

**Guidance for IEP Teams
on
Participation Decisions
for the
Alabama Alternate Assessment Program**



**Alabama State Department of Education
Student Assessment and Special Education Services
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Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team Decision-Making Guidelines Regarding Student Participation in the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program

Introduction

The IEP Team makes many important decisions regarding programs and services available to students eligible for special education and related services. One important decision involves a determination of how a student will participate in the Alabama Student Assessment Program; either in (1) the general education assessment with or without allowable accommodations, or (2) an alternate assessment for students unable to participate in the general assessment, even with allowable accommodations, due to significant cognitive disabilities.

IEP Teams should begin this decision-making process with the understanding that **all** students, including all students eligible for special education, can learn grade-level content and should participate in the general education assessment to the maximum extent possible. However, there are times in which the IEP Team can determine that an alternate assessment is necessary and appropriate for a relatively small group (approximately 1%) of the *total tested* population. For example, if the *total tested* population in a school district is 4,000, then 40 students would represent 1% of the *total tested* population.

This document is intended to help guide Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams to determine whether the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program, an alternate assessment program based on alternate achievement standards, is the appropriate assessment for a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The Alabama Alternate Assessment Program was developed to ensure that all students are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what students know and can do in relation to the grade-level state content standards. As part of a system comprised of curriculum, instruction and assessment, the assessment program allows students with the most significant cognitive disabilities the ability to participate in content instruction and assessments that are aligned to the state standards.

General Criteria

The decision about how an eligible student participates in the Alabama Student Assessment Program is an IEP Team decision, **not an administrative decision**. The IEP Team should use the following criteria for determining the extent to which a student can participate in the general education assessment, with or without allowable accommodations, or whether the student should participate in the alternate assessment.

1. The student must be eligible for special education and must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in effect at the time of the decision.
2. IEP Team decisions regarding a student's participation in the Alabama Student Assessment Program must be based on both current available data and consideration of historical

evaluations and instructional data relevant to the student.

3. The IEP Team's decision should be based on the student's present levels of educational performance, need for specially designed instruction, current annual goals, learner characteristics and access to the general education curriculum.
4. The IEP Team's decision regarding a student's participation in statewide assessments must be made at a scheduled IEP Team meeting that **precedes** administration of the statewide assessment.

Avoid the Following as Criteria for Participation Decisions

Other issues may affect a student's learning experience and his or her ability to learn that are **NOT** appropriate to consider during the decision-making process for the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program. These are:

1. A disability category or label
2. Poor attendance or extended absences
3. Native language/social/cultural or economic difference
4. Expected poor performance on the general education assessment
5. Academic and other services student receives
6. Educational environment or instructional setting
7. Percent of time receiving special education services
8. English Learner (EL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated disruptive behavior
11. Impact of test scores on the State's accountability system
12. Administrative decision
13. Anticipated emotional distress
14. Need for accommodations (e.g. assistive technology, communication device, etc.) to participate in assessment

Alabama Alternate Assessment Program

Federal law requires the use of an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities receiving special education services who cannot participate in the state assessment program. Each state is required to establish the state's definition of "significant cognitive disabilities." In Alabama, the definition of a student with the most significant cognitive disability is a student with an intelligence quotient (IQ) of three standard deviations below the mean, which is an IQ score of 55 or below, that significantly impacts intellectual functioning and that exists concurrently with deficits in adaptive functioning (defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life). As a rule, a student having a significant cognitive disability is not solely determined by an IQ test score, but rather by a holistic understanding of a student. IEP Teams should use this definition as part of the determination for a student to participate in the alternate assessment program. As determined by the student's IEP, a student receiving instruction on the alternate achievement standards, an extension of the grade-level state content standards, meets one part of the eligibility to participate in the alternate assessment program.

Additional criteria for a student with significant cognitive disability references students who require intensive or extensive levels of direct support that is not of a temporary or transient nature. A student with a significant cognitive disability may also require specially designed instruction to acquire, maintain or generalize skills in multiple settings in order to successfully transfer skills to natural settings including the home, school, workplace, and community.

For students with an IQ measured in the 55-70 range, additional factors related to the severity and impact of the disability must be taken into account. Neither the special education disability category nor a given standardized IQ score can be the sole factor considered when determining instructional standards and participation in an assessment. The disability category of Intellectual Disability itself or an IQ score below 70 does not automatically qualify the student to receive instruction based on alternate achievement standards or to take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards.

For a student to be considered as having a significant cognitive disability and therefore eligible for the alternate assessment, the student's IEP Team should carefully consider **ALL** the following statements:

- The student's demonstrated cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior in school, work, home and community environments are significantly below chronological age expectations even with program accommodations.
- The student requires extensive direct instruction and/or extensive supports in multiple settings to acquire, maintain and generalize academic and functional skills necessary for application in school, work, home, and community environments.
- The student demonstrates complex cognitive disabilities concurrent with deficits in adaptive behavior that are below chronological age expectations, which prevents the student from meaningful participation in the standard academic core curriculum or achievement of the appropriate grade level expectations.

