

What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of
Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dottie Anderson and her mother, Charlotte Anderson for showing me the way and to all my students who, in reality, have been the teacher.

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ABSTRACT

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE VIRGINIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM ON THE INSTRUCTION OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES IN ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT?

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Virginia's Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) is a relatively new, but important program for use with students with significant disabilities. An understanding of teachers' perspectives relating to the VAAP as well as its Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS) is crucial in understanding teachers' attitudes concerning perceived effectiveness and improved outcomes for students with the most significant disabilities. This mixed methods study addressed the perspectives, practices and attitudes of teachers using the VAAP in one school district in Virginia. The purpose of the study was to examine the implementation of the VAAP from the perspectives of school personnel on instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district. The specific components of the study included review of: (a) the implementation of "evidenced based best practices," (b) student scores on the VAAP, (c) current curricula and specific teaching practices, and (d) the perceived influence of the degree of severity of the

students taking the VAAP. Finally, the study considered teachers' and staff's perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs and its relationship with instructional practices.

The overall findings from the participants in this study include the following: (a) a need for more expertise and improved staff development in the area of instruction for students with severe disabilities; (b) there were no significant differences before or after VAAP with ASOLs implementations on teachers' use of evidenced based best practices; (c) it is unclear whether results of the VAAP inform instructional practices; (d) a clearly established curriculum for students with severe disabilities does not appear to be consistently implemented; (e) the VAAP with ASOLs does not appear to have impacted the majority of teachers' practices for students with severe disabilities; (f) there is disagreement among staff regarding perceptions of the appropriateness of mastery of academic content with the degree of the severity of the student's disability, and (g) both positive and negative perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs exist among staff in this small school district. Although the VAAP with ASOLs has increased academic expectations for student performance, especially for student with more mild to moderate cognitive disabilities the utility for the most severely cognitively impaired and medically fragile students remains less clear. This study provides a description of how one district is working with the alternative assessment procedures with students with cognitive disabilities. Future research can provide evidence on the effectiveness of the VAAP with ASOLs with students with significant disabilities.

1. Introduction

The passage of two significant pieces of federal legislation, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) IDEA and No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB), has changed how public schools teach and assess students with the most severe disabilities. Due to this legislation, all students with disabilities are required to participate in state assessments of learning. However, due to the nature of some disabilities, this has posed a significant problem for school systems across the country. Systematic approaches to alternative assessments have recently been created in all states, including Virginia. Because the use of formal alternate assessments for state accountability measures has only been in existence for a short period of time, there is a paucity of literature regarding the impact of the alternate assessment on instruction and outcomes for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities (Cobb, 2004). This chapter addresses the background of the issue, the specific problem for this research study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and finally, a glossary of specialized terms.

Background

Federal legislation has been a primary driving force for educational reform in this country in the past few years. In the field of Special Education, this is evident in several recent laws and their ensuing revisions. The field of special education began with the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, when the sweep of civil rights legislation was extended to children with disabilities (Mondale & Patton, 2001). At the

time, public education was on a journey to provide *access* to educational services for all children (Hunter, 2003). The 1997 Amendment of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandated that students with disabilities be included in regular assessment programs with accommodations (if necessary), and that states and the Local Education Authority (LEA) provide alternate assessments for those students deemed unable to participate in content standards assessments. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) requires that “Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may be assessed on state-established *content standards* through an alternate assessment. “All students with disabilities should have access to, participate in and *make progress in*, the general curriculum” (Eisenberg, 2005).

In this new era of high stakes testing, the imperative for participation in this assessment process is further heightened by recent additional Federal legislation through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate, which requires students to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) on statewide assessments. The field of special education has shifted from ensuring access to public education for students with severe disabilities, to ensuring student proficiency with educational (academic) goals. Now all students are required to participate in local testing. Until this recent legislation, students with the most significant disabilities were excluded from large-scale assessments and, for the most part, there were no formal assessments used for state reporting on this specific student population. Now, as a requirement of NCLB, the results of alternate assessments are used in overall scoring for schools and school districts’ pass rates and adequate yearly progress reports.

In the state of Virginia, the assessment tool used for students with severe disabilities is the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). In the past, students with significant cognitive disabilities could opt out of assessments or be exempted through the IEP process. This is no longer the case. Now, in addition to the daunting task of educating students with exceptional learning needs (and often physical and medical needs as well), schools also face heightened pressure to ensure that these students achieve progress in all four core academic areas: reading, math, science and social studies (Scherer, 2007).

Virginia has been administering the VAAP since the 2000-2001 school year. Originally, the VAAP required that student Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals were 'linked' to the State Standards of Learning (SOL). Students and their teachers designed portfolios of work with collections of evidence that demonstrated skills in a variety of settings, with age-appropriate peers and included the student's primary mode of communication. Parental participation was required in the original VAAP (thus addressing the best practice of designing each student's educational plan with familial and educational input) and parents were required to 'sign-off' on the collections of evidence of student work (portfolios).

In 2005, Virginia adopted the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS). Current guidelines from U.S. Dept of Education require that states examine their regular state standards and explore how they might be "reduced in depth, breadth, and complexity or modified to reflect pre-requisite skills," as well as "show a clear link to the content standards" ("Standards and Assessment" 2004). VAAP requirements were changed to

reflect these guidelines, and teachers and students were required to prove mastery of these modified standards (the new ASOLS). Similarly to the previous VAAP, however, the skills had to be demonstrated in a variety of settings, with age appropriate peers, and through the student's primary mode of communication. However, in this incarnation of the VAAP, no parental input was required and there was no relationship between the VAAP and the student's IEP. Most recently, in 2006-07, new VAAP guidelines issued by the Virginia Department of Education require that students show mastery of ASOLs with no relationship to IEP goals, no requirement for learning in multiple settings and/or no communication skills or parental input component. Locally identified scorers score the assessments.

Because their learning is perceived to be so significantly different than typical children, the curriculum for students with severe disabilities has not traditionally focused on academic content, but has instead encompassed a separate curricular focus. Indeed, in many cases, it is often commonly believed that the student's IEP is the curriculum for each individual student. While the IEP certainly represents educational priorities and supports achievement of those educational priorities for the individual student, it does not represent the entire range of curriculum, nor does it represent the academic standards upon which a curriculum should be based (Giangreco, Cloninger & Iverson, 1999). The current priority is that all students have the opportunity to learn academic content, and, in Virginia, that the SOLs should be the basis for each local school division's academic curriculum for all students. This most recent incarnation of

the VAAP highlights the instructional and curricular shifts for children with severe disabilities over the decades, from mere educational access to proficiency in academics.

Specific Problem

Relative to services and programs for normally developing children, the development of curriculum and best instructional practices for students with severe disabilities is a young field. However, special education researchers and practitioners have come a long way in identifying best practices for this population. With Virginia's imperative for immediate development of an assessment program that meets federal requirements, the VAAP was created and implemented in some haste. A deeper understanding of the effects of alternate assessments on instructional practices for students with severe disabilities is needed. The effects of this assessment system on instruction and outcomes for students with severe disabilities are not yet known. Nor do practitioners in the field agree on the degree to which alignment with general education standards should be required for the most severely impaired students.

While little is yet known about the instructional impact of Virginia's alternative assessment program, a few studies of alternate assessments in other states have been conducted. Perhaps the most notable study was one completed in 2006 called "Alternate Achievement Standards and Assessments: A Description of 16 States" (Kohl, McLaughlin & Nagle, 2006) where the assessment practices of sixteen states were reviewed, in order to determine how each state implemented alternate assessments and standards for children with severe disabilities. The study found that all sixteen states were not considered to have completed their process, and all were continuing to work on,

and to fine-tune, their assessments. The study surveyed state representatives who, for the most part, felt positively about the outcomes of the mandated alternate assessment process. However, most respondents noted that the requirements of a mandated alternate assessment process were complex and demanding for their teachers. Quality control remained an issue in many states, in that IEP teams (or, frequently, the teacher in isolation) were often left to determine assessment content. Many state representatives felt that there was a lack of control over the administration of alternate assessments, which is "...in stark contrast to the highly prescriptive content and strictly enforced procedures..." (Kohl et al., 2006, p. 121) applied to the general education assessments. There is only 'modest' information available regarding test validity. Yet another finding reviewed the costs incurred by school districts "...in meeting the federal requirements of the rapid succession of special and general education laws" (Kohl et al., 2006, p. 121). These costs included, but were not limited to, development of curriculum and alternate assessments, staff development and costs relating to scoring and evaluating assessments.

To date, there have been no published studies on Virginia's alternate assessment system. An understanding of teachers' perspectives and concerns relating to the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP), as well as the Virginia Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS), is crucial in determining its effectiveness and its use in improving outcomes for students with the most significant disabilities. This study will address the perspectives, practices and concerns of teachers using the VAAP in one school district in Virginia.

Research Questions

Main Question: How has one district implemented the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and how has this impacted instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district?

1b. How are “evidenced based best practices” implemented in one school district since the implementation of the VAAP?

1c. Given that the state has required the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS) for the VAAP as the core knowledge necessary for success for students with severe disabilities, what are the current VAAP scores? (How are we doing?)

1d. What curriculum are teachers of students with severe disabilities using and to what extent are they using it?

1e. How have teaching practices changed? What do teachers do differently now than before this revised version of VAAP?

1f. Have teachers changed their approach to planning lessons since the VAAP?

2. What is the degree of severity of students taking the VAAP? Is there a breakdown in reported scores by severity?

3. What are teachers’ feelings/perceptions of the VAAP?

Significance

Because there was no need for formal testing of this population for state accountability systems prior to 2001, there is a scarcity of information on the use of alternate assessments in instruction of students with the most severe disabilities in Virginia. In this new era, the lack of both information and experience in relation to the

alternate assessment process has lead to significant problems in the field. Historically, curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities have been individualized to meet the unique needs of the student. Teachers of students with significant disabilities have typically been less aware of state standards, relying instead on functional curricula (Cobb, 2004). There is much that these teachers do not know about validity evidence and curriculum alignment of alternate assessments with this population (Crocker, 2003) especially in regard to alignment with the general curriculum. “It is now a crucial time for each state to actively seek out more effective and efficient ways to implement its own assessment system that meets state and local needs” (Kim, 2004 p. 4).

The VAAP was implemented in 2001 in Virginia, in compliance with NCLB and later with IDEIA. In the beginning, the assessment required linkage to the child’s IEP, linkage to SOLs, assessment of communication skills, and mandatory application of skills in multiple settings with same age peers. These criteria for the VAAP were aligned with, and complimentary to, what is considered to be best practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Since that time, the current VAAP assesses only academic content, and does not require any integration of other components of best practices.

For this research, the primary question is how has the VAAP influenced teachers’ approaches to teaching students with severe disabilities? The hypothesis is that indeed there have been changes to instruction of students with severe disabilities since the current incarnation of the VAAP. The mandate of the VAAP is that all students master academic content. This is a relatively new development in the field of instruction for

students with severe disabilities, and represents a shift from the historically emphasized curricula of developmental and functional skills for students with severe disabilities. A better understanding of the current teaching practices for these students is warranted. What is going on in classrooms, in terms of instruction, since the VAAP? Does this instruction reflect what is considered best practice in the field? The VAAP has the potential and power to cause changes and to make things occur in classrooms, schools and school districts. The measurement of specific outcomes, in terms of teachers' instructional practice and student learning, as well as a better understanding of teachers' perceptions and feelings about this assessment tool, are the goals of this project.

Glossary of Terms

1. Alternate assessment is an assessment defined and mandated by IDEA 1997 that is used to measure the performance of students with significant disabilities who are unable to participate, even with accommodations, in general large-scale assessments using the same academic achievement standards as all other students (Thurlow, Elliot & Ysseldyke, 1998).

2. Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)

“The purpose of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) is to evaluate the performance of students who have traditionally been exempted from state assessment programs. Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) reflect the intent to extend educational accountability and reform to all students, including those with significant

disabilities. Although these students represent a relatively small portion of the overall school population, the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program was developed with the belief that these students are a part of our accountability system and that the evaluation of their achievement represents an important component of our quest toward high standards” (“VAAP Implementation Manual”, 2005).

3. Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs) Guidance from U.S. Dept of Education required that States examine their regular state standards and explore how they might be “reduced in depth, breadth, and complexity or modified to reflect pre-requisite skills,” as well as “show a clear link to the content standards” (“Standards and Assessment”, 2004). According to the VAAP Implementation Manual, ASOLs give students with severe disabilities access to “cross-grade level SOL content” (p. 14) that have been reduced in depth and complexity.
4. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the “State-established definition of annual objectives to measure progress of schools and districts to ensure that all groups of students (including low-income students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency) reach proficiency.” (NCLB, 2002). In order to make adequate yearly progress, school must test at least 95% of their students in each of the above groups as well as meet other requirements including acceptable daily attendance rates, graduation rates, etc.

5. Curriculum is the content of instruction (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, & Shrikanth, 1997).
6. Developmental Curriculum is a model based on the notion that focusing on a student's mental age while disregarding chronological age would provide the best grounds for teaching. Emphasis was on early language development and self-care (Browder, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Karvonen, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2004).
7. Functional life skills are skills dealing with functional academics, self-care, recreation and leisure, vocational and community functioning. A functional life skills curriculum focuses the content of instruction on these domains (Nietupski, et al., 1997).
8. Best Practices: Although there is no one definition of best practices, Westin and Fox (2000) support the notion that best practices must consider changing social values, legal mandates and must be supported by:
 - ...the opinions of a large number of professionals, parents, and/or advocates who have been involved for many years in developing programs, conducting research, writing policies, teaching and providing other services to persons with severe disabilities and... that has been determined effective through empirical research (p. 44).

2. Literature Review

In today's educational culture of accountability and academic imperatives, students with severe disabilities present educators with unique and challenging demands (Browder & Cooper-Duffy 2003; Browder, Spooner, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2003; Browder et al., 2004; Giangreco, Snell, Hughes, Jitendra & Alper, 1997; Nietupski et al., 1997). Education for students with severe disabilities has moved from the developmental model to the functional skills model, with additive curricular focus such as social inclusion and self-determination (Browder, et al., 2004). Teachers of students with significant disabilities have typically been less aware of state standards, relying instead on functional curricula (Cobb, 2004).

Recently, the passage of two pieces of federal legislation governing education, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB), has changed how public schools teach and assess students with the most severe disabilities. Federal mandates now require public schools to use alternate assessments to evaluate these students' academic learning in relation to the general curriculum. This poses an extreme burden on a field whose primary focus has shifted from the mere provision of *access* to educational services for all children, with an emphasis on the individual student's physical, social and communicative needs (Hunter, 2003), to ensuring student proficiency in relation to educational (academic) goals. An

understanding of the legal and historical context of this relatively fledging field will help to underscore the depth and breadth of this challenge.

This chapter addresses a comprehensive review of the literature, in relation to the current culture of accountability in public education, with a focus on the assessment of students with severe disabilities. In order to understand the extreme changes in the field, it is important to have an historical perspective on services for children with severe disabilities. The chapter begins with an overview of special education legislation and applicable policy passed in the last several decades, focusing on that legislation and policy which has driven services. Next, in relation to legislation and policy changes, the shift in curriculum and instructional practices for students with severe disabilities will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will end with an overview of past and current VAAP practices and a review of assessment and accountability practices mandated by law, including alternate assessments. This historical and legislative framework is essential to understanding the significant changes required of the field of services for children with severe disabilities in public education today.

Policy and Legislation

In 1975, when the sweep of civil rights legislation was extended to children with disabilities (Mondale & Patton, 2001), the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) was adopted to provide a “free and appropriate” public education to students with disabilities. Public education was on a journey providing the admission to educational services for all children (Hunter, 2003). Schools were offering services to

children with severe disabilities, as educators were required to accept, often for the first time, that children with disabilities would attend public schools (Browder et al., 2004).

By the 1980's, children with disabilities were still primarily educated in segregated classes and schools, often only in the company of other severely disabled students for peer interactions and modeling. In the 1990's, the advocacy of parents and professionals led to an end of the aforementioned segregation as an acceptable practice. In addition, the 1997 Amendment of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandated that students with disabilities be included in regular assessment programs, with accommodations (if necessary), and that states and the Local Education Authority (LEA) provide alternate assessments for those students deemed unable to participate in content standards assessments. This legislation was remarkable, in that it mandated the inclusion of students with all disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the maximum degree appropriate, as well as participation for disabled students in regular assessment programs, including alternate assessments. This legislation mandated inclusion, the teaching of self-determination skills, and an increased focus on academic content. Instruction in natural environments was required as well as the use of assistive technologies. Specifically, students were to be educated in local schools with typically developing peers (Browder et al., 2004).

Other than PL 94-142, the first law demanding that school provide a "free and appropriate" public education to children with disabilities, the current decade provides perhaps the most significant educational legislation to date for students with severe disabilities. In 2002, the "No Child Left Behind" act (NCLB) was signed into law. With

regard to public education in the United States of America, this legislation is considered groundbreaking in breadth and depth. However, the focus on academics for all students has been perhaps the most remarkable and controversial aspect of this law, especially for educators of severely disabled youth, primarily because of the emphases on academic content and accountability for learning for all students.

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities improvement Act (IDEIA) was also signed into law. Both NCLB and IDEIA required schools to provide access to the general education curriculum for all students, a universal design of curriculum, academic standards for all students, and differentiated instruction. Additionally, IDEIA supported the accountability mandates of NCLB, in that it requires that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities must be assessed on state established content (academic) standards through an alternate assessment (Eisenburg, 2005). This means that general grade level state standards must be accessible for all students. “Regardless of where students receive instruction, all students with disabilities should have access to, participate in, and make progress in, the general curriculum (IDEIA, 2004).” (Eisenburg, 2005). For the first time ever, students with the most severe disabilities are now required to master academic content for state accountability purposes.

Student Population

The group of students referred to in the NCLB legislation as “...the small number of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular State assessment...” (“Standards and Assessment” 2004, p. 29) constitutes a diverse group of learners, including students with severe cognitive disabilities, multiple disabilities, severe

autism and/or deaf blindness. Each individual learner presents a unique set of skills, preferences, and experiences. These students may exhibit some or all of the following characteristics: difficulties with communication, self-determination, behavior and social interactions. They exhibit uneven learning patterns in all domains including cognition, communication, socialization, and self-help. Typically, this student population has co-morbid (and often, multiple) disabling conditions that impact health and stamina, with physical, sensory and medical challenges that make it difficult to learn new tasks, maintain new skills and generalize learned skills to new environments. These students may access information in alternative ways including tactile, visual, auditory, multi-sensory methods. Additionally, students who are labeled as those with severe disabilities often require extensive and long-term supports for all their needs (Browder et al., 2004; Eisenburg, 2006; Snell & Brown, 2006; “Standards and Assessment”, 2004; VADOE, 2007)

Curriculum and Instruction

In order to understand the impact of this legislation on the field, it is imperative to have a better understanding of the curricular and historical context of teaching and learning for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Special education services for all students with disabilities have developed in a relatively short period of time. In the 1970’s, the legislative imperative was *access* to public education. In 1975, the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) was enacted, providing students with disabilities an opportunity to attend public schools for a free and appropriate education.

As a result, schools were offering services to children with severe disabilities often for the first time.

As a result of this legislation, educators of children with significant disabilities were now required to create programs and specific curricula, defined as the content of instruction (Browder et al., 2004) that had never before existed. Schools adapted existing infant and early childhood models and approached instruction for students with severe disabilities with a curricular emphasis on the developmental model. The developmental model was based on the precept that a focus on a student's mental age would provide the best grounds for teaching, and the primary emphases of the model were early language development and self-care (Browder et al., 2004).

By the 1980's, many researchers, including Brown, Nietupski and Hamre-Nietupski (1976), led curriculum development for students with severe disabilities away from the developmental model for instruction, and more towards the functional skills curriculum. This approach required teachers to determine and emphasize skills that each student would require to be successful (functional) in his or her environment and community. The primary skill domains included community, recreation/leisure, domestic and vocational areas. The functional skills model was highly regarded and accepted as the primary curricular focus for instructional services during the 1980's (Browder et al. 2004; Nietupski et al., 1997).

While the field of special education was growing and maturing during the 1970's and 80's, children with severe disabilities were still usually segregated from their non-disabled peers in classes and schools. The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

required social inclusion, the teaching of self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and an increased focus on academic content through access to the general curriculum.

Instruction in natural environments and the use of assistive technologies were mandated by IDEA. Now all students were to be educated in local schools with typically developing peers. The additional focus of inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classes to the functional curriculum became known as the “additive model” (Browder et al, 2004).

While the academic expectations of general education students is different than those for students with significant disabilities, inclusion in and exposure to similar grade level content and experiences are expectations of IDEA and current curricular thought in the field of special education (Giangreco et al., 1998). Students with severe disabilities were to be included to the greatest extent possible with non-disabled peers in all classes, including those for core academics. While general education students would learn academic concepts, the student with severe disabilities may participate alongside non-disabled peers and acquire turn-taking and/or conversational skills with their peers (Browder et al., 2004; Giangreco et al., 1998). While these students were provided access to the general curriculum, “...their IEPs often describe alterative curriculum focused solely on life skills outcomes, with any focus on academic content within these functional contexts” (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski & Bovaird, 2007 p. 103).

Because the educational needs of students with severe disabilities did not fit with the scope of the general curriculum, a variety of alternate curricula and materials were created, often by the teachers themselves (Staugler, 2004). Staugler maintains that while

students made progress, "...the focus of the classroom was likely to reflect the teacher's perspective of needed skills rather than a continuity that flowed into a level of proficiency" (p. vii). Historically, the field of research for this population focused on developmental and functional skill acquisition in the domains of communication, community, recreation, domestic and vocational skills, life skills, behavior and fine and gross motor skills.

As NCLB and IDEIA have mandated the alignment of alternate assessments for students with severe disabilities to the general academic curriculum, new and interesting questions have emerged in regard to academic or functional curricula for those students (Browder et al., 2004). In order for students to pass their alternate assessments, they must show mastery of academic skills. The shift to an academic focus has brought to light the need for research in the area of best practices for instruction of academic skills acquisition for children with severe disabilities.

Educational Best Practices for Students with Severe Disabilities

The idea that students with severe disabilities require highly specialized instructional practices is well documented in the literature (Agran & Alper, 2000; Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Browder, et al., 2004; Cushing, Clark, Carter & Kennedy 2005; Siegel-Cuasey & Allinder, 1998; Snell & Brown, 2006). Despite this, with current shifts in accountability requirements, determining specific "best practices" for instruction of this population is daunting. Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003) and Snell and Brown (2006) lists numerous criteria including integrated environments, functionality, age appropriateness, choice making, instruction in multiple settings,

inclusion, collaborative teaming, integrated therapy, systematic-activity based instruction, data-based decision making, positive behavior supports, assistive technologies, legal mandates and the perspectives of families.

For the purposes of this research, “Best Practices” will refer to a wide range of general topics that encompass many of the more specific details enumerated by Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003) and Snell and Brown (2006). Best educational practices for this population “...refer to the practices that have been shown by recent research to improve an individual’s ability to become an active and accepted member of society” (Demchak, 2002, p. 1). The areas of concern are: inclusion/peer integration, community based instruction (CBI), transition planning, team planning (integrated service delivery), positive behavioral supports (PBS), the use of a functional age-appropriate curriculum and parental involvement.

Inclusion of children with disabilities with peers without disabilities has proven to be a challenging task for teachers. For students with severe disabilities, this practice requires daily interactions in meaningful ways in order to develop communicative and behavioral skills needed for social integration and acceptance. “...participation in socially valued roles, activities, and settings is both the most fundamental outcome of the developmental process and the primary means by which development is achieved” (Schwartz, Staub, Peck & Gallucci, 2006, p. 377).

Community-Based Instruction (CBI) may be defined as instruction that takes place in “natural environments.” Similar to functional skills, natural environments refer to the exact location where the skills will take place. For example, students should have

opportunities to shop in a real stores and purchase meals at actual restaurants versus practicing these skills in simulated classroom experiences. Students need this because generalizing skills to novel settings is often an area of difficulty for learners with severe disabilities (Demchak, 2002).

Transition planning for students with disabilities, which is mandated by IDEA to begin at age 14, is also considered a best practice in the instruction of students with severe disabilities. Assessment, training, and supports for transition to adult life (employment and independent living) must be a part of every student's IEP (Inge & Moon, 2006). However, due to the nature of learning needs for this population, transition training should begin in elementary school. "Since these students may have difficulty acquiring new skills ... and adjusting to new environments...comprehensive, longitudinal educational plans" must be considered at an early age (Demchak, 2002 p.1).

Integrated services and planning are also considered to be best practices for instruction of children with disabilities. Federal law and related policies require that children who need additional related services, particularly in order to access the general curriculum, be provided to them. For students with severe disabilities, this often requires the collaboration of a team of experts in specialized disciplines such as physical therapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, vision and behavioral supports, etc. Currently, many of these disciplines are offering services through assistive technology teams. These teams include members of each discipline and who work collaboratively to identify and purchase technologies that will support a student's learning (Inge & Moon, 2006). Integrative service delivery approach is a term that describes a variety of

approaches including; “a) an agreed upon set of functional goals and services whereby each discipline contribute expertise, b) services are provided within the context of naturally occurring routines and c) collaboration among all services and the family” (Campbell, 2006, p. 302). As a team of experts works together in the best interest of the student, “...the learner benefits from a holistic type of intervention that does not segment him or her into isolated strengths and weaknesses” (Demchak, 2002, p. 1).

Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) requires the creation of a nurturing environment that promotes a decrease in disruptive behaviors and an increase in attainable life goals including “improved learning, access to social networks, employment, and involvement in the full range of community activities” (Horner, Albin, Todd & Sprague, 2006, p. 207). The provision of positive behavioral supports for students in a humane and positive manner is essential to overall good instruction. The primary goal of PBS is to reduce problem behaviors as students gain acceptable, functional and appropriate ways to deal with their education and life (Demchak, 2002).

A functional and age-appropriate curriculum for students with severe disabilities emphasizes skills that are learned in naturally occurring environments, and that are chronologically age-appropriate. Skills should be taught in a natural context, closely mirroring authentic environments (Demchak, 2002). The driving notion for this focus is that students should be functional in their homes and communities and should use instructional materials that are commensurate with the age of the student. While the emphasis is access to, and participation in, the general curriculum, “...it is still necessary

for these students to learn these skills in functional and meaningful contexts” (Browder, Ahlgrim-Dezell, Courtade-Little & Snell, 2006. p. 499).

Finally, parental involvement for this population is essential, and family input, support and reinforcement are often critical to the child’s education. “Professionals must be encouraged to view students within the broader context of family life” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006. p. 56). Parents can provide valuable information and support, as well as carryover of skills to the home and social environments outside of school. With legislative requirements for parental involvement, as well as the need to maintain positive relationships with parents, it is imperative for teachers to work effectively within each unique family system (Demchak, 2002).

As outlined above, instructional practices for students with severe disabilities have primarily focused on the development of individual life skills in authentic, age-appropriate contexts, team/family planning for instruction and transition, and inclusion of special education students in regular education settings as appropriate. With the accountability requirements of NCLB and IDEIA, the focus has shifted from these strategies to an emphasis on the production of evidence that students are learning academic content. The next section will describe the history and development of assessment and accountability systems that has led to this change in focus for the instruction of children with severe disabilities.

Assessment and Accountability Systems

It is important to clarify the differences between assessment programs and accountability systems. “Accountability and assessment are not the same thing, and

testing is just one type of assessment” (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Gutman, & Geenan, 1998, p.2). Assessment requires the collection of diverse information related to a student’s learning, in order to make informed decisions about instruction and/or placement (Cobb, 2004), whereas educational reform efforts under NCLB primarily address school system accountability for student learning. Accountability may be defined as a systematic means of collecting and analyzing data for the purpose of making progress (Elliot & Thurlow, 2000; Hill & DePascal, 2003). This accountability is extended to all students, requiring the inclusion of all assessment scores in local and state reporting systems.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated academic progress for all students, and required that states institute accountability systems in order to continue receive federal education funding. For the first time, each state is expected to have a plan that addresses challenging content and achievement standards for all students, with mandatory inclusion of all students in state and district-wide assessment programs, accountability systems and annual high stakes testing. Schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in each content area, for each of four predetermined subgroups (these groups include students who are considered: minority, limited English proficiency, low-income, and/or special education), as well as in other indicators such as attendance and rates of student participation in assessments. Under NCLB, all students must be assessed, including those with significant disabilities who were, until then, often excluded from high stakes testing.

