FOCUS on Results

Guidance & Technical Assistance from the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

MICHIGAN Department of Education

Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

September 2004

Using Assessment Data Changes the Way Some Schools Do Business

By Sue Johnson and Kathy Bradford

Quality Assurance Review (QAR) Process Provides Valuable Lessons in Helping ALL Students Access the General Curriculum

The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) really seems to work. Schools that have used the QAR process report they have improved the performance of students with disabilities at three levels: classroom, school, and district.

QAR is an action research project in which educators have worked collaboratively to conduct school-based research to improve teaching and learning (see Figure 1). Schools involved in the QAR action research project have achieved improved student results by using research-based practices to guide the cycle of collecting and analyzing meaningful assessment data and then using the information to improve the achievement of students with disabilities.

This *FOCUS on Results* document will introduce the QAR process, which has been piloted in six Michigan schools since 2002 (see sidebar on page 3). Although each school uses data in unique ways to fit its needs, all report that the QAR process has changed the way they use data and plan instruction (see Figure 1). As a result, these schools have learned some valuable lessons about how to help teachers teach so children can learn.

Figure 1

About Quality Assurance Review (QAR)

The 1997 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) offered Michigan an opportunity for special education service providers to support systemic education reform. As a result, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE/EIS) implemented a three-year action research project using the QAR process. The MDE extended the project to a fourth year in 2003.

Throughout the project years, QAR coordinators have continually monitored the school's progress, changing and building the program based on school data. In this way, they have modeled what they want teachers and schools to do for children with disabilities.

At the end of the project's fourth year, QAR pilot schools have completed student case study research for 72 students with disabilities, implementing data-driven individualized educational programs (IEPs) using a QAR process for each student. Teachers report they are also applying the knowledge they've gained through the action research with additional students. The results, according to participant reports, are that *ALL* students are learning more, as measured by a variety of assessment data: text-based, curricula-based, informal teacher assessment and standardized tests.

The QAR process aligns with all state and federal legislation focused on improving the performance of students with disabilities.

Source: Quality Assurance Review, Mentoring Guide 2003-2004, *Revised 6/17/03, Michigan Department of Education (MDE), Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE/EIS).*

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Michigan Curriculum Framework Core Content Areas:

- English language arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social studies

Applying the Lessons Learned from QAR

Lesson One: ***Data analysis should be brought to the student level.***

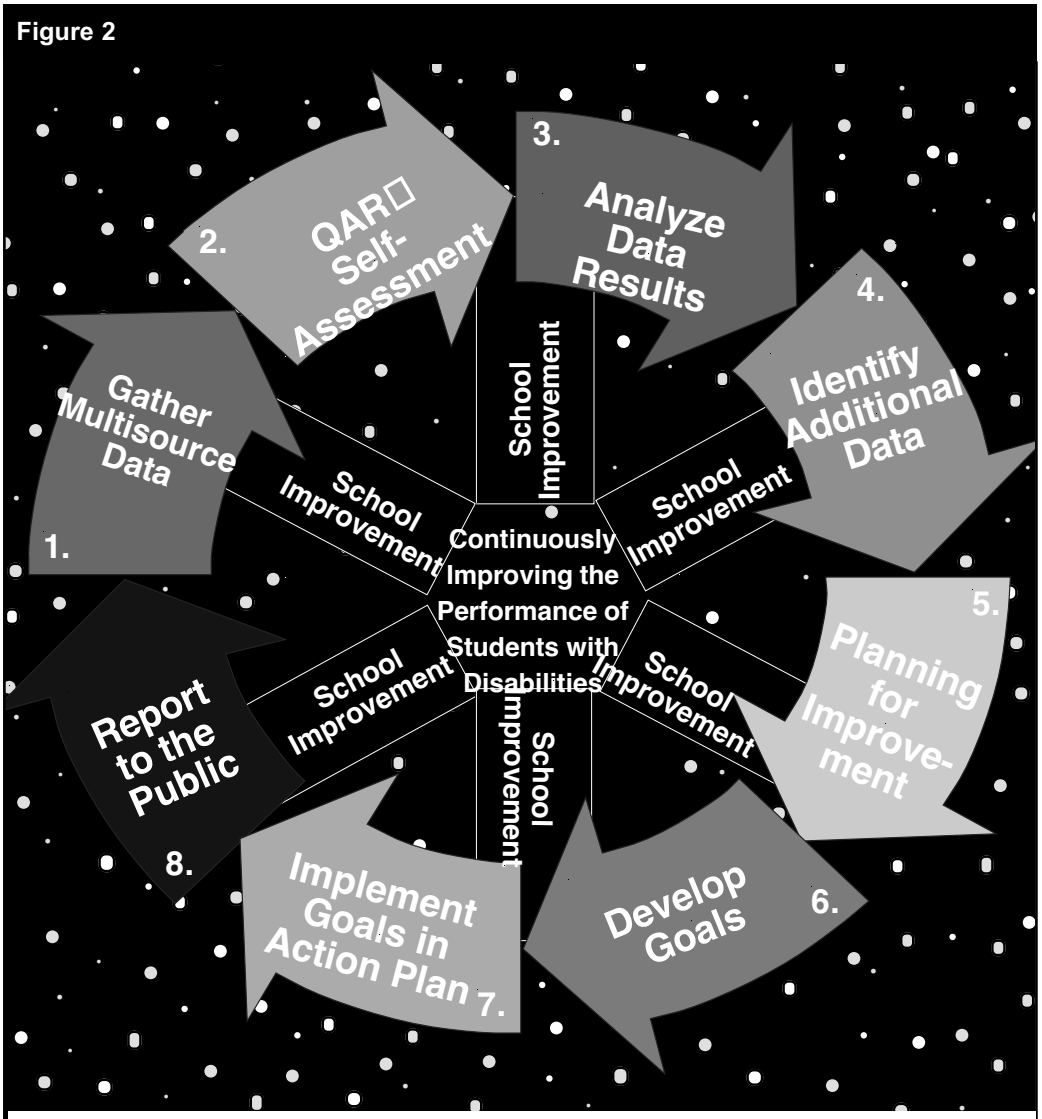
One major finding after the first year of this pilot was that, while the QAR was driving systems reform, this systems reform did not necessarily improve student performance. Even though the staff and parents at the schools were willing to learn new methods and work in new ways within the system, the students' achievement didn't improve.

