relevant frameworks, that are comparable across grade or subject level district-wide” (603 CMR 35.02). DESE does allow an “alternative pathway for evaluating educator impact” such as use of two or more student learning goals as one such method. Educators may need to continue to work to shift their thinking from the idea of meeting a student goal or not and instead think about a reflective cycle that continually asks the educator to ask “have I had an impact on this student’s learning?” If so, what is that impact and how can it be measured. This is a different type of ownership for students’ learning than has existed in the past.

Measurements of student growth within the findings consisted primarily of IEP objectives, work samples and pre-post measurements (e.g. start of school and at a certain time period from start). No specific measures were identified during this study that could be
specifically labeled DDMs. There remains confusion whether DDMs need to primarily be standard academic measures or whether DDMs can encompass other areas. Participants made sense of DDMs by continued focus on their current practices. Findings did not relay a true understanding of DDMs or understanding of the need to change how they measured student growth beyond their current measures.

A need to better understand growth models for students with disabilities. Current growth models used for federal accountability “hold all students to the same standard of becoming proficient by a fixed point in time (i.e., growth to proficiency)” (Buzick & Laitusis, 2010, p. 538). “A fundamental premise associated with using student growth for school accountability is that ‘good’ schools bring about student growth in excess of that found in ‘bad’ schools” (Betebenner, 2009, p. 2). The educators in this study expressed anxiety, and a bit of fear, in the notion that others do not understand what they do to teach students with very challenging needs. Educators continue to struggle to show students’ success in a mandate that is perceived as a one-size-fits all model. As was noted in a forum held in 2012 of researchers, special education and teacher effectiveness experts, “Unfortunately, little is known--in terms of research and practice--about whether student growth can be adequately measured for students with disabilities and appropriately attributed to teachers for the purpose of teacher evaluation” (Holdheide, et al., 2012, p. 1). Often the one-size-fits all approach does not address what is needed for all students or all educators.

Growth models include “measures of how much progress a student makes over time rather than just measuring student achievement of state standards at one single point in time” (Drame, 2010, p. 380). When the standard state testing does not serve to demonstrate knowledge gained for SWD, where do educators turn? Massachusetts uses “student growth percentiles” to
measure student progress by comparing changes in MCAS scores to scores of other similar students (e.g. academic peers). Students with emotional-behavioral needs, as was noted in the findings, often are not able to demonstrate their content knowledge through participation in state tests. In addition, students participating in MCAS-Alternate assessment do not receive student growth percentiles. This is not a measure that is effective in measuring growth for many SWD. The responsibility often falls back to the educator to develop classroom measures (Holdheide, et al., 2012).

Massachusetts suggests DDMs will help to identify “comparable measures in all grade levels and subject areas” to help improve understanding of student knowledge and learning patterns across schools (ESE6, 2013). For students with the most significant needs, better measures can certainly be developed, but they may be related to the individual student rather than a grade level or a school population. The lack of clear guidance for new ways to measure growth for students with the most challenging needs often results in educators continuing with their current practices. Educators will need to be convinced that changing their methodology for measuring growth may lead to better instruction.

**Implications for Practice and Recommendations**

Educators of SWD need more training and support to implement the mandate for DDMs. There is a need for more information and perhaps more justification to push a change in current practices. Special educators have relied on setting IEP goals and meeting or not meeting those goals as a means to show growth and progress. There needs to be consideration from a state level, a school level and at a personal level for educators to move towards a change in practice.

State leaders need to offer more guidance as to the *how* for development of DDMs for SWD. Administrators and special educators of the students with the most severe needs require
directed guidance that is relevant to the populations they serve. There needs to be clearer explanations from the State for better understanding of DDMs direct measures (content specific), as well as the indirect measures (provide information on learning other than student work). Policy makers may need to clarify the relevance and purpose for educators, but also offer assurance that consideration for those students with the most significant special needs are adequately represented in blanket mandates. In addition, new mandates need a longer timeline of implementation to allow the opportunity for current norms of practice to evolve towards building new norms of practice. This may take longer than one – two years to build understanding and acceptance.

