

## AA-AAS: Defining High Expectations for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

### Introduction

States have implemented alternate assessments for nearly two decades.<sup>1</sup> All states now use alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) in their accountability systems.<sup>2</sup>

Expectations for students on the AA-AAS in the late 1990s and early 2000s reflected a prevalent belief that students with significant cognitive disabilities could not learn academic content or could only learn very basic skills. This prevalent belief was reflected in alternate achievement standards that reflected functional content or limited academic skills despite emerging evidence that learning age-appropriate academic content with less depth, breadth, and complexity was possible for students with significant cognitive disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>An Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) regulation in 2003 allowed the use of proficient and advanced performance on the AA-AAS to count for Title I accountability.

<sup>3</sup>The evidence emerged from educators who adhered to the least dangerous assumption, which "...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.

Evidence is accumulating to suggest that past expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities, reflected in states' AA-AAS, have been too low. This Brief shows state data that highlight the low expectations defined for AA-AAS in the past, and presents recent evidence from educators that highlights the need to define higher expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

### Low Expectations in AA-AAS

Alternate achievement standards that define *how well* students need to perform typically have three or more levels—for example, *Below proficient*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*. Some states have more than three levels. Some states use the same labels for the alternate achievement standards as they use for the general assessment. Other states use different labels. Nevertheless, all states define a "proficient" level or performance level that is "on track," defining the level of performance that is expected of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Evidence of the low expectations held for students with significant cognitive disabilities comes in part from the ways that some states have defined their expectations through their performance level descriptors (PLDs).<sup>4</sup> The ways that states have defined the proficient level are

<sup>4</sup>See NCSC Brief #1 for information on content and achievement standards (also referred to as performance standards) for states' AA-AAS.

shown in the following example:

**Proficient Expectation for Grade 4 General Assessment:**

The student who is proficient solves problems that include calculating area and perimeter, including those in which side lengths are missing.

**Low Proficient Expectation for Grade 4 AA-AAS:**

The student who is proficient identifies differences in circles, squares, and triangles.

**Very Low Proficient Expectation for Grade 4 AA-AAS:**

The student who is proficient can make a rectangular bed.

**High Proficient Expectation for Grade 4 AA-AAS**

for the same content would be the following:

*The student who is proficient solves problems using perimeter and area.*

To work toward the high expectation, educators would work on area and perimeter, adapting instruction using evidence-based practices<sup>5</sup>—reducing the depth, breadth, and complexity of the instructional content to support student learning, and then increasing them as appropriate as they make progress.

## AA-AAS Results Reflect Low Expectation

States annually report on the percentage of students showing proficient and advanced performance of students with disabilities on the general assessment and on the AA-AAS for reading and mathematics. Side-by-side portrayals of these percentages for several states from 2007 to 2014 are shown here for reading and math. They show how different the expectations for adequate performance are for students with disabilities who participate in the general

assessment and for students who participate in the AA-AAS. If the expectations were about the same, the percentages of proficient students in the two assessments would be about the same. In contrast, much higher percentages of students in the AA-AAS are deemed proficient and advanced than are students with disabilities in the general assessment.

Figure 1 shows the percent proficient for students with disabilities on the grade 4 general reading assessment across years followed by the percent proficient for the grade 4 reading AA-AAS across the same years. Two states' data are presented as examples of what is seen generally across states.