As a result, QAR teams had to change the way they thought about data. Pilot schools began implementing the eight components of the QAR process at the student level (see Figure 2). They did this by using multiple sources of student data to measure a student's present level of educational performance, which in turn determined the goal(s) and short-term objectives for a student's individualized education program (IEP). Then the teams repeated the same assessment analysis to measure the student's progress and make new decisions about each student's instruction and accommodations.

Lesson Two: ***Data analysis should be done on comparable data.***

It's important to remember that data are information, not just scores. Too often in the need to make data-driven decisions,

Figure 2



8 Components of QAR

schools gather many different assessment scores that measure student achievement at a moment in time. Individually, these scores provide limited information about an individual student. Consequently, using this limited information often leads to subjective decisions about how to teach a student so the student will learn.

QAR teams overcame this barrier by using student data that could be compared; this comparable data guided instructional decisions about the student.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely to find three comparable sources of data results in each of the core content areas for any student. Therefore, QAR teams needed to develop an alternative—a process that would work for all teachers in all schools. Using lessons from existing research and the QAR process implemented in the six pilot schools, teams developed a data-driven decision-making model that improved student learning and focused classroom instruction (see Figure 3).

Lesson Three: *Data analysis must focus on identifying universal skills*

Too often educators think of "skills" as things like "multiplication" or "decoding,"

Figure 3

How did Quality Assurance Review (QAR) work in the pilot school sites?

1. School-based teams collected student data from multiple sources. At each pilot site, the special education service provider collected 12 assessments and their respective results for three students with different disabilities. The12 assessments comprised three different assessments from each of the four core content areas identified in the *Michigan Curriculum Framework*.▼ (Triangulating comparable data of ten items or more is statistically reliable, is compatible with North Central Accreditation (NCA) requirements, and fulfills federal and state compliance regulations.)

2. School-based teams compared the data. Through random selection, the teams analyzed one question answered incorrectly by the student from each of the 12 assessments from the four core content areas (see box on page 9 for a list of the types of assessments pilot schools used). The teams analyzed this data (assessment question) to identify the universal skills (see Figure 4) that the student needed to know and be able to do to answer the question correctly. Teams selected three to five universal skills that repeatedly appeared throughout all core content areas as the focus for the student's learning and basis for developing the student's IEP (see Figure 5 for information about universal skills).