Previously, the assessment of the relatively small number of students with significant disabilities was left up to the classroom teacher as these students were held to

a different set of standards, usually driven by the child's IEP. Typically, accountability for students with severe disabilities has been linked solely to the IEP goals and objectives (Eisenburg, 2006). Now, student progress in the general curriculum must be assessed. "An alternate assessment is an assessment designed for the small number of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular State assessment, even with appropriate accommodations" ("Standards and Assessment", 2004). Final rules for NCLB found in the Federal Register, December 2003, section § 200.1 (d) state that:

For students with the *most significant cognitive disabilities* who take an alternate assessment, a State may, through a documented and validated standards-setting process, define achievement standards that - i) are *aligned* with the State's academic content standards; and ii) reflect professional judgment of the *highest learning standards possible for those students*.

According to work completed by Hess and Brigham (2000), "High Stakes testing that has real consequences can motivate significant educational improvement. In doing so, however, such testing puts the state in the business of labeling significant numbers of students as 'failures'" (p. 26). Hess and Brigham report that these failures often come from groups of students targeted for AYP, those of minority status and those with disabilities.

Another significant aspect of assessment is the notion that assessment is used to gain information (in this case on a person) in order to make a decision (Browder, 1991). While there are many reasons for assessment, alternate assessments are used to assist professionals when making decisions about curriculum and development and student evaluation. "...professionals must gather information on the learner's needs in order to

decide what to teach... (and) to decide when to change instructional strategies to improve student performance” (Browder, 1991, p. 2). Similarly, alternate assessments are used to evaluate students with severe disabilities relative to the general curriculum. “Results of these assessments provide program planners with information about levels of proficiency of individual students...” (Brown, Snell & Lehr, 2006, p. 73).

The Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)

In Virginia, most (if not all) students with disabilities participate in state assessments with modifications and accommodations. Virginia state assessments include the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests used in general education. However, for some students, additional testing support is required and provided via alternative assessments such as the Virginia Grade Level Assessment (VGLA) and the Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program (VSEP). All assessments for accountability purposes are given in grades 3-8 and at the end of most core courses for high school students. The above-mentioned assessments focus on student mastery of grade level content. For students with severe mental retardation, federal regulations mandate an alternative assessment. With this as the imperative, Virginia created the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP).

The purpose of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) is to evaluate the performance of students who have traditionally been exempted from state assessment programs. Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) reflect the intent to extend educational accountability and reform to all students, including those with

significant disabilities. Although these students represent a relatively small portion of the overall school population, the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program was developed with the belief that these students are a part of our accountability system and that the evaluation of their achievement represents an important component of our quest toward high standards (VAAP Implementation Manual, Fall 2005).

In regard to an alternate assessment for this population, the issue of raising expectations and improving outcomes was considered to be critical, despite the fact that empirical data and tracking of academic progress for students in special education programs are limited (Turner, Baldwin, Kleinert & Kearns, 2000). Virginia's Department of Education reviewed the National Longitudinal Study 2 (NLTS 2). The data for students with significant cognitive disabilities/multiple disabilities (MR/MD) revealed the following: graduation rates specified that 88% of students with severe disabilities earned a Certificate of Completion, employment rates were at 53% (this included schooling for work, work or preparation for work) and 84% of adults were still living at home after graduation. Strengthened by this data, Virginia education officials felt the imperative to implement assessments for students with severe cognitive disabilities that would support the requirement that students demonstrate mastery of skills in the general curriculum, as well as mastery of skills for adult living. The resulting Virginia Alternate Assessment Program has undergone several revisions since its inception.

Virginia began administering the first VAAP in the 2000-2001 school year. That first round of VAAPs required that IEP goals be 'linked' to state standards of learning.

For example, the SOL 1.1, Number and Number Sense states: “The student will count objects in a given set containing between 1 and 100 objects and write the corresponding numeral.” (Virginia DOE, Mathematics Standards of Learning). Under the first incarnation of the VAAP, this SOL might have been linked to a student’s IEP Goal in the following manner: for the goal, “Student will use a ‘Cheap Talk’ communication device to answer Yes/No questions”, the teacher would need to create a context for the demonstration of this skills. The teacher might place a number of objects before the student and ask, “Is that five pencils?” The student would use his/her communication device and reply yes or no, trying to express the correct answer. Work samples would be collected on this interaction and would be recorded for the child’s portfolio. Work samples for VAAP purposes may include videotape, audiotape, anecdotal record, interview, data chart/graph and/or a captioned photograph. Students were actively working on IEP goals and objectives within the context of an SOL. Similarly, teachers were collecting data on students’ goals and objectives, not on SOLs.

At that time, and in keeping with best practices for this population, student portfolios of work had to demonstrate skills in a variety of settings, with age-appropriate peers including the student’s primary mode of communication. Teachers were required to submit a portfolio of work for each student that demonstrated learning in all four core academic subjects (English, Math, Science and Social Studies), and to provide multiple pieces of evidence (six or more) for multiple subject objectives (up to 4, depending on the student’s grade level). Parental participation was required in the original VAAP (thus addressing best practices of team-work with familial and educational input on all aspects

of schooling) and parents were required to ‘sign-off’ on the collections of evidence of student work (portfolios). For students with significant disabilities, the responsible teacher compiled the portfolios. This equated to tremendous amounts of work beyond the normal daily routine for teachers (Thompson, Johnstone, Thurlow, & Altman, 2005). Virginia practiced this form of the VAAP through the 2004-5 school year with only minor changes.

In the 2005-06 school year, Virginia revised the VAAP to include newly written Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL). Guidelines from U.S. Dept of Education required that states examine their regular content standards and explore how they might be “reduced in depth, breadth, and complexity or modified to reflect pre-requisite skills,” as well as “show a clear link to the content standards” (U.S. DOE, 2004). According to the VAAP Implementation Manual, ASOLs give students with severe disabilities access to “cross-grade level SOL content” (p. 14) that have been reduced in depth and complexity. An example of an ASOL from the Manual:

Reading ASOL – E-RW8

The student will use simple reference materials.

- a) Use knowledge of alphabetical order by first letter.
- b) Use a picture dictionary to find meanings of unfamiliar words.

For this ASOL, a student must show evidence of the stem of the standard, “The student will use simple reference materials” and one bullet, either a or b. “Students in the VAAP are required to select one ASOL from each of four reporting categories in the content area being assessed: Reading-2 reporting categories, Math-5 reporting categories,

Science-4 reporting categories and History-4 reporting categories. (See table 1). This means that each student/teacher submits a collection of evidence showing mastery of a total of 15 ASOLs in each of four core content areas. (See Appendix A for additional ASOLs provided in the 2007 VAAP Implementation Manual).

Table 1

ASOL Reporting Categories (Adapted from the VAAP Implementation Manual, 2007)

Content Area	ASOL Reporting Category
Reading (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Word Analysis Strategies and Information Resources (RW) • Demonstrate Comprehension of Print Materials (RC)
Mathematics (M)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and Number Sense (NS) • Computation and Estimation (CE) • Measurement and Geometry (M-G) • Probability and Statistics (PS) • Patterns, Functions, and Algebra (PFA)
Science (S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific Investigation (includes resources) (SI) • Force, Motion, Energy and Matter (FME) • Life Processes (LP), Living Systems (LS) and Earth Science (ES) • Interrelationships in Earth/Space Systems (IE) and Earth Patterns, Cycles and Changes (EP)
History/Social Science (H)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History (H) • Geography (G) • Civics (C) • Economics (E)

In 2005, the VAAP required that students prove mastery of the ASOLS in a variety of settings with age appropriate peers, including the use of the student's primary mode of communication. In this incarnation of the VAAP, no parental input was required and there was no relationship between the VAAP and the student's IEP, other than to determine whether or not that student would participate in the VAAP and, if so, to determine his or her primary mode of communication. In the 2006-07 and the 2007-08 school years, however, the VAAP has required that students show mastery of ASOLs, with no determinate relationship to IEP goals, no requirement for learning in multiple settings, and no required communication skills or parental input component. Under the most recent policy guidelines from the US DOE and Virginia, linkage of IEP goals for VAAP purposes is not required in this assessment system.

The Non-Regulatory Guidance Document, *Alternate Achievement Standards for Students With the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (US DOE, 2005) offers the following guidelines: first, IEP goals are individualized for each student, and that student's progress toward each goal is measured for purposes of reporting progress to parents and for making individualized decisions about the special education and related services a student receives. With regards to state accountability purposes and determinations of Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB, test results must ensure consistency in the judgments made about schools (rather than individual students). IEP goals are not designed to meet whole-school accountability requirements. Secondly, as required by Title I legislation and policy schools are accountable for student achievement only in the content areas of reading/language arts and mathematics.

Because a student's IEP is, by definition, a highly individualized and specific educational plan, it seems remiss that other than the mention of assessment type and appropriate accommodations, there is no clear link between IEP content and the VAAP at present in Virginia. "It would appear that a student's IEP objectives should at least in part focus or inform the content of his or her alternate assessment" (Turner et al., 2000. p. 75). This reflects Virginia's shift from a clear and well-justified coordination of VAAP objectives and IEP objectives to a primary focus on the assessment of academic content for students with severe disabilities.

Academic Focus for Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities

This most recent incarnation of the VAAP highlights the instructional and curricular shifts through the past three decades: from mere access to education to proficiency in academics for students with disabilities. As discussed earlier, the learning needs of this population have traditionally been determined to be significantly different from those of non-disabled children. Therefore, the curriculum for students with severe disabilities has not historically focused on academic content, but has instead encompassed a separate curricular focus. Indeed, in many cases it is thought that the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) is the curriculum for each individual student. While the IEP certainly represents educational priorities and supports achievement of those educational priorities for each individual student, it does not represent the entire range of curriculum; nor does it represent the academic standards upon which a curriculum should be based (Giangreco et al., 1998). The new priority is that all students have the opportunity to learn academic content, and, in Virginia, that the

Standards of Learning (SOLs) should be the basis for each local school division's academic curriculum for all students. It has yet to be determined by the special education community and the educational a community at large if this is appropriate for all students, specifically in terms of learning outcomes for students with severe disabilities.

While a foundation of knowledge for education of children with disabilities has been laid with research on functional skills curricula, not enough is known about instruction of reading and math for students with complex physical, communicative and cognitive disabilities. There have been relatively few reviews of the literature regarding academic instruction for students with severe disabilities. A search of the PsycINFO database revealed two meta-analyses on this topic, "The effects of purchasing skill instruction for individuals with developmental disabilities: a meta-analysis" (Xin, Grasso, Dipipi-Hoy, & Jitendra, 2005) and "A meta-analysis and review of sight word research and its implications for teaching functional reading to individuals with moderate and severe disabilities" (Browder & Xin, 1998). These two meta-analyses offer better understanding of approaches to teaching a small segment of academics to moderately and severely disabled students; specifically in the areas of money skills and sight word vocabulary.

Xin et al. (2005) studied the effectiveness of functional mathematics instruction for individuals with disabilities. Twenty-eight intervention studies published from 1967 to 2003 were identified and reviewed in this meta-analysis. The degree to which the intervention resulted in an effect on the participant was calculated using the percent of non-overlapping data or PND. This method for synthesizing single-subject literature is

similar to effect size. It "...is a metric that can reasonably be computed across a wide variety of studies, and, with appropriate controls, reveals a consistent, meaningful outcome" (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Casto, 1987. p. 31). The results for the Xin et al. study suggest "...a moderately positive effect for purchasing skill instruction (median PND = 87%). Maintenance (median PND = 100%) and generalization (median PND = 86%)" (2005, p. 379). Other variables such as participants' entry skills, money skill adaptations, type of purchase, error correction procedure, and instructional setting affected the treatment outcomes. The grade level of the study participants included elementary and middle school (Grades K-8), secondary (Grades 9-12), and postsecondary (adult). Three categories of disability were included in the analysis: (a) mild and moderate mental retardation, (b) moderate and severe mental retardation, and (c) other disabilities (i.e., autism, severe emotional disorders, and dual diagnoses). Results of this analysis indicate that the basics of money skills are the difficult part of making purchases for these students due to the demands of basic academic skills. The authors acknowledge that defining the population (mild, moderate, severe MR) is critical to interpreting study findings and that further research in the area of teaching basic academics to those students with severe disabilities is warranted.

In the second meta-analysis, Browder and Xin, (1998) reviewed the sight word research available from 1980-1997 from a total of 48 studies. While the review focused on students with IQ scores in the moderate and severe disabilities range (n = 177), the study also included other diagnosis such as learning disabilities (n = 38) and severe emotional disturbance (n = 13). The majority of the studies were with elementary and

secondary aged students (83%); several however, included adults (17%). The results revealed that “sight word instruction has been highly effective across individuals for people with moderate and severe disabilities” (p.130). Findings concluded that the overall PND for sight word instruction for students in this population is remarkably high with PNDs above 90%. The authors recognize that one limitation of sight word research is that generalization of skills is difficult.

While important and necessary studies, both of these reviews, which primarily focused on the instruction of academic skills to severely disabled students through specific interventions, failed to factor out ‘other’ disability categories (they included those with moderate MR, learning disabilities and emotional disabilities), and failed to address *only* those students with severe disabilities, a population that requires unique instructional techniques and curricula. The inclusion of a wide range of disabilities under the label “severe disabilities” makes it difficult to identify the most effective interventions for teaching severely disabled students. The fact that neither meta-analysis focused solely on this group raises questions about intervention research with this population as it relates to academic skills, as well as about the efficacy of such practices for this population. Also, there is a paucity of academic intervention research on students with severe disabilities. Regarding these two meta-analysis, the Xin et al. (2005) examined research on functional mathematics over a 36-year span and found only a total of 28 studies. Similarly the Brower and Xin (1998) analysis examined sight word intervention research over 17 years and found 48 studies. That equates to approximately 20 studies per decade on academic instruction for students with severe disabilities.

In order to have a better understanding of the current literature on interventions for severely disabled students, a computer search was conducted using data from PsycINFO, Social Citations Index and PsycLIT. A variety of keywords and terms were used including severe disabilities, developmental disabilities, interventions, academics, sight vocabulary, math and reading. Also, a manual search was conducted of the following journals: *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities* (March 2004-March 2006), *Mental Retardation* (February 2005- October 2006), *Journal of Special Education* (Fall 2002-Spring 2006), *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* and *American Journal on Mental Retardation*.

The articles that were considered appropriate for use were those that employed instructional interventions for the purpose of teaching academic skills (reading and/or math) or pre-academic skills (picture identification) to students with severe disabilities. Similarly, although the interventions needed to take place primarily in a school, other locations were considered. Due to the fact that the two previous meta-analyses similar to this topic considered research were published before 1997 and 2003, the articles reviewed for this analysis needed to be current research, preferably no earlier than 2000. All research had to take place only with the population of students considered to have severe disabilities.

One study by Noel, Whitmarsh, VanDerheyden, Gatti, and Slider, (2003) called “Sequencing instructional tasks: a comparison of contingent and non-contingent interspersal of preferred academic tasks” had a partially effective outcome. (Given the degree of severity of the behaviors studied, any positive effect was considered good.)

This was a study that examined the instruction of five pre-school students with severe language delays to determine if offering preferred academic tasks would enhance target academic task acquisition. The PND for each participant was: 1-32%, 2-62%, 3-100%, 4-35%, and 5-44%. Another study reviewed “The effects of presenting high preference items, paired with choice, via computer based video programming on task completion of students with autism” (Mechling, Gast, & Cronin, 2006. p. 7). This study of two middle school students with autism used a computer-based video program to improve time for completion of specific tasks. The PND for each participant was 1-100%, 2-63%, which would be considered a relatively effective outcome. Another study considered “Supporting the inclusion of students with moderate and severe disabilities in junior high school general education classes: The effects of class-wide peer tutoring, multi-element curriculum and accommodations” (McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, Thorson, & Fister, 2001. p. 141), and used an instructional package including peer-tutoring and a multi-element curriculum with accommodations to decrease disruptive behavior and improve target academic tasks. This multiple-probe study focused on three students with autism, mental retardation and speech language delays, as well as three peer tutors, and was considered to have an effective outcome for five out of six participants with a PND for each participant of 1-100%, 2-100%, 3-100%, 4-57%, 5-100%, 6-100%.

While a wide variety selected studies focused on instructional strategies and outcomes for inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education settings, few studies targeted the specific academic-related measures of reading and basic academic tasks. Most other studies measured student *behavior modifications* as necessary

prerequisites to academics. Given the unique educational needs and challenges of students with severe disabilities, it is not surprising that behavioral strategies were identified and measured. However, there is little in the way of research-based curriculum and instruction that offers specific support for practitioners in need of strategies for teaching academic skills to children with severe disabilities.

The lack of focus for academic intervention with this population begs the question, “Why is there so little focus on academic achievement for students with severe disabilities?” Experimental research with school-aged students in education is rare (Hsieh, Acee, Chung, Hsieh, Kim, Thomas, You, Levin, & Robinson, 2005) and intervention research on instruction for school-age students in special education makes up only a slight percentage of the published articles in major journals over the past 19 years (Mastropieri, M.A., Berkeley, S., McDuffie, K., Graff, H., Marshak, L., Conners, N., Diamond, C.M., Simpkins, P., Bowdey, F. R., Fulcher, A., Scruggs, T.E., & Cuenca-Sanchez, Y. (in press). What is published in the field of special education? An analysis of 11 prominent journals. *Exceptional Children*.) Current legislation also allows for up to 1% of school-aged students to take an alternate assessment, primarily because the relatively small number students who have been determined to have severe disabilities. It is understandable that only a small number of studies have been published to address the topic of academically-centered instruction for this population. Conversely, however, NCLB legislation mandates research-based instruction in classrooms today. This review of current research does not provide enough evidence to inform practice. This is an area

of great need for students with severe disabilities and their teachers and an area open for increased investigation.

Alternate Assessments For Students With Severe Disabilities

Because there was no need, prior to the imperatives of NCLB and IDEIA, for formal testing of students with severe disabilities for state accountability systems, there is a scarcity of information on the use of alternate assessments in instruction of students with the most severe disabilities. In this new era, the lack of information and practice has lead to significant problems in the field of assessments for children with severe disabilities. Historically, curriculum and instruction for these students have been individualized to meet the unique needs of each student. Teachers of students with significant disabilities have typically been less aware of state standards, relying instead on functional curricula (Cobb, 2004). There is much that these teachers do not know about validity evidence and curriculum alignment for alternate assessments with this population (Crocker, 2003) especially alignment with the general curriculum.

In their study Browder et al. (2003) offer a review of the literature to date on critical information regarding alternate assessments using 19 data based studies. They concluded that there is little empirical evidence in the literature about the effectiveness of alternate assessment in the classroom. “We do not have sufficient data to determine if the practice of alternate assessment will live up to its promises...We also know that current practices are fraught with problems threatening the potential of alternate assessment...” (p. 51). Problems include teacher assignment of students to low levels of proficiency, erroneous conclusions that a student’s poor performance automatically refers to a system

of poor quality, the use of assessment tools that are poor quality, and the failure of schools to align content standards with performance indicators as prescribed in procedural manuals (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003). In their study of, ‘the relation of a statewide alternate assessment for students with severe disabilities to other measures of instructional effectiveness’ Turner, Baldwin, Kleinert, & Kearn, (2000) recognize that these problems also include concerns over validity, a lack of continuity among states with regard to methodology of alternate assessments, a lack of training for teachers and staff, a lack of research on acquisition of academics for the students with the most severe disabilities and a lack of focus on outcomes for this population. In its fledgling existence, “... A limited amount of research is available regarding the methods used by the states to extend or expand content standards for the purpose of aligning alternate assessments with the same academic content as the general assessments” (Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle, 2006 p. 109).

While some states employ similar policies and methodologies for their alternate assessment programs, significant differences in approaches often still exist from state to state. Most states require teachers to collect evidence of student’s work (portfolios) on variations of state standards. (Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2001). There are many concerns about the use of a portfolio assessment system. Portfolios (or collections of evidence) are time-consuming for teachers, and require extensive training for teachers in order to be effective. Other bureaucratic issues also provide obstacles to fluid implementation of the alternate assessments. These include mundane problems such as the storage of these large documents, the difficulty of scoring them, and high

costs for states and local school districts. Despite these concerns, portfolio assessments are used in many states, primarily because the benefits align with the purposes of the alternate assessment (Kim, 2004). The implementation of an alternate assessment program is a daunting task for states, and it has led to considerable variability among the states as to how this process is accomplished (Thompson, Johnstone, Thurlow, & Altman, 2005). Considering the fact that states are required to implement alternate assessments, it is a crucial time for work on more effective and meaningful instruments.

Under current accountability imperatives, it is crucial for states to determine more effective and efficient ways to implement and process alternate assessments that meet national, state and local needs (Kim, 2004). More information and a deeper understanding of the use of alternate assessments in public education are needed in the field of special education, particularly in regard to how these assessments may affect instruction and outcomes for students with severe disabilities, and the degree to which alignment with general education standards should be required. The fate and the results of the alternate assessment imperative have yet to be fully understood. Time and practice will give special educators more information on implementation as data on alternate assessments reveal "...continued evolution in various aspects from the approach itself, to the content setting of standards, and the scoring criteria used" (Thompson et al., p 5). In Virginia, meanwhile, the VAAP is the currently mandated method of assessment for this population. Little is known about the effects of this instrument on instruction and practice for students with severe disabilities. An understanding of teachers' perspectives and concerns relating to the VAAP is crucial in determining its effectiveness and its use in

improving outcomes for students with the most significant disabilities. This study will address the perspectives, practices and concerns of teachers using the Virginia Alternate Assessment (VAAP) with ASOLs in one school district in the mid Atlantic region.

3. Methods

The purpose of this study was to determine how the VAAP has influenced teachers' approaches to teaching students with severe disabilities and to determine teachers' perceptions of current practices. This chapter contains a description of the methods of the study and the research design. The participants and setting are described as well as the overall research design. Data sources and procedures for collecting data are explained.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were teachers, administrators and related service providers who serve students participating in the VAAP a semi-rural school district in Virginia. In an attempt to maintain confidentiality for the participants and the school division, only a scant review of this district's demographics will be provided. The school district enrolls approximately 11,000 students. According to schoolmatters.com, Standard & Poor's independent, analytical resource for state and education leaders, this school district serves approximately 12.5% of its population in special education. Of this amount, a central office administrator confirmed that between 45-50 students participated in the VAAP each year for the last two years. This year, approximately 20 teachers in this school district teach students who qualify to take the VAAP.

Because the VAAP is a statewide assessment, all schools serving students with severe disabilities are required to administer the assessment. The state has created instructional manuals and teaching resources for all teachers in an attempt to uniformly administer the VAAP. However, each school district may prepare its teachers and students for the assessment in whatever manner the district sees fit. A case study of this school district provided in depth knowledge of how teachers in one school district have approached the assessment and instructional practices for students with severe disabilities.

Research Design

This research took the form of a case study where “the researcher explores a single phenomenon (the case) bounded by time and activity (a process) and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time” (Cresswell, 1994, p. 12). This research was conducted using a mixed methods approach. Mixed methods research may be defined as “...research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in a single study...” (Tashakkori & Creswell 2007, p. 4) Mixed methods research offers an opportunity to triangulate findings and to bring the results together, adding more scope and breadth to a study (Creswell, 1994). Combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study have been used for many years, but their combined use has become more widely accepted in the last 25 years (Maxwell & Loomis, 2003).

A quantitative study is one in which an issue is broken into variables, mathematically measured and statistically analyzed in order to measure whether or not predictions can be generalized for a given theory (Creswell, 1994). The quantitative aspect of this study came primarily from a survey offered to teachers in one school district in Virginia during the 2007-2008 school year. In this case, the survey was formatted in such a way that the respondents offered some demographic information (years of teaching experience, type of degree held, number of students on caseload, etc.) as well as information about the effects of the VAAP on their instructional practices. (See Appendix B for the survey and the following section “Data Source” for additional information.)

Another layer of quantitative information came from a review of the district’s VAAP scores and professional development opportunities for teachers administering the VAAP. The purpose of reviewing VAAP scores was to determine a pass/fail rate for the district and to determine if, by Virginia standards, students are successfully completing the VAAP. A review of student scores helped determine if students are deemed successful *as determined by the state*. In addition, a review of this school district’s professional development opportunities relating to the VAAP over the years of its implementation was conducted. Given this unique mandate and emphasis on staff development in this school district, all workshops listed in each year’s catalogues were reviewed since the inception of the VAAP. This information offers insight into how the district has approached the implementation of the VAAP and teacher training relating to best practices.

The qualitative data came from open-ended questions on the survey as well as selected teacher and staff interviews. A qualitative study refers to understanding problems by creating a picture where the story is told in the words of the informants (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative research has been used more recently in special education, and is gaining acceptance and prominence in social science research; it is defined as a “...systematic approach to understanding the qualities, or the essential nature of a phenomenon within a particular context” (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 197). In this case, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of current instructional practices for students with severe disabilities in light of the current use of the VAAP as well as teachers’, administrators’ and therapists’ perceptions of instructional practices as they relate to the VAAP. This problem was well suited to qualitative research because the use of alternate assessments in high stakes testing is relatively immature. There is a lack of research on this topic and qualitative research can help bring fragmented pieces together to understand this phenomenon.

The interviews were conducted to better understand the individual stories of the staff members with VAAP experience who provide services to students with severe disabilities. Teacher participants for the interviews were identified in the survey, which offered the opportunity for respondents to volunteer to be interviewed. Ten teachers volunteer to be interviewed. The researcher asked the central office VAAP administrator to help select teachers who offered a diverse set of experiences. From the original ten, six teachers were selected. The elementary, middle and high schools each had two

representatives and both mild/moderate and severe levels of impairment were represented in each of the three grade levels.

Similarly, administrators and related services staff members were asked to participate in an interview. In this school district, two administrators and one assistive technology team have been assigned to support VAAP administration and work with teachers in the classroom. The reason for this “purposive sampling” as Robson (1993) calls it, is to attempt to gain the perspectives of a variety of teachers, administrators and related service providers with a range of experiences with the VAAP and instructional processes for students with severe disabilities. Interviews were conducted in person and all interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. (See Appendix C for interview protocol and the following section “Data Source” for additional information.)

Data Sources

The data sources for this study were a survey, a records review and selected teacher and staff interviews. The basis of this research is a survey of teachers to determine the effects of the VAAP with regard to the instruction of students with severe disabilities. The survey was developed based on existing theory regarding curriculum and best practice literature in the field (Browder et al., 2006; Campbell, 2006; Demchak, 2002; Horner et al., 2006; Inge & Moon, 2006; Schwatz et al., 2006; Snell & Brown, 2006; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006). Surveys from other similar studies (the Charlotte Alternate Assessment Model Project, Browder, 2005 and the MCAS-Alt survey used in a doctoral dissertation by Kim, 2004) were reviewed.

The survey measured the dependent variable, which is the change in instructional practice, if any, caused by the VAAP. With regard to the following topics (see table 2), what change has there been to the instruction of students with severe disabilities since the implementation of the VAAP?

Table 2

Curricular Domains and Instructional Best Practices

Curricular Domains	Best Practices
Self Help	Inclusion
Academics	Peer Integration
Behavior Management	Team Planning
Communication	Functional, age-appropriate curricula
Community integration	Positive behavioral support
Vocational training	Transition Planning/ Community Based Instruction
Recreation/Leisure	Parental involvement

(Adapted from Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Demchak, 2002; Snell & Brown, 2006; Staugler, 2004).

The survey was developed based on a review of the literature of best practices. It is divided into 5 parts:

- Part 1: Demographic information. 7 questions about teachers' years of experience and school district information.
- Part 2: Information about the population taught. 6 questions (teacher's self-reported information about their students).
- Part 3: Instructional practices. 14 questions (teachers' self-reported instructional/classroom practices related to the VAAP).

