



# Washington State Association of School Psychologists

Recently, the WSASP Assessment Committee has started a monthly "Dear Assessment Committee" column, which responds to relevant questions that are submitted by school psychologists across the state. For additional responses and/or to submit a question, please visit the website: <https://www.wsasp.org/Assessment-Committee>. The following article is a reply to a member's question about best practices for how often teams should complete cognitive assessments during reevaluations.

## **Considerations for the Frequency of Cognitive Assessments: A Dear Assessment Committee Article**

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IDEA states that students must be reassessed every three years in special education, though evaluations can occur more frequently based on requests from stakeholders such as the parents or the school team. An initial evaluation, completed to determine a student's eligibility for special education, may commonly include cognitive testing as one part of a comprehensive evaluation. Testing for special education can serve a variety of purposes, including identifying areas of service for a student or certain eligibility categories. Less often discussed is how frequently and at what intervals during reevaluations cognitive testing should be completed again. If a student is, for example, first evaluated in second grade, reevaluations would legally occur a minimum of three times before they finished their education. In cases such as this, what is the best practice for assessing cognitive skills again when completing reevaluations?

Assessment planning is individualized based on student need and referral questions for the evaluation. If the team is considering readministering a cognitive measure, what are the individual variables that are relevant to be considered? There is little established best practice that has been communicated on this subject, though there are often anecdotal rules that can often be found. School districts may sometimes have arbitrary answers such as 'every other evaluation' or 'once in elementary and then again in high school', though often without specific reasoning for this rule.

Potential guidelines are more complicated than that, as they hinge on many factors that should be considered by the practitioners and the team. A recent NASP (2020) publication addressing how to navigate assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic reiterated that for a reevaluation "Standardized assessments are not required

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team should consider other components when determining appropriate assessment approaches.

To guide team considerations, the following questions may be considered when approaching a reevaluation that could include cognitive testing. Please note that these are not inclusive to all circumstances, but rather just a guideline to considering evaluation updates. One important area not fully explored in this article is testing considerations for emerging bilingual students or the noted differences that exist for persons and communities of color (Council of National Psychological Associations for the Advancement of Ethnic Minority Interests, 2016). Another area that is not fully explored is the impact to validity as a result of alterations to testing parameters due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Best practices for cognitive testing remain a complicated and expansive topic, and the WSASP assessment committee hopes to continue to explore many different contexts for this topic in the future.

## **Considerations:**

### **How much time has passed between testing, and what test was used?**

An important area that should be considered by all practitioners when examining cognitive testing is the reason for such testing in the first place. Cognitive testing demonstrates strong predictive validity due to the ability to highly correlate with long-term academic outcomes or adaptive behaviors (Krantzler et al., 2020). Despite this strong association, there are potential hurdles to the accuracy of cognitive testing over time, including impacts from the Flynn effect. The Flynn effect refers to the tendency of measurements of cognitive scores to rise over time. The effect posits that there is a tendency for scores on previously normed tests to inflate cognitive scores when compared to more recently normed tests. Based on estimates from research completed by Flynn, scores may increase on average by 0.3 points per year. This is why general guidelines advise that professionals not utilize a test that is more than 10-15 years from the most recent norms. A meta-analysis on the Flynn effect (2014) concluded, “when individuals are tested near the release of a newly normed assessment, the difference in IQ scores produced by the newer test and the older test would indicate that the individual is performing more poorly than what earlier testing may have suggested.” Further, the meta-analysis proposed that this may impact a student when “an individual is assessed at two different sites (e.g., when a child moves and is assessed in a different school district), it may be possible for the child to have



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disability during this second assessment...” (Trahan et. al, 2014).