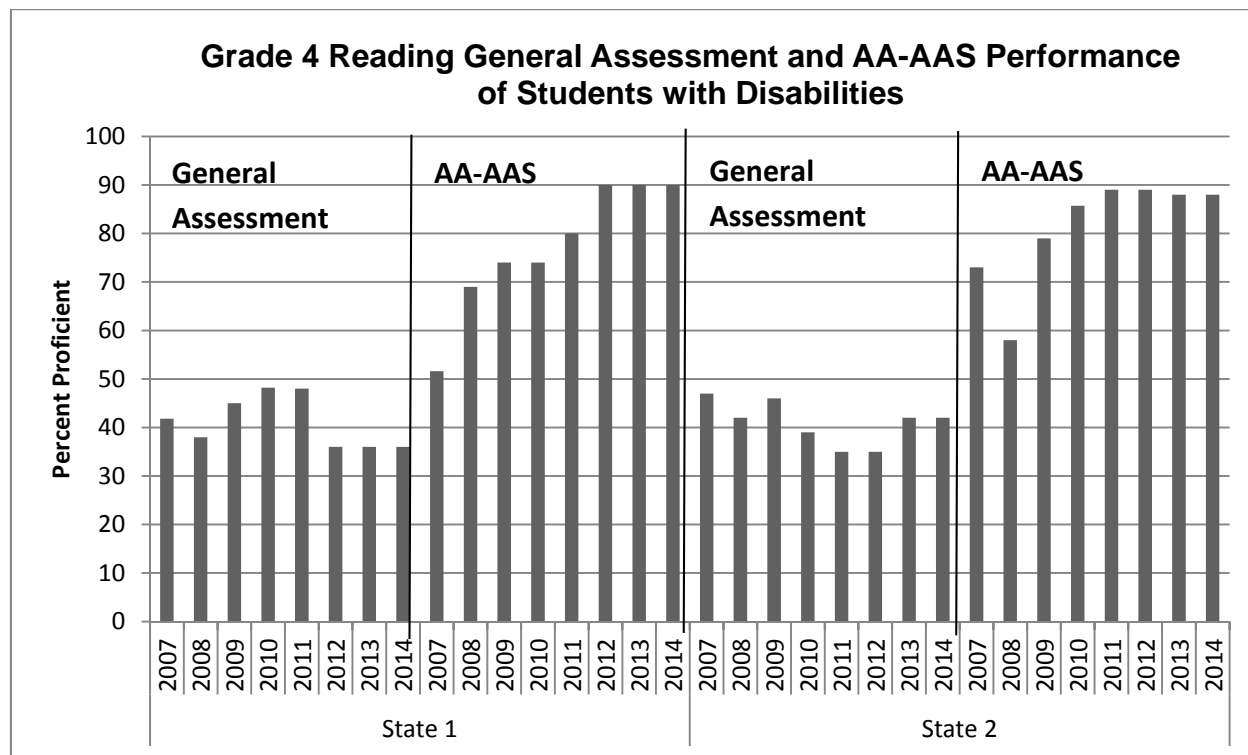
Figure 2 shows the percent of students with disabilities proficient for the grade 8 general math assessment across years followed by the percent proficient for the grade 8 math AA-AAS across the same years. The two states included in this figure are different states from those included in Figure 1.

Figure 3 includes two states, different from those in either Figure 1 or Figure 2. This figure shows high school assessment results, first for reading (students with disabilities on general assessment followed by AA-AAS) then for math (students with disabilities on general assessment followed by AA-AAS). These figures show the missing years of data often seen at the high school level. Even with the missing data, the difference in expectations for students with disabilities in general assessments and those in alternate assessments is obvious.

These side-by-side portrayals show the dramatic differences in expectations for students with disabilities who participate in the AA-AAS compared to those who participate in general assessments. Comparisons of proficiency rates on the AA-AAS to overall proficiency rates of all students or students without disabilities on the general assessment show similar, although smaller, differences in expectations.

