

AA-AAS: Standards That Are the “Same but Different”

Introduction

Alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) are designed to measure the knowledge and skills of students with significant cognitive disabilities. When first required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,¹ there was limited understanding of the content on which the assessments should be based. There was even less understanding of appropriate expectations for the students participating in these new assessments.

At that time, most educators assumed that students with significant cognitive disabilities could not learn academic content, nor would they benefit from academic content if they could learn it. Their curriculum was based on an assumption that functional life-skills were the only appropriate and feasible path to the future. Yet, there were small pockets of educators using evidence-based practices and a commitment to including ALL students in standards-based reform. Through their efforts, teachers, parents, and the students themselves demonstrated the assumption that only functional life-skills could be learned was not true. Consistent with the principle of the “least dangerous assumption,”²

the values of age-appropriate content and least restrictive alternatives led to more students with significant cognitive disabilities being included in grade-level settings, and participating actively in the grade-level curriculum.

The IDEA requirement to assess students with significant cognitive disabilities as part of standards-based reform was in response to this early evidence that it was time to raise the bars of opportunity and expectation for these students. Although there was agreement that students with significant cognitive disabilities would need adapted curricular materials, with reduced depth, breadth, and complexity, they had demonstrated that they could participate fully in the big ideas and activities of the grade-level curriculum and build skills and knowledge that supported their active engagement in the school, community, and with peers. Evidence was building that they could benefit from the same content as their peers, but at a different level of expectation and achievement.

In the time that has passed since the AA-AAS was first required, much has been learned about the students who participate in the AA-AAS and the standards for both content and achievement on which they are based. Still, there is confusion about what it means to have the assessment based on the **same** grade-level content standards but **different** achievement standards from those on which the general assessments are based. This Brief provides definitions and examples of

¹Alternate assessments were first required in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997.

²“The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults.” Source: Donnellan,

A. (1984). The criterion of the least dangerous assumption. *Behavioral Disorders*, 9, 141-150.

same grade-level content standards and different achievement standards.

Same Grade-Level Content Standards

Content standards define the content being assessed. In the past several years, states and consortia of states have been developing assessments based on college and career ready standards. These include both general assessments and alternate assessments meant to measure college and career readiness, based on the same content that is defined by the state as the content standard for each grade level. Alternate assessments are based on the same foundation of rigorous content as the general assessments.

Just as teachers found success and benefits from including students with significant cognitive disabilities in the curriculum of their grade-level peers, but with less depth, breadth, and complexity in their content expectations, alternate assessments cover the same carefully prioritized content. For example, at grade 4, all students, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, will work on area and perimeter, as stated in this content standard: Apply the area and perimeter formulas for rectangles in real world and mathematical problems. Educators will use this content standard to adapt instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities using evidence-based practices³—adjusting the depth, breadth, and complexity of the instructional content as the students learn.

Different Achievement Standards

As teachers work to include all students in the grade-level curriculum in the least restrictive

³ See https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main_Page for specific guidance on evidence-based practice and strategies to adapt appropriately for all students, including specific instructional strategies at https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional_Resource_Guide and progress monitoring tools at https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Systematic_Activities_for_Scripted_Systematic_Instruction.

environment, they may struggle to determine what level of achievement they should expect, and to ensure they are not reducing depth, breadth, or complexity in ways that prevent opportunities for all students to learn. That is also true with alternate assessments—what should we expect that students with significant cognitive disabilities can reasonably achieve on the grade-level content?

Alternate achievement standards⁴ define *how well* students need to perform on the content to be considered proficient. They include four components:⁵

- (1) **Levels:** These provide descriptive labels or narratives for student performance (i.e., proficient, advanced, etc.).
- (2) **Descriptions:** These indicate what students at each level must demonstrate relative to the assessment tasks. These are referred to as *performance level descriptors*⁶ (PLDs) or *achievement level descriptors* (ALDs).
- (3) **Student Work Examples:** These illustrate the range of performance within each level.
- (4) **Cut Scores:** These clearly separate each performance level.

Performance/Achievement level descriptors (PLDs) reflect both the content assessed and the expectations for students. They describe how different performance levels on a test reflect specific skills and knowledge in the content being assessed. It is through PLDs that teachers, parents, and the public can see not only what grade-level content a student should know and do to be proficient, but also how well the student needs to perform—what depth, breadth, and complexity is an appropriately

⁴ Achievement standards are also known as *performance standards*.

⁵ Components identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2001). Source: Sheinker, J. M., & Redfield, D. L. (2001). *Handbook for professional development on assessment literacy*. Washington, DC: CCSSO.

⁶ ESEA and IDEA use the term *achievement level descriptors*. The terms are used interchangeably.

high expectation.

PLDs show how one level of achievement differs from another level. In doing so, they also show the specific content, skills, or knowledge that are the next steps in learning.

Achievement standards for AA-AAS are set in the same way as achievement standards are set for general assessments. States have differed in the decisions they have made about whether the achievement standards reflect high expectations closely aligned to grade level performance or they reflect low expectations. In the past, it often was the case that states set reasonably high expectations for the general assessment but low expectations for the AA-AAS.

For example, states or consortia have developed PLDs to reflect appropriately high expectations for students in the AA-AAS. The examples below reflect high, low, and very low expectations, currently reflected in state or consortia PLDs, using the grade 4 content standard noted earlier.

Grade 4 Content Standard: Apply the area and perimeter formulas for rectangles in real world and mathematical problems.

PLD for Grade 4 Proficient Expectation for General Assessment: The student who is proficient solves problems that include

calculating area and perimeter, including those in which side lengths are missing.

Same Content and Different Achievement Standards for Student Success

PLDs provide powerful policy statements about both the content standards and the achievement standards for the AA-AAS. Further, they give teachers information about the next steps in learning and directions of focus for their teaching.

Through the use of PLDs, teachers can build their understanding of how students with significant cognitive disabilities are provided meaningful access to the curriculum. Resources are available to build teacher understanding of both the grade-level content and appropriate instructional strategies to reduce depth, breadth, and complexity for appropriate but high achievement. For example, the online instructional resources at https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional_Resources were developed to support educators in the delivery of instruction aligned to college and career ready standards, with grade-level content standards and alternate achievement standards as the least dangerous assumption for student success!

Examples of AA-AAS PLDs for Grade 4 Proficient Expectations That Reflect High, Low, and Very Low Expectations

| High Expectation | Lower Expectation | Very Low Expectation |
|---|---|---|
| The student who is proficient solves problems using perimeter and area. | The student who is proficient identifies differences in circles, squares, and triangles | The student who is proficient can make a rectangular bed. |

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