

National Center on Educational Outcomes

Special Topic Area: Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities

Introduction

Alternate assessments are tools used to evaluate the performance of students who are unable to participate in regular state assessments even with accommodations. Alternate assessments provide a mechanism for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and for other students who may need alternate assessment formats to be included in the accountability system.

Alternate assessments are relatively new in most states, developed for students who were not included in most large-scale assessments until Federal law mandated their participation. The requirement for states to develop these assessments first appeared in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997* (IDEA 97). Regulations for the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) included the results of these assessments in its accountability requirements. NCLB regulations clarified that more than one type of alternate assessment may be used by a state, and that students with significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate assessments could be held to alternate achievement standards (December 2003 Title I Regulations).

The primary purpose for alternate assessments in state assessment systems is to increase the capacity of large-scale accountability systems to create information about how a school, district, or state is doing in terms of overall student performance. Gathering data on the performance of students through alternate assessments requires rethinking traditional assessment methods. An alternate assessment is neither a traditional large-scale assessment nor an individualized diagnostic assessment. For students with disabilities, alternate assessments can be administered to students who differ greatly in their ability to respond to stimuli, solve problems, and provide responses.

Since the inception of alternate assessments, the population of students deemed by States and IEP teams as eligible for these assessments ranged from students with severe and profound disabilities to some students with moderate and other disabilities. In most cases, these students have represented less than 1% of the total population assessed in a large-scale assessment. However, the December 2003 Title I Regulations may lead to a greater variety of alternate assessments for a broader and more diverse student population.

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