- Part 4: Open ended questions. 4 questions (open ended questions about the VAAP).
- Part 5 Opportunity for additional input -2 questions.

Content validity was tested via an administration of a draft of the survey to a group of special educators as a pedagogical exercise in survey development and analysis. These teachers were taking a Masters level research methodology course. The class reviewed the content of the instrument and provided suggestions for changing or modifying the content. After this, the suggestions for revisions included the rewording of several questions, clarification of terms and using bold-face type to highlight sections of the survey. These suggestions were subsequently applied to the survey.

The survey data on teacher's practice since the ASOLs in the VAAP was only one data source for this research. In addition, this study included teacher and staff interviews. The strength of interviewing is "the opportunity to learn about what you cannot see" (Glesne & Pshkin, 1992, p. 65). In that light, the interviews for this research were designed to obtain a deeper understanding of what teachers and staff know, what they do and how they feel about the VAAP since the addition of the ASOLs. In relation to this, Robson (1993) refers to structuring interview questions concerning facts, behavior and beliefs/attitudes. The questions came from what Glesne and Pshkin (1992) refer to as the 'cultural reality' of the respondents. Questions for the interview were based on current literature and input from teachers of students participating in the VAAP who acted as knowledgeable informants. Similarly, the researcher has experience as a teacher of students with severe disabilities and as a former school administrator responsible for a

school division's special education department, including oversight of the alternate assessment. This prior experience was used in developing some interview questions.

The questions for each interview were semi-structured with an open protocol. Robson suggests "...flexibility in wording and in the order of presentation of questions" (p. 227). Questions included some basic demographic data similar to the survey (the 'Facts' section). Next, teachers and staff had the opportunity to discuss their practices (the 'Behavior' section). Finally, teachers and staff were able to express their perceptions of the VAAP relating to their own experiences (the 'Beliefs/Attitudes' section). There were a total of 18 questions and, the interviews took from 15-25 minutes each.

Procedures

Prior to the implementation of this study, the Application for Human Subject Research Review was sent to the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) for approval. After approval from HSRB, individual consent for participation in the study was obtained for both the survey and interviews (See Appendix G). The surveys were disseminated electronically. The researcher obtained email addresses from the appropriate central office administrator responsible for oversight of the VAAP in this school district. One email was sent to teachers who have students on their caseload who participated in the VAAP in the last 3 years. The email asked for the teacher to participate in the online survey. This email gave specific information about the nature of the research, time expected to complete the survey, a note that no teacher was obligated to participate in the survey and an offering of a \$5.00 donation to either the Special Olympics or the March of Dimes for their participation in the survey. (See

appendix D for copies of emails). After one week, a follow-up email was sent to teachers thanking those who participated and reminding those who had not that the survey was still available. Two weeks later a final email requesting teacher support was sent. The total length of time for the active survey was four teacher workweeks.

Based on the research questions, the following null hypothesis was developed to guide quantitative analysis:

1. The implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs has not affected teachers' instructional practices. There have been no changes in instruction since the VAAP with ASOLs.

Research hypothesis: since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, teachers have changed their instructional practices.

Data Analysis

This section describes the data analyses for this study. First a table is presented listing research questions, data sources, and analysis procedures (see table 3) followed by a more detailed description of the data analysis for the quantitative component followed by the qualitative component.

Table 3

Research Questions and Data Analysis

Research questions	Data sources	Analysis
Main Question: How has one district implemented the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and how has this impacted instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district?	Survey Interviews Test scores Record review	Descriptive Correlations <i>t</i> -test, Emic and etic coding
1b) How are “evidenced based best practices” implemented in one school district since the implementation of the VAAP?	Survey Interviews Record review	Descriptive Correlations, <i>t</i> -test, Emic and etic coding
1c. Given that the state has required the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS) for the VAAP as the core knowledge necessary for success for students with severe disabilities, what are the current VAAP scores? (How are we doing?)	Test scores	Descriptive
1d. What curriculum are teachers of students with severe disabilities using and to what extent are they using it?	Survey Interviews Record review	Descriptive Correlations, <i>t</i> -test, Emic and etic coding
1e. How have teaching practices changed? What do teachers do differently now than before this revised version of VAAP?	Survey Interviews Record review	Descriptive Correlations, <i>t</i> -test, Emic and etic coding
1f. Have teachers changed their approach to planning lessons since the VAAP?	Interviews	Emic and etic coding
2. What is the degree of severity of students taking the VAAP? Is there a breakdown in reported scores by severity?	Test scores Record review Interviews	Descriptive
3. What are teachers’, administrators’ and related service providers’ feelings/perceptions of the VAAP?	Survey Interviews	Descriptive Correlations, <i>t</i> -test, Emic and etic coding

The data from the survey was collected, visually reviewed and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), for analysis. Quantitative analysis procedures included basic descriptive statistics (measures of central tendency and dispersion) and frequencies were summarized. Comparisons between variables such as teaching experience, licensure, number of students on caseload, etc. were made.

Data analysis for this study included results that fit into four categories: descriptions, relationships, comparisons and predictions (Fink, 2003). Each of these will be described in some detail. The analysis of the data collected from the survey included descriptions and summaries of overall teacher characteristics and backgrounds in the form of tallies or frequencies (e.g. the number of years teaching experience or the type of licensure for each teacher). In addition, the analysis included summary descriptions of teacher responses regarding whether or not teachers have changed their practices and if so, to what degree.

Another type of analysis determined if there were relationships between specific teacher characteristics, their instructional practices and their attitudes and perceptions regarding the VAAP. This included a comparison of the attitudes and practices of teachers who have similar characteristics (demographics). That is, teachers with more experience (or full licensure or grade level) may have had different practices than those with fewer years of experience (or full licensure or grade level). These differences were compared.

Scoring survey responses was conducted in two ways. For some likert-type items response options included: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree, 5 =

Strongly Disagree and 6 = Not Applicable (NA). The 6 = NA option was included to allow respondents to have an opportunity to indicate a particular item did not apply to them. Those items are reported for the frequencies, however, those data are not meaningful responses for computing means and standard deviations from all other respondents. Therefore all subsequent analyses involving descriptive and statistical analyses were conducted without including the “6” not applicable response choices.

In preparation for this analysis, each variable was examined to determine the exact methods used to describe, summarize, compare and predict, and a determination was made as to whether the collected data would be nominal, ordinal or numerical for each variable (Fink, 2003). The analytical strategies for each survey question depended on the data collected. (See table 4). *T* - tests are hypothesis-testing procedures and are used when the sample sizes are small (when *n* is below 30) and are used to compare the performance of two groups. The two groups for this study were teachers reported practices 1) before the VAAP with ASOLs and 2) after the VAAP with ASOLs. When assumptions were met, relevant parametric and nonparametric statistical tests were run to determine whether differences were statistically meaningful.

Table 4
Research Questions, Survey and Data Analysis

Research questions	Survey Question (# of items)	Analyses
Main Question: What are the effects of VAAP on instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district?	Teacher demographics (7) Students (7) Instructional Practices (14)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)
1b) With regards to what the literature refers as “best practice,” in teaching / instruction for students with severe disabilities, what is currently taking place in this school district?	Instructional Practices (14)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)
1d. What curriculum are teachers of students with severe disabilities using and to what extent are they using it?	Instructional Practices /Curriculum (6)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)
1e. How have teaching practices changed? What do teachers do differently now than before this revised version of VAAP?	Instructional Practices (15)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)
2. What is the degree of severity of students taking the VAAP? Is there a breakdown in reported scores by severity?	Students (2)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)

3. What are teachers' feelings/perceptions of the VAAP?	Students (1) Instructional Practices (1)	Means, <i>SDs</i> and parametric and non-parametric analysis (<i>t</i> test, Mann-Whitney U)
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The qualitative aspect of this study included open-ended survey questions as well as teacher, administrator and related service provider interviews. Each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed and coded in order to look for patterns in responses. Similarly, for open-ended survey questions, the responses were also coded to look for patterns. To account for reliability, a non-related party listened to interviews and read transcripts to verify correct wording of transcripts. After that, the researcher thoroughly reviewed transcriptions to identify the general issues presented by the teachers. With regard to the interviews and open-ended survey questions, the first step in analyzing the data was to code and categorize each interview. This began with a transcription of the major parts of the recorded interviews. (That is, 'small talk' was not included in official transcriptions.) After that, a thorough pass through was made to review the general issues presented by the teachers and staff. Then a determination of the nature of each person's responses was accomplished by considering emic and etic categorization. Maxwell refers to the use of emic categories as those that are "...taken from the conceptual structure of the people studied..." (Maxwell, 2005, p.79), whereas etic categories come from existing theory on the topic. Existing theories about best practices for this population have been enumerated in the literature review. In this case, the questions provide a basis for the etic categorization. However, with the qualitative aspect

of this research and in keeping with the inductive model of thinking, theory emerged during data collection and analysis phase and therefore, did “...not begin with a theory to test or verify” (Creswell, p. 94).

A general list of each respondent’s words or phrases that applied to the research questions was created. As a means of tracking codes for each interview and in the absence of a software package for assistance in coding data, the “Insert Comment” function of Word Perfect was used. This helped highlight aspects of interviews that were important and to ‘cut and paste’ coded sections. The emic categories were listed separately for each person interviewed and some general patterns emerged.

Because Maxwell encourages making critical connections with the research question (2005), the researcher created a matrix display of interview questions (etic categories) and participant’s responses to each question (emic categories). Tables were created that list the questions asked and the codes for each person’s responses. Themes emerged as codes repeated themselves throughout the table. (See Table 5). The levels of analysis for the interviews included defining and describing and making meaning of teacher and staff feelings. Connections between participant responses were reviewed for patterns, by grouping items and making linkages.

Table 5

Example of Etic and Emic Categories for Interviews and Open-ended Questions

Etic/Question	Emic/Participant X	Emic/Participant Y
1 Like	Structure Goals to C and I End product/portfolio Pushes teacher	Accountability to parents Guides curriculum Measurable standards
2 Not Like	IEP- takes away from goals Takes away from functional curriculum Not relevant to SD/not flexible for SD Time consuming	Low level not good Irrelevant Life skills more important Time – consuming- takes away from life skills
3 Better Off	No's- wrong emphasis- should be life skills Assesses teachers not kids Too time consuming Yes's- exposed to academics Forces better planning	No's- too much time Not enough for life skills Yes's - broader range of material
4 Change	VAAP for lower level goals- simpler/more Useful/more relevant/reduce or amend Academic goals for SD/allow re-do of failed goal	Needs to address wider Range of ability levels

The final layer of quantitative information was a review of the district's VAAP scores and professional development opportunities for teachers administering the VAAP. VAAP scores are posted on the Virginia Department of Education website in Excel spreadsheet format. These spreadsheets were downloaded and reviewed. The information was summarized in a table stating overall pass rates for the school division in each content area over the years of the VAAP administration. In addition, a review of this school district's professional development opportunities relating to the VAAP over the years of its implementation was conducted. Catalogs containing this information were obtained. Catalogs for the past eight years (the number of years that the VAAP has been required in Virginia) were reviewed for title and types of staff development for the VAAP. This information was summarized in table format with a narrative explanation of staff development over the years. The data was analyzed regarding direct teacher instruction of instructional practices.

In summary, primary data sources for this mixed methods research study came from a survey of teachers and interviews of teachers, administrators and related service providers whose students participate in the VAAP. Additional data sources came from a records review. Findings from quantitative and qualitative components were combined to triangulate results.

4. Results

This study addressed the effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and its new Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs) in one school district in Virginia. For many, the ASOLs represent the first time that success with academic instruction (mastery of general education academic standards) has been mandated for a population for whom life skills and functional living curricula have been the primary models of instruction. In summary, the main research questions were: How has one district implemented the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and how has the VAAP impacted instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district? Subsequent questions were designed to help examine exact practices, perceptions and outcomes relating to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. These included an in-depth examination of the following: (a) the implementation of “evidenced-based best practices” since the ASOLs, (b) current VAAP scores as they relate to the demonstrable success of the district on the new assessment, (c) the curriculum teachers are using and to what extent are they using it, (d) whether teaching practices and lesson planning have changed, (e) examining the degree of severity of students taking the VAAP and, finally (f) examining perceptions of the teachers and staff responsible for the execution of the VAAP. The three main data sources for this mixed-methods study included (a) survey (b)

records review (c) interviews. The triangulation of three data sources provides both quantitative and qualitative data thereby enriching the overall analysis for the topic.

Quantitative data came from the survey and the records review. For the survey of teachers responsible for the VAAP in this school district (see appendix B for the survey questions), 21 surveys were disseminated and 18 completed resulting in an 86% response rate. Data was coded and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. A test of internal consistency was conducted to determine if the survey was reliable. Cronbach's Alpha is one of the most commonly used indicators of internal consistency. The closer the rating score is to 1.0 the scale is considered more reliable (Pallant, 2001). For this survey, the reliability score was .6, which is considered somewhat low but an acceptable level. Next, frequencies were run to determine general patterns. These analyses provided descriptive data including percentages, means, and standard deviation scores. Next, a comparison of the means across some subgroups of the sample was completed to determine if there were any differences in responses by subgroup of respondents. Finally, when assumptions were met, relevant parametric and nonparametric statistical tests were run to determine whether differences were statistically meaningful.

The records review included a review of the school division's records regarding staff development for special education teachers and review of current VAAP scores posted on the VA DOE website. Robson refers to content analysis or documentary analysis as the use of documents, often prepared for some other purpose, as a "...secondary or supplemental method in a multi-method study" (p. 274). The quantitative

information provided by the document analysis was reviewed and summarized according to the research question and used as supporting evidence for the other data sources.

Qualitative data came from open-ended questions on the survey and in depth interviews. Qualitative data analytic procedures were employed to analyze the data generated from these sources. There were nine in-depth interviews (see Appendix C for interview questions) of selected teachers (two from each elementary, middle and high school levels. Teachers interviewed represented all ability levels, from mild to moderate to severe. Additional demographic information on those interviewed will be withheld in order to provide anonymity) two related service providers from the assistive technology team and one administrator responsible for oversight of the VAAP in this school district. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Next, a thorough pass through was made to review the general issues presented by the teachers and staff. Then a determination of the nature of each person's responses was accomplished by considering emic and etic categorization (Maxwell, 2005). Member checks were used to ensure validity. (See Appendix H for sample member checks.)

In this case, the questions provided a basis for the etic categorization and the individual responses provided the emic categorization. For example, one etic category considered "Using a Curriculum" and the emic responses were taken directly from participants' responses: (a) "I make up my own"/ "teachers are building their own" (b) "the VAAP is the curriculum" (c) "The curriculum is the IEP", (d) "We use the life skills curriculum as a basis. I got it from the district in 2001". Themes emerged from the categorization of responses. Similarly, open-ended survey questions were coded for emic

and etic categories, member checked and reviewed for emerging themes. Then data from these interviews and open-ended survey questions were examined to determine whether responses confirmed or disconfirmed survey responses.

Triangulation of all data was employed. The three sources of data included survey, interviews and records review and all three offered a picture of what was taking place in this school district. These sources helped to collect information from multiple sources, a wide range of individuals and in numerous settings, using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 1996). First, the survey data offered an overall picture of current demographics and quantitative information on the research questions. Then, the records review offered documentary analysis as supplemental information. Last, analysis of the interviews offered an enriched and current picture of teachers and staff perceptions of the effects of the VAAP on instruction. These three sources were utilized to confirm or disconfirm findings. Next, the analysis for each research question will be presented.

Research Question One: Main Question

The main question was: *How has one district implemented the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and how has this impacted instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district?* First a review of some background information was conducted that included overall characteristics of the sample such as demographic data. Then an examination of school district support (via staff development) for teachers who implement the VAAP was conducted and finally a review of the instructional impact. This next section describes findings for each of these components in more detail.

Teacher Demographics

The number of years of classroom experience of those who responded to the survey varies, but a significant number of respondents have a relatively high number of years in the field. Of those surveyed, 61% have over 10 years experience in education, 28% have 3-10 years experience and only 11% have 1-2 years experience in the classroom. The education level of this group is generally high, with 39% holding a BA to BA plus 15 credits. A full 50% hold MAs with an additional 11% reporting MA plus 15 credits. Primary certification for this group is MR, with 78% endorsed in this area. An additional 17% hold their endorsement in 'Other' areas, including LD, ED and SPED. Worthy of note is that 90% of teachers surveyed hold additional endorsements; however, only 17% are in the area of SD (no one reported a primary certification of SD). Of those surveyed, 83% indicate that they are fully licensed, with 17% reporting conditional or provisional licensure status. (See table 6.)

Table 6

Basic Background Information on Teacher Demographics

1. Years experience	61% Over 10 years 28% 3-10 years 11% 1-2 years experience
2. Education level	39% BA to BA plus 15 credits 50% MAs 11% MA plus 15 credits
3. Primary certification	78% MR 17% 'Other' (LD, ED and SPED) 90% Hold additional endorsements 17% Secondary endorsement of SD
4. Licensure status	83% Fully Licensed 17% Conditional or Provisional
5. Grade Level	39% Elementary 44% Secondary 16% No response

Professional Development

A review of the school district's staff development practices as they relate to the VAAP was conducted. Given the high rate of teacher endorsement in MR (78%), in contrast to the relatively low rate of endorsement in SD (17% listed as secondary endorsement), staff development in this area is warranted. The Virginia Standards of Quality (SOQs) require all personnel involved in instruction to participate in professional development (Department of Instructional Services Manual, 2007). In this school district, teachers must earn a specified number of credits related to their professional development during each school year. Teachers often take advantage of a unique program

whereby they may attend workshops or courses that will equal or exceed 3 days of staff development credit. This program offers literally hundreds of staff development options for all staff. Subjects vary from field trips to museums, CPR training, reading enhancement, recognizing child abuse, learning the French horn, etc. All categories of teachers are included from kindergarten to high school, from reading specialists to career and technical education staff. (See Appendix E or sample of courses and range of disciplines covered.)

Teachers are encouraged to consider their area of expertise and needs of their department/school before signing up for workshops. A catalogue of all staff development options is provided for each teacher at the beginning of the school year, and teachers are advised to review all options early and sign up for offerings in a timely fashion. Not all staff development options are listed in the catalog. At times, additional courses are offered with an email to staff noting course offerings. Any of these additional courses offered on the VAAP were not reviewed.

Robson (1993) suggests conducting a content analysis within the framework of the research question, deciding on a sampling strategy, defining the recording unit and, finally, constructing the categories for analysis. In this case, given this unique mandate and emphasis on staff development in this school district, all workshops listed in each year's catalogues were reviewed since the 2000-01 school year (the inception of the VAAP) to 2007-08 school year. The document analysis for staff development included a review of each year's offerings, listing them according to the *total* number of options offered county-wide (range from 192-288), the total number of options for both general

education *and* special education staff (range 4-29), the total number of options specifically (solely) for *special education staff* (range 5-14) and finally, the number of options *specific to the VAAP* (range 0-3). The results are summarized in table 7 below. While it is true that special education teachers may attend any workshop they chose, a small percent of workshops addressed the instructional practices and needs specific to the special educator. In summary, relative to the total number of course offering each school year, few are specific to special education and even fewer addresses the VAAP.

Table 7

Summary of Staff Development 2000-2008 Delineated by 1) All teachers, 2) General and Special Education Staff, 3) Special Education Staff and 4) VAAP.

School Year	(1) Total <i>n</i> County-wide	(2) Total <i>n</i> -% General & Special Education	(3) Total <i>n</i> -% Special Education	(4) Total <i>n</i> -% Specific to VAAP
2000-01	217	15 - 6%	12 - 5%	0
2001-02	202	10 - 4.5%	9 - 4%	0
2002-03	269	16 - 5%	7 - 2.5%	0
2003-04	227	11 - 5%	5 - 2%	0
2004-05	192	5 - 2.5%	6 - 3%	0
2005-06	232	17 - 7%	14 - 6%	0
2006-07	288	4 - 1%	9 - 3%	2
2007-08	264	29 - 10%	14 - 5%	3 - 1%

Staff development specific to the VAAP has only been offered in the last two years, which is concurrent with the shift to ASOLs. Even still, the VAAP staff

development offerings written into the yearly catalogues are mostly targeted towards the management of the VAAP and include topics such as the compilation of portfolios, VA DOE updates on the VAAP, criteria for student participation, timelines and procedures and the organization of collections of evidence for the VAAP. Teachers were given opportunities to ask questions and to share ideas for evidence collection. Since 2000-2001 school year, only *one* workshop titled “Connecting the ASOLs to Curriculum: Addressing the Use of Thematic Units”, was geared specifically towards instructional practices.

Classroom Demographics

Data relating to services for students with severe disabilities were reviewed. For this school district, those surveyed reported about their students and provided information about caseloads, instructional settings and basic student profiles which varied greatly within this group. Teachers reported an average caseload of 9 students. Responses to the survey question “I have administered the VAAP to students with the following disability (or disabilities)” included all eligibility categories that Virginia recognizes but the most common categories included mental retardation (MR), severe disabilities (SD), autism (AUT) and multiple disabilities (MD) (co-morbid with visual impairments, hearing impairments and speech and language impairments). Teachers reported the degree of the severity of their caseloads as: 17% mild, 33% moderate, (these variables were then collapsed to Mild/Moderate = 50%), 22% severe and 18% combined mild/moderate/severe (two respondents did not respond to this question). Of those surveyed, 50% consider their students to have significant medical conditions.

This school district provides services to students in a wide range of educational settings, even within the relatively small group of students taking the VAAP. Fifty percent of teachers report that they work exclusively in a self-contained setting, while 44% teach in a combined self-contained/ inclusive setting (one person did not respond to this question). Of those surveyed, 61% of teachers report that they are actively involved in instruction 75-100% of the time and an additional 17% report 50-75% of their day spent actively involved in instruction. Teachers have administered the VAAP an average number of 11 times each, with three teachers reporting that they have never administered the VAAP, and one teacher accounting for 37 separate VAAP assessments. (See table 8)

Table 8

Additional Classroom Demographics

<i>Item</i>	<i>n, Percentage, Mean or Range</i>
Average caseload	<i>n</i> = 9
Degree of the severity caseloads	50% Mild/Moderate 22% Severe 18% Combined
Significant medical condition	50% Yes 50% No
Educational settings	50% Self-contained 44% Combined (SC/Inc)
% time spent actively involved in instruction	61% - 75-100% of the day 17% - 50-75% of the day
Administered the VAAP	Mean=11 Range 0-37

Summary

Overall, the demographics from the survey suggest that the teachers in this school district have relatively high levels of teaching experience (61% over 10 years) and the education level of this group is generally high (61% MA or MA plus 15 credits). While the primary endorsement is in MR (MR, 78%) and 90% of teachers hold additional endorsements only 17% of the teachers surveyed hold a secondary endorsement in SD and none of the teachers surveyed reported that they held a primary certification in SD. The records review indicates that there is little staff development relating to VAAP. The average caseload was 9, all disability categories were represented in VAAP administration, and teachers reported a wide range of VAAP administration experiences. Teachers report that their instruction primarily takes place in self-contained (50%) and combined self-contained-inclusive settings (44%) with the majority of staff actively involved in instruction over 75% of the day.

The section above provides background information that includes the overall characteristics of those surveyed, a review of how the school district has supported staff development with regard to the VAAP and some general information on the degree of severity and types of disabilities represented by the students participating in the VAAP. The next section provides more information about instructional practices employed in this district for students with significant disabilities as these practices relate to the VAAP.

Research Question 1b: Evidenced-Based Best Practices

The next research question deals with how were “evidenced based best practices” implemented in one school district since the VAAP has been required. Teachers in the

school district utilize a variety of evidence-based best practices to varying degrees. The seven best practices selected for this study based on research evidence (Demchak, 2002; Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Snell & Brown, 2006) and highlighted in Chapter Two are: inclusion/peer integration, community based instruction (CBI), transition planning, team planning (integrated service delivery), positive behavioral supports, the use of a functional age-appropriate curriculum and parental involvement. A summary of each practice as it relates to aspects of the VAAP with ASOLs reported by teachers is in table 9. Responses to the interview questions: “Define instructional practices for the students you teach and have you changed your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?” are then discussed.

Table 9

Summary of Teachers’ use of Each Best Practice Relating to Aspects of the VAAP with ASOLs

Best Practice	Daily use since ASOLS	Confident the Practice works	Support with Practice
Inclusion	N=17 65% Practiced inclusion both before and after the ASOLs 11% only before 11% never	N =17 41% Confident inclusion works 47% Not confident it works	N =17 41% Have had support with inclusion 47% No support with

Peer Integration	<i>N</i> =17 61% Practiced peer integration both before and after the ASOLs 11% Only before 17% Never	<i>N</i> =18 72% Confident peer integration works 22% Not confident it works	<i>N</i> =17 61% Have had support with peer integration 33% No support with peer integration
Community Based Instruction (CBI)	<i>N</i> =18 44% Practiced CBI both before and after the ASOLs 17% Only before 11% only since 28% Never	<i>N</i> =18 72% Confident CBI works 28% Not applicable	<i>N</i> =17 61% Have had support with CBI 6% No support with 28% Not applicable
Transition Planning	<i>N</i> =18 78% Practiced transition planning both before and after the ASOLs 22% never	<i>N</i> =18 72% Confident transition planning works 6% not confident it works 22% Not applicable	<i>N</i> =17 78% Have had support with transition planning 17% Not applicable
Team Planning	<i>N</i> =18 83% Practiced team planning both before and after the ASOLs 6% Only since 11% Never	<i>N</i> =18 94% Confident team planning works 6% Not applicable	<i>N</i> =17 83% Have had support with 6% No support with 6% Not applicable

Positive Behavioral Supports	<i>N</i> = 18	<i>N</i> = 18	<i>N</i> = 16
	83% Practiced positive behavioral supports both before and after the ASOLs	83% Confident positive behavioral supports works	61% Have had support with positive behavioral supports
	6% Only since	7% Not applicable	17% No support with
	11% Never		11% Not applicable
Curriculum	<i>N</i> = 17	<i>N</i> = 18	<i>N</i> = 17
	78% Used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs	78% Confident using a curriculum works	56% Have had support with using a curriculum
	6% Only since	11% Not confident it works	28% No support with
	11% Never	11% Not applicable	11% Not applicable

Findings on Evidenced-Based Practices

Overall, 67% of those surveyed agree or strongly agree to the statement “I have changed my instructional practices since the implementation of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL).” while 22% remained neutral and only 5% strongly disagree. The VAAP with ASOLS does not seem to have had any significant impact on teachers’ practices of inclusion. Sixty-five percent of teachers reported using inclusive practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLS. However, teachers also reported mixed perceptions about the efficacy of

inclusionary practices. According to this survey, 41% of teachers were confident that inclusion works with this population while, 47% are not confident it works. The exact same breakdown occurred when asked if teachers have had administrative support with inclusion: 41% report that they have had support and 47% report no support.

The VAAP with ASOLS does not appear to have impacted significantly teachers' peer integration practices. Sixty-one percent of teachers reported that they have practiced peer integration both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs. Seventy-two percent of teachers reported being confident that peer integration is an effective strategy to use with this population. Sixty-one percent reported administrative support for this practice. For the practice of community-based instruction (CBI), teachers' practices were varied. All participants responded to this question ($N = 18$). Forty-four percent of teachers practiced CBI both before and after the ASOLs, 17% only before, 11% only since and 28% reported that they have never practiced CBI. According to this survey, 72% of teachers were confident that CBI works with this population. When asked whether or not teachers have had administrative support with CBI, 61% reported that they have had support and 28% reported not applicable.

The VAAP with ASOLS does not appear to have impacted teachers' transition planning practices. Seventy-eight percent of teachers practiced transition planning both before and after the ASOLs, although 22% report that they have never practiced it. In terms of teacher-reported perceptions of transition planning with this population, 72% of teachers were confident that it is an effective strategy. A similar breakdown occurs when

asked if teachers have had administrative support with transition planning: 78% reported that they have had support.

For the practice of team planning, the VAAP with ASOLS does not appear to have had any significant impact on teachers' practices. Eighty-three percent of teachers reported that they have practiced team planning both before and after the VAAP with ASOLS. Teacher-reported perceptions of team planning practices are nearly unanimous in that 94% are that confident team planning works with this population. Eighty-three percent reported that they have had support for team planning.