Given the current timelines, school administrators are left to interpret the mandates at the same time they are expected to implement the mandates. If the message about new mandates from administrators is that they are “one more thing to do,” buy-in may be slow or not at all. If mandates can be introduced and modeled positively, educators may build reflective practice rather than worry about compliance, resulting in more success for changing practice. There needs to be adequate time to learn and understand a new mandate before schools have to be held accountable for the mandate.

There also now exists an additional question given the recent passage of ESSA. Considering ESSA does not include the same accountability for educator evaluation, will Massachusetts continue on the same path? The State will need to offer guidance sooner rather than later to maintain the momentum of moving forward with the current system in place. The NCLB waivers will expire in August, 2016, and accountability measures will change creating more confusion for administrators and educators regarding what will be expected.
Educators of SWD are worried and sometimes defensive about directives to change their practices. Educators need to know that it isn’t that what they are doing is wrong, but that new practices can often be positive in providing additional and different forms of information about their students’ learning and growth that can lead to improved instruction and learning. There is a fear of educators being held accountable for SWD’s slow rates of progress. Implications related to educator evaluation remain unclear. Supervisors/administrators doing educator evaluation may need more specific guidance on evaluating teachers working with the students with most significant needs. Determining how behavioral and health variables impact student learning must be taken into consideration, but there must be objective rather than subjective measures for administrators to rely on.

Educators need further training to understand the difference in measuring growth and development of growth measures. Given the history of special education and the reliance on compliance through IDEA and accessibility through NCLB, patterns have been established. DDMs question those patterns and require educators to consider their practices and the resulting impact on learning. It is imperative to understand the disabilities and challenges SWD demonstrate, but despite these challenges the question should be, how has what the educator put in place moved the student forward. This is about good practice rather than the often perceived punitive and consequence-based perceptions. In theory, it should be about professional development and professional growth to do better for students.

Teacher preparation programs must include more training in ways for developing growth measures, especially for SWD. Special education teaching programs must help educators differentiate ways to accommodate all levels of SWD, including those students with most severe
and multiple disabilities. Teachers must learn to understand that a slow rate of growth does not mean growth measures cannot be developed. Every student has a starting point and a goal point.

Educators are not yet making sense of the new mandate for development of DDMs for SWD. This is evident through a lack of change in practice. There is uncertainty from educators of what information the state really wants. There is mixed messaging relayed as to what and when implementation is required, and there is fear that the information being gathered does not meet the state’s target.

It is hoped that this case study has provided a contribution to the field of special education and ideas for training of special educators. Educators of the most impaired students with disabilities must continue to be taught to develop incremental ways for their students to demonstrate content knowledge, but at the same time document areas of growth for improved access to education, independence and overall quality of life. Training programs for educators of SWD need to reinforce not only what to teach, but how to teach in measurable and effective ways.

In regards to understanding new mandates, educational settings make sense through adjusting their day-to-day practices when they understand the relevance and importance of the mandate. Systems change can take time and needs ongoing administrative support and guidance.

**Considerations for Future Research.**

The mandate for DDMs is new and not completely understood in the field of education. Continued examination of DDMs would benefit educators in meeting the needs of SWD, but also to address accountability measures outside of a one-size-fits-all approach. Further research on DDMs in a broader range of SWD, number of settings and with a larger sample of educators responsible for SWD would provide valuable information. In addition, research on timelines of
implementation of new mandates in education may serve to better develop action plans than can assist schools and administrators on improved success.

Given that the category of students with disability is a wide range of students, further research on specific disabilities may help to identify more details to address student individuation and rates of growth. Seeking to identify and categorize students’ level of need could provide further insight into understanding how to develop accurate growth measures connected to specific disabilities.