3. School-based teams collaborated with parents/guardians. The data analysis was shared with parents/guardians of the students with disabilities. Parents/guardians were also invited to share their own observations about the universal skills their child used effectively or struggled to use at home. This input became part of the decision-making data set used to write a quality IEP.

4. School-based teams prepared for a quality IEP. Using the QAR data-based decision-making process, the team used the student's universal skills and descriptors in a number of ways: to describe the student's present level of educational performance (PLEP); to develop a suggested quality annual goal to access and progress in the general curriculum; to develop suggested quality short-term objectives for the IEP; and to develop a suggested quality statement of progress. Pilot participants surveyed parents/guardians to measure whether they believed their input was valued and used in developing their child's IEP.

5. The school-based teams determined measures to evaluate the student's progress. In collaboration with general education teachers, QAR teams identified three different assessments to measure a student's progress toward achieving the annual goal and its short-term objectives in each core content area. In addition, pilot participants developed charts identifying the assessments and the results, which were sent to the parent/guardian with the same frequency as progress reports for all students in the school.

The six QAR pilot study school sites:

- Navigator School, Pinckney Community Schools
- Parkside Elementary School, Rockford Public Schools
- Pattengill Elementary School, Berkley School District
- Sparta Middle School, Sparta Area Schools
- Townsend Elementary School, Vandercook Lake Public Schools
- Winchell Elementary School, Kalamazoo Public Schools

Members of QAR core teams at each pilot school:

- 1 building principal
- 2 general education teachers
- 2 special education service providers, one of whom must be a teacher
- 1 parent of a student with disabilities attending that school

At least one of these members must already have been serving on the school's improvement team. (Some schools had extended core teams.)

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By the end of the project's fourth year, QAR pilot schools will have completed student case study research for 72 students with disabilities, implementing data-driven individualized educational programs (IEPs) using a QAR process for each student.

▾▾▾

These are the student's needed universal skills based on analysis of his 12 assessment questions.

or "using a noun and a verb to make a complete sentence." These are academic skills.

Knowledge gained from this action research and other published literature suggested that students first needed to master certain basic universal skills before they could achieve academic, social, or daily living skills. By analyzing a student's 12 incorrectly-answered assessment questions, pilot teams identified the basic universal skills the student must be taught to apply in order to learn content material.

Teachers came to recognize that curriculum content is the "what" that students must learn; it provides the context in which students apply their specific universal skills. These are the skills that build bridges for the critical thinking patterns the student needs in order to progress in the general curriculum (see Figure 4).

Project participants—including students, parents, and teachers—reported that students with disabilities found it difficult to transfer skills from one setting to another. Using this as a hypothesis for the QAR student case study research,▾▾ it was determined that students experience their disability throughout different educational and learning settings. Therefore, a student's unique need to learn specific universal skills occurs throughout the general curriculum (each core content area) and all school, work, and home-related settings.

Figure 4

What Are Universal Skills?

This action research project used a framework of seven universal skills inherent in the development of critical thinking patterns: 1) Apply, 2) Reason, 3) Categorize, 4) Communicate, 5) Imagine, 6) Problem Solve, and 7) Organize.

The descriptor skills can be used to specifically focus the student's need to learn a universal skill. For a student with disabilities, the identification of a universal skill and/or descriptors is based upon an analysis of a random sampling of assessment questions the student answered incorrectly. The universal skills and/or descriptors determine the critical thinking patterns the student needs to learn the general education curriculum.

UNIVERSAL SKILLS	DESCRIPTORS
Apply	collect, construct, plan, modify, reduce, expand, demonstrate, and engage
Reason	deduce, induce, show cause/effect, generalize, reward, and identify consequence
Categorize	define, label, identify, compare/contrast, locate, and recognize
Communicate	discuss, interpret, choose, explain, advocate, express, infer, and detail
Imagine	create, describe, display, illustrate, show examples, and invent
Problem Solve	analyze, integrate, investigate, evaluate, synthesize, and solve
Organize	order, place/space, position, outline, prioritize, sequence, and prepare

The universal skills and their descriptors were developed through a comprehensive analysis of the core content standards and benchmarks in the *Michigan Curriculum Framework; extensive research literature (see Bibliography, page 9); and two years of action research (see Figure 5).*

Source: Preparing a Quality Individualized Education Program for a Student with Disabilities*, Revised 11/1/03, MDE, OSE/EIS.*

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Figure 5

How Were the Universal Skills and/or Descriptors Developed?