The VAAP with ASOLS does not appear to have had any significant impact on teachers' practices of positive behavioral supports. Eighty-three percent of teachers practiced positive behavioral supports both before and after the ASOLS. Eighty-three percent were confident positive behavioral supports work with this population. A similar breakdown occurs when asked if teachers have had administrative support with positive behavioral supports: 61% have had support with positive behavioral supports with 11% reporting not applicable.

For the practice of a functional age-appropriate curriculum, 78% of teachers used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLS and 78% were confident that using a curriculum works with this population. Slightly over half of the teachers (56%) reported that they had support in using a curriculum. (See question 1d for more information on the curricular issues for this school district with students participating in the VAAP.)

In summary, despite the fact that 67% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed to the statement "I have changed my instructional practices since the implementation of

the VAAP and the ASOLs.” the majority of the participants report the use of evidence-based practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs. There are slight differences in the utilization of each practice, but for the most part, teachers reported that they have not greatly changed the use of evidence-based practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs.

The Influence of ASOLs on Practice

As for the influence of ASOLs on practice, similarly, people reported that the ASOLs have not had a major influence on best practices. Using a Likert scale of 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = NA, survey respondents replied to the following item: “The VAAP with ASOLs has *influenced* my use of (insert best practice).” The 6 = NA items were reported for the frequencies; however, those data were not meaningful responses for computing means and standard deviations from all other respondents. Responses for both analyses are summarized in Table 10 below. Overall, respondents remained relatively neutral to this statement for all best practices.

Table 10

*ASOL Influence on Best Practices**With N = 6 in analysis*

<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>
Inclusion	17	3.35 (1.27)
Peer integration	17	3.47 (.717)
CBI	17	3.65 (1.93)
Transition planning	17	3.94 (1.64)
Team planning	17	3.47 (1.41)
Positive behavioral supports	17	4.29 (1.53)
Functional age-appropriate curriculum	17	3.29 (1.45)
Parental involvement	17	3.47 (1.12)

With N does not = 6 in analysis

<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Frequency of n = 6</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>
Inclusion	16	1	3.19 (1.10)
Peer integration	17	0	3.47 (.717)
CBI	13	4	2.92 (1.60)
Transition planning	13	4	3.31 (1.31)
Team planning	16	1	3.31 (1.30)
Positive behavioral supports	12	5	3.58 (1.24)
Functional age-appropriate curriculum	15	2	2.93 (1.10)
Parental involvement	17	0	3.47 (1.12)

Influence of specific demographics on evidence based practices.

Based on survey responses, it appears that the VAAP with ASOLs has not had a significant impact on teachers' daily use of best practices or that the VAAP with ASOLs has had a major influence on best practices; however, some responses warranted a deeper investigation. More information about the use of evidenced-based best practices and the VAAP with ASOLs was needed, specifically regarding specific demographic data. Using the survey items "The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of...(insert best

practice)” each best practice was analyzed against specific demographics using non-parametric analysis. This was due to the small sample size and data not meeting assumptions for parametric analyses. The Mann-Whitney U Test, compares medians and "...evaluates whether the ranks for the two groups differ significantly." (Pallant, p. 260, 2004). Each of the seven best practices was measured with seven specific demographics using the Mann-Whitney U Test for a total of 49 comparisons.

For previous comparisons, the 6 = NA items were reported for the frequencies. For this application of the Mann-Whitney U Test analyses were conducted without including the “6” not applicable response. Data indicated that there were no differences on any variables. “There is always likely to be *some* difference between conditions” (Robson, 1993, p 351). The results of these tests were conducted at the .05 confidence level and findings reflect the fact that there is a 1 in 20 probability that the difference could have occurred by chance alone. Findings indicate that, overall, the VAAP with ASOLs has not significantly impacted teachers’ use of best practices. While there are slight differences in the use of each practice, overall teachers report that they have not greatly changed the use of evidence-based practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs. Similarly, the analysis of specific demographics indicated that there were no significant differences in teachers’ use of best practices.

(See tables 11- 17.)

Table 11

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Primary Certification

ASOLs Influence on	Primary Certification	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	MR/SD	13	2.92	.954	1	.069
	Other	4	4.75	1.26		
Peer Integration	MR/SD	13	3.38	.650	0	.534
	Other	4	3.75	.957		
Community Based Instruction	MR/SD	13	3.31	1.97	4	.612
	Other	4	4.75	1.50		
Transition Planning	MR/SD	13	3.46	1.51	4	.579
	Other	4	5.50	1.00		
Team Planning	MR/SD	13	3.54	1.39	1	1.00
	Other	4	3.25	1.71		
Positive Behavior Supports	MR/SD	13	4.23	1.48	5	.436
	Other	4	4.50	1.92		
Curriculum	MR/SD	13	2.85	1.14	2	.378
	Other	4	4.75	1.50		

No Significant differences

Table 12

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Years Experience

ASOLs influence on	Years Experience	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	1-2 yrs	1	3.00	.	1	
	3 + yrs	15	3.20	1.15		.822
Peer Integration	1-2 yrs	2	3.00	.000	0	
	3 + yrs	15	3.53	.743		.252
Community Based Instruction	1-2 yrs	2	2.00	1.41	4	
	3 + yrs	11	3.09	1.64		.362
Transition Planning	1-2 yrs	1	1.00	-	4	
	3 + yrs	12	3.50	1.17		.127
Team Planning	1-2 yrs	2	2.50	.707	1	
	3 + yrs	14	3.43	1.34		.253
Positive Behavior Supports	1-2 yrs	2	2.50	.707	5	
	3 + yrs	10	3.80	1.23		.182
Curriculum	1-2 yrs	1	2.00	-	2	
	3 + yrs	14	3.00	1.11		.337

No Significant differences

Table 13

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Significant Medical Condition

ASOLs influence on	Significant Medical Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	Yes	8	3.50	.926	1	.252
	No	8	2.88	1.25		
Peer Integration	Yes	9	3.56	.527	0	.526
	No	8	3.38	.916		
Community Based Instruction	Yes	6	3.50	1.05	4	.240
	No	7	2.43	1.90		
Transition Planning	Yes	7	3.71	.488	4	.374
	No	6	2.83	1.83		
Team Planning	Yes	8	3.25	1.16	1	.871
	No	8	3.38	1.51		
Positive Behavior Supports	Yes	6	3.83	1.47	5	.507
	No	6	3.33	1.03		
Curriculum	Yes	7	3.29	.756	2	.186
	No	8	2.62	1.30		

No Significant difference

Table 14

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Degree of Severity

ASOLs influence	Degree of Severity	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	Mild Mod	9	3.33	1.00	1	.582
	Severe	7	3.00	1.29		
Peer Integration	Mild Mod	9	3.67	.707	0	.385
	Severe	7	3.29	.756		
Community Based Instruction	Mild Mod	6	3.00	1.79	4	.869
	Severe	6	2.83	1.72		
Transition Planning	Mild Mod	8	3.75	1.03	4	.172
	Severe	5	2.60	1.52		
Team Planning	Mild Mod	8	3.62	1.06	1	.513
	Severe	7	3.00	1.63		
Positive Behavior Supports	Mild Mod	6	3.67	1.21	5	.850
	Severe	5	3.80	1.30		
Curriculum	Mild Mod	9	3.11	1.05	2	.501
	Severe	6	2.67	1.21		

No Significant differences

Table 15

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to College Degree

ASOLs influence	College Degree	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	BA	7	3.71	.951	1	.124
	MA	9	2.78	1.09		
Peer Integration	BA	7	3.57	.787	0	.830
	MA	10	3.40	.699		
Community Based Instruction	BA	5	2.80	1.79	4	.822
	MA	8	3.00	1.60		
Transition Planning	BA	4	2.50	1.29	4	.128
	MA	9	3.67	1.22		
Team Planning	BA	7	3.29	1.50	1	.957
	MA	9	3.33	1.22		
Positive Behavior Supports	BA	5	3.60	.894	5	.933
	MA	7	3.57	1.51		
Curriculum	BA	6	2.33	1.03	2	.087
	MA	9	3.33	1.00		

No Significant differences

Table 16

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Licensure Status

ASOLs influence on	Licensure Status	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	Fully Licensed	14	3.07	1.07	1	
	Not Fully Licensed	2	4.00	1.41		.322
Peer Integration	Fully Licensed	14	3.57	.756	0	
	Not Fully Licensed	3	3.00	.000		.146
Community Based Instruction	Fully Licensed	10	3.00	1.70	4	
	Not Fully Licensed	3	2.67	1.53		.728
Transition Planning	Fully Licensed	12	3.50	1.17	4	
	Not Fully Licensed	1	1.00	.		.127
Team Planning	Fully Licensed	13	3.62	1.19	1	
	Not Fully Licensed	3	2.00	1.00		.053
Positive Behavior Supports	Fully Licensed	10	3.80	1.23	5	
	Not Fully Licensed	2	2.50	.707		.182
Curriculum	Fully Licensed	13	3.00	1.15	2	
	Not Fully Licensed	2	2.50	.707		.537

No Significant differences

Table 17

ASOLs Influence on Best Practices with Regard to Grade Level

ASOLs Influence on	Grade Level	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of <i>n</i> = 6	<i>p</i>
Inclusion	Elementary	6	3.67	1.21	1	.259
	Secondary	8	2.88	1.13		
Peer Integration	Elementary	7	3.43	.787	0	.569
	Secondary	8	3.50	.756		
Community Based Instruction	Elementary	4	3.25	1.71	4	.612
	Secondary	8	2.75	1.75		
Transition Planning	Elementary	3	4.33	.577	4	.115
	Secondary	8	2.88	1.46		
Team Planning	Elementary	7	3.29	1.50	1	.953
	Secondary	8	3.25	1.28		
Positive Behavior Supports	Elementary	5	3.60	1.52	5	1.00
	Secondary	6	3.50	1.22		
Curriculum	Elementary	6	2.67	1.03	2	.546
	Secondary	8	3.12	1.25		

No Significant differences

Qualitative Data and Evidence-Based Practices

With regard to the qualitative aspect of this research and those formally interviewed, the data is scant when it comes to the use of evidenced-based best practices since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. When those interviewed were posed with the following: “Define instructional practices for the students you teach,” and “Have you changed your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?” the responses varied. A few teachers reported on community-based instruction (CBI) and inclusion. CBI was the one evidenced-based practice most often discussed in the interviews. One teacher reported, “...the way I teach... is still a community-based life skills program... I just kind of broadened the activities.” Teachers are trying to integrate ASOLs into their CBI program. “I try to help work the VAAP into the community-based component.” CBI seems to be a critical component to the middle school and high school programs as cited by one person: “...they have taken the ASOLs and the life skills curriculum and have combined them through the CBI. There is a lot of that at the middle school.” A few others commented on practicing inclusion since the ASOL VAAP, but inclusion does not seem to be a priority for this population. As one teacher stated, “...some VAAP goals could be done in an inclusive setting but that might be a push...” In summary, the interviews did not provide any substantive information with regard to the specific evidenced based practices cited in the literature review section.

One reason for this may be that teachers do not use the same terminology with regard to best practices. When asked to talk about their instructional practices, most

teachers referred to curricular content. For example, one teacher said “Three-fourths of the time is spent on academics – functional academics. I do teach one class that is just social living skills.” Another reported that she uses more one-on-one instruction and small group work. One person from the Assistive technology team reflected that before the VAAP with ASOLs students were “not taught...basic skills. They were doing more recreational-type things...many functional living type skills but they did not always tap into the academics... (Now) there is a greater emphasis on the academics.”

Parental Involvement

One open-ended item on the survey asked for input with regard to parental involvement since the ASOLs. That statement read: “Please describe how the VAAP with ASOLs has influenced the way in which you involve parents in instructional practice.” Eight people wrote a response and the following quote is representative of their feelings “I have always involved parents and I don't feel that I do it any more now than prior to the VAAP.” For the most part, teachers use VAAP evidence in reporting to parents the same way they use other data forms. “I do involve the parents in the beginning when I am choosing my goals. I ask the parents for any suggestions... I also keep the parents updated on what the child has completed as we progress through the goals.”

However, the VAAP does not seem to be a major vehicle for involving parents in their child’s education. Of the eight responses, four contained concerns relating to overall parental issues. Two quotes are striking in this regard: “Unfortunately, most parents of my students do not ask about or are involved with what the students are

learning... I often send notes home regarding what we are working on, but don't get any responses.”

The parents I have dealt with during the VAAP, are only involved minimally in the process. Parents will look at the forms and review the work samples etc. but it has been my experience that the students that participate in the VAAP, come from families with a variety of issues that hinder them from participating in their child's education (i.e. drugs, alcohol, single parents, unemployment...) these parents don't typically take time to help their children with homework, look at notes, or follow-up with school related issues, let alone be involved with something this complex [the VAAP].

Summary

As far as the degree to which “evidenced-based best practices” are implemented in this school district since the introduction of the VAAP, analysis of the quantitative data suggests that teachers perceive that their daily use of the seven practices since the ASOLS has not changed overall. That is, the majority of teachers reported that they used evidenced-based practices to similar degrees, both before and after the ASOLs and that the ASOLs have had a minimal impact on their instructional practices. Analyses of the limited qualitative data taken from interviews and responses on open-ended survey questions on use of evidence based practices suggest that teachers define instructional practices for the students they teach using terminology that does not reflect the “best

practices” definitions implemented in this study. With regard to parental involvement, overall, the VAAP with ASOLs has not changed teacher’s practice of involving parents in their student’s education.

Research Question 1c: Scores

Given that the state has required the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLS) for the VAAP as the core knowledge necessary for success for students with severe disabilities, what are the current VAAP scores? (How are we doing?) Educational assessments are used to assist professionals when making decisions about curriculum and development and student evaluation. Teachers and staff should be using formal assessment results to help guide instruction. (Browder, 1991; Brown et al., 2006; Brown, Snell & Lehr, 2006). It is therefore important to determine how students are performing on the VAAP. In order to determine the performance of this school district on the VAAP, a review of the VA DOE VAAP website was conducted. Scores are presented in Table 18 with a summary discussion following. On the website each table included the following key:

Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (School Year) Divisional Results

All data for PP - Passed Proficient, PA - Passed Advanced and NI - Needs

Improvement is in the form of percentage of students at each level from total

number tested. * Divisions where the total number of students tested were

below ten. SOL = Standards of Learning

Note: As of August 12, 2008, no scores for the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years have been posted.

Table 18

Virginia Alternate Assessment Program 2001-2006 Division Results

School Year	Access to English SOL			Access to Math SOL			Access to Science SOL			Access to History SOL		
	N	PP	PA	NI	PP	PA	NI	PP	P A	NI	PP	PA
2001-02	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2002-03	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2003-04	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2004-05	21	61	18	7	71	21	14	64	21	7	46	46
2005-06	24	24	48	20	20	56	26	30	39	23	32	41
2006-07	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2007-08	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Summary: School Year	Access to English SOL	Access to Math SOL	Access to Science SOL	Access to History SOL
No scores for 2001-04	*	*	*	*
2004-05	21% NI 79% Pass	7% NI 92% Pass	14% NI 85% Pass	7% NI 92% Pass
2005-06	24% NI 72% Pass	20% NI 76% Pass	26% NI 69% Pass	23% NI 73% Pass
No scores for 2006-08	*	*	*	*

In keeping with Robson’s (1993) suggestion for conducting a content analysis, using data archives (a set of records) is another form of supplementary methodology for a mixed methods study. Analysis of the score archive on the DOE website reveals the

following: for this school district, there were no scores reported for the years 2001-2004. The Virginia Department of Education (VADOE) does not require reporting for fewer than 10 participants. This regulation is delineated in the Approved State Accountability Plan (for NCLB) found on the U.S. Department of Education website (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/index.html>). The plan specifically addresses the “Minimum Number Used for Reporting Purposes” and states that while the ultimate goal is that all students participate in statewide assessments, the reporting of fewer than 10 students for any group or subgroup is not required. “Although from a statistical perspective, a minimum subgroup size of three protects the identity of the subgroup members, a minimum of 10 students in a group or subgroup will ensure that individual students are not personally identifiable” (p. 60). Using the minimum number of 10 participants satisfies NCLB reporting requirements and also upholds protections required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

The DOE website does not provide a cumulative score or a breakdown of scores by the severity of disability. In the early years of the VAAP, only 3rd, 5th, 8th and 11th grades were required for testing. This may be reason for fewer than 10 in the reporting category for the years 2001-2004. This is only an assumption, as current numbers in the reporting category for this school district (n=55, according to information obtained during interviews) do not support this notion. The DOE does not require that scores be reported by severity of disability. This may be in part to the deference to FERPA, as reporting more specific severity categories might make individual students more personally identifiable.

The VAAP has changed greatly since its inception as reflected in the data. Differences in the 2004-05 and 2005-06 scores may highlight more recent changes since ASOLs have been added. The Needs Improvement (NI) rate for 2005-2006 is nearly double that of 2004-2005. There was a 14% drop in the average Pass score in the 2005-06 school year. (See table 19). Questions remain as to why the scores vary. The assessment changed during this time and exact comparisons are not reliable. No definitive conclusions may be drawn from the posted DOE scores about the disability level of the students and their ability to pass the VAAP. Nevertheless, this school district is doing well (in light of the fact that a majority of students participating in the VAAP are “passing”), according to the scores for the two years that are posted on the website.

Table 19

Overall Pass Rate for the Two Years with Results

School Year	Average of all content areas
2004- 05	12% NI 87% Pass
2005-06	23% NI 73% Pass

In summary, the DOE website provides some but not all information. Scores by the severity of disability and cumulative scores were not available. For this school district, there were no scores reported for the years 2001-2004 or 2006-2008. Due to the lack of score reporting, no definitive conclusions may be drawn from the posted DOE

scores about the disability level of the students and their ability to pass the VAAP.

According to the scores for the two years that are posted on the website, the majority of this population is considered to be “passing” the VAAP (87% in the 2004/5 school year and a decline to 73% in the 2005/6 school year).

Research Question 1d: Curriculum

What curriculum are teachers of students with severe disabilities using, and to what extent are they using it? Because this study is about the effects of the VAAP with ASOLs on instruction for students with severe disabilities, it is critical to look at the type of curriculum used and to what degree. As reviewed in Chapter two, services for this population have changed greatly over the past three decades with curricular shifts as the hallmark of these changes. Current theory maintains that the best curriculum for this population is one that is functional and based in life skills (Snell & Brown, 2006). The domains of Self Help, Academics, Behavior Management, Communication, Community Integration (CBI), Vocational Training and Recreation/Leisure should be integrated into daily instruction (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Snell & Brown, 2006; Staugler, 2004).

In order to determine curricular use in classrooms for students with severe disabilities, the survey asked six questions. In response to research question 1b (the “Evidence Based Practices” section above), four questions have been addressed and are repeated in Table 20 below.

Table 20

Summary of Teachers' use of Curriculum Relating to Aspects of the VAAP with ASOLs

Best Practice	Daily use since ASOLS	Confident it works	Support with Practice	VAAP with ASOLs' influence on practice
Curriculum	N=17 78% Used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs 6% only since 11% never	N=18 78% Confident using a curriculum works 11% not confident it works 11% Not applicable	N=17 56% Have had support with using a curriculum -28% No support -11% Not applicable	N=17 34% Agree or strongly agree 22% neutral 28% Disagree or strongly disagree 11% Not applicable

In addition to the above information on the use of a functional age appropriate curriculum and the degree to which teachers use an established curriculum, 57% disagree and 28% were neutral to the statement “I teach from an established curriculum.” That is a total of 85% of those surveyed are not using an established curriculum. When asked what type of curriculum they use, 72% respondents reported that they made their own curriculum for teaching students with severe disabilities. This may be what teachers are referring to in the chart above when 78% of those asked report using a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs. Of the 17 responses to the survey, only one person said that

she used a district-made curriculum and one person reported using a pre-existing curriculum.

General Use of Curricular Domains

More information about the use of a curriculum and the VAAP with ASOLs was needed; specifically regarding how the VAAP with ASOLs has affected the amount of time teachers spend in specific curricular domains. Teachers were asked to respond to the following two statements on a Likert scale: 1) Please rate each of the following curricular domains in terms of the amount of time that you incorporated them into your instruction PRIOR to the implementation the VAAP with ASOLs and 2) Please rate each of the following curricular domains in terms of the amount of time that you incorporate them into your instruction SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. The curricular domains were: Self Help, Academics, Behavior Management, Communication, Community Integration (CBI), Vocational Training and Recreation/Leisure. The Likert scale read: 1=Never, 2=Seldom, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Always.

Descriptive data for these items are in Table 21. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the amount of time teachers incorporated all curricular areas into their instruction prior to the VAAP with ASOLs and after the implementations of the VAAP with ASOLs. For two domains, academics and recreation leisure, there was a statistically significant change. There was an increase in incorporating academics in instruction since the ASOLs ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.09$) to prior to the ASOLs ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.189$), $t = 3.238, p < .006$ and there was an decrease in incorporating recreation and leisure in instruction since the ASOLs ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.072$) to prior to the ASOLs (M

= 3.43, $SD = 1.016$), $t = 2.687$, $p < .019$. No significant differences were obtained on the items addressing self-help, behavior management, communication, CBI and vocational domains.

Table 21

The Influence of the VAAP with ASOLs on the Amount of Time Teachers Spend in Each Curricular Domain

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Self Help					
Prior	14	4.07	.357	-1.16	.266
Since	14	3.71			
2. Academics					
Prior	14	3.79	-.714	-3.24	.006*
Since	14	4.50			
3. Behavior Management					
Prior	14	4.43	.143	-.694	.500
Since	14	4.29			
4. Communication					
Prior	14	4.50	.357	-1.79	.096
Since	14	4.14			
5. CBI					
Prior	14	2.79	.214	1.00	.336
Since	14	2.57			
6. Vocational					
Prior	14	3.07	.143	1.47	.165
Since	14	2.93			
7. Recreation/Leisure					
Prior	14	3.43	.357	-2.69	.019*
Since	14	3.07			

*Significant $p < .05$, according to the paired-samples t-test.

Impact of Demographics on Curricular Domains

Analyses were conducted to determine whether demographic variables impacted teachers' use of curricular areas. Due to the small sample size, non-parametric tests were

conducted. The Mann-Whitney U Test was applied to each of the seven curricular areas (prior to the VAAP with ASOLs and since the VAAP with ASOLs) and were measured with seven specific demographics for a total of 49 comparisons. After applying this test, data indicated that indeed there are differences within a few demographics. The results of these tests were conducted at the .05 confidence level and findings reflect the fact that there is a 1 in 20 probability that the difference could have occurred by chance alone. (See tables 22-24).

Table 22

Use of Curricular Domains with Regard to Primary Certification

Item	Sample	M/SD	p value
CBI Since			
MR/SD	13	3.08/1.44	
Other	4	1.00/.000	0.01**

**Significant, $p < .05$, according to the Mann-Whitney U Matched-Pairs, Signed Ranks Test

Table 23

Use of Curricular Domains with Regard to Grade Level

Item	Sample	M/SD	p value
CBI Since			
Elementary	7	1.57/.78	
Secondary	8	3.75/1.39	.009**
Vocational Since			
Elementary	7	1.86/.69	
Secondary	8	4.00/1.41	.011**

**Significant, $p < .05$, according to the Mann-Whitney U Matched-Pairs, Signed Ranks Test

Table 24

Use of Curricular Domains with Regard to Degree of Severity

Item	Sample	<i>M/SD</i>	<i>p</i> value
Self-Help Since			
Mild/Moderate	9	3.11/1.26	
Severe	7	4.60/.89	.037**
Behavior Management Prior			
Mild/Moderate	8	4.00/1.30	
Severe	6	5.00/.000	.022**
Communication Since			
Mild/Moderate	9	3.78/1.30	
Severe	7	5.00/.000	.034**
Vocational Since			
Mild/Moderate	9	2.33/1.19	
Severe	7	4.60/.894	.030**
Recreation/Leisure Since			
Mild/Moderate	9	2.67/.866	
Severe	7	4.20/1.09	.04 **

**Significant, $p < .05$, according to the Mann-Whitney U Matched-Pairs, Signed Ranks Test

Significant differences were obtained on curricular domains when compared with demographic variables either prior to the VAAP with ASOLs or since the VAAP with ASOLs. These variables were: (1) primary certification status (MR/SD and Other) with regard to CBI since the ASOLs, (2) grade level (elementary and secondary) with regard to CBI since ASOLs, the use of the vocational domain since the ASOLs and (3) the degree of severity of the students' disabilities with regard to self help since ASOLs, behavior management prior to ASOLs, communication since ASOLs, the use of the vocational domain since ASOLs and recreation/leisure since ASOLs.

Significant differences were obtained on the curricular domains primary certification status and teachers' use of CBI since the VAAP with ASOLs, there was a significant difference between scores for teachers certified MR/SD $n = 13$, ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.44$) and teachers certified in other categories $n = 4$, ($M = 1.00$, $SD = .000$); $z = 2.56$, $p < .010$. (See Figure 1). That is, teachers certified MR/SD report that they sometimes incorporated CBI Prior to ASOLs; whereas, those certified in other categories never did.

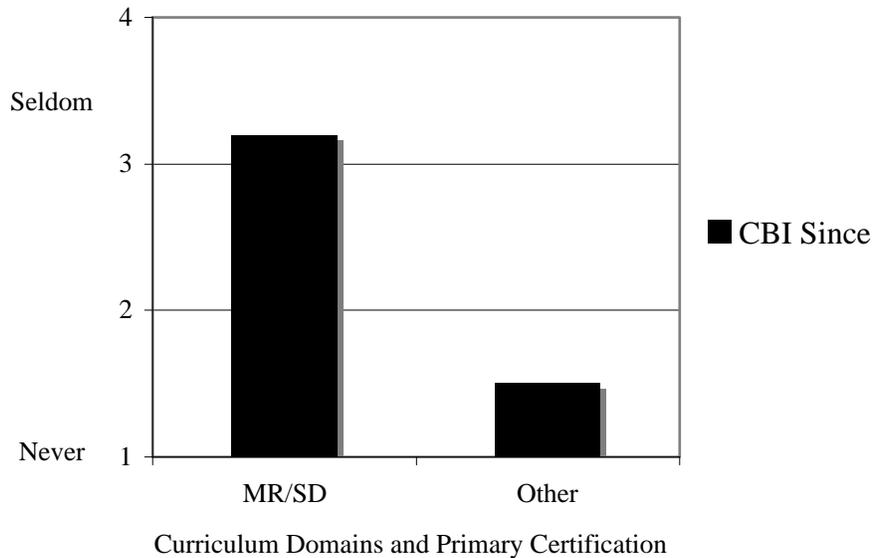


Figure 1. Primary Certification Status and Community Based Instruction (CBI)

Significant differences on use of CBI since VAAP with ASOLS were obtained between scores for elementary teachers $n = 7$, ($M = 1.57$, $SD = .79$) and secondary teachers $n = 8$, ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.39$); $z = 2.61$, $p < .009$. That is, teachers at the elementary level report that they seldom incorporated CBI since ASOLS; whereas, those teaching at the secondary level sometimes to often did. A significant difference was observed on use of the vocational domain since the VAAP with ASOLS between scores for elementary teachers $n = 7$, ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .69$) and secondary teachers $n = 8$, ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.41$); $z = 2.55$, $p < .001$. That is, teachers at the elementary level report that

they never to seldom incorporated the vocational domain since ASOLs; whereas, those teaching at the secondary level often did. (See Figure 2).

