



# Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting!



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States have developed alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards, called here **alternate assessments**, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Alternate assessments enable these students to be tested, the same as their peers, on their academic knowledge and skills, but the tests require performance levels appropriate for them. The results of these tests are used to judge how well schools are meeting the students' educational needs.

Alternate assessments are designed specifically for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. These assessments are based on the

same state **content** standards for the student's grade as applied to all students, but with different expectations for achievement on those content standards (called **alternate achievement standards**; see Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2015).

The specific name of an alternate assessment varies from state to state. Most often, it has the word *alternate* somewhere in the name.

Providing alternate assessments requires that states be very clear about who students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are. Each state has guidelines to help Individualized Education Program

## Names of Some States' Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards

- California Alternate Assessments (CAAs)
- Delaware System of Student Assessments – Alternate (DESSA-Alt)
- Hawaii State Assessment – Alternate (HSA-Alt)
- Maine's Alternate Assessment
- Mississippi Academic Assessment Program– Alternate (MAAP-A)
- New Mexico Alternate Performance Assessment (NMAPA)
- Tennessee Alternate Assessments
- Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)
- Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) – used across multiple states
- Multi-State Alternate Assessment (MSAA) – used across multiple states

See [https://nceo.info/state\\_policies](https://nceo.info/state_policies) for information on states' alternate assessments not listed here.

(IEP) teams determine whether a student has a significant cognitive disability that makes the alternate assessment the appropriate assessment for that student. The decision about which assessment a student takes is separate from the decision about where a student is educated. Participation in the alternate assessment does **not** automatically mean that a student is in a different setting from that of his or her same-age peers without disabilities.

## Who are Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not identify a category of disability called “most significant cognitive disability.” Most states, though, have indicated that these students are ones with a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly affect intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. In this description, adaptive behavior refers to the knowledge and skills essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

Most states have resources to help IEP teams identify whether a student has a significant cognitive disability that indicates that participation in the alternate assessment is appropriate for the student. These resources generally identify both the characteristics

that indicate a possible *significant cognitive disability*, as well as those characteristics that should not be considered. For example, the need for extensive, direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable achievement gains on the content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled may indicate a significant cognitive disability. Being an English learner (EL) is an example of a characteristic that should not be used to define a significant cognitive disability. Further, previous low achievement in class or on a state or districtwide assessment is **not** an indication of a need to participate in an alternate assessment. Thurlow, Lazarus, Larson, Albus, Liu, and Kwong (2017) summarize states' alternate assessment participation guidelines.

## Least Restrictive Environment Provisions in IDEA

IDEA provides funds for educational services for students with disabilities. IDEA assumes that the most appropriate classroom for the child is the “least restrictive environment” or LRE. The starting assumption is that the child should receive educational services in the general education classroom, unless the child cannot be educated satisfactorily in that environment even when supplementary aids and services are provided. Further, IDEA regulations indicate that a child with disabilities should not be removed from age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed adjustments to the general education curriculum.

Unfortunately, too often, school systems decide that if a child participates in the alternate assessment, the child should be placed in a separate classroom, a placement that segregates the student from his or her peers without disabilities. Researchers have documented that educating a child outside of the general education classroom negatively affects access to the curriculum (see Kleinert et al., 2015).

## Legal Provisions that Support Inclusion

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), now called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), supports the inclusion of students who take a state's alternate assessment with their peers who do not have disabilities. There are several provisions in the law that, taken together, support inclusion. Specifically:

- States are to ensure that educators receive training on administering assessments, including alternate assessments. The educators who should be trained include general education and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, specialized instructional support personnel, and for ELs with disabilities, EL educators.
- States are to ensure that all students are provided instruction and assessments aligned to their content standards for the grades in which they are enrolled, not to earlier, lower-level grades.
- States may not prevent students who participate in alternate assessments from attempting to complete the requirements for a regular state high school diploma.
- States must measure alternate assessment performance in a way that a student who meets those standards is on track to pursue postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment.
- States must encourage the involvement of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, and promote their progress in the general education curriculum that is based on the state's academic content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities should not be instructed on an alternate curriculum, which suggests that these students need a separate classroom. Instead, they need individualized accommodations, modifications, and adapted materials for the grade-level general education curriculum.

## Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities in General Education Classrooms

Parents, teachers, and administrators must be committed to successfully including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in general education classrooms. They need to be able to address social and academic aspects of inclusion at the same time.

When you participate in your child's IEP team meeting, you will need to continue to talk forcefully about your child's academic and social needs. You will also need to be clear that taking the alternate assessment

does not mean that the student must be in a separate placement. Taking the perspective of the *least dangerous assumption* is beneficial during these discussions. Focus on your child's strengths and how to build on them.

If a communication system has not been identified for your child, finding one should be your first concern. It is difficult, if not impossible, to learn both social and academic skills without a communication system. There are successful approaches for identifying communication attempts and developing a communication system for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Your child's school should use these approaches to identify and develop a communications system for any child who does not currently have a way to communicate that his or her teachers and peers understand. Several communication tools are available (see Kearns, Kleinert, & Erickson, 2018/19).

Research indicates that students with significant cognitive disabilities can be included successfully in general education classrooms. Further, this inclusion benefits both the students with significant cognitive disabilities and their classmates without disabilities (see Saunders & Wakeman, 2018/19).

As a parent, you may need to help your child access the grade-level content. This will involve working with your child's teachers to think about how your child can access the content standards. This may involve breaking them down into manageable pieces. Finding your state's performance level descriptors for the alternate assessment will help you to do this. The performance level descriptors describe what a student with significant cognitive disabilities is expected to do at each grade.

### Least Dangerous Assumption

In the early days of implementation of IDEA, Donnellan [1984] proposed that until the field had data on what to expect from students with disabilities when they are given the opportunity to learn and appropriate educational services, supports, and specialized instruction on the content they need to be successful, we must assume they can learn it all.

Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2019, p. 11

## Next Steps for Parents

There are several steps that you can take as the parent of a student with significant cognitive disabilities:

1. Communicate with your child's teachers about your high expectations for your child. This may mean requesting that a communication system be developed for your child, or it may mean that you work with your child's teacher to determine how to develop the skills needed to be on track for successful postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment by the time your child leaves school.
2. Emphasize your expectation that the school will adopt the *least dangerous assumption* for your child.
3. Develop a strategy for ensuring that you can support your child to be successful in the general education classroom—with peers without disabilities—for as many years as possible. You may need to provide information to your child's educators, including the general educator, about how to provide your child access to the general education curriculum. Work with a parent training center in your area for support (see Center for Parent Information and Resources; this and other resources in the Resources section will help you do this).

Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities benefit from participation in academic and social interactions with their same-age peers without disabilities in the general education classroom. Supporting your child and encouraging educators will help to ensure that your child's inclusion is successful.

## Resources

Center for Parent Information and Resources – see [www.parentcenterhub.org](http://www.parentcenterhub.org); also find a parent training and information center or community parent resource center in your area at <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>.

*Impact Feature Issue: Inclusive education for K-8 students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.* Available at <https://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/312/#Cover>

Kearns, J., Kleinert, J., & Erickson, K. (2018/19). Strategies for supporting AAC use in inclusive general education classrooms. *Impact*, 31(2), 32-33. Available at <https://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/312/Supporting-AAC-Use/#Supporting-AAC-Use>

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