Another area to consider is the type of testing that was previously completed for a student. Krantzler et al. (2020) noted limitations for testing completed with nonverbal testing, stating that “When using nonverbal intelligence tests, examiners must note that, as a whole, they tend not to predict academic achievement as well as verbal tests-for all groups” (p. 343). Though predictive validity with nonverbal assessments is generally considered to reach an acceptable use for evaluations, the reduction of language loading does limit the number of cognitive areas that the test claims to measure (McCallum, 2013). The reduction in linguistic loading is a trade-off, as it does allow the testing to be generally valid with students who have limited English proficiency (LEP), as well as those from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, due to the limitations of the predictive validity, Krantzler et al. (2020) suggest “recommendations and interventions based on the results of nonverbal tests for children with LEP always should be tentative and short-term (no longer than 1 year at most)” (p. 343). As stated above, the full implications of emerging bilingual students will not be fully explored in this article. Rather this area is intended to serve as an example of the many factors that should be considered by practitioners and teams when assessment planning for a student’s reevaluation.

### **Are there reasons for the team to expect the results of another cognitive assessment to display different information?**

Reviewing the barriers to completing valid and reliable cognitive testing is an important part of the evaluation process before administering any intelligence test. Despite this, the full breadth of a student’s information is not always readily available to examiners before administering measures, which may lead to inaccurate testing. Though immediate impacts to validity should be noted for testing, future testing may benefit from the knowledge of situations such as an undiagnosed medical condition or information that was unknown during initial intelligence testing. In such instances, later evaluations may be able to reflect differently on what the most appropriate assessment for a child may be, or make changes to administration style (e.g., time of day of administration, use of frequent breaks, etc.) to produce more valid results.

Practitioners should always aim to minimize potential confounds by examining existing data (e.g., a child’s hearing and vision screenings or medication usage). However, there may be a limit to what conditions are under the evaluator’s purview in these instances. As an example, students who are prescribed certain medications may



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cannot create a wholly inclusive list that encompasses all of the varied reasons that new information may be gained from testing. In order to explore each student's unique circumstances, practitioners should review all available information from previous assessments to gain a clear perspective on if updated testing is likely to display significantly different results.

### **What additional factors may be impacting a student currently?**

Cognitive measures examine the rate of development compared to peers of the same age. Therefore, updated testing may prove useful in instances where students may display different impacts to their abilities over time as they grow and develop. In these instances, updated testing could prove to be helpful as it may show the difference in their cognitive development compared to their same-aged peers, or even relative to a student's previous abilities in certain cases. Developmental information may play an important role in this process, as screening for information such as occurrences of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or other progressive or acquired medical conditions are a part of looking for confounds that might be impacting cognitive abilities. Examples could include things like major medical episodes, such as childhood chemotherapy exposure, which has been noted in multiple publications as having the possibility to cause 'later effects' in cognitive development including a significant decrease in full-scale cognitive scores. In order to consider potential impacts from additional factors, teams should aim to review updated medical information and file reviews, which may assist in determining the need for additional testing.

### **What are the student's needs outside of the school setting?**

Special education evaluations are not obligated to provide testing for parents and families outside of considerations for school-based eligibility and development of an IEP. However, students' needs outside of school often intersect with their school-based experiences and should be thoughtfully reviewed when approaching any evaluation. Cognitive testing may be used in a multitude of different instances outside of the school setting, including for medical diagnoses, treatment planning, or even in determining access to social services. In Washington State, the use of only certain cognitive assessments will be accepted by the Developmental Disabilities Association to meet the criteria for receiving social services. Teams may consider this factor as it may limit a student's ability to access external support that could help them in the school setting as well. Similarly, the College Board has certain requirements for students to be able to receive accommodations for instances such as the SAT or AP testing. Though it is not



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## Conclusion:

Overall, outside of changes due to external factors, the long-term stability of cognitive scores has been well-established in the literature, with cognitive scores typically stabilizing in early elementary school (Krantzler et al, 2020). While students may experience growth between early education and later adolescence, this growth is still relative to same-aged peers. Even with this consideration, there are many reasons that updated testing may prove helpful to a team or a family. To comply with the NASP Practice Domains (2020b), it is important that the practitioner reflects on Domain 1: “School psychologists understand and utilize assessment methods for identifying strengths and needs; for developing effective interventions, services, and programs”. Though this requirement is not unilaterally met by completing updated cognitive testing, or by gathering data from any one method, it is important to consider the role testing may play for any student. A thorough review of the facts and circumstances related to a student’s evaluation will serve practitioners best as they proceed through the reevaluation process.

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