



Answers to Common Parent Questions Regarding the NCSC Alternate Assessments

1. What is the National Center and State Collaborative?

The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is a consortium of 24 states and five national organizations. NCSC has a grant to develop a new alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in math and English Language Arts (ELA) for grades 3-8 and 11 by the 2014-15 school year.¹ ELA includes reading and writing. NCSC is also developing curriculum and instructional resources and professional development modules which will be publicly available at <https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/mediawiki>. You can read more about NCSC partner states and organizations at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/about>.

2. Why are state assessments important for children with significant cognitive disabilities, including those whose disabilities are considered profound?

It is very important for students with significant cognitive disabilities to take state assessments in order to hold schools, districts, and states accountable for the educational progress of all their students, regardless of disability. The performance data from state assessments are expected to be used to improve the educational system. Research shows that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can perform well on academics when they have had the opportunity to learn the content. Challenging state assessments designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can raise expectations and improve instruction and performance. In fact, alternate assessments have demonstrated that many students who are considered to have profound cognitive disabilities have learned much more than previously believed. Although the assessments focus on academic content, working on this content also helps build critically important functional skills, as described in the answers to Questions 7 and 8.

3. Are schools required to give an assessment like this to students with significant cognitive disabilities?

Yes. Two federal laws, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) require that students with disabilities participate in state assessments. States are permitted to use an alternate assessment, like the NCSC assessment, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The state departments of education and the U.S Department of Education collect data on the participation and performance of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in the alternate assessments. States are permitted to establish policies that cover rare circumstances when a student cannot take the assessment.

¹Individual states may be on different implementation timelines.

4. What is the process for deciding which students will participate in these assessments?

The determination is made annually by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team, which includes parents and/or guardians. There is an IEP Team Guidance for Participation Decisions that explains which factors are to be considered and which factors are not to be considered in making that decision. There is a parent resource with this information at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>. Generally, students who take this assessment will have significant cognitive disabilities that affect the student in both ELA and math, and in all settings (including home and school).

5. How are the NCSC assessments different from other state assessments that have been given to my child?

These assessments will be based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS are standards in math and ELA, which includes reading and writing. The standards describe what students are expected to know and be able to do in both subjects. They were designed to prepare all students to be “college and career ready” by graduation from high school. A description of what college and career readiness means for students with significant cognitive disabilities can be found in the answer to Question 7. The NCSC assessments will take approximately 1.5-2 hours per subject, which can be broken down into shorter testing periods. Most of the 30 questions on each assessment will ask students to select the answer (e.g. multiple choice) with some questions asking students to create a response using their method of communication (e.g. picture symbols, not limited to “written” responses). There is a parent resource, called NCSC AA-AAS FAQs at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>, which provides more details about the NCSC assessments.

6. How will this online assessment be given to children who cannot use the computer program?

Most students will use the online testing program directly on the computer, with support as needed from the test administrator. If a student cannot use the computer program, the test administrator may print out testing materials and enter the student’s answers into the computer. Local training, oversight, and audit procedures will help ensure the tests are administered appropriately and student responses are entered accurately into the test.

7. What does college and career readiness mean for my child who has significant cognitive disabilities?

College and Career readiness in the NCSC model includes community readiness. Most of the skills that any student needs to be prepared for a college and a career are related to the skills that students with significant cognitive disabilities also need for success in the community. The academic instruction designed for college and career readiness will have value for every student. It will promote improvements in communication, math and reading performance, independent and team work skills, expected social skills for the student’s age and skills for identifying and requesting needed supports. Many students with significant cognitive disabilities can attend college and have long-term employment. You can find a list of these college programs at www.thinkcollege.net. There are two parent resources with more information about college and

career readiness for students with significant cognitive disabilities at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>.

8. How will my child’s teachers be able to focus on teaching my child the functional skills he/she needs to be successful in the community if the focus of the assessment is on academics?

As explained in the answer to Question 7, college and career ready academic instruction will promote many important skills that improve the ability of a student to function successfully in the community. In addition, most other functional skills can be learned and practiced as part of academic instruction. Cooking, taking medication, traveling on the bus, making purchases, and engaging in many employment tasks involve following multi-step directions, recognizing the meaning of symbols, and understanding numerous math skills. Effective communication is the most important functional skill of all. Reading and writing instruction can include using picture symbols or other communication methods. NCSC has made it a priority to provide resources designed to help teachers find a way for students to communicate effectively.

9. If my child does not have a consistent way to communicate, will she be able to take this assessment? If not, how will the school be held accountable for his/her progress?

There will likely be a few, rare situations where a student does not have an effective communication system with which to answer the questions during the assessment. There will be a policy to address whether the assessment can be stopped if the student is unable to respond. The policy will also address how data about stopped assessments will be collected and evaluated. If a student does not complete the assessment, his/her progress cannot be measured using that tool. NCSC’s role in accountability for a student’s academic progress is limited to the assessment. Accountability under ESEA for the student’s academic progress will then depend on each state’s accountability plan. There may be other measures of progress, in addition to the assessment, that your state is using for accountability.

10. How long will it take to get the assessment results and how will the results be reported to parents?

The length of time for receiving parent reports will differ by state. NCSC will meet state and federal timelines for release of test scores, including parent reports. Parents will receive reports for their child, which provide test scores and performance levels in math and ELA. These reports will provide descriptions of what their child can do in reading, writing, and math.

11. What are the consequences for my child and for my child’s school if my child does not do well on the assessment?

When parents ask this question they are often concerned that their children may be held back or suffer other negative consequences based on their performance on the assessment. There are no negative consequences for students required by NCSC. However, some states may have policies that use student assessment results in a way that affects student promotion or graduation. If a state plans to do this, it will have to conduct studies to show that the assessment is appropriate for these purposes. The scores from the NCSC assessments will be used by member states to hold schools and districts accountable for student achievement. Poor student performance may mean that teachers in the school need to match up their instruction and course materials more closely with the content that is being assessed. NCSC supports this work by providing

curriculum and instructional materials to all teachers. Other consequences for the school will depend on each state's accountability plan.

12. What is the impact for my child and for my child's school if my child does well on the assessment?

If a student does well, this will raise expectations for his/her academic achievement. It will also help identify areas where a student is ready to deepen knowledge and do more complex tasks. Part of school accountability is the recognition of schools where students are performing well. States can use the scores from the NCSC assessments to recognize and even reward these schools.