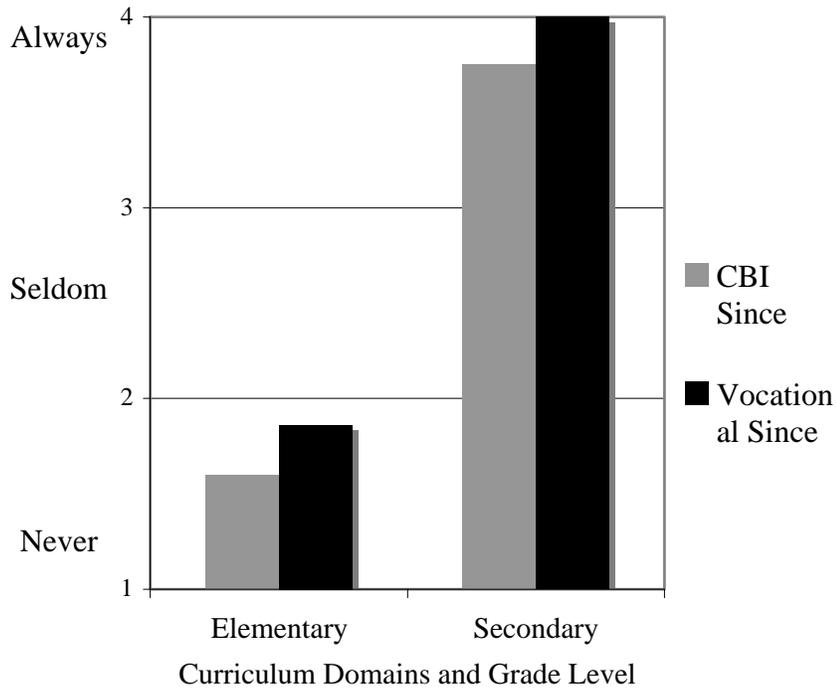


Figure 2. Elementary vs. Secondary Influence on Curricular Domains

Significant differences were obtained on the curricular domains self help since, behavior management prior, communication since, vocational since and recreation and leisure since between scores for teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities and teachers of students with severe disabilities. That is, teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities report differences in the amount of time they spend in curricular domains prior to and since the VAAP with ASOLs than those teaching students

with severe disabilities. A summary of these differences is given in Figure 4 and a discussion of each follows.

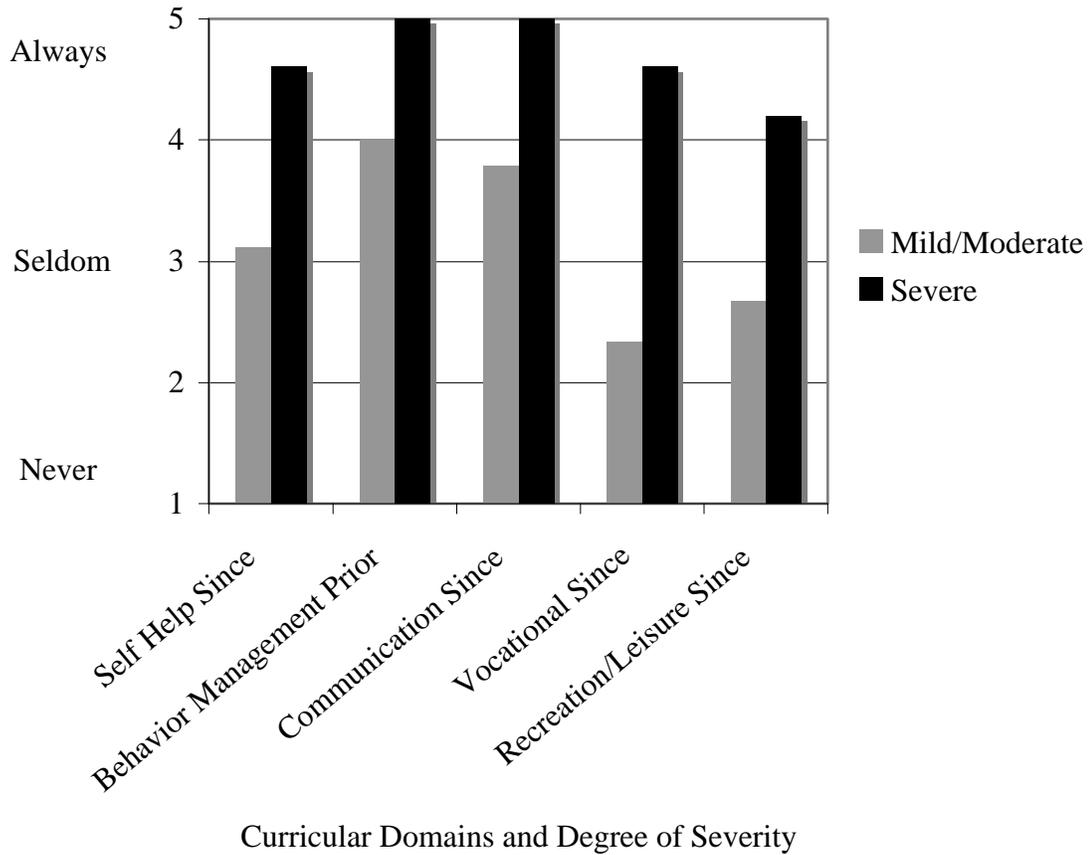


Figure 3. Mild/Moderate vs. Severe Influence on Curricular Domains

Significant differences were obtained between scores of behavior management prior to the VAAP with ASOLs given the *degree of severity* of the students' disability. That is, there was a significant difference between scores for teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities $n = 8$, ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.30$) and teachers of students with severe disabilities level $n = 6$, ($M 5.00$, $SD .000$); $z = -2.29$, $p < .022$. Teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities reported that they often incorporated behavior

management prior to ASOLs; whereas, those teaching students with severe disabilities always did. Significant differences were obtained between scores for communication since the VAAP with ASOLs and degree of severity. There was a significant difference between scores for teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities $n = 9$, ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.30$) and teachers of students with severe disabilities level $n = 7$, ($M = 5.00$, $SD = .000$); $z = -2.12$, $p < .034$. That is, teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities report that they sometimes to often incorporated communication since ASOLs; whereas, those teaching students with severe disabilities always did.

Significant differences were obtained between scores for the vocational domain since the VAAP with ASOLs, given the degree of severity of the students' disability. There was a significant difference between scores for teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities $n = 9$, ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.19$) and teachers of students with severe disabilities level $n = 7$, ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .894$); $z = -2.16$, $p < .030$. That is, teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities report that they seldom to sometimes incorporated the vocational domain since ASOLs; whereas, those teaching students with severe disabilities often to always did.

Significant differences were obtained between scores for the recreation/leisure since the VAAP with ASOLs given the degree of severity of the students' disability. There was a significant difference between scores for teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities $n = 9$, ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .866$) and teachers of students with severe disabilities level $n = 7$, ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.09$); $z = -2.05$, $p < .040$. That is, teachers of students with mild/moderate disabilities report that they seldom to sometimes

incorporated recreation/leisure since ASOLs; whereas, those teaching students with severe disabilities often to always did.

Despite the fact that a total of 85% of those surveyed report that they are not using an established curriculum, teachers are still teaching within the seven curricular domains considered essential. Interviews confirm the survey in that teachers report that they do not use a curriculum but rather, make up their own. Within curricular domain areas, teachers are spending more time on academic instruction and less time in the area of recreation/leisure. Considering that these areas are believed to be essential (and the following information from the interviews reveals this), then, according to what teachers report, the district has done well to adjust curricular focus to meet the needs of the VAAP (increase in academic and decrease in recreation/leisure). The demographic Severity of Disability had the most differences in how teachers are utilizing the curricular domains behavior management, self help, communication, vocational and recreation/leisure. Generally, those teaching students with mild/moderate disabilities seldom to sometimes utilize these domains (supporting the above claim that they are spending more time in academics) whereas those teaching students with more severe disabilities often to always did utilize these domains. However, there were 49 comparisons and 8 resulted in significant differences. The results of these tests were conducted at the .05 confidence level and findings reflect the fact that there is a 1 in 20 probability that the difference could have occurred by chance alone

Qualitative Data on Curriculum

In teacher and staff interviews the question “Do you use a curriculum?” was asked. Only one teacher interviewed said that she used a district-made life skills curriculum. One person did not know if such a curriculum existed, and 7 people said that teachers either make up their own curriculum or do not use one at all. “I make up my own curriculum. I do follow a social skills guideline for one of my classes. I design my own program based on the student’s abilities and interest.” Another person stated “...there was some confusion over whether or not there even was a life skills curriculum...” in the school district. Another teacher responded: “...I am all over the place. The curriculum is the IEP and whatever goal I chose from the VAAP books that I think my students can do.” and another said: “I use my own conglomeration- I don’t know what you would call it.” The following statement from one person sums up the confusion: “Honestly, I question whether there is really a curriculum.”

For the most part, the staff responsible for the VAAP is not in agreement when it comes to a formal curriculum for this population. Some people feel that the IEP is the curriculum, others look for a pre-existing ‘life skills’ curriculum that covers all bases and others use the VAAP and ASOLs. Some attempt to combine existing curricula, the VAAP and the IEP but are frustrated with the overall continuity:

The curriculum is what teachers want to do, whatever they want. This reading book...this off the shelf...Martin Luther King from this little book. ‘I’m going to do whatever.’ That is the curriculum piece. Teachers use a piece meal curriculum. IEP goals are not necessarily tied into in the

classroom. It is sort of just what they came up with for their students...tying it into the VAAP. They just go through a list and pick something and write it down. They just pick without tying it into the bigger picture...

Part of the breakdown falls across the degree of the severity of the students disabilities.

One person stated:

The more disabled the student, the more the IEP impacts the daily instruction because there are just so many functional skills (with) OT PT speech and language, that *have* to be incorporated into the child's day. (For the most severely disabled) it is *much* more about the IEP rather than the ASOLS.

Yet another person reports, "I think that the VAAP is the curriculum... more than the goals on the IEP...But there is not a curriculum for most of the classes..."

In summary, with regard to the curriculum that teachers of students with severe disabilities are using and to what extent are they using it, the data is conflicting. As for ASOLs and their impact on curriculum, the majority of teachers report that they used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs, and the majority of teachers are confident that using a curriculum works with this population. However, 85% of those surveyed report that they are not using an established curriculum. The majority of teachers make up their own curriculum for teaching students with severe disabilities. Teachers in the district have done well to adjust the focus in instructional practices in specific curricular domains to meet the needs of the VAAP (increase in academic and decrease in

recreation/leisure) and remain relatively constant with other domains more specific to a functional living curriculum. (Self-Help, Behavior Management, Communication and Vocational). After talking to the staff responsible for the VAAP, it is apparent that there is no agreement when it comes to the use of a formal curriculum for this population. People refer to the IEP and the ASOLs as the ‘curriculum’ they use.

Research Question 1e: Teaching Practices

How have teaching practices changed? What do teachers do differently now than before this revised version of VAAP? Of the 15 responses to the survey question “I have changed my instructional practices since the implementation of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs)”, a full 73% of those surveyed agree or strongly agree that their instructional practices have changed since the ASOL VAAP. However, looking at individual best practices, the majority of the participants report the use of all of the evidence-based practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs. (Refer to discussion section of question 1b above.) As stated in the previous section, teachers are utilizing two domains in a manner that is different than before the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs: academics and recreation/leisure. Otherwise, they have not changed the time they spend in other curricular areas.

Qualitative Data on Changes in Teaching Practices

Of those interviewed, eight people responded to this question. Two teachers responded that their practices had not changed because they have only taught since the introduction of the VAAP with ASOLs. Five respondents said that their teaching

practices have changed since the introduction of the VAAP with ASOLs. The following themes were derived from the emic categories of those interviewed: increased focus on academics, including an increase in teachers' organization, increase in the types of activities offered to students, improved correlation with general education curriculum, improved assessment strategies and a more "educational" affect in classrooms. Several themes uncover potentially negative changes including a loss of teacher creativity and less attention to functional living skills.

In response to the interview question "Have (your) teaching practices changed since the ASOL VAAP?" the following responses were generated: "Yes it has changed the way I teach ... I am more organized and have more exact activities to do." With regard to assessment, one teacher offered a detailed account of her challenge:

"What I have changed is the way that I assess them at the end...I like the idea that this has challenged me to come up with assessment devices... to come up with some kind of device that is honest and realistic about what they have done but also in a way that others can see what they have done."

The following excerpt from one interview is particularly striking in terms of the respondent's perceptions of the changes in teaching practices as services for children with severe disabilities have moved from a primarily focus on custodial care to more emphasis on 'educational' services.

Definitely. I think it has turned more educational than what it was. Before it was more functionally based because you could pull it from the IEP.

The whole outlook of the MD class, like even the physical appearance of it

has actually changed...there are more books. They are reading books and there are finger puppets during reading time...it's not just about access and moving around, and having switch toys; the rooms are more stimulating. They've moved from looking more therapeutic to more educational and I think that's cool. I see teachers doing more 1on 1 time working on very specific things, more academic type things.

While most of the changes that staff report can be described as 'positive,' some people feel that the changes to teachers' practice have been negative since the implementation of the VAAP ASOLs. This perception is due in part to a perceived loss of teacher creativity in lesson planning and execution, as well as the lesser emphasis for focus on life skills that so many feel are imperative. "I think that a lot of creativity is lost...The VAAP does not offer enough life skills/ functional behavior things our kids need to know. You need to be teaching them grocery skills or time management skills." and "Before it was more of a 'hands-on/functional skills' kind of thing. If you are talking about math skills, you are measuring one cup of flour and that kind of thing. Now it is more general education related." This quote exemplifies the notion that some teachers continue to struggle with how to implement the ASOLs within a functional skills curriculum that enables them to teach life skills and academics. It also indicates the negative feelings of some that the academic skills of the ASOLs are not written in a 'life skills' manner.

Overall, the analysis of data regarding teaching practices and curricular domains suggests that teachers are utilizing domains in a manner that is different than before the

implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. Teachers spent more time in the curricular areas of Self-Help, Behavior Management, Communication, Vocational, and Recreation/Leisure prior to the VAAP with ASOLs, and teachers spend more time only in Academics since the ASOLs. Those interviewed report an increased focus on academics, as well as an increase in teachers' organization, an increase in the types of activities offered to students, improved correlation with general education curriculum, improved assessment strategies and a more "educational" affect in classrooms. Several themes uncover potentially negative changes including a loss of teacher creativity and less attention to functional living skills (that teachers do not like.) Reports indicate that classrooms have moved from looking therapeutic to looking academic.

Research Question 1f: Lesson Planning

Have teachers changed their approach to planning lessons since the VAAP? There was no specific question about lesson planning on the survey. Of the six teachers interviewed, all responded to the question, "Have you changed your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?" Two teachers offered that they do not make lesson plans. While this may be surprising, these teachers offered that their day-to-day routine is such that the schedule dictates the lesson plan, and that the IEP drives the objectives for learning. That is, students arrive at school, they unpack for the day (20 minutes of lesson planning accomplished as individual students work on individual 'unpack' objectives), students eat breakfast (30 minutes of lesson planning accomplished as individual students work on individual self-help objectives) students are toileted (25 minutes of lesson planning accomplished as individual students work on individual self-help objectives),

etc. With the exception of general themes for story time, art activities, cooking activities and other “plan-able” times, some teachers feel that they do not need to map out and plan for each lesson.

With regard to the teachers who responded that ‘Yes, their approach to lesson planning has changed’ the following themes emerged: ASOLs drive planning and force teachers to be more organized, to use different materials (than before ASOLs) and to leave functional skills behind while focusing on the ASOLs. As one respondent noted, “I have to design my lesson plan around the ASOLs so I can get material covered in class. It helps to tailor my instruction and organize my lesson in some way.” and “...it’s (my instruction) more organized when I have to do it and it seems like I use more different materials.” are quotes that illustrate this. One teacher reports that there are two distinct times in her school year, VAAP time and Functional Skills time.

I pretty much wait until middle of December to start doing stuff because that is when we kind of get an idea of what needs to be in the book [the portfolio/collection of evidence] and what we are going to do. They [the state department] change everything around. I get started and it is just full fledge VAAP stuff for three months. That is my lesson plan. So you are working on the functional skills and the IEP and all that. When it is VAAP time it is academics, otherwise it is functional skills.

In summary, interview data reveals that some teachers report that they do not create daily lesson plans. General themes for story time, art activities, cooking activities are planned. However, some teachers feel that they do not need to map out and plan for

each hour of the day. Nevertheless, some teachers report that ‘Yes, their approach to lesson planning has changed’. ASOLs drive planning and force teachers to be more organized, to use different materials (than before ASOLs) and to leave functional skills behind while focusing on the ASOLs.

Research Question Two: Degree of Severity

What is the degree of severity of students taking the VAAP? Is there a breakdown in reported scores by severity? In the survey, the following question was posed: “For the students you teach, please use the following scale to rate the degree of the severity of their disability. 1-Mildly impaired, 5-Moderately impaired and 10-Severely impaired.” Out of 15 responses, 17% felt that their students were mildly impaired, 33% felt their students were moderately impaired, (these were collapsed to 50% mild/moderate) 24% felt their students were severely impaired and 12% indicated that they served students with combined mild, moderate and severe impairments.

As reported earlier, the VA DOE does not require that VAAP scores be broken down according to severity of disability. Similarly, the school district does not keep record of scores as they relate to the degree of severity. However, as gleaned by the interviews, individual teachers are intensely aware of the pass/fail status of their caseloads. There does seem to be a significant divide among staff with regard to mastery of academic content and degree of the severity of the student’s disability.

There is a clear breakdown with regard to the VAAP with ASOLs and concern as to whether or not this is an appropriate assessment for the most severely disabled students. Everyone interviewed (9 out of 9 people) echoed this sentiment. The following

quotes reflect this concern: “I think that there should be some kids that fall into the medically fragile category that should be exempted from the assessment.”, “With those students the medical conditions were so severe that the VAAP...even with adapting it as much as they did, there was great difficulty dealing with it.”, “When you look at a child who is tube fed, has multiple seizures many times a week, which means – how do we know what that means? And he is non-verbal, is not responsive to pain, is nonambulatory, how do you tap into these kids?”, “That very small tier at the bottom that you have done colors, numbers, all of these things for months and months, sometimes years and years and you see no progress. I think that is a big problem (with the VAAP).”, “I can and find things that work with my kids (EMR) but for TMR and MD and SD there are limitations.”, “I would be upset if I had to provide this to my severe disability kid. It doesn’t show the kind of growth they would have. Academic - paper pencil stuff - these kids can’t do that.”, “I would think with the lower group of severe and profound kids it is practically impossible to do some of those ASOLS.” and finally,

My kids are TMR/EMR and nothing below that. The VAAP is ridiculous for anyone below TMR/EMR. I don’t see any reason why children the MD classes- children with a mental ability of 6 months who are catheterized, fed, who do not speak, can’t follow things....I watch our MD teacher showing these kids pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln looking for some flicker of recognition- and *they don’t even know the names of their brothers and sisters!* How ridiculous is *that*? It can only be a group of people that are *so* obsessive and *so* distanced from the reality

that they have *no* sense of what they are talking about. They *do not know* how limited these children are! I mean, some of these children are receiving custodial care and you need to stand there with a picture of George Washington. I mean isn't that ludicrous?!

In summary, as stated in the results to the main question, teachers reported on the survey that the numbers of students they serve by severity level were mild/moderate - 50%, severe - 22% and 18% combined mild/moderate/severe. However, as gleaned by the interviews, individual teachers are intensely aware of the pass/fail status of their caseloads. Staff appear to have differing opinions regarding mastery of academic content and severity level of the student's disability.

Research Question Three: Staff Perceptions

What are teachers', administrators' and related service providers' feelings/perceptions of the VAAP? Open-ended questions on the survey and individual questions in the interviews offered an opportunity for teachers and staff to write and tell about their feelings and perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs. As before, both the anecdotal reports from the survey and the interview data were coded and reviewed for relevant themes. Five main themes emerged from the responses, including: (a) general positive and negative feelings (b) professional growth and responsibilities (c) curriculum, instruction and assessment for this population (d) issues with the concept of 'mastery' for this population (e) the efficacy of the ASOLs and the degree of the severity of the student's impairment. (Quotes presented here reflect the feelings of teachers, related service staff and those responsible for the oversight of the VAAP in this school district.

In order to protect anonymity, there will be no indication of the role of the person making the quote.)

Negative Perceptions

Three questions were asked of each the survey participants and those interviewed. These questions were *What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?*, *What do you not like about the ASOL VAAP?* and *If you could, how might you change the ASOL VAAP?* While some teachers touted positive aspects of the assessment, there was much more negative perception of the VAAP than positive feelings. This is based on overall content taken from emic and etic categories (themes) as well as the word count for each question. Positive vs. negative feelings fell across a continuum related to the degree of severity of individual student's disabilities (mild, moderate and severely disabled students.) The mean word count for each question was as follows: a) What do you like about the VAAP? = 23, b) What do you NOT like about the VAAP? = 48 and c) What would you change about the VAAP? = 43. (See table 25)

Table 25

Word Count Means, Medians, Modes, Ranges and Totals

	What do you like about the VAAP?	What do you NOT like about the VAAP?	What would you change about the VAAP?
Number of responses	16	16	14
Mean	23	48	43
Median	21	34	19
Mode	7	27	5
Range	2-68	1-196	5-141
Total Number of Words	378	773	605

Sixteen out of 18 participants responded to the survey question *What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?* The total word count for the responses to this question was 378, with a word count range from 2 to 68 and the *M* number of words = 23. The themes of the responses ranged from “ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!” to pleasure with having an assessment system for students with significant disabilities. Several teachers’ responses to this question dealt with the overall philosophy of the VAAP. One respondent noted, “It is a wonderful thing. It has made the MR child more a part of the school in that the administration and other teachers recognize that we have standards, too.” Themes for answers to this question fell into three main categories: curriculum and instruction, assessment, and professional growth (with regard to teacher practices).

To the survey question *What do you NOT like about the ASOL VAAP?* there were 16 responses (2 were left blank). The total word count for the responses to this survey question was 773 with a word count range from 1 to 196 and the *M* number of words = 48. This word count is more than two times the amount written for the previous question. The responses ranged from “EVERYTHING!” to specific issues with this assessment system for students with severe disabilities. There were several themes that emerged from the written responses; however, one major theme deals with concerns about the degree of severity of the student’s disability as it relates to the relevance of academic skill instruction, their IEP and the curriculum. Other themes included the concept of “mastery” and the time commitment.

To the survey question *If you could, how might you change the ASOL VAAP?* there were 14 responses (4 were left blank) and the total word count for the responses to this survey question was 605 with a word count range from 5 to 141 and the *M* number of words = 43. Respondents provided good suggestions for realistic changes to the VAAP. Themes for this question fell into three main categories: a different assessment for the lowest level student, improving the ASOLs and issues with the concept of ‘mastery’ for this population. Responses also addressed the workload for teachers, with the suggestion to alter the more tedious aspects of VAAP paperwork.

Participants wrote more about what they did not like and what they would change about the VAAP with ASOLs. The word counts for the last 2 questions were 773 and 605 respectively vs. the total word count for what people like about the VAAP with ASOLs with a total word count 378. Although there was a range of number of words written

across individuals, the mean number of words was lower for what teachers like about the VAAP (23) and higher for what they did not like (48) and what they would change (43). (See Figure 4). Overall perceptions are that while there are some benefits to this assessment process, respondents have concerns with specific issues. Next, these issues will be addressed in more detail.

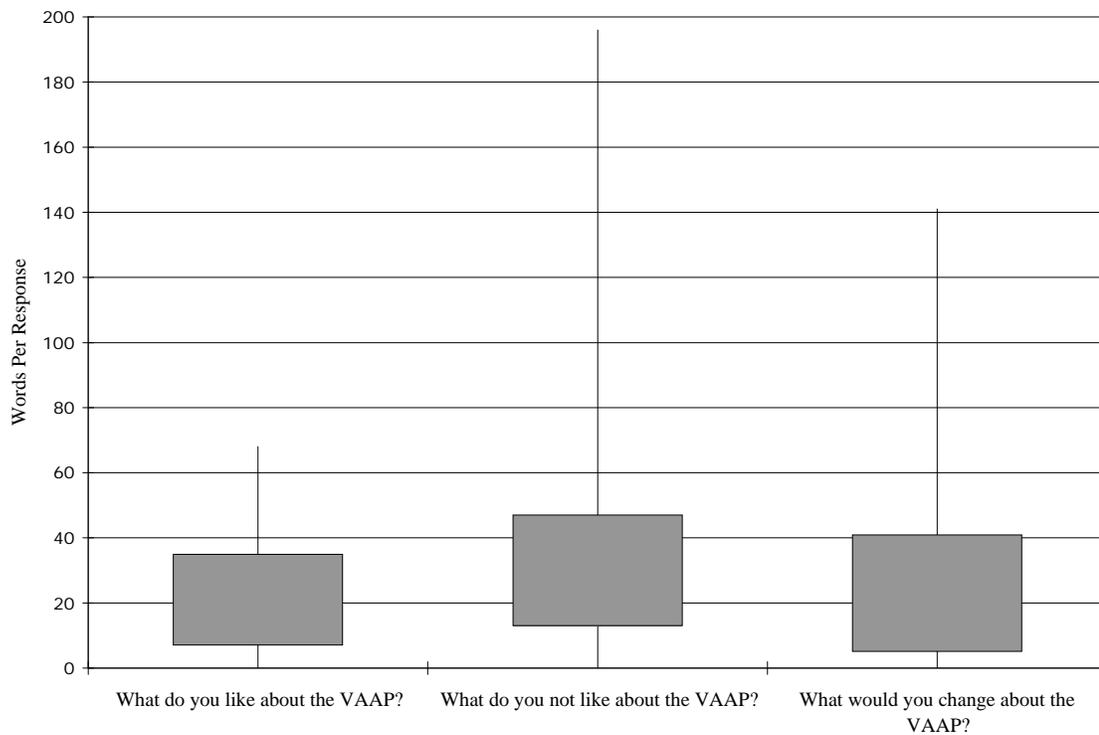


Figure 4. Word Count From Teachers Responses to Open-ended Survey Questions

Teachers' Professional Growth and Responsibilities

While many teachers expressed a positive sense of professional growth since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, with regard to their practice, many are

frustrated with the responsibility of data collection and the time required to compile portfolios. Examples of positive perception of professional growth include: “It [the VAAP with ASOLs] has caused me to try to teach colors and patterns to my students, 3 years ago, and I probably would not have worked so hard at it.”, “I feel it gives structure to my lessons.”, “I appreciate anything that gives me ideas of activities to do with my students.” and “...the ASOLs pushed us as teachers to incorporate more academic and challenging material.”

Many also spoke directly to the fact that they have grown with regard to other teaching practices. As one teacher said: “This has been a good experience for me to learn about teaching this population...” Teachers have improved in their ability to complete the VAAP. Their skills in collecting the evidence and compiling the portfolios have improved. This may be that the teachers’ skill base has improved and/or that the VAAP did not change extensively in the last two years. One interviewee said “The first time I did it I didn’t know what I was doing... It makes more sense now [that] there are clear definitions of what’s expected.”

Finally, there is simply an overall feeling that improved instruction is taking place in most (but not all) classrooms. As one person said: “I like that most of the teachers are doing pretty awesome things... the ASOLS force teachers to challenge kids in ways they were not being challenged so that is a good thing.” and “It is not a perfect system, especially for kids with more severe disabilities, but for kids I teach, [EMR] it’s a good way to assess them. They would experience failure if they had to take the SOLs.” A recurrent theme was the degree of the severity of the disability.

While most of the previous data suggests positive feelings towards some aspects of the ASOL VAAP, half of the responses referred to time constraints, either in terms of the time necessary for the teacher to collect the required evidence and to compile the portfolios, or the time it takes for students with mental retardation to *master* academic content. With regard to time necessary for collecting evidence and compiling portfolios, some teachers are overwhelmed with the burden. Some feel that the collections of evidence are a reflection of the teacher's ability to compile the data in manner that the scorers will like vs. a true measure of a child's ability. "...it is extremely time consuming and it is like a judgment of the teachers. The VAAP is grading the teacher as much as the student.", "I feel it is a lot of work for each student. It is difficult to cover all the ASOLs, especially, in math. We are not given enough time in the year to complete ASOLs...", "Putting it together is time consuming, which can take away from classroom planning, IEPs and other necessary paperwork..." One teacher reported that, in one school year, she alone completed the VAAP for 9 different students in all four content areas.

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment for this Population

With regard to curriculum and instruction, some people directly addressed the fact that the VAAP provides curricular support and improved structure to instruction and classrooms. "It offers a standard for low-incidence disability students to receive and be guaranteed instruction in a variety of areas.", "It gives a curriculum to work on." and "I think that having specific academic goals to focus on can help provide a student with a solid foundation for academics." are quotes that illustrate this.

