



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

General Assessments | Participation

Should all students with disabilities, English learners (ELs), and ELs with disabilities participate in state and district content assessments?

All students should be included in educational accountability systems. These systems are based, in part, on educational assessments. Most students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities participate in these assessment systems by taking the general content assessment with, or without, accommodations.

A small percentage of students, those with significant cognitive disabilities, participate in a state or district [alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards \(AA-AAS\)](#). Students who participate in alternate assessments to the general assessment are part of the overall accountability system.

There are now two options for handling ELs who have come to the U.S. within the last 12 months: 1) Exempt them from one administration of the English language arts test and exclude their results from school accountability for one year; or 2) Assess and report both English language arts and math performance every year but for accountability take a phase in approach to using their scores – Year 1: exclude; Year 2: include a measure of growth; Years 3 & later: Include proficiency.

For an accurate picture of the educational system's strengths and weaknesses, schools need to determine how ALL students are doing. Students who are excluded from measurement are excluded from school improvement plans based on that measurement. Unintended effects, such as not having access to limited resources to improve schools, are important reasons to include ALL students in measurement for accountability. Participation is also important for the students themselves, because raising expectations encourages all students to perform at a higher level. If all students are to benefit from educational reforms, all students must be included.

Who should decide about the participation of students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities?

For students with disabilities who receive special education services, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team makes decisions about participation in assessments. States have established criteria to help IEP teams make participation decisions. These teams know the student well, including the student's instructional program and the student's strengths, needs, and other relevant characteristics.

For ELs who have an IEP, assessment decisions are made by the IEP team. It is important that an English as a Second Language or bilingual education professional serve on the IEP team so that decisions take into account both the student's disability and language learning needs. For ELs who have a 504 accommodation plan, assessment decisions often are made by a school-based decision-making team. Regardless of whether a team is involved, it is critical that decisions take into account both the disability and the language learning needs of the student.

Although there is no specific federal requirement for a team-based approach to assessment decision making for ELs who do not have disabilities, many schools and districts do have language development teams that make these decisions.

How should content assessment participation decisions be made for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities?

Start with the premise that all students are going to participate in the accountability system. The basis for decisions about participation in content assessments of English language arts, math, science, and other areas should not be the category of a student's disability, his or her level of proficiency in English, the settings in which the student receives instruction, or the percentage of time a student spends in particular classroom settings. Many states have guidelines that help in deciding which assessment option is the best for an individual student.

Although states have guidelines that address participation decisions for students with disabilities and ELs, not all states have them specifically for ELs with disabilities. If specific guidelines for ELs with disabilities do not exist, decision makers must use both the guidelines for students with disabilities and the guidelines for ELs. States that do not have guidelines for ELs with disabilities should work toward developing specific decision-making criteria for this population. These guidelines will make it easier for decision makers who must know both sets of criteria as well as the student (e.g., strengths, weaknesses, instructional program, first and second language skills) to make the best decisions.

Why should students who will not do well be put through the emotional stress of taking a state or district assessment?

Assessments in standards-based systems serve a number of purposes: instructional planning; measuring school and district performance; providing an indicator for state, district, school, and student accountability.

When the purpose is to measure the effectiveness of the school in helping all students—including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities—reach high standards, then having these students participate in the assessment is important. Participation is important **WHETHER OR NOT** they have had the opportunity to learn



those skills. Only by measuring "how well the system is doing" will we clearly identify and then fill the gaps in instructional opportunity that leave out students from some special populations.

When the purpose of an assessment is to measure the progress of individual students, or to use the results for decisions about graduation or grade promotion, then full participation in the assessment is critical. At the same time, the system must make sure that students from special populations have access to opportunities to learn to high standards.

Involving the student and family or guardian in decisions is important to ensure that all involved understand the purpose, and any concerns can be minimized. IEP teams should receive training and support on this topic. Teachers, parents, and school administrators can help students understand the purpose of assessments and reduce student anxiety about the testing experience.