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# The West Virginia Alternate Identification and Reporting Program

An Exploratory Analysis

**Survey results suggest that the AIR process made progress in diminishing the burden that a label appears to place on students emotionally, and the associated low expectations.**

**Although the AIR program did not fully achieve its goals, it appears it is well on its way to doing so if the findings from this study can be used to inform program implementation going forward.**

This study examines the results of the Alternative Identification and Reporting (AIR) program, which promoted the nonuse of disability labels for students receiving special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a group of 26 elementary and middle schools in West Virginia. The AIR program was founded on the premise that the determination of a specific disability category and subsequent labeling is not necessary for providing students needed instructional and behavioral services. Instead, staff were to focus on the instructional and behavioral needs of the students.

*Method of study.* Survey and assessment data were used to examine the results of the AIR program. In response to e-mail invitations, 273 teachers, 20 principals, 12 assistant principals, and 11 psychologists completed online questionnaires. Additionally, an analysis of WESTEST/WESTEST 2 assessment data examined whether students with disabilities attending AIR schools outperform students with similar disabilities in non-AIR schools in mathematics and reading/language arts.

*Findings.* The AIR program made limited progress toward the first of its four goals, to establish and reinforce the commonality of instructional and behavioral needs for students. The AIR program made some progress in its second goal of transitioning teachers, administrators, and parents towards a model of support that is based on the student's instructional and behavioral needs and not a defined area of disability. Survey results also suggest that the AIR process made progress in diminishing the burden that a label appears to place on students emotionally, and the associated low expectations. Addressing the third goal, analyses in this study reveal some higher, though statistically insignificant, gains in test scores for AIR students in mathematics and reading compared with students with similar disabilities in non-AIR schools. The fourth goal, accomplished with this report, was to contribute to the national dialogue associated with early intervention, response to intervention (RTI), and appropriate instruction and support for students who demonstrate the need for the protections of IDEA.

*Limitations of study.* Limitations included (a) a lack of direct contact with potential survey participants resulting in inconsistency across schools regarding who responded to the survey; (b) variation in the length of experience with the AIR program among survey respondents; (c) shortcomings in a survey with multiple choice response options; (d) some confusion about the differences between RTI and AIR; (e) the availability of only posttest responses for educators, precluding the ability to detect changes in attitudes over time; and (f) the exclusion of students too young to take WESTEST 2.

*Recommendations.* Although the AIR program did not fully achieve its first three goals, it appears it is well on its way to doing so. Recommendations include (a) provide more resources and support for school personnel; (b) reduce negative perceptions of the program held by some school personnel; (c) encourage parents' engagement with the AIR model of support based on needs; (d) have better documentation and aim to increase the fidelity of the AIR program; (e) include general education students as part of the AIR program; (f) focus specifically on school culture in the AIR program; and (g) thoroughly review the literature at the program planning stage.

For more information, contact coauthor Nate Hixson (nhixson@access.k12.wv.us), or download the full report, *The West Virginia Alternate Identification and Reporting Program: An Exploratory Analysis*, available on the Office of Research website: <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2012.html>.