In terms of teachers' instructional practices, many of those interviewed spoke about an improvement with regard to curricular focus.

I have found for many teachers they are amazingly creative- they have taken the ASOLs and the life skills curriculum and have combined them through the CBI [community based intervention] - there is a lot of that at the middle schools. At the elementary level, they were always good at teaching the curriculum. One reason is that they have access to materials at the kids' grade and functioning level- more than the middle schools and high schools teachers. At the high schools, [with] the real severely disabled kids, they are trying to combine the functional skills but it is very difficult- especially with any abstract concepts.

With regard to assessment, some people were pleased with the fact that the VAAP allows for a portfolio assessment for this population. People who responded "[I like] Being held accountable for growth in academic skills [with] portfolio type data" and "I like using a portfolio approach." echo the sentiments of others who like the portfolio as a means of assessment.

Other responses spoke directly to increased information for parents. For example, several people made statements similar to the following: "The parents like the end product [the portfolio]." and "It shows parents the work we have done over the year." The VAAP requires teachers to participate in the statewide accountability system. This assessment makes the teachers and their students feel like they are more a part of the

school community. “Their scores [the VAAP scores] impact the school’s scores - I like all of that.”

Interview responses also highlighted the area of assessment. As with the survey, respondents agreed that being part of the accountability system is worthwhile, and that they like having a portfolio of student work with evidence of student learning. One teacher did have positive things to say about the challenges she has faced with regard to how we assess:

I like the idea that this has challenged me to come up with assessment devices. I try to do as much as I can to assess with paper and pencil (the scorers really like that) and so I try to do allot of that in a way that is meaningful. It has challenged me to think in broader ways, not only I understand that they have performed this, but how do I devise or come up with some kind of device that is honest and realistic about what they have done but also in a way that other can see what they have done.

However, as the VAAP is currently administered, a student may not repeat an ASOL if that student has successfully passed for a given content area. Some teachers had trouble with this fact, as illustrated by this quote: “...if a student fails a subtest he or she should be allowed to repeat that skill the following year.” and “If a child does not master a specific goal, even if it is at the most basic first level, that goal can not be revisited for the next year’s VAAP, which may set the child up for failure...”

Issues with the Concept of ‘Mastery’ for this Population

Closely related to the degree of the severity of the student's impairment is the notion of mastery of academic content. Issues with memory and retention of information within this population are a primary characteristic of students with severe disabilities. Most school districts in Virginia use criteria for eligibility in the Severe Disabilities category that encompasses the fact that students maintain, "severely impaired cognitive abilities" (taken from the Overview of disabilities for Fairfax County Public Schools <http://www.fcps.edu/ss/SpecialEd/speddisb.htm>) including "...problems with attention, perception, memory and problem solving" (Hume, 2008). Research has documented that some children with severe cognitive disabilities have significant issues with memory and retention (Henry 2008).

For those participating in this research, the concept of mastering academic content proved to be a concern. As one person wrote: for students with severe disabilities, they "...do not progress at the same pace as... indicated by the ASOLs." Yet another teacher wrote, "I would change the content of some of the ASOLs to better reflect the learning rate and depth of MR students." Yet another teacher interviewed said "...but will they (the students) remember what they did in a year and will they use it? Probably not." In an interview, one teacher spoke directly and at length about what does it mean to 'master' an ASOL:

One thing I really don't like is what they consider 'mastering' the ASOL. My understanding is that (it only takes) one performance of that goal correctly...-you *can* document that *one* correct response- but sometimes that was just a shot in the dark. To me that is not mastery- the kids got

lucky that day and I happened to be standing there taking notes and they got it right. There just has to be a different, more realistic criteria for what it takes to reach a goal and get it accomplished. The one shot deal or the 2 out of 3 is absolutely meaningless.

Another teacher echoed this sentiment and adds a specific story to illustrate the issue. She also speaks to the pressure teachers feel when documenting a behavior that takes place but does not necessarily mean that a child has ‘mastered’ the content:

The thing that I have a problem with is that I can not say that they (the students) have comprehension of this. So what I am doing is I am signing a paper (affidavit) saying that I am not manipulating data but by the virtue of the fact that I am doing the data at all and it is a 50/50 chance that they going to make it. I *am* manipulating data. So I am signing that and I am lying (*big sigh, tears in eyes*). You know- I had a child pass math last year and had to count 1-10. She could do 1-3 with me doing a behavior mod. ‘You push these things – 2 blocks + 1 block to make it 3 blocks and I give you an M and M or a fruit loop.’ That was all she wanted. By doing that behavior, (she had no comprehension of it) she passed it! The data *is* manipulated and that 50% becomes a 100%. It is very frustrating because no matter what we do it does not make any difference but the data might show mastery. Data does not tell the whole story. Data might show that on one day he had a good guess- he passed. But he did not. I’m not allowed to write that the child has no comprehension of this. As a teacher

we can tell- we are *trained* to tell- and even if they are disabled you know that they do not know because you see them everyday and the information does not matter to their lives.

The Efficacy of the ASOLs and the Degree of the Severity of the Student's Impairment

A primary theme that emerged is that staff's perceptions of the efficacy of this assessment process seem to be directly related to the degree of the severity of disability of the students. That is, according to those responsible for teaching and assessing these students, there is a relationship between the appropriateness of the ASOLs and the degree of the severity of the disability for each student taking the assessment. The relationship includes concerns with the IEP, improving the ASOLs to reflect more realistic goals for the lowest ability student, the relevance of intense academic skill instruction, and issues with the concept of 'mastery' for this population.

As one interviewee said: "You are putting the knife to the neck of the teacher to require them to do something that is impossible for the ability of the student..." Every interviewee ($N=9$), and 11 out of the 16 survey responses, spoke specifically to the degree of severity of the student's disability and the appropriateness of the VAAP. Every interviewee, and nine out of the 16 survey responses, questioned the relevance of academic goals for students in a life skills program. These two themes are closely related. As many people express their negative feelings about the VAAP for the most severely disabled students, the concerns primarily stem from experiences with students who are medically fragile and multiply disabled (including students with significant behavioral issues.)

Examples for this concern abound. Respondents point out that for children who are so cognitively impaired that they do not recognize pictures of family members or understand ‘cause and effect’, that mastering even the lowest ASOL is nearly impossible. “Parents and children don’t need to know if they can distinguish between a solid, liquid, and gas – they just want their kids to be able to button their shirt or make a PB & J on their own.”, “...it is not fair to make students with severe disabilities to complete the VAAP, knowing that if they can barely lift their head or make a consistent eye gaze...”, “It is difficult to conform to specific ASOLs when a student is severely disabled where they struggle with cause and effect and expect them to be able to sort or turn pages in a book.”

As long as we *have* to test, the VAAP for the majority of the kids it is pretty appropriate but for some kids- they *absolutely* cannot access those skills, those standards, and it is *not* appropriate and we need the option to say that it is *not* appropriate and to say that we can test all kids is not living in the real world!

Similarly, some teachers expressed their belief that the ASOLs are irrelevant, in the long run, to the lives of children with severe disabilities. Responses to the survey ($N = 16$) and those interviewed ($N = 9$) offer the following: “...some [ASOLs] are so out of the ordinary that children with MR would never use such information (eg: art, music literature, Ellington, Hughes and O’Keefe)... it is difficult for many in this population to understand those kinds of ‘abstracts’.”, “It takes time from my Life Skills Curriculum. I am now testing for things that have no relevance or meaning for my students.”, “For

many of these children it is a total waste of time trying to teach them things which have no meaning to them and they will never use again in their lives.”, “The ASOL VAAP takes time away from teaching significantly cognitively impaired children what they need to succeed in the real world: life skills.” One teacher said,

There are still things in it that are not necessary for our kids to have to know. I think that there are other things that would be better for them to have to know. ‘Christopher Columbus’ and stuff like that- I think my students have no reason to know outside of school when they grow up and get a job at Wal-Mart.

While the degree of severity of the child’s disability and the relevance of the assessment to the child’s life were the biggest concerns, others mentioned several other issues, including the lack of focus on the IEP. “...the success of the student with their individual IEP goals should be enough of an assessment for anyone. The only people who want this information are people who work in the government who want to see figures.” With regard to the IEP, comments focused on the lack of time to devote to both ASOLs and the IEP. “It does not leave time for IEP driven goals, which should be prioritized as IEPs address individual needs.”

Perhaps the most striking and consistent theme relates to the notion of a different assessment for students with the lowest ability level. While three responses suggested a total exemption for the most severely disabled students, other suggestions included: “Develop another VAAP type testing that (we) would administer to lower functioning students.” Four teachers suggested an entirely different assessment and four teachers

offered lowering the overall academic level (to pre-k and below), while incorporating other skill areas such as communication for the most severely disabled. “I would include lower level skills and I would include other reporting categories.” One person felt that the IEP should be the backbone of the assessment. “I think it should be based on students’ IEP goals...their needs.” Similarly, one person stated during an interview

I think that with the most severe kids, we *have* to put forth the effort to do ASOLs. But, when it gets to the point that when students react negatively when that curriculum is put upon them- they push away, do inappropriate behavior like screaming, yelling, biting... then we *have* to look at the appropriateness of the IEP vs. the VAAP.

Nearly all the responses suggested improving the actual ASOLs. Ideas included changing the ASOLs to reflect life skills, to include communication skills, to reduce the number required for each reporting category, to increase the number of ASOLs in reading and to reduce in the numbers required in math, science and social studies and to simplify the process. Quotes that support this include: “I would take out the social studies and science. I would make the math and reading more functional and less academic.” and “If you have to do it, limit it in scope. Why do kids have to do 15 content areas per child?”

My suggestion is to cut back on science and social studies to maybe 2 goals apiece ...make 4 goals for Language Arts, written language and communication, and these could be at the discretion of the teacher or the IEP team. These are things that could really be directed towards *this* child’s needs. There are very few children that fall in the VAAP category

that do not have language and communication deficits. *These* are the skills that are going to impact their life more than knowing ... other things.

The degree of severity of the child's disability interacts with negative feelings concerning the VAAP as demonstrated by this interview response:

They (my feelings) have (changed over time) - particularly with the most severely disabled kids and those who are medically challenged- it is just really really difficult. It goes back to those kids- their day is so IEP driven- they get OT, PT they are being changed, they have feeding tubes or to be hand fed, (they have) bathroom issues. All that takes a huge amount of time. Identifying things like the front cover, back cover and title page of a book is *really not appropriate*.

All respondents, including those who responded to the survey and the interview, expressed concerns regarding the ASOL VAAP. For the most part, these feelings dealt not as much with the assessment itself but rather the degree of severity of the child's disability and the relevance of academics in the lives of those with the most profound disabilities. "I am more convinced as time goes on that this is inappropriate. At first I was open and really tried- now I am firmly against it." Finally, one person questioned the mandate:

People who make decisions at the state and national level have no understanding that teachers are spinning their wheels for something that has no bearing on the life of the child. If you are trying to not leave a

child behind, these children are being left behind because we are not focusing on what they need!

Data Triangulation

This mixed methods study researched a current topic in special education (the effects of the VAAP and its new ASOLs in one school district in Virginia) as it occurred in real time. Research in the social sciences is a complex endeavor because truth is often difficult to quantify (Nardi, 2006; Robson, 1993). As Robson (1993) stated: "...one of the challenges about carrying out investigations in the 'real world' is in seeking to say something sensible about something a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally 'messy' situation." (p. 3). Therefore, in order to gain a deeper and less biased understanding of these phenomena, triangulation of data was employed which determine validity by using multiple methods and data sources to cross check data. The three sources of data in this study included survey, interviews and records review. These three sources provided data from "...a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 75).

For data triangulation survey questions were compared with interview questions for confirmations and disconfirmations among variables. This was done primarily by visual review of data. For example, with regard to teachers use of a functional age appropriate curriculum, responses to the survey item: "With regard to the use of a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum for your students: I teach from an established curriculum. Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree" and the

survey item “With regard to teaching from a curriculum please give the most accurate response. I teach from: A pre-existing curriculum, A district-made curriculum A teacher-made curriculum, I do not use a curriculum or Other.” were compared to each other and then to the interview questions: “Do you use a curriculum? If so, what type?” and “Describe how the curriculum influences your planning and instruction.” The participant responses were then compared with the review of staff development in this district as it relates to the VAAP.

In this instance, triangulation of data confirms that there is little consistency with regard to the adaptation and implementation of a clearly established curriculum for students with severe disabilities. The results from the survey show that the majority of teachers reported that they used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs, and the majority of teachers are confident that using a curriculum works with this population; however, the majority of teachers (85%) report that they are not using an established curriculum and 72% make up their own. In subsequent interviews, the majority of teachers reported that they make up their own curriculum and there is no agreement when it comes to the use of a formal curriculum for this population. The records review of staff development with regard to support for the VAAP also suggests that there is no formal instruction on the part of the district with regard to curricular implementation. The triangulation of the three data sources supports the findings of this study that there is no agreement when it comes to the use of a formal curriculum for this population in this district. Other survey items, interview questions and records review data were similarly compared

5. Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine the effects of the VAAP with ASOLs, from the perspectives of school personnel, on instruction of students with severe disabilities in one school district. The specific components of the study included a review of “evidenced based best practices,” student scores on the VAAP, current curricula, specific teaching practices, and the effect of the degree of severity of the students taking the VAAP. Finally, the study considered teachers’ and staff’s feelings and perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs and its effect on instructional practices in one school district in Virginia. This chapter addresses the findings of this study.

The overall findings of this study include the following: (a) a need for more expertise and better staff development in the area of instruction for students with severe disabilities; (b) the VAAP with ASOLs has had a minimal effect on teachers’ use of evidenced based best practices; (c) there is little evidence that the results of the VAAP inform instructional practices for students with severe disabilities; (d) there is little consistency with regard to the adaptation and implementation of a clearly established curriculum for students with severe disabilities; (e) the VAAP with ASOLs has had little impact on the majority of teaching practices for students with severe disabilities; (f) there is disagreement among staff regarding perceptions of the appropriateness of mastery of academic content with the degree of the severity of the student’s disability, and (g) the

staff maintains both positive and negative perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs. Each is discussed separately next.

Expertise and Staff Development

Overall, the demographics from the survey suggest that the teachers in this school district have relatively high levels of teaching experience (61% over 10 years) and the education level of this group is generally high (61% MA or MA plus 15 credits). Teachers report that their instruction primarily takes place in self-contained (50%) and combined self-contained-inclusive settings (44%) with the majority of staff actively involved in instruction over 75% of the day. Worthy of note is that 90% of teachers surveyed hold additional endorsements (that is 90% of teachers hold two or more endorsements); however, only 17% are in the area of SD. Of critical note: no one reported a primary certification of SD, implying that the district may not have any 'experts' in the specialized area of instruction for students with severe disabilities.

Recently, Virginia listed Special Education as the number one critical shortage area for schools in the Commonwealth (<http://www.doetest.vi.virginia.gov/VDOE/newvdoe/critical-shortage-areas2008-2009.pdf>). In a time of a national shortage of teachers in special education and high stakes accountability, it is all the more imperative that we adjust our systems to acquire and retain well-trained personnel. To this end, Virginia has recently adopted new licensure regulations effective September 21, 2007 (Licensure Regulations for School Personnel, 8VAC20-22-530).

In addition to certification for visual impairment and hearing impairment, there will be two primary curricula for teachers to become certified in special education: Certification in “Students with disabilities accessing the general curriculum” and certification in “Students with disabilities accessing the adapted curriculum”. According to experts “The old severe disabilities licensure program has changed very little.” (Behrmann, 2008). That is, the coursework for K-12 teacher licensure in SD has made few changes with relatively the same number of credits and courses required. However, the designated title has changed. Teachers who were previously endorsed in SD and MR now will be endorsed via the title “Adapted Curriculum” while new teachers previously endorsed in LD, ED and MR will be endorsed via the title “General Curriculum” This change highlights the degree to which Virginia and other states have fully embraced the general curriculum and access to it for all. In addition, this may be interpreted as providing licensure covering larger domains of knowledge while reducing the number of licensure areas.

Given the lack of teachers endorsed SD in the district, the recent reformatting of state licensure remains yet another change in an evolving field. The addition of required mastery of academic content in a field primarily trained in functional skills is a significant change for teachers in the field (Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007). All the more, teachers need support via staff development to remain current in best practices for this highly specialized population.

The records review conducted for this study indicated that there is relatively little staff development relating to the VAAP. Special Education teachers are able to take any

staff development module they prefer or that they feel will support their own professional development and learning needs. However, in previous years, there has been a lack of staff development in areas that would support specialized instruction for students with significant disabilities in this school district. Data in this study revealed that 17 % of teachers were certified in SD. Since fewer teachers are certified in SD and many teachers hold alternative certificates, there is an even greater need for staff development in best practices for instruction of children with severe disabilities.

The *VAAP Implementation Manual 2007-8* specifically states the need for staff development. “In addition to being familiar with VAAP requirements and procedures, Directors of Special Education must identify and address the professional development and support needs of special education and related services personnel involved in the VAAP collections of evidence” (VA DOE, p.3). The notion of increased training is supported in the literature. Browder, et al. (2005) noted an increase in the alternate assessment scores of students whose teachers took part in staff development relating to instructional practices for children with severe disabilities. Similarly, Browder et al. (2005) noted an improvement in student performance of their IEP objectives as teachers participated in additional training. With relatively few teachers primarily endorsed in severe disabilities, dramatic changes in expectations of teachers and students on alternate assessments, significant shifts in curriculum and instruction, clearly, ongoing, innovative and up-to-date training for current teachers is essential.

The Use of Evidenced Based Best Practices

The findings of this study indicate that, overall, the VAAP with ASOLs has not significantly impacted teachers' use of best practices. While there are slight differences in the use of each of the seven practices measured, overall teachers reported that they have not greatly changed the use of evidence-based practices from before or after the VAAP with ASOLs including the analysis of seven specific demographics that were used for comparison. With regard to parental involvement, overall, the VAAP with ASOLs has not had a significant impact on teacher's practice of involving parents in their student's education. In summary, of the 49 areas comparing the VAAP with ASOLs influence over best practices and specific demographics, there were no significant differences. Therefore, it can be asserted that the VAAP with ASOLs has not had a major impact on teachers' use of best practices.

On the survey there were 7 opportunities to respond on "The VAAP with ASOLs has *influenced* my use of (insert best practice)." With a range of 1 to 5 for responses with 1= Strongly Agree and 5= Strongly Disagree. Of the 7 areas of comparison, the mean scores ranged from 2.92 - 3.58 thus implying a degree of neutrality among staff with regard to the effects of the VAAP with ASOLs' impact on best practices. That is, teachers remain relatively neutral to its impact on instructional best practices. As described in the Non-regulatory Guidance on Alternate Achievement Standards for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities statement provided by the USDOE, "...including students with disabilities in State assessments and accountability systems is critical..."(p.8). Then, the fact that teachers in this district are neutral to this

assessment's effect on teaching is interesting. The fact that the VAAP has not significantly impacted teachers' use of best practices implies that the VAAP has not caused major shifts in teaching in this district.

Instructional Practices in Relation to VAAP Scores

The DOE website only provides individual division results on the VAAP for the school years 2004-5 and 2005-6. It does not provide significant information with regard to the VAAPs cumulative scores or a breakdown of scores by the severity of disability. However, it would be helpful to have results for each school year broken down by disability. Because of this, no definitive conclusions may be drawn from the posted DOE scores about the disability level of the students and their ability to pass the VAAP. Similarly, there is no data available for school years 2001-04 or 2006-08 (whereas SOL data is widely available to the public, individual districts, schools and teachers).

The National School Board Association (NSBA) agrees that using data to drive instructional practices is critical. An issue brief on NCLB the NSBA states that data should be made available to teachers in a timely fashion so accountability measures can move forward.

(<http://www.nsba.org/MainMenu/Governance/DataDrivenDecisionMaking/DataDrivenDecisionmaking.aspx>) As determined by this study in one school district, VAAP scores are not being reported in a timely fashion (or often not at all) so there is less chance for test results to drive instruction. This lack of score reporting is in direct contradiction to what professionals know about the use of data to inform instructional practice.

Information is the key to holding schools accountable for improved performance every year among every student group...Data is our best management tool. I often say that what gets measured gets done. If we know the contours of the problem, and who is affected, we can put forward a solution. Teachers can adjust lesson plans. Administrators can evaluate curricula. Data can inform decision-making. (Spellings, 2007)

Another significant aspect of score reporting and assessment is the notion that assessment is used to gain information in order to make decisions (Browder, 1991). While there are many reasons for assessment, alternate assessments are used to assist professionals when making decisions about curriculum and development and student evaluation. "...professionals must gather information on the learner's needs in order to decide what to teach... (and) to decide when to change instructional strategies to improve student performance" (Browder, 1991, p.2). Similarly, alternate assessments are used to evaluate students with severe disabilities relative to the general curriculum and the results provide educators with needed information for individual students (Brown, et al. 2006). This means that alternate assessments should provide critical information with regard to students' current functioning, be utilized for future programming, and that timely and accurate reporting of assessment results is important for quality programming.

In order for data to be most helpful for making instructional decisions, it is important to receive data in timely manner. Since VAAP scores are unavailable for the first three years of the assessment and that the most recent years are not available raises questions. Will teachers be able to make important instruction decisions in the absence of

the data? Scores need to be reported to teachers and parents in a timely manner. This will assist the district in terms of planning for staff development and proceeding with curriculum alignment and it will assist teachers in terms of changing instructional strategies and student evaluation in order to best meet the needs of the child. “Because assessment outcomes influence so many aspects of a student’s educational experience, the development of an assessment process that produces meaningful and usable results is critical” (Brown, Snell, & Lehr , 2006, p 67).

Adaptation and Implementation of Curriculum

With regard to the curriculum used by teachers of students with severe disabilities in this school district, as well as to the extent to which they are using it, the data from this study is conflicting. In regard to the implementation of ASOLs and subsequent impact on curriculum, the majority of teachers reported that they used a curriculum both before and after the ASOLs, and the majority of teachers are confident that using a curriculum works with this population. However, 85% of those surveyed reported that they are not using an established curriculum. The majority of teachers reported that they make up their own curriculum for teaching students with severe disabilities. As determined by this study, teachers in the district have adjusted the focus in instructional practices in specific curricular domains to meet the needs of the VAAP with increases in time spent on academic instruction and decreases in recreation/leisure time and remain relatively constant with other domains more specific to a functional living curriculum. That is, they are relatively constant with regard to the use of the curricular domains of self-help, behavior management, communication and vocational skills. From the results of this

study there is no agreement when it comes to the use of a formal curriculum for this population. For example, many teachers refer to the IEP as the ‘curriculum’ they use, others consider the ASOLs the ‘curriculum’ to follow while a one teacher referred to a district made curriculum as her resource.

As reviewed in Chapter two, a functional and age-appropriate curriculum for students with severe disabilities emphasizes skills that are learned in naturally occurring environments, and that are chronologically age-appropriate. Skills should be taught in a natural context, closely mirroring authentic environments (Demchak, 2002). The driving notion for this focus is that students with severe disabilities should be functional in their homes and communities and should use instructional materials that are commensurate with the age of the student. In the context of the findings of this study, the teachers of this school district understand the need for participation in the general curriculum; however, they are struggling with the fact that doing so in meaningful ways is difficult. This is corroborated by the report of Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade-Little & Snell (2006) who found that while teaching academics is critical “...it is still necessary for these students to learn these skills in functional and meaningful contexts” (p 499).

Staff in this district have concerns regarding curriculum. One of the major issues requiring consensus is: what is a curriculum? This issue is echoed in the literature to date: “The term ‘curriculum’ often brings to mind a purchased package of materials, objectives and activities that guides the teacher’s instruction” (Alper, 2003, p 75). However, uncertainty remains as to what is meant by the term “curriculum” in general and, more specifically, what constitutes a curriculum for students with severe disabilities. Some

view curriculum as "...a theoretical model reflecting beliefs about an appropriate scope and sequence of education" (Alper, 2003, p 75). Moreover, Brown, Snell & Lehr, (2006) believe that "Rather than the traditional academic or developmental categories, curriculum domains are used because they (a) represent the major life areas, (b) lead to the selection of practical skills, and (c) emphasize the functional goals of self-sufficiency" (p 87). Finally, Browder et al. (2004) defines curriculum as "The content of instruction" (p 211) and offers that it remains one of the most controversial areas in education. Browder et al. (2004) believe that this is due, in part, to the fact that the focus of school curriculum changes with changing societal perspectives. The current accountability movement has had a strong influence on curriculum, especially in special education.

Issues remain with curricular domains and approaches. Curricular shifts over the past three decades have occurred within the field of severe disabilities. The first trend was the developmental (Brown, et al. 1976) and functional skills model (Browder et al., 2004; Nietupski et al., 1997). Next, the field moved to the general curriculum combined with the functional skills model (Browder et al, 2004). Currently, states are aligning alternate assessments with general curriculum. Browder et al. (2004) believes that, deciding which curriculum, academic or functional, remains an interesting question since the increased use of alternate assessments for accountability purposes. This study found from its surveys and interviews in one school district that the use of which curricular model (functional or academic) for students with severe disabilities remains unclear.

In this study, teachers' use of curriculum varies. Historically, special education students have used a variety of alternate curricula. For students with severe disabilities, the "...curriculum maybe outlined in a guide (e.g. a functional curriculum guide) or created through the IEP... an alternate curriculum has separate content and goals from the general curriculum" (Browder et al. 2004, p. 219). To add to the confusion, even the experts have not given a definitive approach to curriculum for this population. Browder et al. (2004), lists popular approaches to alternate curriculums including 1) creating a matrix embedding IEP goals into the general curriculum 2) focus on academic content but requiring different expectations for performance and 3) using critical skills such as communication and choice making across multiple contents.

In this study, most of those interviewed reported improvements in curricular focus. Many reported directly that the VAAP with ASOLs provides curricular support. The literature supports that teachers need a framework to help guide instruction (Burgess & Kennedy, 1998; Wakeman et al. 2007). At this point, the VAAP with ASOLs appears to be this needed framework. Browder et al., (2004) suggest a meshing of two curricular approaches and a blending of functional skills and general curriculum. Despite the reported improvements in curricular focus because of the ASOLS, this research reveals that teachers struggle with blending the requirements of academics in the general curriculum and life skills in the functional curriculum.

Curriculum remains a major issue in terms of the effects of the VAAP with ASOLs on instruction of students with severe disabilities in this school district. Similarly, this is a problem for the field in general. Special educators are confused and feel

significant pressures in terms of meeting accountability standards and meeting individual goals of the IEP (Cushing, Clark, Carter & Kennedy, 2005). With all of this confusion, “...questionable quality of the curriculum and instruction for students with severe disabilities ...continues to be a serious and ongoing issue” (Giangreco, 2006, p 6).

Overall Teaching Practices

In this study, the data supports that changes in teaching practices have occurred since the VAAP with ASOLs. Of those surveyed 73% agreed or strongly agreed that their instructional practices have changed since the ASOL VAAP. After reviewing individual best practices, the majority of the participants report the use of all of the evidence-based practices both before and after the VAAP with ASOLs. However, teachers noted an increase in time spent in teaching academics versus a decrease in time spent on recreation and leisure. Similarly, in structured interviews, teachers revealed an increase in their organization, increase in the types of activities they offered to students, improved correlation with general education curriculum, improved assessment strategies and a more “educational” affect in classrooms. The respondent’s perceptions of the changes in teaching practices are that services for children with severe disabilities have moved from a primary focus on custodial care to more emphasis on ‘educational’ services.

This shift in focus mirrors the changing national trends in services for students with severe disabilities. Classroom practices have followed the legal mandates of inclusion in general education and, where once nearly impossible even ten years ago, students with severe disabilities are accessing general education (Downing, 2005;

Giangreco, 2006; Ryndak & Alper, 2003; Snell & Brown, 2006). This has required individual changes in teaching practices as well as systemic changes in services. This study extended the findings of Ryndak & Alper (2003) as they refer to the development of "...one educational service delivery system that serves all students" (p. xx). that includes innovative practices, increased organization and improved correlation with general education.