1. In 2001, Quality Assurance Review (QAR) project manager Kathy Bradford conducted a comprehensive horizontal and vertical analysis of the core content and content standards and benchmarks, as described in the *Michigan Curriculum Framework*. She used this analysis to identify the skills a student needs to know to achieve the standards and benchmarks.

2. That same year, Bradford, along with QAR consultant Jim Newnum, applied extensive research to the project (see Bibliography page 9) which included, but was not limited to, concept-based education, differentiated learning, skill-based learning, meta-cognition, and right- and left-brain learning.

3. For two years, QAR pilot study school sites field-tested application of the universal skills and/or descriptors as a basis for developing a quality IEP to improve the performance of students with disabilities.

The universal skills and/or descriptors are designed to transcend all curriculum and education settings to ensure that the student's learning of the general curriculum is transferable to all content areas in all settings.

To test the application of the universal skills and/or descriptors in preparing a quality IEP, action research was conducted in six QAR pilot study school sites. The results—as measured by text-based, curriculum based, and standardized assessment—indicate significant improvement for students with disabilities.

Source: Preparing a Quality Individualized Education Program for a Student with Disabilities*, Revised 11/1/03, MDE, OSE/EIS.*

For example, historically, an IEP goal for a student with disabilities might have read, "*Jimmy will learn to read at sixth-grade level"* or *"Jane will read three stories, two times a week."* In comparison, using the QAR process to identify and measure the universal skills a student needs to learn, an IEP team might write a quality annual goal that reads, "*John will improve 80-100 percent in learning to apply, sequence, prioritize, and organize*▼▼▼ *using the third-grade-level expectations for English Language Arts from the Michigan Curriculum Framework. Progress will be measured each marking period based upon an analysis of three types of assessments: teacher made, textbook chapter tests, and curriculum-based."*

Focusing on the universal skills a student needs to learn transcends all learning environments. This focus also provides continuity for the student to learn and apply these skills in all settings and with four core content areas. The results received from the pilot schools indicate that identifying and measuring each student's universal skills yields significant improvement for students with disabilities.

Lesson Four: ***Collaboration is key to raising student achievement.***

Using data effectively requires consistent collaboration. This collaboration needs to happen at two levels: 1) between the general education and special education providers and 2) between the school and home.

First, special education service providers explored new roles, becoming advisors and collaborators with classroom teachers. Special education providers in the QAR pilot schools facilitated collaboration with the student's general education teachers to collect the multiple sources of student assessment data for

QAR Abbreviated Glossary

Action Research: Projects, like QAR, in which educators work collaboratively to form questions about their professional practice; to collect, analyze, and interpret data; to draw conclusions about their practice; and to use the results of this research to enhance and improve their professional practice.

Annual Goal: Statement that describes what a student with a disability can reasonably be expected to accomplish within a 12-month period in the student's special education program.

Assessment: The act of collecting, analyzing, and using data in making informed instructional decisions about student achievement. Assessment instruments include norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, district, and classroom tests, as well as observational records, projects, portfolios, and other data collecting devices.

Collaboration: A relationship developed to the level where all work toward the same objectives and exhibit a cooperative working modality to achieve common goals.

Comparative Analysis: A tool used to help organize and think about data, usually using what's called a Comparison Matrix.

Data: Information that is collected and organized for analysis and used as a basis for making "data-based" decisions.

Glossary, cont'd.

Data-based Decisions: Decisions based on analysis of collected data. Three types of data can be used for decision-making: outcome, demographic, and process.

Descriptor Skills: Skills that describe more specifically the seven universal skills (see Figure 4).

General curriculum: (sometimes referred to as general education) is defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as the same curriculum as that established for students without disabilities [34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(1)(i)].

Multi-source Data: Data collected from many measures. For special education purposes, using a minimum of three sources is considered statistically sound practice.

Observational Data: Data obtained from observing specific occurrences or patterns of behavior. Usually the data are recorded in what is called anecdotal records.

Performance Assessment: The measure of a student's progress related to what the student knows, understands, and can do; includes content understanding and process performance.

analysis. Then together they reviewed assessments and analyzed the data to determine which specific universal skills the student needed to learn or improve. In addition, special education providers used the results to become "accommodation experts" to help classroom teachers identify precisely how to teach and observe these universal skills using the content in each core content area.

As the discussion between special education teachers and general education teachers became more collaborative and focused on the universal skills that the student needed to learn, classroom teachers were more likely to say, "I can do that!"