Continued future research in the field of teacher education to explore practices of educating special and regular education teachers in how to assess SWD would provide benefit to all. Examining what data practices are effective and ineffective to inform instruction can support teacher success in educating SWD. Developing statistical approaches for variables associated with SWD’s learning would help to quantify student learning in an objective manner. Examining ways to demonstrate concrete learning, academic as well as non-academic areas, is critical to understanding an educator’s effect on student learning.

Research on training administrators in effective practices for special educator evaluation would be of great benefit. Given the notion that student growth measures are reflective of an educators’ effectiveness, better understanding for how administrators differentiate evaluation practices based on roles and responsibilities of educators is something that could benefit the field of education.

Conclusion

Qualitative research is to help one provide further insight rather than predict or generalize (Hodges, 2011). This qualitative case study has sought to gain insight from one research question: How does a Massachusetts collaborative public day school make sense of the mandate
to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities? Given a lens through one collaborative setting, they are making sense by holding off any changes and continuing with current practices.

As the DDMs mandate is relatively new in Massachusetts, findings suggest it has not yet had a strong impact in changing current practices. Measuring student progress has not been replaced or replicated by development of student growth measures for all SWD. Standard growth measures in place (e.g. student growth percentiles) do not effectively provide information for students with significant disabilities to demonstrate progress. Educators of students with significant needs are not convinced of the relevance of DDMs to change their methodologies. In addition, there is confusion and anxiety of using students’ growth to evaluate educators’ effectiveness in teaching SWD. For SWD with the most significant needs, many variables associated with behavior and health impact access to typical content instruction.

Mandates in education continue to direct educators in accountability and instructional goals. New mandates are slowly received and need time to evolve into the normal routines and practices within school settings. Educators must believe in the relevance and understand the importance of mandates in their day-to-day experiences in order for them to become a new norm.

**Personal Summary Statement**

My positionality statement refers to my current role as a Program Director of a collaborative day program. It has been necessary for me to learn and respond to the DDMs mandate at the same time that I was researching this phenomenon through the lens of others’ experiences. The findings of this case study parallel some of the encounters I have had with many special education teachers and administrators throughout this process. Educators are
focused on the day-to-day survival and individualized needs of their students. The shift in practice will not occur until a shift in thinking occurs.

   Special educators are trained to gather data, but there is not adequate training on how to use data effectively to inform practice. Part of the shift in thinking that is required is to look beyond the isolated data of one student. IEPs goals are developed each year and reviewed as met or not met; then we move on. MCAS Alternate assessments are done with students with significant disabilities without a connection to a previous year. Training educators to utilize data in a cumulative manner, may lead to insights overtime related to disability type and generate successful strategies and methodologies for SWD. The concept of DDMs can assist educators in making this shift.

   Part of my work with special educators has focused on asking them to examine the barriers impacting student learning. Educators need to ask better questions – more focused questions, to determine what measures will assist in providing evidence of student learning. If a student can eye gaze for 3 seconds on a page in a book, can their target be 6 seconds? What strategies and instructional adjustments can be made to move that student to their next step? If a student with an emotional disability is out of the classroom for 75% of the math class, what accommodations and modifications can be put in place so that he attends for 50% of the math class? What steps has an educator put in place to have an impact? That is what special educators should be evaluated on.

   Most educators and administrators are in the field to make a difference. They know their students well. There is a responsibility for compliance and accountability that can be balanced with the confidence of identifying what each student needs to grow. Educational regulations have evolved and will continue to evolve in the future as the most recent ESSA reminds us.
Educators must continue to ask questions to learn, rather than ask questions to defend current practices. The continued mission of professional growth and educating children may be at stake unless we shift our thinking processes.
References


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Appendix A
Introduction phone call to Collaborative Executive Director

Hello (Executive Director)

Thank you for taking my phone call. My name is Anita Woods. I am the Program Director at Cape Cod Collaborative and currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University. I am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program and seeking a Collaborative that runs a day program serving a range of students with disabilities as a potential research site. Your Collaborative was suggested as a potential site by my Executive Director and other colleagues in the field. Participation would include seeking volunteers (Program Directors and Special Education Teachers) to participate in interviews with me to discuss how they are making sense of the mandate for developing District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities.

