



Guidance for Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams on Participation Decisions for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] in Mathematics and English Language Arts

This document is intended to help guide Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to determine whether the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, is the most appropriate assessment for an individual student. This assessment was developed by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) to ensure that all students are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to the grade level Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This assessment was

developed to be part of a system of curriculum, instructional, and assessment tools, so that students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in instruction and assessments that are aligned to the CCSS.

The [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is designed for certain students with significant cognitive disabilities. The criteria for participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] reflect the pervasive nature of a significant cognitive disability. In other words, a significant cognitive disability affects the student across academic content areas and across multiple settings (including school, home, and community).

KEY TERMS IN PARTICIPATION CRITERIA

Adaptive behavior- actions that are necessary for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

IQ score- an intelligence test score.

Common Core State Standards- a set of content standards for English Language Arts and mathematics that define what students are expected to learn at each grade in order to leave school ready for college or a career.

Curriculum- the methods and materials used to teach the content and skills defined in the standards and the order in which they are taught.

Core Content Connectors- the essential content of the Common Core State Standards that is needed for students with significant cognitive disabilities to make progress across the grades.

DESCRIPTION OF CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION DECISIONS

When determining whether a student should participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], a student must meet ALL three of the following criteria for both ELA and mathematics:

- 1. The student has a significant cognitive disability.**

Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly affect intellectual

Extensive direct individualized instruction - the amount of time spent on instruction designed for and directed toward an individual student.

Measureable gains - increases in academic performance that can be calculated.

Substantial supports - support from the classroom teacher and others (e.g. resource teacher, co-teacher, and aide), as well as various supports within the student's environment (e.g. adapting text and breaking down content into smaller parts).

Substantially adapted materials - classroom and other materials that have been changed in appearance and content from the materials that peers without disabilities use for instruction or assessment.

Individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways - individually selected methods for presenting information to the student that are different than the traditional presentation.

Acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings - when the student can learn and apply the skills in different classes, at home, at a job and in the community.

functioning and adaptive behavior. Having a significant cognitive disability is not determined by an IQ score. The IEP team must make this determination based on a complete understanding of the student.

2. The student is learning content linked to (based on) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the CCSS for the grade in which the student is enrolled. Also, they must address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student. The student's disability or multiple disabilities affect how the student learns curriculum linked to the CCSS. Therefore, the student is learning content that is linked to the CCSS, but breaks the standards into smaller steps to guide instruction. These smaller steps are called Core Content Connectors (CCC).

3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade and age-appropriate curriculum.

The student:

(a) requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature, and

(b) uses substantially adapted materials (e.g. significantly shortening the length of reading passages or using raised dots and hand-over-hand counting when identifying a matching number in math) and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire,

maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings.

You can learn more about how these criteria are applied in the Frequently Asked Questions section of this document.

Information to be Considered by the IEP Team

The IEP team, which includes the parents, is to consider the following information to determine whether the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate for an individual student:

- Description of the student’s curriculum and instruction, including data on progress
- Classroom work samples and data
- Examples of performance on assessment tasks to compare with classroom work
- Results of district-wide alternate assessments
- Results of individualized reading assessments
- Information found in the IEP including:
 - Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), goals, and short-term objectives.
 - Considerations for students with individualized and substantial communication needs or methods (from multiple data sources).
 - Considerations for students who may be learning English as a second or other language (i.e., English language learners) that may interfere with an accurate assessment of his or her academic, social, or adaptive abilities.

Do Not Use the Following Information for Participation Decisions

In addition to the three criteria for participation, there are other issues that may affect a student’s learning experience and his/her ability to learn that are **not appropriate** to consider during the decision-making process for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. The IEP team, which includes the parents, does not use the following as criteria for participation decisions:

1. A disability category or label
2. Poor attendance or extended (long) absences
3. Native language/social/cultural or economic difference
4. Expected poor performance on the general assessment
5. Academic and other services student receives
6. Educational environment or instructional setting (e.g. whether the student is in a general education or special education classroom)
7. Percent of time receiving special education services
8. English Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated disruptive behavior (a concern that the student will become disruptive, before knowing if this is true)
11. Impact of test scores on accountability system
12. Administrator decision
13. Anticipated emotional distress (a concern that the student will experience fear, anger, anxiety, or other extreme negative emotion, before knowing if this is true)
14. Need for accommodations to participate in assessment. An accommodation is a change in materials or procedures that allow the student to participate in instruction and show what he/ she

knows and can do on an assessment without changing the intent of what is being taught or measured, e.g. assistive technology or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (such as text-to-speech communication aids, picture or symbol boards, etc.)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Who decides that a student should participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]?

The IEP team decides how a student will participate in statewide assessments. The IEP team must follow the NCSC Participation Guidelines to decide whether to assign a student to the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. No one member of the IEP team makes this decision. Parents, teachers, and administrators make the decision based on specific sources of information (evidence) being used to identify whether the student meets the participation criteria. If the parents disagree with the decision of the other IEP team members about the participation decision, there is a process for addressing that. [PLACEHOLDER: States are encouraged to add a description of the process for dealing with disagreement and/or provide a link to the policy].