The Impact of the Degree of Severity on Practices

In summary, teachers reported on the survey that the severity breakdown for their classes is: Mild/Moderate -50%, severe - 22% and combined mild/moderate/severe-18%. Nowhere are VAAP scores delineated to distinguish between mild, moderate or severely impaired students. As reported earlier, the VA DOE does not require that scores be broken down according to severity of disability. Similarly, the school district does not keep record of scores as they relate to the degree of severity. However, as gleaned by the interviews, individual teachers are aware of the pass/fail status of their caseloads. There is a significant divide among staff with regard to their perceptions of the appropriateness of mastery of academic content and the degree of the severity of the student's disability.

Overall, with regard to mastery of academic material for students with severe disabilities, the field is moving at a feverish pace towards academic instruction, primarily in inclusive settings, while researchers are trying to gather data to show whether or not academic content is appropriate and viable for the most severely disabled. A few studies report that students can learn a *functional curriculum* in general education classes; however, more research is available regarding the *social* benefits of inclusion. "...

although some resources describe general curriculum access, research currently provides minimal guidance on how to achieve this access for students with SD” (Browder et al, 2004, p 212).

Originally, alternate assessments linked academic instruction to functional skills. However, NCLB only requires measurement for core academic content. In their study that reviewed the implications of NCLB for students with developmental disabilities (Wakeman et al., 2007) revealed that although some states first developed alternate assessments to focus on functional skills, NCLB (2002) and subsequent non-regulatory guidance (US DOE, 2005) specified that for school accountability purposes, only core content assessments (language arts, math and science) were required. Stakeholders question if the shift is in the best interest of students with significant disabilities (Wakeman et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, with the push of NCLB, alternate assessments seemed to reflect a potential shift in curriculum for this population (Browder et al. 2004). This occurred despite the fact that some in the field were questioning the efficacy of such a mandate. Wakeman et al., 2007 report that even in 1999, researchers surveyed national experts asking them to validate the performance indicators for alternate assessments. They found support for focusing on *functional skills*. The Center for Policy Research (1996) found that states were

...wrestling with how to be inclusive (of students with disabilities) while acknowledging that for a small percentage of students, high academic standards are not relevant to their lifelong goals...This debate continues

today as stakeholders within special education disagree on the benefit of standards based reform for students with disabilities, in particular those students with significant cognitive disabilities. (Wakeman et al., 2007, p 147.)

This study extended the findings of Agran & Alper (2000) who also found that teachers consider functional and social skills more important for students with the most severe disabilities than access to the general curriculum.

Positive and Negative Perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs

In this study, instructional staff reported both positive and negative perceptions of the VAAP with ASOLs. In addition to general positive and negative feelings, several main themes emerged, including: (a) professional growth and responsibilities, (b) curriculum, instruction and assessment for this population and (c) issues with the concept of ‘mastery’ for this population. However, a primary theme that emerged from interviews: perceptions of the efficacy of this assessment process appear directly related to *the degree of the severity of disability* of the students. That is, there is a relationship between the perceived appropriateness of the ASOLs and the degree of the severity of the disability for each student taking the assessment. For example, interview respondents agreed with one person who said that “As long as we *have* to test, the VAAP for the majority of the kids it is pretty appropriate...” however, for children who are so cognitively impaired that they do not recognize pictures of family members or understand ‘cause and effect’, that mastering even the lowest ASOL is nearly impossible. The relationship includes concerns with curriculum and instruction, the IEP, testing for this

population, improving the ASOLs to reflect more realistic goals for the *lowest ability* student, the relevance of intense academic skill instruction, and issues with the concept of ‘mastery’ for this population.

This study extended the findings of Stone (2006). In a state wide examination of teacher’s perceptions of the Tennessee’s alternate assessment portfolio system, Stone (2006) revealed that teachers felt the alternate assessments are a reflection of teacher’s work, and not necessarily of student progress. In addition, Stone (2006) notes that teachers also generally question the appropriateness of the assessment for the most severely disabled, and teachers are also concerned with the time-consuming demands of the assessment. The fact that portfolios are considered to be challenging in documenting evidence and in the amount of time required is also documented in the literature (Wakeman et al., 2007). Flowers et al. (2005) reported that special education teachers see both benefits and challenges to participation in alternate assessments. They found that participation raises expectations for students with severe disabilities, but also that the alternate assessment competes with time for instruction and meeting individual student needs, as well as creating an increased paperwork burden.

This study’s findings of teachers negative perceptions of the mastery of academic content for severely cognitively impaired students are corroborated by the reports of Agran et al. (2002); Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle (2006) and Wakeman et al. (2007). Teaching academics versus functional life skills poses competing priorities and remains problematic for teachers (Kohl, et al. 2006). Findings of the Browder et al. (2004) study show that experts in the field accept the blending functional and general curriculum via

alternate assessment performance indicators, however, they also address that not all academic indicators are appropriate for all students. For a small percentage of students, high academic standards are not relevant to their lifelong goals and some question its relevancy (Wakeman et al. 2007). Many believe, as the staff in this study report, that functional and social skills are more important for the most severely disabled students than access to the general curriculum (Agran et al. 2002). More research is needed with regard to students with developmental delays accessing the general curriculum (Wakeman et al. 2007).

Limitations of the Study

There were limitations to this study. First, the sample size in the present study was small (18 survey responses and 9 interviews) and restricted to one small school district (approximately 11,000 students enrolled as of 2008). Since the sample was small, the findings of this study may not be representative of other schools districts. Second, the case study relied on the reflection and the representation of the truth of its participants in one moment in time. By the nature of inquiry, some questions remain unanswered and some data remain elusive (Nardi, 2006). In addition, all results of this study primarily come from staff reports of their practices. Since there were no formal observations of teacher practices completed, it is unknown whether they actually do teach the way they report teaching. This mixed methods study attempted to ameliorate some of the burdens of solely qualitative or solely quantitative studies by triangulating data and incorporating a records review. This review included outcome data as presented by the VA DOE but did not include individual teacher data or assessments to corroborate findings. Since this

was an applied research study conducted in the schools , convenience sampling was used, and therefore, any attempt to generalize the findings of this study to the overall population should be done with some degree of caution (Robson, 1993).

However, specific to this study in both the survey and the interviews was the use of specialized vocabulary or jargon. For example, the interview items “Please define instructional practices for the students you teach” and “Have you changed your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?” were met with hesitation on the part of some of the participants. Similarly, for “evidenced based practices”, the literature lists dozens of strategies. Those selected for this study represent practices referred by the US DOE. The wording of the questions for this study did not exactly match what some participants may call evidence-based practices; therefore, those interviewed did not mention many of them. Finally, the question: “Are you using an established curriculum?” could have been interpreted to mean a pre-packaged curriculum, curricular domains or functional/life skills vs. academic skills. Better explanation of terms would have alleviated later ambiguity in analysis.

In order to gain more information about how teachers use their students VAAP scores for instructional purposes, the survey or interviews should have asked this question directly. Analysis of teachers’ use of scores is inferential based on the fact that they are not available in a timely manner, if at all. A better understanding of this phenomenon could have taken place if teachers were asked directly as to how the results of the VAAP informed their instructional practice.

Educational Implications

In this study, 90% of teachers surveyed hold additional endorsements; however, only 17% are in the area of severe disabilities. There were no teachers who reported primary special education certification in this area. Many of these teachers have been practicing for many years and may not be as up to date with current trends in academic instruction including reducing barriers to literacy, adapting materials, recognizing pre-literacy opportunities, creating literacy rich environments and including literacy in all activities of daily living (Downing, 2005). Teacher training and staff development needs to address the shift from custodial care to academic and literacy instruction.

In addition, more support and training is needed in the implementation of ASOLs *within* a functional skills curriculum. For a teacher to say, “The VAAP does not offer enough life skills/ functional behavior things our kids need to know. You need to be teaching them grocery skills or time management skills,” suggests that teachers have not had enough support in being creative within the ASOLs. ASOLs and functional skills are not mutually exclusive and, perhaps with the exception of the most cognitively impaired students, teachers need to know how to manage these two arenas.

Teachers in this school district feel strongly that the VAAP with ASOLs is not appropriate for the most severely cognitively disabled students. There is no breakdown in scores by degree of severity. Because teacher beliefs concerning degree of severity of disability affects their feelings of the inappropriateness of the VAAP with ASOLs, individual school districts and states should track this data. If overall a school district is ‘passing’ the alternate assessment, then the fact that individual students are failing may

not become apparent. If data reveals that, indeed, those with the most impaired cognition are not mastering content in one year, then Virginia might adopt a 2-3 year 'mastery' plan for ASOLs. Given the limited reported data on the state website there is less of an opportunity for test results to drive instruction. If, as the literature suggests, assessment should drive instruction (Browder, 1991; Brown, Snell & Lehr, 2006), these scores, and the lack of data aggregation by degree of severity has affected the district's ability to use of data to inform instructional practices for this population and for teachers. This is a practice that needs improvement.

Future Research

Because many teachers lack a primary endorsement in severe disabilities and there are dramatic increases in academic expectations of teachers and students with regard to alternate assessments additional research is needed to examine the effects of changes in personnel preparation programs. Moreover, there appear to be significant needs in curriculum and instruction for individuals with significant disabilities, which indicate future research and development efforts can be devoted to curriculum development for individuals with significant disabilities and preparation in terms of preservice and in-service for individuals working with students with significant disabilities. Additional research is also needed to inform the field of the existing evidenced based best practices

As "...questionable quality of the curriculum and instruction for students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms continues to be a serious and ongoing issue..." (Giangreco, M., 2006, p. 6), consensus regarding appropriate curricula for all

levels of students participating in alternate assessments is needed. Research is needed to develop and test the efficacy of various materials with individuals within a range of intellectual disabilities. Future research addressing best practices would assist current and future teachers. More research is needed on how students with developmental delays can progress in the general curriculum (Wakeman et al., 2007, p. 147) and on how teachers use scores on alternate assessments to drive instruction.

Overall Summary and Conclusions

NCLB has forced reform in the field of education and the changes in special education have been extensive (Wakeman et al. 2007). Because of this mandate, the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program has been driving instruction for students with significant disabilities. However, the questions “Why are we doing this?” and “Is it appropriate for *all*?” beg attention. If the reason to have all students participate in the VAAP is to solely be in compliance with federal regulations, then Virginia is doing well. If, however, the idea of doing the right thing for *all* students is the goal, then, as determined by this study, we need to consider how we put policy into practice.

In many ways, from an historical perspective, this is the best of times for individuals with severe disabilities, at least thus far. I write this with the full recognition that our current *best* is relative and is a long way from *good* for far to many people labeled as having severe disabilities.

(Giangreco, 2006, p. 3)

The VAAP with ASOLs has increased expectations for student performance with regard to academic content. However, for the most severely disabled and medically

fragile students, the field remains uncommitted to the efficacy of this practice. “Specially designed instruction means ‘adapting ... content, methodology or delivery of instruction to meet the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability;’ (34 CFR 300.26 [b][30]).” The “one size fits all” model for the range of functioning levels of individuals with respect to the VAAP with ASOLs may be incompatible with the original intentions of specialized education for those for whom cognition remains the greatest challenge. The merits of the VAAP with ASOLs are numerous and practitioners can be proud of the progress. However, as Giangreco (2006) states “... the field of special education is not at a stage of development where the curricular, instructional and support needs of students with severe disabilities are consistently and sufficiently addressed” (p. 5). For practitioners who face this challenge daily, this continues to be a serious and ongoing issue.

Appendix A

Reporting Categories for each core content area. Taken directly from the VAAP Implementation Manual for 2007 found at:
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Assessment/VAAP/VAAP_Manual07

These ASOLs are for each reporting category and were selected in order to demonstrate the depth and breadth of Virginia's aligned standards. This sample of ASOLs is provided to illustrate the range of knowledge required as students progress through the VAAP and is not the complete set of standards.

READING ALIGNED STANDARDS OF LEARNING

Reporting Category: Use word analysis strategies and information resources

E-RW 1 The student will understand how print is organized and read.
(SOL K.5)

- a) Hold print materials in the correct position.
- b) Identify the front cover, back cover, and title page of a book.
- c) Follow words from left to right and from top to bottom on a printed page.
- d) Match voice with print: syllables, words, and phrases.

E-RW 3 The student will develop an understanding of basic phonetic principles.
(SOL K.7)

- a) Identify and name the uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet.
- b) Match consonant and short vowel sounds to appropriate letters.
- c) Identify beginning consonant sounds in single-syllable words.

E-RW 4 The student will apply knowledge of how print is organized and read.
(SOL 1.5)

- a) Read from left to right and from top to bottom.
- b) Match spoken words with print.
- c) Identify letters, words, and sentences.

E-RW 16 The student will read fiction and nonfiction with fluency and accuracy.
(SOL 4.3)

- a) Use context to clarify meanings of unfamiliar words.
- b) Explain words with multiple meanings.
- c) Use knowledge of word origins; synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms; and multiple meanings of words.

d) Use word-reference materials, including the glossary, dictionary, and thesaurus.

E-RW 19 The student will demonstrate comprehension of information from a variety of print resources.

(SOL 5.7)

- a) Develop notes that include important concepts, summaries, and identification of information sources.
- b) Organize information on charts, maps, and graphs.

E-RW 20 The student will read and learn the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases.

(SOL 6.3)

- a) Identify word origins, derivations, and inflections.
- b) Identify analogies and figurative language.
- c) Use context and sentence structure to determine meanings and differentiate among multiple meanings of words.
- d) Use word-reference materials.

Reporting Category: Demonstrate comprehension of printed materials

E-RC 1 The student will demonstrate comprehension of fiction and nonfiction.

(SOL K.8)

- a) Use pictures to make predictions about content.
- b) Retell familiar stories, using beginning, middle, and end.
- c) Discuss characters, setting, and events.
- d) Use story language in discussions and retellings.
- e) Identify what an author does and what an illustrator does.
- f) Identify the topics of nonfiction selections.

E-RC 2 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of fiction and nonfiction.

(SOL 1.9)

- a) Preview the selection.
- b) Set a purpose for reading.
- c) Relate previous experiences to what is read.
- d) Make predictions about content.
- e) Ask and answer who, what, when, where, why, and how questions about what is read.
- f) Identify characters, setting, and important events.
- g) Retell stories and events, using beginning, middle, and end.
- h) Identify the topic or main idea.

E-RC 3 The student will read fiction and nonfiction, using a variety of strategies independently.

(SOL 2.7)

- a) Preview the selection by using pictures, diagrams, titles, and headings.
- b) Set purpose for reading.
- c) Read stories, poems, and passages with fluency and expression.
- d) Reread and self-correct when necessary.

E-RC 4 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fiction and nonfiction.

(SOL 2.8)

- a) Make predictions about content.
- b) Read to confirm predictions.
- c) Relate previous experiences to the topic.
- d) Ask and answer questions about what is read.
- e) Locate information to answer questions.
- f) Describe characters, setting, and important events in fiction and poetry.
- g) Identify the problem, solution, and main idea.

E-RC 9 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fiction.

(SOL 5.5)

- a) Describe the relationship between text and previously read materials.
- b) Describe character development in fiction and poetry selections.
- c) Describe the development of plot and explain how conflicts are resolved.
- d) Describe the characteristics of free verse, rhymed, and patterned poetry.
- e) Describe how an author's choice of vocabulary and style contributes to the quality and enjoyment of selections.

E-RC 11 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of fiction, narrative nonfiction, and poetry.

(SOL 6.4)

- a) Identify the elements of narrative structure, including setting, character, plot, conflict, and theme.
- b) Use knowledge of narrative and poetic structures to aid comprehension and predict outcomes.
- c) Describe the images created by language.
- d) Describe how word choice and imagery contribute to the meaning of a text.
- e) Describe cause-effect relationships and their impact on plot.
- f) Use information stated explicitly in the text to draw conclusions and make inferences.
- g) Explain how character and plot development are used in a selection to support a central conflict or story line.
- h) Paraphrase and summarize the main points in the text.

MATHEMATICS ALIGNED STANDARDS OF LEARNING

Reporting Category: Number and Number Sense

M-NS 1 The student, given two sets containing 10 or fewer concrete items, will identify and describe one set as having more, fewer, or the same number of members as the other set, using the concept of one-to-one correspondence. (SOL K.1)

M-NS 2 The student, given a set containing 10 or fewer concrete items, will (SOL K.2)

- a) tell how many are in the set by counting the number of items orally;
- b) select the corresponding numeral from a given set;
- c) write the numeral to tell how many are in the set.

M-NS 6 The student will count objects in a given set containing between 1 and 100 objects and (SOL 1.1) write the corresponding numeral.

M-NS 7 The student will group a collection of up to 100 objects into tens and ones and write the corresponding numeral to develop an understanding of place value. (SOL 1.2)

Reporting Category: Computation and Estimation

M-CE 1 The student will add and subtract whole numbers, using up to 10 concrete items. (SOL K.6)

M-CE 2 The student, given a familiar problem situation involving magnitude, will (SOL 1.7)

- a) select a reasonable magnitude from three given quantities: a one-digit numeral, a two-digit numeral, and a three-digit numeral (e.g., 5, 50, and 500);
- b) explain the reasonableness of his/her choice.

M-CE 5 The student will recall basic addition facts — i.e., sums to 18 or less — and the corresponding subtraction facts. (SOL 2.6)

M-CE 8 The student will create and solve one-step addition and subtraction problems using data from simple tables, picture graphs, bar graphs, and practical situations. (SOL 2.9)

M-CE 20 The student will create and solve problems involving addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers, using paper and pencil, estimation, mental computation, and calculators. (SOL 5.3)

M-CE 24 The student will add and subtract with fractions and mixed numbers, with and without regrouping, and express answers in simplest form. Problems will include like and unlike denominators limited to 12 or less. (SOL 5.7)

M-CE 25 The student will (SOL 6.6)

- a) solve problems that involve addition, subtraction, multiplication, and/or division with fractions and mixed numbers, with and without regrouping, that include like and unlike denominators of 12 or less, and express their answers in simplest form; and
- b) find the quotient, given a dividend expressed as a decimal through thousandths and a divisor expressed as a decimal to thousandths with exactly one non-zero digit.

Reporting Category: Patterns, Functions, and Algebra

M-PFA 1 The student will sort and classify objects according to similar attributes (size, shape, and color). (SOL K.17)

M-PFA 2 The student will identify, describe, and extend a repeating relationship (pattern) found in common objects, sounds, and movements. (SOL K.18).

M-PFA 6 The student will solve problems by completing a numerical sentence involving the basic facts for addition and subtraction. Examples include: $3 + __ = 7$, or $9 - __ = 2$. (SOL 2.26)

M-PFA 7 The student will recognize and describe a variety of patterns formed using concrete objects, numbers, tables, and pictures, and extend the pattern, using the same or different forms (concrete objects, numbers, tables, and pictures). (SOL 3.24)

M-PFA 9 The student will recognize, create, and extend numerical and geometric patterns, using concrete materials, number lines, symbols, tables, and words. (SOL 4.21)

M-PFA 11 The student will analyze the structure of numerical and geometric patterns (how they change or grow), and express the relationship, using words, tables, graphs, or a mathematical sentence. Concrete materials and calculators will be used. (SOL 5.20)

M-PFA 14 The student will investigate, describe, and extend numerical and geometric patterns, including triangular numbers, patterns formed by powers of 10, and arithmetic sequences. (SOL 6.21)

M-PFA 16 The student will (SOL 6.23)

- a) model and solve algebraic equations, using concrete materials;
- b) solve one-step linear equations in one variable, involving whole number coefficients and positive rational solutions;
- c) use the following algebraic terms appropriately: variable, coefficient, term, and equation.

SCIENCE ALIGNED STANDARDS OF LEARNING

Reporting Category: Scientific Investigation

S-SI 1 The student will conduct investigations in which (SOL K.1)

- a) basic properties of objects are identified by direct observation;
- b) observations are made from multiple positions to achieve different perspectives;
- c) objects are described both pictorially and verbally;
- d) a set of objects is sequenced according to size;
- e) a set of objects is separated into two groups based on a single physical attribute;
- f) nonstandard units are used to measure common objects;
- g) a question is developed from one or more observations;
- h) picture graphs are constructed using 10 or fewer units;
- i) an unseen member in a sequence of objects is predicted;
- j) unusual or unexpected results in an activity are recognized.

S-SI 2 Students will investigate and understand that humans have senses that allow one to seek, find, take in, and react or respond to information in order to learn about one's surroundings. (SOL K.2). Key concepts include

- a) five senses and corresponding sensing organs (taste – tongue, touch – skin, smell – nose, hearing – ears, and sight – eyes);
- b) sensory descriptors (sweet, sour, bitter, salty, rough/smooth, hard/soft, cold, warm, hot, loud/soft, high/low, bright/dull).

S-SI 3 The student will conduct investigations in which (SOL 1.1)

- a) differences in physical properties are observed using the senses;
- b) simple tools are used to enhance observations;
- c) objects or events are classified and arranged according to attributes or properties;
- d) observations and data are communicated orally and with simple graphs, pictures, written statements, and numbers;
- e) length, mass, and volume are measured using standard and nonstandard units;
- f) predictions are based on patterns of observation rather than random guesses;
- g) simple experiments are conducted to answer questions;
- h) inferences are made and conclusions are drawn about familiar objects and events.

Reporting Category: Scientific Investigation - Resources

S-R 1 The student will investigate and understand that materials can be reused, recycled, and conserved. (SOL K.1). Key concepts include

- a) materials and objects can be used over and over again;
- b) everyday materials can be recycled;
- c) water and energy conservation at home and in school helps preserve resources for future use.

S-R 2 The student will investigate and understand that natural resources are limited. (SOL 1.8). Key concepts include

- a) identification of natural resources (plants and animals, water, air, land, minerals, forests, and soil);
- b) factors that affect air and water quality;
- c) recycling, reusing, and reducing consumption of natural resources.

S-R 3 The student will investigate and understand that plants produce oxygen and food, are a source of useful products, and provide benefits in nature. (SOL 2.8). Key concepts include:

- a) important plant products (fiber, cotton, oil, spices, lumber, rubber, medicines, and paper);
- b) the availability of plant products affects the development of a geographic area;
- c) plants provide homes and food for many animals and prevent soil from washing way.

Reporting Category: Force, Motion, Energy, and Matter

S-FME 1 The student will investigate and understand that magnets have an effect on some materials, make some things move without touching them, and have useful applications. (SOL K.3)

Key concepts include

- a) attraction/nonattraction, push/pull, attract/repel, and metal/nonmetal;
- b) useful applications (refrigerator magnet, can opener, magnetized screwdriver, and magnetic games).

S-FME 2 The student will investigate and understand that moving objects exhibit different kinds of motion. (SOL 1.2). Key concepts include

- a) objects may have straight, circular, and back-and-forth motions;
- b) objects may vibrate and produce sound;
- c) pushes or pulls can change the movement of an object;
- d) the motion of objects may be observed in toys and in playground activities.

S-FME 4 The student will investigate and understand simple machines and their uses. (SOL 3.2). Key concepts include

- a) types of simple machines (lever, screw, pulley, wheel and axle, inclined plane, and wedge);
- b) how simple machines function;
- c) compound machines (scissors, wheelbarrow, and bicycle);
- d) examples of simple and compound machines found in the school, home, and work environment.

S-FME 6 The student will investigate and understand the characteristics of electricity. (SOL 4.3). Key concepts include

- a) conductors and insulators;

- b) basic circuits (open/closed, parallel/series);
- c) static electricity;
- d) the ability of electrical energy to be transformed into heat, light, and mechanical energy;
- e) simple electromagnets and magnetism;
- f) historical contributions in understanding electricity.

S-FME 8 The student will investigate and understand basic characteristics of visible light and how it behaves. (SOL 5.3). Key concepts include

- a) the visible spectrum and light waves;
- b) refraction of light through water and prisms;
- c) reflection of light from reflective surfaces (mirrors);
- d) opaque, transparent, and translucent;
- e) historical contributions in understanding light.

HISTORY / SOCIAL SCIENCE ALIGNED STANDARDS OF LEARNING

Reporting Category: History

HS-H1 The student will recognize that history describes events and people of other times and places by (SOL K.1)

- a) identifying examples of past events in legends, stories, and historical accounts of Pocahontas, George Washington, Betsy Ross, and Abraham Lincoln;
- b) identifying the people and events honored by the holidays of Thanksgiving Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Presidents' Day, and Independence Day (Fourth of July).

HS-H3 The student will interpret information presented in picture time lines to show sequence of events and will distinguish between past and present. (SOL 1.1)

HS-H7 The student will compare the lives and contributions of American Indians (First Americans), with emphasis on the Powhatan of the Eastern Woodlands, the Sioux of the Plains, and the Pueblo people of the Southwest. (SOL 2.2)

HS-H9 The student will explain how the contributions of ancient Greece and Rome have influenced the present world in terms of architecture, government (direct and representative democracy), and sports. (SOL 3.1)

HS-H33 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the impact of the European Age of Discovery and expansion into the Americas, Africa, and Asia by (SOL WHII.4)

- a) explaining the roles of explorers and conquistadors;
- b) describing the influence of religion.

Reporting Category: Geography

HS-G1 The student will describe the relative location of people, places, and things by using positional words, with emphasis on near/far, above/below, left/right, and behind/in front. (SOL K.3)

HS-G4 The student will develop map skills by (SOL 1.4)

- a) recognizing basic map symbols, including references to land, water, cities, and roads;
- b) using cardinal directions on maps;
- c) identifying the physical shape of the United States and Virginia on maps and globes;
- d) locating Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, and Richmond, the capital of Virginia, on a United States map.

HS-G17 The student will use maps, globes, photographs, and pictures in order to (SOL WG.1)

- a) obtain geographical information and apply the concepts of location, scale, and orientation;
- b) develop and refine his or her mental maps of world regions.

Reporting Category: Civics

HS-C1 The student will demonstrate that being a good citizen involves (SOL K.8)

- a) taking turns and sharing;
- b) taking responsibility for certain classroom chores;
- c) taking care of personal belongings and respecting what belongs to others;
- d) following rules and understanding the consequence of breaking rules;
- e) practicing honesty, self-control, and kindness to others.

HS-C3 The student will apply the traits of a good citizen by (SOL 1.10)

- a) focusing on fair play, exhibiting good sportsmanship, helping others, and treating others with respect;
- b) recognizing the purpose of rules and practicing self-control;
- c) working hard in school;
- d) taking responsibility for one's own actions;
- e) valuing honesty and truthfulness in oneself and others.

HS-C19 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the challenges faced by the new nation by (SOL USI.7)

- b) identifying the basic principles of the new government established by the Constitution of the United States of America and the Bill of Rights;
- c) identifying the conflicts that resulted in the emergence of two political parties.

Reporting Category: Economics

HS-E1 The student will match simple descriptions of work that people do with the names of those jobs. (SOL K.6)

HS-E5 The student will recognize that people save money for the future to purchase goods and services. (SOL 1.9)

HS-E6 The student will describe the differences between natural resources (water, soil, wood, and coal), human resources (people at work), and capital resources (machines, tools, and buildings). (SOL 2.7)

HS-E17 The student will demonstrate knowledge of westward expansion and reform in America from 1801 to 1861 by (SOL USI.8)

- b) identifying the geographic and economic factors that influenced the westward movement of settlers;
- c) describing the impact of inventions, including the cotton gin, the reaper, the steamboat, and the steam locomotive, on life in America.

HS-E24 The student will demonstrate knowledge of ancient Greece in terms of its impact on Western civilization by (SOL WHI.5)

- c) identifying the social structure and role of slavery, explaining the significance of citizenship and the development of democracy, and comparing the city-states of Athens and Sparta.

Appendix B

Online Survey

What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?

Thank you for taking time to participate in this survey. The purpose of this survey is to better understand instructional practices since Virginia has incorporated the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs) into the current Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). For your participation a donation will be made to either the Special Olympics or the March of Dimes. You will have the option to select which charity you prefer at the end of the survey.

Next you will find the consent form. Please read and proceed.