Second, pilot schools found new ways to collaborate with families. Collaboration between school and home has been, and remains, an important practice for most educators. However, using parent input as part of the data set to plan and measure the student's continuous improvement is new! The QAR process empowers parents to be key partners on the IEP team, helping prepare the IEP and evaluate the results of the data-driven decisions.

In the pilot schools, parents/guardians were invited to look at and respond to the universal skills identified for improvement, based on an analysis of their child's assessment data in school. They were invited to talk about how their child learns at home. For example, special education teachers asked questions like, "What seems to help your child do a job independently?" and "How does your child solve problems?" Parents provided additional information that became part of the data set used to develop a quality IEP and then applied this information in the classroom. At the conclusion of their child's IEP, the parents/guardians were surveyed to evaluate whether they believed the school team valued and used information about their child's learning at home when preparing and implementing the IEP. Survey results showed that parents/guardians indeed felt as if they were working members of their child's IEP team.

Lesson Five: ***Using data to improve student achievement requires a new use of time and additional staff support.***

Using assessment data to plan a quality IEP, monitor progress, and apply the results to continually improve student performance is not doing business as usual—it is groundbreaking school reform. Consequently, school-based teams need time to implement new practices and personnel development in order to build success.

Pilot schools provided **data-driven personnel development** to help teachers identify and compare existing assessment data that was available to them. Teachers also learned how to reduce academic skills to the basic universal skills students needed to acquire in order to progress in the general education curriculum. When they applied these lessons to their instruction in the classroom, teachers started seeing improved student performance reflected in better test scores. Once teachers started seeing results, they asked teams to expand the process to help more students—including those without an IEP.

Student assessment results were used to design future personnel development for the pilot teams, based on teacher response. In this way, personnel development responded to the needs of the staff to improve student performance. Then teams used a post test of the same student assessments to see if teachers had suc-

cessfully implemented what they learned in the classroom.

In addition to personnel development, school-based teams needed **time** to implement new practices and develop support within the system. Gathering and analyzing comparable data can be frustrating because ideal testing vehicles do not exist. At times, the pilot schools found the process time consuming and difficult. In the beginning, some schools found the process required from 1.5 to 3 hours for each student. However, each time the process was completed, it became easier. School-based teams reported the time was cut to 30 to 45 minutes for each student.

By the second year, all the general education staff members were aware of the process. Each teacher had a prepared list of her/his assessments and was introduced to the universal skills. All involved teachers were working together to measure a student's universal skills within the content area. As the process became more systemic, it became more streamlined, showing actual results—improving student performance.

When teachers, principals, and parents began seeing results, they knew the time had been well spent. Seeing students learning and reaching their goals generated excitement, which brought new teachers on board. Plus, preparing and implementing IEPs using QAR became a systemic process; school staff began to understand the process and were more willing to participate. School leaders even began to save time by identifying student assessment data they didn't need. They eliminated some assessments and found new tools that provided more useful student information.

Putting the Lessons to Work

Preparing a Quality Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a Student with Disabilities

Continuous improvement for a student with disabilities is the number one reason to be well prepared for the individual education program (IEP) team meeting.

If you would like to learn more about using student assessment data to write quality IEPs for students, the QAR team has assembled some tools to help. Check out the resources on page 10 for more details.

Glossary, cont'd.

Personnel Development: (1) Provides access to continuous learning of teachers, special education service providers, and parents. Includes learning to use appropriate technology aids. Supports effective engagement in the teaching-learning process for students with disabilities. (2) A continuous process of improvement to promote high standards of academic achievement and responsible citizenship for all students.

Present Level of Educational Performance (PLEP): Describes how the child's disability affects her/his progress in the general curriculum. The purpose of the PLEP is to identify the student's needs and establish a baseline from which to develop meaningful and measurable goals.

Short Term Objectives: The intermediate steps that will assist the student in accomplishing the annual goals; determine what behavior, conditions, and criteria will be monitored.

Triangulation: Using multiple sources of data, three or more, to get a more complete understanding of a student's achievement. Can also be used to analyze achievement on the classroom, school, and district levels.

Universal Skills: Seven skills inherent to the development of critical thinking patterns: 1) apply, 2) reason, 3) categorize, 4) communicate, 5) imagine, 6) problem solve, and 7) organize.