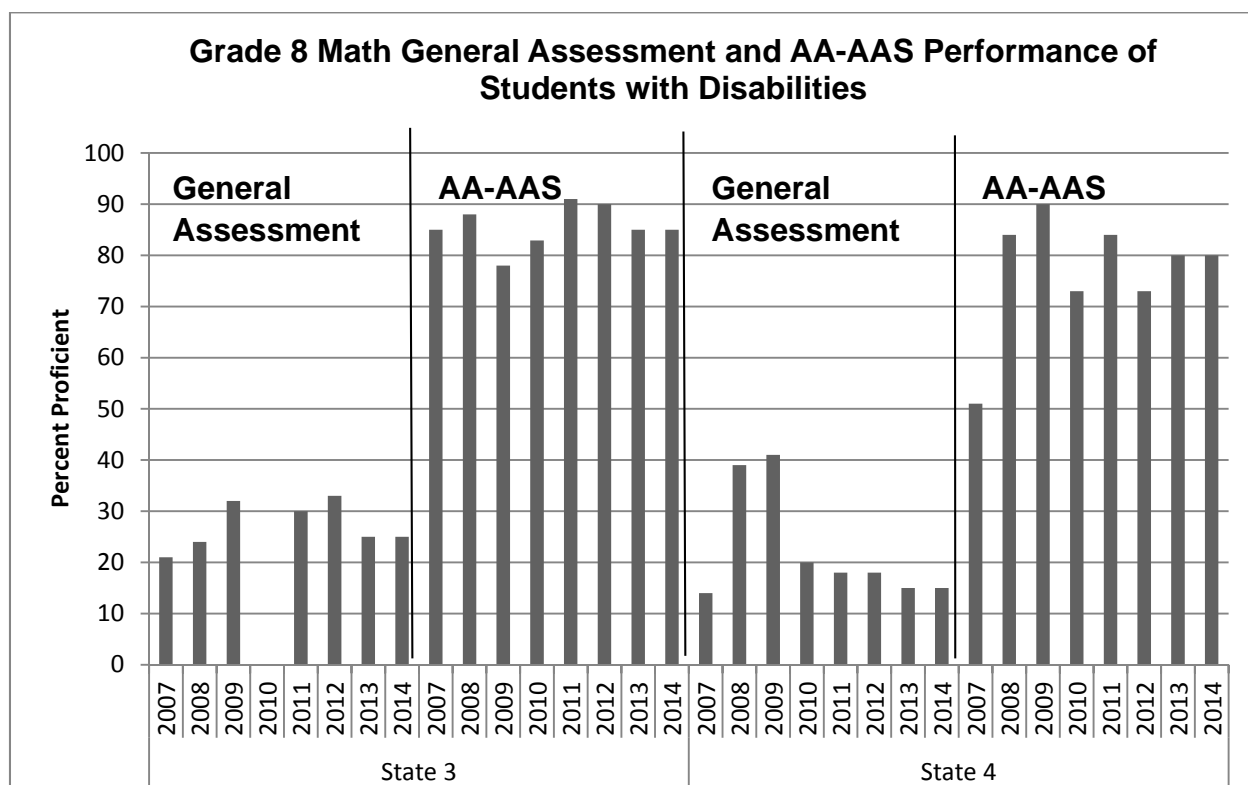
<sup>5</sup>See [https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main_Page) for specific guidance on evidence-based practice and strategies to adapt appropriately for all students, including specific instructional strategies at [https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional\\_Resource\\_Guide](https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional_Resource_Guide) and progress monitoring tools at [https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Systematic\\_Activities\\_for\\_Scripted\\_Systematic\\_Instruction](https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Systematic_Activities_for_Scripted_Systematic_Instruction).