What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to determine how the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) has influenced teachers' approaches to teaching students with severe disabilities and to determine teachers' perceptions of current practices in one school district. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey addressing instructional practices. The survey should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. In addition, if you choose to volunteer, you may participate in a short interview with the researcher about your thoughts and feelings related to your instructional practices under the VAAP.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in improving instruction for students with severe disabilities.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. This is an anonymous survey. Names and other identifiers will not be placed on surveys or other research data.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. For each survey completed, the following organizations will receive a cash donation: The Special Olympics and The March of Dimes.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Lisa Mistretta, a Doctoral candidate at George Mason University. She may be reached at 540-418-7413 for questions about the survey, any cited references or to report a research-related problem. Her faculty advisor's name is Margo Mastropieri who may be reached at 703-993-4136. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study (If yes, check correct response below.)

The George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board has waived the requirement for signing the consent form. However, if you would like to sign a consent form prior to beginning the research, please contact Lisa Mistretta at *** or lmistret@gmu.edu.

By clicking below I indicate that I have read the information about this research and that I agree to participate.

I provide consent

I decline participation (if you decline, please exit the survey now.)

Now that you have provided consent, the survey will begin with a brief overview of the

VAAP and ASOLs.

What is the VAAP?

"The purpose of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) is to evaluate the performance of students who have traditionally been exempt from state assessment programs. Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) reflect the intent to extend educational accountability and reform to all students, including those with disabilities.

Although these students represent a relatively small portion of the overall school population, the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program was developed with the belief that these students are a part of our accountability system and that the evaluation of their achievement represents an important component of our quest toward high standards." (Taken from <http://www.ttaonline.org/staff/assessment/assess.asp>)

What are the ASOLs?

"Appropriate content level standards have been identified for each content area (reading, mathematics, science, history, social science). These content level standards are referred to as Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs). The ASOLs provide students with significant cognitive disabilities with access to cross-grade level SOL content that has been reduced in depth and complexity." (Taken from the VAAP Implementation Manual 2007-08 available online at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Assessment/VAAP/VAAP_Manual07.pdf)

The survey is divided into five parts.

- *Part 1 Demographic information about your years experience and teacher preparation (7 questions)
- *Part 2 Information about the population you teach (6 questions)
- *Part 3 Instructional practices (14 questions)
- *Part 4 Open-ended questions (4 questions)
- *Part 5 Opportunity for additional input (2 questions)

PART 1 Demographic information about your years of teaching experience and your teacher preparation

1. I have _____ number of years of teaching experience: (please write in the number)

2. I currently teach the following grade level(s): _____

3. I currently teach students of the following ages (please write in the numbers):

4. My level of education:

BA BA + 15 MA MA + 15 PhD Please write any additional years or certifications

5. My certification is in the following area(s):

Vision Impairment

Hearing Impairment

Mental Retardation

Severe Disabilities

Other:

6. My teaching license status is: (please check the most accurate response)

I am fully licensed

I am conditionally or provisionally licensed

I am not licensed

Other:

7. I would describe my teaching experience and previous coursework as adequate preparation for administering the VAAP with ASOLs.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

Part 2 ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS

8. My current caseload is _____ students. (Please write in the number of students for whom you are primarily responsible for teaching, assessing and writing IEPs.)

8a. Of these students, I teach and assess _____ students. (Please write the number of students that you both teach and assess.)

9. One or more of my students has a significant medical condition. (This might be seizure disorder, feeding issues, respiratory problems, etc.)

Yes

No

If yes, please indicate the type(s) of conditions:

10. I teach in the following structure:

Inclusion

Self-contained

Combined inclusion and self-contained

Other:

11. On average, I am actively involved with instruction for _____ of the day. (Please indicate the percentage below):

Less than 10% 10-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75-100% Other:

12. Please indicate the most accurate response to the following:

I have never administered the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP).

I have administered the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). If so, please indicate the number of times below.

The total number of times I have administered the VAAP:

13. I have administered the VAAP to students with the following disability (or disabilities). Please check all that apply.

Autism

Physical Disabilities

Multiple Disabilities

Blindness/Vision Impairment

Deafness/Hearing Impairment

Mental Retardation (EMR/Mild)

Mental Retardation (TMR/Moderate)

Severe Disabilities (including severe MR)

Speech/Language Impairment (SLI)

N/A

Other:

Part 3 INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Reminder: the purpose of this survey is to better understand instructional practices since Virginia has incorporated the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOLs) into the current Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP).

14. I have changed my instructional practices since the implementation of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the Aligned Standards of Learning (ASOL).

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

The definition of inclusion by the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) is “The practice of educating all or most children in the same classroom, including children with physical, mental, and developmental disabilities.”

15. With regard to the inclusion of your students and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced inclusion ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced inclusion ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced inclusion both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced inclusion.

I am confident that inclusion works.

Yes No NA

I have had instructional support (via administration, other teachers and/or central office) with inclusion.

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of inclusion with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

Peer Integration may be defined as one’s belonging to and incorporation in the same societal group especially based on age, grade, or status. For students with severe disabilities this includes relationships and friendships with non-disabled peers.

16. With regard to the use of peer integration and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced peer integration ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced peer integration ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced peer integration both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced peer integration.

I am confident that peer integration works

Yes No NA

I have had support with peer integration (via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of peer integration with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

Community Based Instruction (CBI) may be defined as regular, carefully planned instruction in community settings. CBI practices should take place in 'natural environments'. That is, teaching money skills should occur in a setting where money is naturally used such as grocery stores, the cafeteria or the school store vs. reliance on simulated classroom experiences.

17. With regard to community based instruction and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced community based instruction ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced community based instruction ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs

I have practiced community based instruction both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced community based instruction.

I am confident that community based instruction works.

Yes No NA

I have had support with community based instruction (via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of community based instruction with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

Transition planning is preparing students for the next change in their life and/or adjusting to new environments. This may include the next level of their schooling and/or entry into adult life. (Demchack, 2002)

18. With regard to transition planning and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced transition planning ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced transition planning ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced transition planning both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced transition planning

I am confident that transition planning works.

Yes No NA

I have had support with transition planning(via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of transition planning with my

students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

Team planning is considered “Collaboration among all services and the family on an agreed upon set of functional goals and services. Each discipline contributes expertise.” (Campbell, 2006 p. 302)

19. With regard to team planning and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced team planning ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced team planning ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced team planning both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced team planning.

I am confident that team planning works.

Yes No NA

I have had support with team planning (via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of team planning with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

“Positive behavioral support (PBS) is the redesign of environments to produce both decreases in problem behavior and increases in basic lifestyle goals such as

improved learning, access to social networks, employment, and involvement in the full range of community activities.” (Horner, Albin, Todd & Sprague, 2006. p. 207)

20. With regard to positive behavioral support and the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I practiced positive behavioral support ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced positive behavioral support ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have practiced positive behavioral support both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never practiced positive behavioral support.

I am confident that positive behavioral supports work.

Yes No NA

I have had support with using positive behavioral supports (via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of positive behavior supports with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

21. With regard to the use of a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum for your students: I teach from an established curriculum.

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

With regard to teaching from a curriculum please give the most accurate response. I teach from:

A pre-existing curriculum

A district-made curriculum

A teacher-made curriculum

I do not use a curriculum

Other:

With regard to the use of a functional age appropriate curriculum and the

implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs, please check the statement that most accurately reflects your experience:

I used a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum ONLY PRIOR to the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I used a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum ONLY SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I used a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum both before and after the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs.

I have never used a Functional Age Appropriate Curriculum.

I am confident that using a functional age appropriate curriculum works.

Yes No NA

I have had support with using a functional age appropriate curriculum (via administration, other teachers and/or central office staff).

Yes No NA

The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced my use of a functional age appropriate curriculum with my students.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

NA

22. The VAAP with ASOLs has influenced the degree to which I involve parents in instructional practice.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Please describe how the VAAP with ASOLs has influenced the way in which you involve parents in instructional practice. _____

23. Please rate each of the following curricular domains in terms of the amount of time that you incorporated them into your instruction PRIOR to the implementation the VAAP with ASOLs (if you did not teach prior to the VAAP with ASOLs please go to question 24)

Self Help

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Academics

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Behavior Management

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Communication

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Community integration

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Vocational training

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Recreation/Leisure

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

24. Please rate each of the following curricular domains in terms of the amount of time that you incorporate them into your instruction SINCE the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs:

Self Help

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Academics

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Behavior Management

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Communication

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Community integration

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Vocational training

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

Recreation/Leisure

Never Seldom Sometimes Often Always

25. While working with a student on an Aligned Standard of Learning (ASOL), I use the following:

Pull-out instruction with one student at a time

Full class instruction on an ASOL

Combination of pull-out and full class instruction

26. I incorporate ASOL instruction all year long.

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

27. I feel my students receive better instruction since the ASOL VAAP.

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

Part 4 Open Ended Questions:

Please use the space below to respond to the following questions

28. What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?

29. What do you not like about the ASOL VAAP?

30. If you could, how might you change the ASOL VAAP?

31. Do you feel that your students are better off due to the ASOL VAAP? Please explain your answer.

Part 5 OPPORTUNITY FOR ADDITIONAL INPUT

32. Would you be willing to participate in an interview? If so, please include your email address and/or phone #

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. For your time, \$5.00 will be donated to either Special Olympics or to The March of Dimes. Please indicate below which charity you prefer.

Special Olympics

The March of Dimes

Appendix C

Teacher Interview questions for The Effects of the VAAP on Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities

Introduction to be read to participant:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

As with the survey, I am interested in knowing more about your instructional practices since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. There are no right or wrong answers. This interview will remain anonymous and if I refer to any of your responses I will use a pseudonym.

You will notice that some of the early questions are similar to questions on the survey. I ask these just to get an idea of your experience in the field and the types of students you teach. After that I will ask some questions about your classroom practice and then a few final questions on your feelings about the VAAP. If at any time you need clarification, please ask or if you want to end the interview, let me know. I am very grateful to you for your help....

A. Facts

1. How many years have you been teaching?

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10-15 15+

2. What grade level are you currently teaching?

(Prompt) PreK - 3 4-5 6-8 9-12

3. What is your level of education?

(Prompt) BA MA MA+15 MA+30

4. How many years have you been administering the VAAP

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6

5. How many VAAPs you have completed?

(Prompt) 0 1-3 4-7 8-12 more than 12

6. For those VAAPs that you have completed, please indicate the disability category of each student. Prompt with the following if needed:

Mild/Moderate mental disability, Severe Disability, Multiple Impairments, Autism, etc.

Behavior

6. Please define the VAAP in your own words.
7. Now, Please define instructional practices for the students you teach.
- 7a. Have you changed your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?
If yes, in what ways. Please describe...
If no, why not?
8. Have you changed your approach to planning lessons since the VAAP? If so, how?
9. Do you use a curriculum? If so, what type (Prompt: county, teacher made)
 - 8a. Describe how the curriculum influences your planning and instruction.
10. How much does the IEP impact your daily instruction?
 - 9a. What is the relationship between the IEP, curriculum and the VAAP?
11. How would you describe your instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?

Beliefs/attitudes

12. How do you feel about the VAAP?
13. Have these feelings changed over time?
14. What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?
15. What do you not like about the ASOL VAAP?
16. What would you change about the ASOL VAAP?
17. Are your students better off due to the ASOL VAAP? Why or why not?
18. Is there anything else you would like to say in relation to this topic?

Related Service - Interview questions for The Effects of the VAAP on Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities

Introduction to be read to participant:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

I am interested in knowing more about the school district's instructional practices since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. There are no right or wrong answers. This interview will remain anonymous and if I refer to any of your responses I will use a pseudonym.

I will ask some questions about you, then about instructional practice in classrooms you support and then a few final questions on your feelings about the VAAP. If at any time you need clarification, please ask or if you want to end the interview, let me know. I am very grateful to you for your help....

A. Facts

1. How many years have you been a _____ (OT, S/L Pathologist, etc.)?

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10-15 15+

2. What are your primary responsibilities?

3. What is your level of education?

(Prompt) BA MA MA+15 MA+30

4. How many years have you been working with the VAAP

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6

5. How many VAAPs you have supported?

(Prompt) 10-20 20-40 40-60 60-80 more than 80?

5a. How many teachers have you supported?

6. For your caseload, please indicate the disability category of students assessed. Prompt with the following if needed: Mild/Moderate mental disability, Severe Disability,

Multiple Impairments, Autism, etc.

Behavior

7. Please define the VAAP in your own words.
8. Now, Please define instruction.
 - 8a. What are instructional practices for teachers of students with SD?
9. For this school district, have the instructional practices changed since ASOL VAAP?

If yes, in what ways. Please describe...

If no, why not?

10. How do you support teachers as they use the VAAP with ASOLs?
 - 10a. Have you changed your approach to supporting teachers since the VAAP with ASOLs? If so, how?
 - 10b. What do you find most challenging about supporting teacher's instructional practices relating to the VAAP?
 - 10c. Do teachers in this school district use the supports you provide?
11. How much does the IEP impact daily instruction?
 - 9a. What is the relationship between the IEP, curriculum and the VAAP?
12. How would you describe the school district's instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?

Beliefs/attitudes

13. How do you feel about the VAAP?
14. Have these feelings changed over time?
15. What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?

16. What do you not like about the ASOL VAAP?
17. What would you change about the ASOL VAAP?
18. Are our students better off due to the ASOL VAAP? Why or why not?
19. Is there anything else you would like to say in relation to this topic?

Administrator - Interview questions for The Effects of the VAAP on Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities

Introduction to be read to participant:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

I am interested in knowing more about the school district's instructional practices since the implementation of the VAAP with ASOLs. There are no right or wrong answers. This interview will remain anonymous and if I refer to any of your responses I will use a pseudonym.

I will ask some questions about you, then about instructional practice in the school district and then a few final questions on your feelings about the VAAP. If at any time you need clarification, please ask or if you want to end the interview, let me know. I am very grateful to you for your help....

A. Facts

1. How many years have you been an administrator?

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10-15 15+

2. What are your primary responsibilities?

3. What is your level of education?

(Prompt) BA MA MA+15 MA+30

4. How many years have you been working with the VAAP

(Prompt) First year 1 2 3 4 5 6

5. How many VAAPs you have supported?

(Prompt) 10-20 20-40 40-60 60-80 more than 80?

How many teachers have you supported?

6. For this school district, please indicate the disability category of students assessed.

Prompt with the following if needed: Mild/Moderate mental disability, Severe Disability, Multiple Impairments, Autism, etc.

Behavior

7. Please define the VAAP in your own words.

8. Now, Please define instruction.

8a. What are instructional practices for teachers of students with SD?

8b. For this school district, have the instructional practices changed since ASOL VAAP?

If yes, in what ways. Please describe...If no, why not?

9. Have you changed your approach to supporting teachers since the VAAP with ASOLs? If so, how?

9a. What do you find most challenging about supporting teacher's instructional practices relating to the VAAP?

10. Do teachers in this school district use a curriculum? If so, what type (Prompt: county, teacher made)?

10a. Describe how the curriculum influences teacher planning and instruction.

11. How much does the IEP impact daily instruction?

11a. What is the relationship between the IEP, curriculum and the VAAP?

12. How would you describe the school district's instructional practices since the ASOL VAAP?

Beliefs/attitudes

13. How do you feel about the VAAP?
14. Have these feelings changed over time?
15. What do you like about the ASOL VAAP?
16. What do you not like about the ASOL VAAP?
17. What would you change about the ASOL VAAP?
18. Are our students better off due to the ASOL VAAP? Why or why not?
19. Is there anything else you would like to say in relation to this topic?

Appendix D

Email #1

Subject: VAAP Survey

Dear Teachers,

As some of you may know, I am currently a student in the doctoral program at George Mason University, majoring in the field of Special Education. The Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) has been an interest of mine for several years, and is currently the focus of my dissertation research.

I have been given permission by our school district administration to pursue research on “What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?” The survey has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Special Education and approved by the Associate Superintendent. Your participation will provide valuable information with regards to the VAAP and instructional practices. I would truly appreciate your assistance with an online survey that should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. For each completed survey, I will donate \$5.00 to one of two charities that you may select.

The data in this study will be confidential. No names and other identifiers will be used. No individual will be revealed in any reporting of these data. You are under no obligation to participate.

Please click on the link below to get to the web-based survey. I am hoping to have all surveys completed by _____ (date) so your timely participation will be much appreciated.

LINK HERE

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to email me.

Thank you so very much and have a super day!
Lisa Mistretta

Email #2

Subject: VAAP Survey Reminder

Dear Teachers,

To those of you who have responded to the survey on “What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?” I want to thank you very much. So far, ____ dollars will go to _____ and _____ dollars to _____.

This is just a reminder that I am hoping to have all surveys completed by ____ (date) so, if you have not been able to take the survey, your timely participation will be much appreciated. PLEASE, only submit one completed survey.

Again, your participation will provide valuable information with regards to the VAAP and instructional practices. I would truly appreciate your assistance with an online survey that should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. For each completed survey, I will donate \$5.00 to one of two charities that you may select.

Your participation will remain anonymous and is not required.

Please click on the link below to get to the web-based survey.
If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to email me.

Thank you for your help and have a great day!
Lisa Mistretta

Email #3

Subject: Final VAAP Survey Reminder

Dear Teachers,

Thank you to everyone who has helped my research on “What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?”

Thus far, ____ dollars will go to _____ and _____ dollars to _____ charities.

This is just a reminder that I am hoping to have all surveys completed by _____ (date) so, if you have not been able to take the survey, your timely participation will be much appreciated. PLEASE, only submit one completed survey.

If you have not been able to, I would be grateful for your assistance with an online survey that should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. For each completed survey, I will donate \$5.00 to one of two charities that you may select.

As before, your participation will remain anonymous and is not required.

Please click on the link below to get to the web-based survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to email me.

Thank you for your help and take good care!

Lisa Mistretta

Appendix E

Sample Staff Development Offerings 2000-2008

Examples of Workshop Titles	ESL Information Session First Aid Basics French Horn Techniques From Pacing Guides to Curriculum Maps Goal Setting and Test Anxiety Introduction to Blackboard Perfectionism: Strategies to Help Students Cope With It Graphing Calculators Learn how to Write Right Grief So You Want To Help Your Students Math Their Way Great Middle School Books Integrating Art into the Language Arts Classroom Early Language and Motor Development Sensory Issues for Children with Special Needs Collaborative Teaching Model for Student Success Social and Pragmatic Strategies for the Classroom)
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Examples of Target Groups	All staff All teachers and administrators Teachers K-12 K-3 Teachers K-5 Science Grade 6-12 Science Biology Teachers History 4-12 History and Art World History Teachers Secondary History 6-12 Reading teachers Language Arts/Librarians Elementary Career and Tech Ed Music and Choral teachers P.E. 6-12 ASL, ESL F/L Teachers ECSE and K-5 Teachers All SPED New SPED
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Examples of Special Education Staff Development

2000-01 217 All SPED and GEN 15 SPED 12 VAAP 0

- Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) – effective team interaction
- Assistive Technology
- Children with autism in the school environment
- Disabilities and the school environment
- Enhancing instruction for special needs students through the use of digital camera*
- Hearing loss and educational implications
- Implications of auditory processing disorders
- Integrated thematic instruction round table * (Low incidence SD)
- Special education process: pre-referral to implementation of services
- Understanding transition (2) *
- What’s behind the little black box (understanding and applying PSY information)
- Integrating technology into the curriculum (6)
- Classroom strategies for learning and behavioral disorders *
- Conducting a Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) and creating Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) (3)*
- Creating positive learning environments
- Developing measurable IEP goals (4)*

2001-02 202 All SPED & GEN 10 SPED 9 VAAP 0

- Use of ____ district IEP forms *
- Accessing the curriculum for MD/MD population *(SD)
- ADHD, ODD and other behavior disorders
- Children with autism in the school environment (2)
- Classroom data collection made easy
- Collaborative teaching
- Conducting FBAs and developing BIPs (2)*
- Developing measurable IEP goals (2)*
- Disabilities and their educational environment
- Overview of asperger’s syndrome (2)
- Phonological awareness in pre-K
- Recognizing signs of abuse and neglect
- Software for the LD classroom*
- Transition issues (2)*

2002-2003 All 269 SPED & GEN 16 SPED 7 VAAP 0

- Disabilities and their educational environment (2)
- Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)*

- S/L expectations for Pre-K – 3rd gr.
- Overview of asperger's and high functioning autism (3)
- Programming for Intelli-keys (2)
- Questioning and brainstorming techniques
- Recognizing signs of abuse (2)
- Teaching social skills to students with pragmatic deficits
- IDEA and FBA and BIP (2) *
- Eligibility process (4)
- Transition and the IEP (4)*

2003-04 All 227 SPED & GEN 11 SPED 5 VAAP 0

- 12 words that “trip up” at risk students
- Disabilities and their educational environment
- Introduction to ABA *
- Overview of asperger's and high functioning autism (3)
- Recognizing signs of abuse
- Teaching students with social deficits
- IDEA and FBA and BIP (2)*
- The deaf or hard of hearing student
- Transition to middle school *
- Turning failure into success through modeling
- Questioning and brainstorming techniques
- What's new in transition *
- Preventing burnout- strategies for dealing with difficult or challenging students

2004-2005 All 192 SPED & GEN 5 SPED 6 VAAP 0

- Early Language and Motor Development
- Sensory Issues for Children with Special Needs
- Collaborative Teaching Model for Student Success
- Behavior management strategies (2) *
- Transition from School to Work *
- IEP Development (3)*
- Essential Vocabulary for middle school English
- From IEP to Lesson Design

2005-06 All 232 SPED & GEN 17 SPED 14 VAAP 0

- Writing for elementary-secondary students
- Collaborative Teaching Model for Student Success
- Sensory strategies(3) *
- Differentiated Behavior management strategies (3)*
- Social and Pragmatic Strategies for the Classroom (2)*
- IEP Development (2)*
- Creating Active Readers (2)

Basic Sign Language for the classroom teacher (2)*
 Social/Emotional Competency in Young Children (2)
 Early Literacy Development for Young Children (2)
 Sensory Issues for Children with Special Needs (2)
 Aspergers, Methods for Autism Spectrum (2)*
 Professional Book Club: “Better Answers”, “Choice Words”, “7 Keys to Comprehension”, “Informational Text in the Classroom”, “Literacy Links”, “Strategies that Work”, “Teaching Reading in Social Science, Science and Math”, “The Fluent Reader”, “What Really Matters for the Struggling Reader” (9)

2006-07 All 288 SPED & GEN 4 SPED 9 VAAP 2

- Trait Writing for Elementary/Secondary (2)
- SPED Teachers / Connecting the ASOLs to Curriculum *
- Professional Book Club: “Better Answers”, “The Fluent Reader” (2)
- The Big Idea: Developing Functional Behavior Assessments , Behavior Intervention Plans (2) *
- The Importance of Play 1,2,&3. (3) *
- Understanding the VAAP *
- Understanding the VGLA *
- Under- standing the VSEP*

2007-08 All 264 SPED & GEN 29 SPED 14 VAAP 3

- Boardmaker for the Classroom, Trait Writing for Young Writers (2)
- Co-Teaching that Works (2)
- Early Childhood Data Collection Module (3)
- Hands on Equations, Solving Word Problems Using Hands on Equations (2)
- High School Fall '07/'08 EOC SOL Non-writing Training (4)
- English Vertical Team Meetings (8)
- Getting to Know Prentice Hall Online Resources (2)
- The Power of Rubrics (2)
- Alternate and Alternative Assessments at the High School Level *
- Augmentative Communication Workshop (3)*
- Transition, New Trends, New Laws *
- Professional Book Club: “Little Big Minds”
- The Big Idea: Developing Functional Behavior Assessments , Behavior Intervention Plans (2)
- Using ABLLS to Assess Progress for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (3)*
- Using Smart Board in the Elementary SPED Classroom (3)*
- VAAP Collections of Evidence Update (2)*
- VGLA Collections of Evidence Update *
- Visual Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

2007-8 offerings VAAP specific: (Taken from the Professional Development Catalogue)

Alternate and Alternative Assessments at the Elementary and Middle School

This workshop will provide updates on the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the Virginia Grade Level Assessments (VGLA) as they relate to elementary and middle school special education, 504 and ESL students. State-created materials will be made available, and the criteria for participation for each will be reviewed. Timelines and procedures for the assessments will be discussed, as well as the importance of intervention at the school level by school administration. Strengths and weaknesses of the assessments from 2006-2007 will be reviewed.

Alternate and Alternative Assessments at the High School Level

This workshop will provide updates on the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program (VSEP) as they relate to high school special education and 504 students. State-created materials will be made available, and the criteria for participation for each will be reviewed. Timelines and procedures for the assessments will be discussed, as well as the importance of intervention at the school level by school administration. Strengths and weaknesses of the assessments from 2006-2007 will be reviewed.

VAAP Collections of Evidence Update

This workshop will provide training to those teachers and their school administrators in the organization of the VAAP Collections of Evidence. Teachers will be given opportunities to ask questions and to share ideas for evidence collection. Materials for the completion of the COE will be provided as well as all required forms for the collections. The VAAP timeline will be reviewed and procedures for submittal of assessments will be reviewed.

Sample Member Checks

Question	Member 1	Member 2
1 Like	structure goals to C and I end product/portfolio pushes teacher	accountability to parents guides curriculum measurable standards
2 Not Like	IEP- takes away from goals takes away from functional curriculum not relevant to SD/not flexible for SD time consuming	low level not good irrelevant life skills more important time – consuming- takes away from life skills
3 Better Off	no's- wrong emphasis- should be life skills assesses teachers not kids too time consuming	no- too much time not enough for life skills
	yes's- exposed to academics forces better planning	yes- broader range of material
4 Change	VAAP for lower level goals- simpler/more useful/more relevant/reduce or amend	needs to address wider range of ability levels
	academic goals for SD/allow re-do of failed goal	

Appendix G

INFORMED CONSENT FORM For On-line Survey

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to determine how the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) has influenced teachers' approaches to teaching students with severe disabilities and to determine teachers' perceptions of current practices in one school district. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey addressing instructional practices. The survey should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. In addition, if you choose to volunteer, you may participate in a short interview with the researcher about your thoughts and feelings related to your instructional practices under the VAAP.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in improving instruction for students with severe disabilities.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. No names and other identifiers will be used. Data for the survey responses will be aggregated for reporting purposes. No individual will be revealed in any reporting of these data.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. For each survey completed, the following organizations will receive a cash donation: The Special Olympics and The March of Dimes.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Lisa Mistretta, a Doctoral candidate at George Mason University. She may be reached at 540-418-7413 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Her faculty advisor's name is Margo Mastropieri who may be reached at 703-993-4136. You may contact the George Mason University Office of

Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study (If yes, check correct response below.)

The George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board has waived the requirement for signing the consent form. However, if you would like to sign a consent form prior to beginning the research, please contact Lisa Mistretta at 540-418-7413 or lmistret@gmu.edu.

By clicking below I indicate that I have read the information about this research and that I agree to participate.

I provide consent

I decline participation (if you decline, please exit the survey now.)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM: Interview

What are the Effects of the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program on the Instruction of Students with Severe Disabilities in One School District?

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to determine how the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) has influenced teachers' approaches to teaching students with severe disabilities and to determine teachers' perceptions of current practices in one school district. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview that should take about 20-25 minutes to complete.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in improving instruction for students with severe disabilities.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. For the interview, the researcher will conduct each interview. For reporting purposes, each interview participant will be given a pseudonym. Similarly, the school district will not be referred to by name and only scant

demographic information will be given so that the district will not be identified. No individual will be revealed in any reporting.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. For each survey completed, the following organizations will receive a cash donation: The Special Olympics and The March of Dimes.

This interview will be conducted in order to better understand the individual stories of teachers with VAAP experience who teach students with severe disabilities. The interviews will be conducted in person, most likely in each teacher’s school. All interviews will be tape-recorded and later transcribed. The audio tapes will remain in the possession of the researcher who will listen to and transcribe each tape. Once the transcriptions of each interview are completed and reviewed, the tapes will be destroyed.

_____ I agree to audio taping.

_____ I do not agree to audio taping.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Lisa Mistretta, a Doctoral candidate at George Mason University. She may be reached at 540-418-7413 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Her faculty advisor's name is Margo Mastropieri who may be reached at 703-993-4136. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Name

Date of Signature

Version date: 1/22/08

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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