



National Down Syndrome Congress Policy Brief

What you need to know about State alternate assessments

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Executive Summary

Federal law requires States to assess all students in grades 3-8 and once in high school in Math, English and Science.

States have a general assessment for most students and also have an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Each State has a document that describes how the annual IEP decision is made about which students will take an alternate assessment.

The alternate assessment subject matter is based on the curriculum for the student's grade.

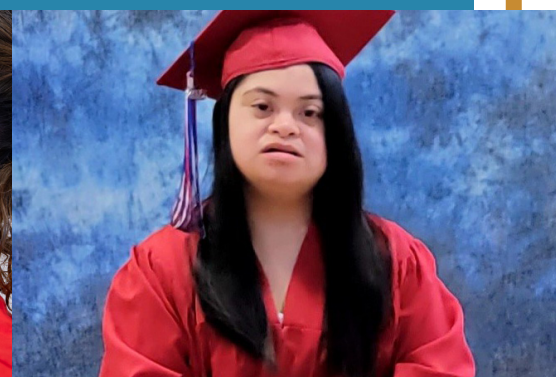
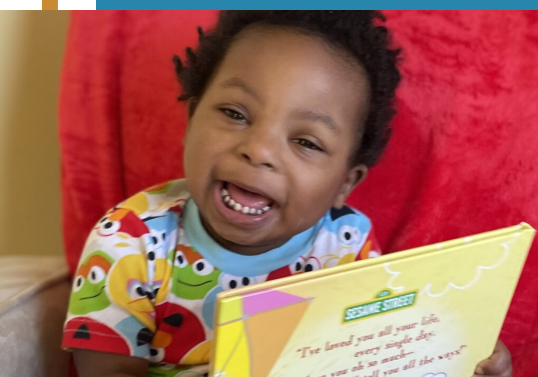
The breadth, depth and complexity of what the student is expected to master for the alternate assessment is different than the expectations for the general assessment.

It important for students to take the State assessments so everyone, including the U.S. Department of Education, can see how students with disabilities are doing academically.

If the students at a school are doing poorly on the assessments the school may be eligible for more federal funding to help the students.

State assessments also put more of a focus on teaching these students academics and determining which accommodations are needed for the student to do well.

Federal law says students who takes an alternate assessment must be permitted to work toward a regular diploma, should be included in general education classes to the maximum extent appropriate, and be taught using the same general education curriculum as the other students (with modifications and adapted materials as needed).



National Down Syndrome Congress Policy Brief

What you need to know about State alternate assessments

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has long required States to ensure that all children with disabilities are included in general State and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations and alternate assessments, if necessary, as indicated in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). However, it is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [(formerly called No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB and now called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)], which added details about who should take the State alternate assessment used for federal accountability purposes and the requirements related to these students. Some of the alternate assessment language from ESSA now also appears in IDEA regulation 300.116 (c). ESSA requires State assessments for math, English Language Arts and Science in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

Under ESSA the State alternate assessments are referred to as alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). They are designed to measure the knowledge and skills of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Which students fit in this category is defined by the States in their participation guidelines. The term alternate achievement standards causes some confusion. There are two types of standards: academic content standards and academic achievement standards. The content standards describe WHAT is taught in each grade. The achievement standards describe HOW MUCH, at a minimum, students are expected to learn to be proficient on the State's general and alternate assessment. Therefore, the term alternate achievement standards refers to what the student is expected to master to be considered proficient on the alternate assessment.

Here is an example: Cindy is taking the alternate assessment in a grade that covers geometry. The alternate assessment should be aligned to the grade level content for geometry, but will cover it with less breadth, depth and complexity and permit a greater variety of ways for the student to demonstrate knowledge. The instruction for this student is required to be aligned to academic content for the student's enrolled grade, not an alternate curriculum. The accommodations, modifications and adapted materials must be individualized for this particular student, rather than using the same instruction and materials for all students who take an alternate assessment. For examples about instruction see [this TIES Center brief](#).



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In a presentation Martha Thurlow did on the history of assessments, she made the following points about what education was like before NCLB when no one was expected to look at assessment data for the disability subgroup:

- Most states did not include students with disabilities in their assessment systems.
- Students with disabilities (all disabilities) were held to different expectations – we worked hard to make sure that they felt good about themselves, but we did not necessarily attend to their academic needs.
- Little thought was given to accommodations that students might need in instruction to access the curriculum, much less how to use universal design principles for instruction and assessment.