Does this sound like something that would be feasible or interesting to your Collaborative? (Allow response time, etc.) If you have the time, I would love to tell you a bit more about the research proposal.

(Continue or request to set up another time to talk.)

My goal is to gain the perspective of one Collaborative public day school to investigate the development of District-Determined Measures (DDMs) for students with disabilities (SWD) through the perspectives of Program Directors and Special Education Teachers. Their experiences and perceptions of this process will be the primary data for development of a qualitative case study.

The research process will involve 60-90 minute interviews with each volunteer and a request to review any DDMs being used or proposed by your program. I believe this case study will benefit the field of special education and aide schools in developing steps to respond to educational mandates. The goal is to better understand how one public day school’s perspective of making sense of the mandate for DDMs for SWD might offer insight to others developing measures demonstrating growth for SWD.

With your approval, I would like to send you an email that you could forward to your Special Education Teachers and Program Directors working in a public day school setting to see if there is any interest by your staff to participate. Would that be possible?

I can go into more detail or I’d be happy to send you further information or set up another time to talk. I am happy to take a ride to your Collaborative if that is more convenient. May I give you my contact information? (Provide personal information.)

Are there any questions I can answer now? I will also send you a letter summarizing our conversation today. Thank you once again for taking the time to talk with me. I look forward to talking again soon.
Appendix B
Follow-up Letter to Collaborative Executive Director

(Date)

Dear (Executive Director)

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me on (date of phone call). As we discussed, I am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of a doctoral program through Northeastern University and am seeking a Public Day School site to conduct my research. My research is focused on making sense of the mandate for developing District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities.

Through a qualitative case study, I hope to investigate the development of District-Determined Measures (DDMs) for students with disabilities (SWD) through the perspectives of Program Directors and Special Education Teachers at a Public Day School. Their experiences and perceptions of this process are of particular value to gain meaningful insight into the key elements of the development of DDMs for SWD.

The research process will involve individual, taped, 60-90 minute interviews with each volunteer and a request to review any DDMs developed and/or proposed. I believe this case study will serve to benefit the field of special education and aide schools in developing steps to respond to educational mandates. The goal is to better understand how one public day school’s perspective of making sense of the mandate for DDMs for SWD might offer insight to others developing measures demonstrating growth for SWD.

Thank you for your consideration to conducting my research in your program. If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 472-6410 or via e-mail at fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Sandra Nickel at Northeastern University, s.nickel@neu.edu.

With your approval, I will send an email to you that you may forward to Program Directors and Special Education Teachers to determine if there is interest in participating in this research project. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Anita Woods,
Doctoral Candidate,
College of Professional Studies Northeastern University,
Boston, MA
fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu
Appendix C
Initial Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: Request for Volunteers in a Research Project

Dear Colleagues:

My name is Anita Woods. I am the Program Director at the Cape Cod Collaborative STAR Program and a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study about the development of District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

You have been asked to participate in this project because you have a wealth of in-depth knowledge about students with disabilities, have been actively involved in the process of developing District-Determined Measures (DDMs) in your program and your role is as a Program Director or Special Education Teacher. Your insight will be valuable in obtaining information regarding your perspective and understanding of this process.

The expectation for your participation would include: 1. Responding to this email as interested in this study. 2. Responding to a brief email survey. 3. Signing a Northeastern University consent form to participate. 4. Participating in a 60-90 minute interview with me. (You would also have the opportunity to review your interview transcription.)