When an IEP Team determines that the student should participate in the alternate assessment program, the Team must justify **why** the student cannot participate in the general education assessment.

It is also the responsibility of the IEP Team to clearly understand the difference between assessments based on grade level standards and those based on alternate achievement standards. This includes how participation in the alternate assessment may delay or affect a student's completion of the requirements of a regular high school

diploma. The definition of a “regular high school diploma” means the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma, except that a regular high school diploma shall not be aligned to the alternate academic achievement standards described in section 1111(b)(1)(E). The ALSDE and the LEA must ensure that parents of a child assessed using an alternate assessment aligned with alternate achievement standards are informed that their child’s achievement will be based on alternate achievement standards and how participation in the alternate assessment may delay or affect their child’s completion of the requirements of a regular high school diploma.

Guidance for the IEP Team on Participation Decisions for the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 and 2004, as well as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), requires that all students with disabilities, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, participate in state and district assessments.

The IEP Team may decide that a student's knowledge and skills can best be assessed with the alternate assessment program if the student meets **all** of the following participation criteria:

Criteria

Description

The student has an IEP in effect at the time of the assessment participation decision. Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.



The student must have a documented cognitive disability that affects intellectual potential. For the purposes of the state assessment, the term "the most significant cognitive disability" is a designation used to refer to the population eligible to participate in the alternate assessment. (See definition on page 4)

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



The student requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction with support that is not of a temporary or transient nature.

The student uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings, including school, workplace community and home.

The student demonstrates complex cognitive disabilities and poor adaptive skill levels determined to be significantly below chronological age expectations by the student's most recent individualized eligibility determination data.



The student scores **at least** three (3) standard deviations below the mean on standardized assessments for intellectual functioning and concurrently has deficits in adaptive functioning and academic achievement.

The determination for how a student participates in the Alabama Student Assessment Program should **NOT** be based on (a) disability category or label, (b) poor attendance or extended absences, (c) native language/social/cultural or economic difference, (d) expected poor performance on the general education assessment, (e) academic and other services student receives, (f) educational environment or instructional setting, (g) percent of time receiving special education services, (h) English Learner (EL) status, (i) low reading level/achievement level, (j) anticipated disruptive behavior, (k) impact of test scores on the State's accountability system, (l) an administrative decision, (m) anticipated emotional distress, (n) need for accommodations (e.g. assistive technology, communication device, etc.) to participate in assessment.

Alabama Alternate Assessment Program Participation Decision Documentation

ALL participation criteria **MUST** be answered in order for the IEP Team to determine that the general education standards and general education assessment are **not** appropriate, even with accommodations, for a student to attain grade level achievement. Using this participation criteria, the IEP Team will determine whether the student meets the criteria for participation in the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program.

Name of Student: _____ School Year: _____

In Alabama, the definition of a student with the most significant cognitive disability is a student with an intelligence quotient (IQ) of three standard deviations below the mean which is an IQ score of 55 or below that significantly impacts intellectual functioning and that exists concurrently with deficits in adaptive functioning (defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life). As a rule, a student having a significant cognitive disability is not solely determined by an IQ test score, but rather by a holistic understanding of a student.

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Source of Evidence (check all that apply)
<p>1. A student with the most significant cognitive disability according to AAC 290-4-2-.03.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p>Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.</p> <p><i>Adaptive behavior is defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual intellectual evaluation or a measure of cognitive functioning</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual adaptive behavior evaluation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual educational achievement evaluation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of informal assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual reading assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of district-wide alternate assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of language assessments including English language learners (ELL) language assessments, if applicable</p>
<p>2. The student participates in or may participate in content instruction on the alternate achievement standards that are aligned to the Alabama Courses of Study.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p>Goals and instruction listed in the IEP are linked to the enrolled grade-level Alternate Achievement Standards (AAS) and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives and materials, including work samples</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, goals, and benchmarks from the IEP</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Data from scientific research-based interventions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Progress monitoring data</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other _____</p>

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Source of Evidence (check all that apply)
<p>3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curriculum.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p>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 and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across academic content.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives, and materials including work samples from both school and/or community-based instruction</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher collected data and checklist</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, goals, and benchmarks, post-secondary goals and transition activities from the IEP</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other _____</p>

It was also determined at this IEP Team meeting that the student's inability to participate in the general education assessment, even with accommodations, is **primarily the result of a significant cognitive disability and NOT**

- a disability category or label
- poor attendance or extended absences
- native language/social/cultural or economic difference
- expected poor performance on the general education assessment
- academic and other services students receive
- educational environment or instructional setting
- percent of time receiving special education services
- English Learner (EL) status
- low reading level/achievement level
- anticipated disruptive behavior
- impact of test scores on accountability system
- an administrative decision
- anticipated emotional distress
- need for accommodations (e.g., assistive technology, communication device) to participate in assessment

The IEP Team has determined, based on a review of the student's educational information, that the alternate assessment, based on the alternate achievement standards, will be used to provide an evaluation of the student's current academic achievement.