National Down Syndrome Congress Policy Brief

What you need to know about State alternate assessments

IEP Team State Assessment Decision

The first decision regarding whether a student will take an alternate assessment should not be made until the IEP meeting that will cover grade 3. Some states are inappropriately tracking students into this assessment for 3rd grade as early as kindergarten. The assessment decision is an annual one and should be discussed in the IEP meetings for each subsequent year. States are required to develop participation guidelines to help the IEP team, including the parents, determine whether the student meets eligibility criteria for an alternate assessment. If the school has not provided you with this document, you should request it. If a student can participate in the general State assessment with accommodations, the student should not be considered for an alternate assessment. Therefore, it is also important that the school share the accommodations that are available for the State's general assessment.

Why State Assessments Matter

It wasn't until the NCLB (the predecessor of ESSA) that States, LEAs and schools were held accountable for the participation and performance of the disability subgroup in State assessments. The results of State assessments are the way the federal government tries to determine how well students are being taught content aligned to their grade level. Neither NCLB in 2002 nor ESSA in 2016 said anything about these assessment scores being used to negatively impact students, although some States use the assessments to determine promotion to another grade or passage of the regular assessment in high school to get a diploma. If students with disabilities are not assessed, due to opt-outs or other reasons, then the data for the disability subgroup will not be complete and schools that are struggling will not get the support they need to do better. Also, researchers, like Martha Thurlow from the National Center on Educational Outcomes, have found that students who are not assessed are not getting taught to the same standards as assessed students.

National Down Syndrome Congress Policy Brief

What you need to know about State alternate assessments

Potential Consequences of Taking an Alternate Assessment

NDSC advocated strenuously and successfully to ensure that ESSA contained key provisions to raise expectations and improve academic opportunities for students who take alternate assessments. After careful deliberation, the IEP team may determine that an alternate assessment is the right choice for your student and will benefit the student. If it is correctly determined that the alternate assessment is appropriate for certain students, there are potential positive consequences to taking it instead of the general assessment. For example, the students may have a more meaningful and less stressful test-taking experience. Also, the alternate assessment may provide more accurate information to schools and districts about how much of the general education curriculum these students are mastering.

However, it is important to be aware of, and counter, potential negative consequences. These negative consequences may occur for students who take an alternate assessment, or opt-out of the alternate assessment, since most states are not implementing these ESSA provisions properly.

The most common negative consequences in states that are not properly implementing ESSA include:

Placement in a separate classroom and instruction using an alternate curriculum due to taking an alternate assessment.

Neither ESSA nor IDEA authorize or say anything about an alternate curriculum or that the type of assessment should be considered in placement decisions. In fact, ESSA expressly says alternate assessments must be aligned with the State's challenging academic content standards--the same content as other students are taught--even though the achievement standards used for proficiency on the alternate assessment are less complex than on the general assessment.

There is only one curriculum! IDEA only talks about the general education curriculum, not a general and an alternate curriculum. Students with disabilities must be provided supports and services to access and make progress in that general education curriculum, regardless of the child's educational setting.

Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are educated in general education classes may be assessed with an alternate assessment.

IDEA regulation 300.116 (e) says a student cannot be removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general education curriculum. Therefore, modifications needed by students who take an alternate assessment should not be used to preclude inclusion in a general education classroom.

Being taken off the diploma track.

ESSA also says that States cannot preclude students who take alternate assessments from attempting to complete the requirements of a regular high school diploma.

By definition these students will require some modifications, so that is not a reason to take them off diploma track. It is true that if the modifications required by a student are too extensive, the student may not be able to earn a regular diploma depending on State/local diploma requirements. However, they must be given the opportunity to try.

Conclusion

NDSC continues to advocate with the U.S. Department of Education to improve implementation of IDEA and ESSA, including implementation regarding assessments. It is important for students, parents and educators to understand the facts about alternate assessments.

Resources

NDSC collaborated with the federally funded TIES Center (focused on inclusive practices and policies for students with significant cognitive disabilities) to develop parent briefs that can help you better understand the federal provisions related to these students. The briefs can be used in your personal, local and State advocacy efforts. [Click here to view the TIES Center briefs.](#)