At this time I am simply looking for an initial response to see who and how many people may be interested in participating. Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to participate in this study will have no reflection on your work within your school whatsoever. Also, any participation in the study will be completely confidential; names and other personal information will not be used. This is voluntary.

Please respond via e-mail to fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu if you are interested or would like to ask any questions. I will be happy to reply or give you a phone call to follow up if that is easier. Your note of interest is not binding and any participant may leave the study at any time.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Anita Woods, Doctoral Student
College of Professional Studies Northeastern University
fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu
Cell phone: 508-472-6410
Appendix D
Participant follow-up email request

Subject: Volunteer Research Participant Follow-up

My name is Anita Woods. I am the Program Director at Cape Cod Collaborative currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University. I am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. My research is focused on making sense of the mandate for developing District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities.

Thank you for expressing an interest in participating in this proposed research exploring how your school has made sense of the mandate for development of District Determined Measures for students with disabilities. If you are comfortable and still interested in participating, please answer the following survey questions. (If you prefer, you can give me a call and answer verbally.) (Embedded survey within email)

1. I am still interested in participating in your study. I understand I will need to sign a consent form and you will set up a time to do an interview.
   o Yes (questionnaire continues)
   o No (questionnaire moves to a page thanking the participant for responding)
2. Male or Female
3. Current role
   o Special Education Teacher
   o Program Director or other administrative capacity
   o None of the above (questionnaire moves to a page thanking the participant for responding)
4. Years of experience working with students with disabilities
   o 1 year
   o 2-5 years
   o 6-10 years
   o 10+ years
5. Years working at Public Day School site
   o 1st year
   o 2-5 years
   o 6-10 years
   o 10+ years
6. The best way to reach me is:
   a. By phone _______________________
      i. Between 8:00 – 10:00
      ii. Between 1:00 – 3:00
      iii. After 3:00
      iv. Other ____________
   b. By email: __________________________
Appendix E
Participant interview confirmation email

Subject: Interview confirmation

Hello (participant)

This email is to confirm that we have scheduled a time for an interview on ___(Date and Time) __at ____(Location)__. I am excited to meet and talk with you about District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities. Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time if this day/time is no longer convenient or you no longer wish to participate.

I have attached a (pdf) copy of the consent form I will review and ask you to sign when we meet for the interview. With your permission, I will also ask to audio tape the interview so that I can transcribe the interview after we are done and be able to review the audio for accuracy. I will also give you an opportunity to review the transcript as well.

As always, contact me anytime should you have questions or concerns. See you soon!
Anita

Anita Woods, Doctoral Student
College of Professional Studies Northeastern University
fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu
Cell phone: 508-472-6410
Appendix F

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Names: Principal Investigator, Dr. Sandy Nickel; Student Researcher, Anita Woods
Title of Project: Making Sense of Implementing The Mandate For District-Determined Measures For Students With Disabilities: A Descriptive Case Study

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You have been asked to participate in this study as you are a Program Director or Special Education Teacher working in a Public Day School. You have expressed an initial interest in participating from an email request sent on (xx/xx) 2015 and the follow-up survey sent on (xx/xx/xxx).

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe key factors that contributed to the development of growth measures for students with disabilities. Identification of specific steps and problem-solving that led your Public Day school to making sense of the mandate to develop District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities will be valuable to the field of special education.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in the following ways:
1. Read and sign this consent form.
2. Participate in an interview session lasting approximately 60-90 minutes.
3. Participant will be asked for permission to audio tape the interview. (You will have the opportunity to review the transcript.)
4. Share with the researcher District-Determined Measures developed and/or considered by the staff at your Public Day School.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can opt out at any time.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take between 60 to 90 minutes. When the interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to respond to note any inaccuracies. Response may be via email or by phone.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in being a participant in this study. Given the small number of participants, it is possible that confidentiality may be lost should participants choose to share with each other their choice to participate.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