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Firing Up Your Team to Use Data-driven Instruction

New tools and knowledge coming out of the QAR pilot schools can make the learning curve shorter for schools that are just starting to use data-driven instruction. However, school teams will still need administrators who will cheer them along, encourage honesty and risk-taking, and provide personnel development that focuses on improving student achievement.

Seeing students succeed should inspire staff and parents. At first, though, education leaders using data-driven processes need a powerful set of messages to share with their staff. When parents and staff ask, "Why should we do this?" here are a few reasons to offer:

- **It works for kids**, and QAR pilot schools have the results to prove it.
- **It works for all teachers**, creating a common language (e.g., universal skills, *Michigan Curriculum Framework*, assessment data.).
- **It saves everyone time.** You will waste fewer hours on methods that don't work, and you'll toss out assessments that don't help you make decisions for students.
- **It makes reporting easier.** It became very easy for pilot schools to complete the questions asked by *Education YES!* and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Plus, schools felt more confident about their answers, because they were based on real data.
- **Schools will be more successful in making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).** This is what new accountability measures are all about—helping *ALL* students succeed, no matter where they start.
- **Using student-level data will transform your work.** The QAR process has shown that when teachers are given methods that work, they'll never go back to the old way of doing things.

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Types of Assessments Used for QAR Action Research

Types of Assessments

Informal Teacher Assessment:	Created by the teacher
Text-based Assessment:	Written by the publisher of the textbook
Curriculum-based Assessment:	Measures mastery of the content of the curriculum
Standards-based Assessment:	Uses benchmarks, objectives, and/or are teacher-made or commercial
Standardized Tests:	Criterion Referenced (MEAS) or Norm Referenced
Portfolio:	Samples of student work gathered over a period of time that reflect growth and improved learning
Investigation:	Inquiry projects, experiments
Performance:	Demonstration, speech, project-based, etc.
Teacher Observation:	Data about student behavior that is seen by the teacher and recorded in a systematic format

Source: Preparing a Quality Individualized Education Program for a Student with Disabilities*, Revised 11/1/03, MDE, OSE/EIS.*

NOTE: The authors are writing as representatives of the entire QAR team, which includes teachers, administrators, staff, and parents at each pilot school. The authors stress that decision-making and exhaustive efforts to continuously improve the project are on-going team efforts driven by evaluation data. The QAR pilot project continued in two schools throughout 2003-04. The findings from these schools' implementation of QAR will lead to further changes and adjustments to the process. Additionally, the project began a formal evaluation to measure the impact on teacher practice and student achievement. Evaluaton results and updated QAR information-will be posted to the CEN Web site at www.cenmi.org.

This article reflects lessons learned by the action research team to date, and the authors claim no exclusive responsibility for the decisions made or the results achieved.

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WEB LINKS

Tools to Help You Use Quality Assurance Review

Preparing a Quality Individualized Education Program for a Student with Disabilities is a 35-page document packed with step-by-step directions and worksheets to guide you through preparing, implementing, and evaluating a data-driven IEP. (This document will continue to be revised throughout the remainder of the QAR pilot in 2003-04.)

Compilation of Assessments is a tool developed to help teachers begin to identify, analyze, and use the school's existing assessment results.

QAR Self-Assessment and Planning Personnel Development From Self-Assessment Results. Together with a study of disaggregated Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) result data, these two tools can help administrators make effective decisions about what personnel development is needed and what has the greatest potential for increasing student performance. (QAR pilot schools compared the MEAP results of students with disabilities to those in general education. This information, along with the QAR Self-Assessment, helped administrators determine priorities for personnel development.)

All these resources can be downloaded at www.cenmi.org. Those without Web access can call CEN for a copy at (800) 593-9146.

National Special Education Web Sites with Assessment Information

National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO)
http://education.umn.edu/nceo

Federal Resource Center for Special Education (FRC)
www.dssc.org/frc
This site includes the publication
Special Education in an Era of School Reform: Accountability, Standards and Assessment by Ronald Erickson, Ph.D.
http://www.federalresourcecenter.org/frc/pubs/erickson.pdf

National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (NCAC)
http://www.cast.org/ncac
Enter "assessment" into the search site tool

Michigan Special Education Web Sites

Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education (CAUSE)
Michigan's designated parent training and information center
www.causeonline.org/

Center for Educational Networking (CEN)
www.cenmi.org

Michigan Department of Education
(Click on Administrators, then Special Education, then Assessment and Accomodations)
www.michigan.gov/mde