Figure 1. Grade 4 Reading Performance in Example States

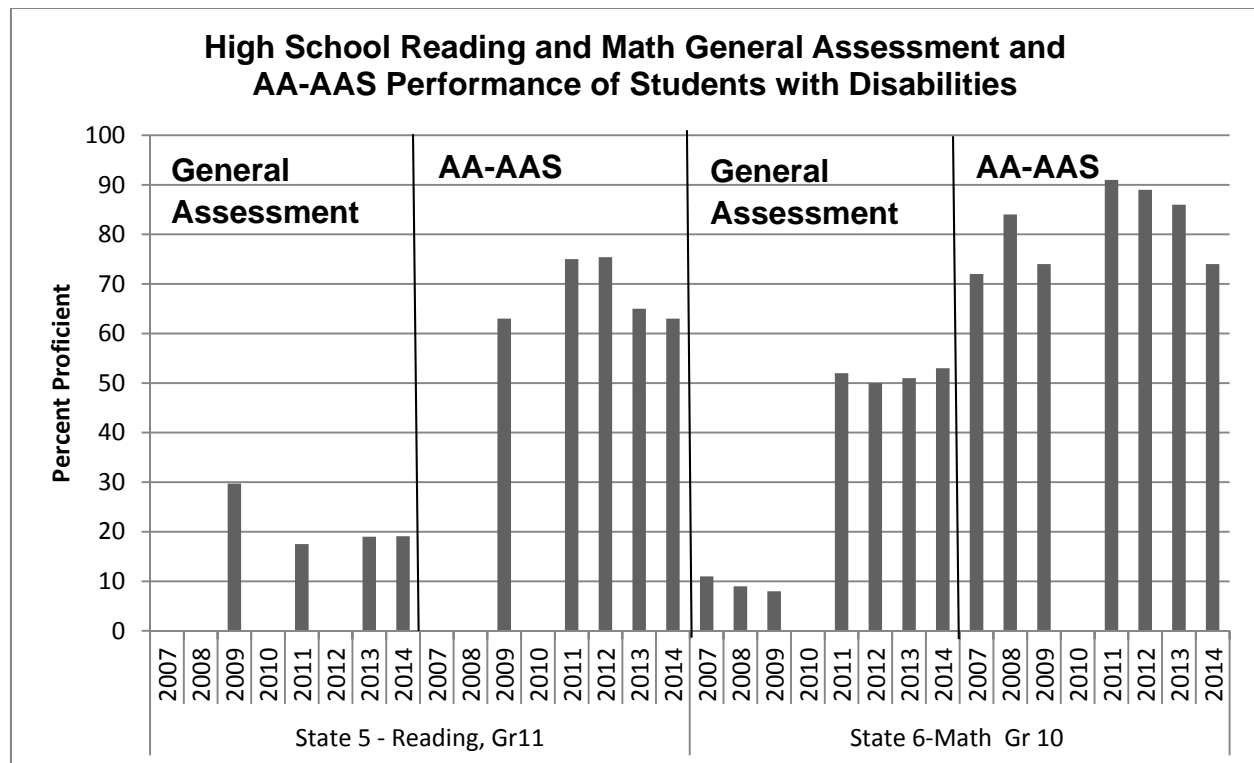


Note: State 2 changed to a new general assessment in 2009-10.

Figure 2. Grade 8 Math Performance in Example States



**Figure 3. High School Reading and Math Performance in Example States**



Note: State 5 changed to a new general assessment in 2008-09. State 6 changed to a new general assessment in 2011-12.

## Classroom Evidence Highlights Need for Higher Expectations

Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities have reported on the current levels of performance of their students through the *Learner Characteristics Inventory*.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of data from 5,285 teachers indicated that students with significant cognitive disabilities show a large range in performance, with the majority having consistent reading and math skills:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The *Learner Characteristics Inventory* was developed at the University of Kentucky to collect information on students with significant cognitive disabilities. It was used by the National Center and State Collaborative to collect, among other information, data on the current reading and math performance of students with significant cognitive disabilities in NCSC states. Source: Towles-Reeves, E., Kearns, J, Flowers, C., Hart, L., Kerbel, A., Kleinert, H., Quenemoen, R., & Thurlow, M. (2012). *Learner Characteristics inventory project report* (A product of the NCSC validity evaluation). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center and State Collaborative

<sup>7</sup>Source: Lee, A., Towles-Reeves, E., Flowers, C., Hart, L., Kearns, J., Kerbel, A., Kleinert, H., & Thurlow, M. (2013).

### **Reading Skills of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities:**

- 65% read written text or braille
  - 39% read basic sight words, simple sentences, directions, bullets, and/or lists in print or braille (These students can be building literacy skills like comprehension through read-aloud techniques while continuing to develop decoding fluency.)
  - 22% read fluently with basic, literal understanding of print or braille
  - 4% read fluently with critical understanding in print or braille
- 19% are beginning to build reading skills

*Teacher Perceptions of Students Participating in AA-AAS: Cross-State Summary* (A product of the NCSC validity evaluation). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center and State Collaborative.

- 16% have no observable awareness of print or braille

***Math Skills of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities:***

- 66% actively engage in mathematics
  - 42% performed computations, either with or without a calculator
  - 26% counted with 1:1 correspondence to at least 10, or made numbered sets of items
- 17% are beginning to use numbers
- 15% have no observable awareness of numbers

These percentages suggest that the AA-AAS needs to focus most of its items on the skills that these students already know. In test development, it is important to structure the test to discriminate between the student who is proficient/on track and the student who is not proficient/on track. Most items need to address the skills of the 65% of students who read written text or braille, and the 66% of students who actively engage in mathematics.

Not many items are needed to determine that a student is just beginning to build reading skills or use numbers, or the student who does not yet have a consistent means of communication, or who has no knowledge of print, braille, or numbers. For these students, use of fine-grained progress monitoring tools used by teachers in daily instruction in the classroom, or documentation of communication interventions, are more helpful measures of their progress than an assessment used for system accountability.

The AA-AAS must define high expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Educators can use available resources to ensure that they know the instructional strategies to use to reduce the depth, breadth, and complexity of grade-level content, while at the same time

maintaining appropriate high expectations for achievement.

Specific guidance on evidence-based practice and strategies to adapt instruction and curriculum materials for all students is available at [https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main_Page). It includes specific instructional strategies at [https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional\\_Resource\\_Guide](https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Instructional_Resource_Guide).

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This Brief reflects the work of the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC).  
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The NCSC state partners participating in the spring 2015 NCSC operational assessment are: Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Idaho, Indiana, Pacific Assessment Consortium, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, and US Virgin Islands. As of spring 2015, additional states are members of the NCSC Consortium, representing varying levels of participation. They are: California, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Wyoming.

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