Participation in this proposed research may offer benefits to the field of special education. The opportunity for site participants to reflect on factors that have led to the development of District-Determined Measures for their students with disabilities and to share with colleagues through the research findings may be professionally beneficial. With your insight and input, your participation could potentially assist others working with students with disabilities.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your identity as a participant in this study will not be shared. The name of the Public Day School will not be shared. No one, except the student investigator (interviewer) will know your identity or the name of the Collaborative Program. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

The data collected for this study will be kept by the researcher, including audio tapes, and will not be shared with others with the possible exception of the researcher’s primary advisor for any necessary clarification or with interview transcribers. All data collected for this study will be kept in a locked file cabinet and/or in password protected computer files. All data will be destroyed after three years. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information. No identifying information will be shared with people at your school.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee, etc.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Anita Woods, the person mainly responsible for the research:
Anita Woods, Doctoral Student, Northeastern University; fontaine.a@husky.neu.edu; Cell phone: 508-472-6410 You may also contact the Principal Investigator: Dr. Sandy Nickel, Northeastern University College of Professional Studies, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115; E-mail: s.nickel@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel. 617-373.4588, e-mail: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study other than a participant’s time.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old to participate. You must be a certified special education teacher or a Program Director working in a public day school.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

____________________________________________
Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix G
Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Pseudonym) ________________________________

Interviewee Role: Program Director __; Special Education Teacher ____

Interviewer: Anita Woods

Date: ________________________________

Location of Interview: ________________________________________

Time of Interview: Beginning: ___________ Ending: ________________

INTRODUCTION

Part I: Introductory Question Objectives (5-7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions, review and sign IRB protocol and form for tape recording.

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you volunteered to share your experiences and knowledge regarding the development of District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities. This research project focuses on gathering data to improve understanding of how school personnel have made sense of this mandate. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into the actions, strategies, and use of resources that led to ways to demonstrate growth for students with disabilities.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. The tapes will be transcribed by myself or a transcriptionist, but the pseudonym will be used to label the tapes. After transcription, you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy.

To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me (provide the form). Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm (allow time to review form). Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form? If you are comfortable I would also like to audio tape this interview to use as a reference when the interview is complete.

We have planned this interview to last no more than ninety-minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Introduction to Interview

A. Interviewee Background – my name is Anita Woods and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am presently working on my dissertation. I am also the Program Director at the Cape Cod Collaborative STAR Program in Osterville on Cape
Cod. This is my fourteenth year as Program Director. I have worked in the field of education for over 25 years.

INTERVIEW
Participant info
1. You shared that your role is ____________ and you have worked here at this school for __ years and worked overall with students with disabilities for ____ years.
   a. Is this correct?
2. Is there other information you feel is important to share that may be related to how you approached development of DDMs?

B. Interview Questions:
1. Can you describe the population of students that you work with?
2. How do you typically measure the progress they are making at school?
3. How would you describe your understanding of the mandate for District-Determined Measures?
4. Typically when new mandates are delivered from DESE how does your school respond?
   (Prompt: Tell me about how information is shared.
   Describe how you see your role in this responsibility.)
5. Describe how your school team dealt with DDMs.
6. What were some of the challenges, if any, your school team encountered?
   (Prompt: How did you over-come these challenges?)
7. What key factors and characteristics were considered in identifying a District-Determined Measure?
8. What types of District-Determined Measures were considered?
   (Prompt: Tool already using?
   Standardized assessment?
   Something new?)
9. How did your school team make sense of determining “high”, “moderate” and “low” growth?
   (Prompt: What key factors were considered?)
10. In comparison to other measures your team utilizes for determining growth and learning for students with disabilities, how do DDMs compare?
11. What advice would you give other Program Directors to help them make sense of developing District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities?
12. Is there any other information relative to District-Determined Measures for students with disabilities that you feel is important and relevant to share?

{General probes for consideration:
 • Can you tell me more about that?
 • Can you provide a specific example?
 • How would that work?}