YES **NO** (the student will participate in the general education assessment)

Information from the *Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions for the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program* guide was discussed at the IEP Team meeting. The decision-making information in the guide was followed to determine the student's participation in the Alabama Alternate Assessment Program. The parent has been informed of the difference between assessments based on grade level standards and those based on alternate achievement standards and how participation in the alternate assessment may delay or otherwise affect the student's completion of the requirements for a regular high school diploma*. Additionally, the parent has been provided access to the guide and given an opportunity to ask questions.

*A "regular high school diploma" means the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma, except that a regular high school diploma shall not be aligned to the alternate academic achievement standards described in section 1111(b)(1)(E);

Date provided to the Parent: _____

This form must be signed by the parent(s) after the IEP Team has determined that the general education assessment, even with accommodations, would not be an accurate measurement of academic achievement, and therefore, the student will participate in the alternate assessment. This document will become part of the student's IEP and filed with the current IEP record.

I understand that my child's achievement will be measured by participation in the alternate assessment which is based on the alternate achievement standards. I understand that my child's participation in the alternate assessment may delay or otherwise affect my child's completion of the requirements for a regular high school diploma.

I understand that decisions regarding participation in statewide assessments must be discussed at the student's annual IEP Team meeting and documented in the IEP.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Documentation of the attempts to provide parent(s) access to the guidance and to obtain a signature.

Date	Description of attempts	Results

Purpose of this form:

This form is to help document the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team's decision in determining whether the alternate assessment, based on the alternate achievement standards, is the most appropriate assessment for an individual student. An IEP Team's decision in determining that the general education assessment, even with accommodations, is not an appropriate measurement of achievement for a student with a significant cognitive disability, will justify the student's participation in the alternate assessment.

This form outlines criteria that an IEP Team must answer in determining that a student will not participate in the general education assessment, even with accommodations; therefore, the student will participate in the alternate assessment. To document that the alternate assessment is an appropriate assessment for a student with the most significant cognitive disability, the IEP Team must review the student's eligibility records and current academic achievement level. Documentation may include results from evaluations, progress monitoring data, IEP information, work samples, etc.

When to use this form:

- Use this form at an initial IEP Team meeting for a student the IEP Team is considering may meet the criteria to participate in the alternate assessment.
- Use this form for a student who has an IEP and currently participates in the general education assessment and the IEP Team is considering may meet the criteria to participate in the alternate assessment.
- Once the IEP Team has determined a student meets the criteria to participate in the alternate assessment, use this form at each annual review to determine whether the student continues to meet the participation criteria for the alternate assessment.
- Use this form to document that a student's learning content will be based on the alternate achievement standards.
- Use this form to document that the parent(s) was clearly informed about the difference between grade level course of study content standards and the alternate achievement standards, as well as the assessment aligned to each.
- Use this form to document that the parent(s) was clearly informed that learning content from the alternate achievement standards may delay or otherwise affect their child's completion of the requirements for a regular high school diploma.

Things to remember:

- If an IQ score is not required for a student's eligibility for special education services or an IQ score is not obtainable due to the level of functioning of a student, the IEP Team must use professional judgement when reviewing the student's results of evaluations to determine the student's disability significantly impacts his or her intellectual functioning.
- This documentation must be completed annually at the IEP Team meeting. If the student will be assessed using an alternate assessment, the parent(s) must have access to a copy of the guidance.
- Based on the ESSA requirement, this form will be signed indicating the parent is clearly informed of the difference between grade level standards and those based on alternate achievement standards and how participation in the alternate assessment may delay or otherwise affect their child in completing the requirements of a regular high school diploma. This signed form becomes part of the student's IEP and filed with the current IEP record.
- If the parent is not in attendance at the IEP Team meeting, this form must be completed and sent home with a copy of the IEP and guidance.
- The determination of the IEP Team that the student will be assessed by participating in the alternate assessment must be documented on the *Notice of Proposal or Refusal to Take Action* form indicating that the general education assessment was considered and why it was rejected for the student.
- All students who are participating in the alternate assessment must have a signed copy of this form as part of the current IEP record. If the parent(s) does not attend the IEP Team meeting, it is very important

to document your attempts to provide the parent with this information and to obtain a signature.

- If it is not a testing year for a student with the most significant cognitive disability, this form must be completed at an IEP Team meeting to determine that the student is a student with the most significant cognitive disability and the student will be receiving instruction from the alternate achievement standards.
- If your LEA is monitored regarding the percentage of students participating in the alternate assessment, this form and the supporting documentation used to determine a student's participation in the alternate assessment will be reviewed.

What happens next?

- Upon determining that a student is a student with the most significant cognitive disability and will participate in the alternate assessment, complete the *Individual Accessibility/Accommodation Supports Checklist* and justify why the student will not be participating in the general education assessment.
- If a student has been instructed on the alternate achievement standards, and it has been determined that the student will now participate in the general education assessment, please ensure that the student has a successful transition to a new course of study.
- If an IEP Team has determined that a student will not participate in the alternate assessment, the *Individual Accessibility/Accommodation Supports Checklist* must be completed for the general education assessment.