2. How do we know that a student has a “significant cognitive disability”?

NCSC does not define a “significant cognitive disability” in terms of an IQ score. Most students with significant cognitive disabilities have intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism, but not all do. And, not all students with these disabilities are considered to have a “significant cognitive disability.” Academic difficulties alone do not indicate that a student has a significant cognitive disability. Students demonstrating academic difficulties solely due to learning disabilities, speech-language impairments, and emotional-behavioral disabilities do not qualify for participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. Students receiving special education services who are identified as having orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, or traumatic brain injuries, do not necessarily have a significant cognitive disability. Performing 3-4 grade levels below peers without disabilities is not, by itself, evidence of a significant cognitive disability. Students with autism or intellectual disabilities should be carefully considered for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], but they should not automatically be assigned to the alternate assessment based on their disability category.

A significant cognitive disability is pervasive, affecting student learning across content areas and in social and community settings. Therefore, a student who participates in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] should participate for all content areas. For example, in all but a few unusual cases, a student will not participate in the mathematics alternate assessment if he/she does not also meet all the criteria for English Language Arts (ELA).

Not all students with autism or intellectual disabilities have a significant cognitive disability. Many students eligible to receive special education and related services under these labels are able to participate in general assessments, with accommodations. Students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities may be more appropriately placed in the general assessment system with accommodations. Neither past low achievement nor an expectation of future low achievement on the general assessment means that the student should be taking the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

In those states that had alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) for some students with disabilities, the decision-making process for those students should not be altered. Students who participated in AA-MAS were not designated as having most significant cognitive disabilities, and thus should take the general assessment, not the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

3. How do I know if the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate for an English Language Learner (ELL) with an IEP whose language issues make it difficult to assess content knowledge and skills?

An ELL should be considered for the alternate assessment if (a) his/her intellectual functioning indicates a significant cognitive disability (using assessments in his/her home language, as appropriate), and (b) he/she meets the other participation guidelines for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. Assessments of adaptive behavior and communication, as well as information on goals and instruction in the student's IEP should take into account language, social and cultural factors. This is necessary for an accurate decision about whether a student has a significant cognitive disability or whether other factors are playing a big role in the student's academic difficulties. If an ELL with an IEP does not meet the three criteria for the alternate assessment, he/she should take the general assessment with accommodations, as appropriate.

4. Why is it important to indicate that a student, participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], is receiving instruction on content linked to the CCSS and his/her performance will be measured against alternate achievement standards?

The decision to use the Core Content Connectors that are linked to the CCSS in a student's academic program as part of participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] has consequences. A student's direct contact with the full CCSS for the grade level in which he/she is enrolled will be limited. This limited or modified exposure to the grade level standards may have a major impact on academic outcomes and post-secondary opportunities. However, the use of the Core Content Connectors and participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is not a reason for educating a student outside the general education classroom. [PLACE HOLDER: States are encouraged to add a description of the impact the AA-AAS will have on a student's

chances to earn a regular high school diploma (including whether only satisfactory performance on a general assessment would qualify a student for a regular high school diploma) and/or a link to any policy on this topic.]

5. What if it seems impossible to assess a student because the student does not appear to communicate?

All attempts should be made to find a method of communication for the student as soon as he or she enters school. If various approaches and technologies do not appear to demonstrate a method of communication, then consider that all behavior that the student exhibits is a form of communication. This should be used as a starting point for identifying effective and consistent communication methods. An important part of assessing all students based on the CCSS is a focus on communicative competency (the use of a communication system that allows students to gain and demonstrate knowledge). Best practice would be for students to enter Kindergarten with a communication system (a combination of methods) that allows them to demonstrate an understanding of academic concepts before starting the third grade. However, with or without a communication system, students who meet the participation criteria must still participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

6. If a student has been tested in the past on an alternate assessment, but the current IEP team determines that the student does not meet the NCSC Participation Guidelines, can the student be assigned to the general assessment?

Yes. The IEP team must ensure that the student receives appropriate instruction on the CCSS and participates in the required general assessments for his/her current grade level with or without accommodations.

7. Is it possible that a decision whether to participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] could change as a student gets older?

Yes. Participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] requires that the student has a significant cognitive disability AND is learning content in a way that significantly changes the expectations as compared to the student's typically developing peers. Even though students with significant cognitive disabilities often are identified prior to starting school, they may be able to participate in the general assessment during their elementary grades. IEP teams should be especially cautious about assigning students with significant cognitive disabilities to an alternate assessment in their early school years. The level of support needed for the student to participate in the full content addressed by the CCSS will likely increase as the student gets older. At that time, the team may determine that participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to continue to need supports to live and work as independently as possible throughout their adult lives after high school. Students who did not need early intervention services, or who are unlikely to need substantial daily supports in their adult lives, probably do not have a significant cognitive disability and would not be appropriately placed in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

8. Who can we ask if we have questions about this important decision?

If you have any questions about participation decision making for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] that cannot be answered by your child's IEP team, contact your state department of education. [PLACE HOLDER: States are encouraged to provide contact information for the appropriate personnel]