

National Center on Educational Outcomes

Special Topic Area:

Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why provide alternate assessments?

- **To ensure educational accountability.** Alternate assessments are necessary in order to achieve educational accountability for all students. Students who are excluded from the state assessment and reporting of results are not considered when decisions are made about how to improve programs, and they may be denied educational opportunities available to other students.
- **Requirements of federal legislation.** The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997* (IDEA) first identified alternate assessments as an option for some students. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) specifies that each state, district, and school must be held accountable for the achievement of all students. Alternate assessments are intended to provide the missing piece that makes it possible to include all students with disabilities in state and district assessments.

2. Who should participate in alternate assessments?

In general, alternate assessment participants are those students with disabilities who are unable to participate in regular assessments even with accommodations. Some of these students may have significant cognitive disabilities and can be assessed using alternate formats aligned to the grade-level content, but based on alternate achievement standards that define proficiency differently from the general assessment. Other students may require alternate assessments aligned to grade-level content that is based on grade-level achievement standards, or the same definition of proficiency as the general assessment.

3. What are some sample guidelines?

Who should participate in alternate assessments on alternate achievement standards?

Guidelines might include the following: A student with a significant cognitive disability:

- who requires substantial modifications, adaptations, or supports to meaningfully access the grade-level content,
- who requires intensive individualized instruction in order to acquire and generalize knowledge, and
- who is unable to demonstrate achievement of academic content standards on a paper and pencil test, even with accommodations.

Who should participate in alternate assessments on grade-level achievement standards?

Guidelines might include the following: A student with a disability :

- who requires accommodations that are not available on the general assessment to demonstrate skill and knowledge on the grade-level content and grade-level achievement standards, and
- who demonstrates achievement in different formats or contexts than are provided by the general assessment.

4. What should be included in an alternate assessment?

All assessments for NCLB accountability purposes should measure student achievement on the grade-level content. How these assessments reflect the depth and breadth of the grade-level content depends on whether the alternate assessment is based on grade-level achievement standards or alternate achievement standards. For alternate assessments based on grade-level achievement standards, the depth and breadth of assessed content should be the same as on the general assessment in order to draw accurate inferences of student proficiency.

Alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards must also assess student achievement on the grade-level content. In states with checklists and performance tasks, stakeholders typically have prioritized content to be covered for students with significant cognitive disabilities. States that use portfolio or body of evidence approaches may permit IEP teams to select a limited number of grade-level content standards and benchmarks to assess; or the state may require specific content standards or benchmarks for each tested grade. In portfolio or body-of-evidence states that require specific content coverage, stakeholders have generally prioritized specific content for that purpose.

Many states that had earlier identified one set of prioritized content standards across all grade levels for their alternate assessment students now require grade-level content alignment. This reflects NCLB regulations and guidance requirements that all assessments must be aligned to the grade-level definitions of content for the enrolled grade of the student being assessed.

5. What do alternate assessments look like?

States use a variety of approaches in the design of alternate assessments.

Definitions of the most common types of alternate assessment approaches are listed below.

Definitions

(based on Roeber, 2002; see

<http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis42.html>)

- **Portfolio:** Student portfolios are a purposeful and systematic collection of student work that is evaluated and measured against predetermined scoring criteria.
- **Performance Assessment:** These assessments are direct measures of a skill, usually in a one-on-one assessment. These can range from highly structured one-on-one assessments similar to traditional pencil/paper test, to a more flexible approach that can be adjusted based on student needs.
- **Checklist:** This method relies on teachers to remember whether students are able to carry out certain activities. Scores reported are usually based on the number of skills that the student was able to successfully perform.

6. How should alternate assessments be incorporated into the accountability system?

States typically report the assessment results from their assessment programs by achievement levels, also known as proficiency or performance levels. Terms such as “novice,” “basic,” “proficient,” “meeting the standard,” “advanced,” or “exceeding the standard” may be used to describe the achievement level of each student. Achievement standards include labels for the various achievement levels, descriptions of competencies associated with each achievement level, and assessment scores (“cut scores”) that differentiate among the achievement levels. Achievement standards must be defined using a rigorous process and must be aligned with academic content standards.

The December 9, 2003 NCLB Regulations permit states to develop alternate assessments based on grade-level achievement standards, and alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities based on alternate achievement standards. The process of setting achievement standards (i.e. describing various levels of proficiency and identifying cut-scores) is required for both options. Achievement standards for alternate assessments based on grade-level achievement standards must be equivalent to those on the general assessment. Setting alternate achievement standards based on grade-level content standards is a challenging but rewarding process, and requires the active participation of test company partners, measurement experts, curriculum and special education state leadership, as well as educators, parents, and higher education standard-setting panelists.

According to the December 9, 2003 NCLB Regulations, once achievement standards have been set, all scores determined to be “proficient” are included as proficient in accountability indices whether they are on alternate achievement

standards or on grade-level achievement standards, provided that the number of proficient and advanced scores based on the alternate achievement standards does not exceed 1.0 percent of all students in the grades tested at the State or LEA level, unless a special exception has been granted. For further information about the conditions under which alternate achievement standards may be used, please refer to the December 9, 2003 regulation published in the Federal Register <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/finrule/2003-4/120903a.html>

FR Doc 03-30092 [Federal Register: December 9, 2003 (Volume 68, Number 236)]
[Rules and Regulations][Page 68697-68708]
From the Federal Register Online via GPO Access [wais.access.gpo.gov]
[DOCID:fr09de03-27]

Related NCEO Publications:

- [**2005 State Special Education Outcomes: Steps Forward in a Decade of Change**](#) / [PDF Version \(3MB\)](#)
- [**Putting it All Together: Including Students with Disabilities in Assessment and Accountability Systems \(Policy Directions 16\)**](#) / [PDF Version \(2003\)](#)
- [**Setting Standards on Alternate Assessments \(Synthesis Report 42\)**](#)
- [**Alternate Assessment Forum 2000: Connecting Into a Whole**](#)
- [**Report on Alternate Assessment and "Gray Area" Assessment: a report on the pre-conference session at the National Conference on Large-Scale Assessment, June 11-12, 1999**](#)
- [**Measuring Academic Achievement of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Building Understanding of Alternate Assessment Scoring Criteria \(Synthesis Report 50\)**](#) / [PDF version](#)
- [**Use of Alternate Assessment Results in Reporting and Accountability Systems: Conditions for Use Based on Research and Practice \(Synthesis Report 43\)**](#)
- [**State Alternate Assessments: Status as IDEA Alternate Assessment Requirements Take Effect \(Synthesis Report 35\)**](#)
- [**Including Alternate Assessment Results in Accountability Decisions \(Policy Directions 13\)**](#)

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