



**Guidance for IEP Teams on
Participation Decisions for
Maine’s Alternate Assessments
based on Alternate Academic
Achievement Standards
(AA-AAAS)**

Maine Department of Education

Updated August 2024

Contact Information:

Mechelle Ganglfinger

Coordinator for Alternate and English Language Proficiency Assessments,

Office of Federal Programs

Maine Department of Education

mechelle.ganglfinger@maine.gov, 207-242-4244

Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions on

Alternate Assessments

Introduction

According to federal and state law, all students must be assessed in grades 3 – 8 and high school in the content areas of mathematics and English language arts. Students in grades 5, 8, and high school must be assessed in the content area of science. The following options exist for meeting this requirement:

1. Participation in the statewide general assessment without accommodations
2. Participation in the statewide general assessment with approved state accommodations per the student's IEP
3. Participation in the statewide alternate assessment

This document is intended to outline steps to guide Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams to determine whether an alternate assessment is the most appropriate assessment for an individual student. These steps include: (a) reviewing student records and important information across multiple school years and settings (e.g., school, home, community), and (b) determining whether the student fits all criteria for participating in alternate assessments, as outlined in this document. Students deemed eligible will participate in an alternate assessment in all content areas.

Maine's alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) are:

Assessment	Content Area	Grades Eligible
MSAA	ELA and Mathematics	Grades 3-8 and 3 rd y HS
MSAA Science	Science	Grades 5, 8 and 3 rd y HS
Alternate ACCESS for ELLs	English language proficiency	Grades 1-12

Participation in Alternate Assessments

In Maine, a student must meet all three of the following criteria to be found eligible to participate in AA-AAAS:

1. **The student has a significant cognitive disability.** Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.
2. **The student is learning content linked to (derived from) state content standards (alternate academic achievement standards).** Goals, objectives and instruction included in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level standards and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student. In Maine, the AAAS in ELA and mathematics are the Core Content Connectors (CCC). The AAAS in science are the Extended Performance Expectations (EPE).
3. **The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curriculum.** 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 multiple settings

Participation Descriptions

1. **A student with a significant cognitive disability** is one who has documentation that indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is defined as actions essential for an individual to live independently and to function safely in daily life. *Having a significant cognitive disability is not determined by an IQ test score, but rather a holistic understanding of a student.*
2. **The student is learning content linked to (derived from) state standards.** The student's disability or multiple disabilities affect how the student learns curriculum linked to the standards. The student is learning content that is linked to (derived from) the standards that are appropriately broken into smaller steps, reduced in breadth and complexity. These alternate academic achievement standards, derived from grade level standards and adapted for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, are the [Core Content Connectors \(CCC\) in English language arts](#), the [Core Content Connectors in Mathematics](#), and the [Extended Performance Expectations \(EPE\) in Science](#).
3. **The student's need for extensive direct individualized instruction is not temporary or transient.** His or her need for substantial supports to achieve gains in the grade- and age- appropriate curriculum requires substantially adapted materials and customized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings.
4. The IEP Team is to consider the following information to determine whether an alternate assessment is appropriate for an individual student:
 - Description of the student's curriculum and instruction, including data on progress
 - Classroom work samples and data
 - Examples of performance on assessment tasks to compare with classroom work
 - Results of district-wide alternate assessments
 - Results of individualized reading assessments
 - IEP information including:
 - Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), goals, and short-term objectives.
 - Considerations for students with individualized and substantial communication needs or modes (from multiple data sources)
 - Considerations for students who may be learning English as a second or other language (i.e., English language learners) that may interfere with an accurate assessment of his or her academic, social, or adaptive abilities.

The following are not used as criteria for participation decisions:

In addition to the three criteria for determining participation, there are other issues that may affect a student's learning experience and his/her ability to learn that are **not appropriate** to consider during the decision-making process. 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 Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated disruptive behavior
11. Impact of test scores on accountability system
12. Administrator decision
13. Anticipated emotional distress
14. Need for accommodations (e.g., assistive technology/AAC) to participate in assessment

Eligibility Guidance and Resources:

There are several tools designed to support IEP Teams as they collect and organize evidence prior to making the determination about whether a student meets all of the criteria listed above.

[Participation Checklist](#)

This resource includes examples of evidence and documentation sources the IEP Team uses when determining whether a student is eligible to participate in alternate assessments.

[Participation Flowchart](#)

This resource includes the sequence of decisions made by IEP Teams when determining whether a student is eligible to participate in alternate assessments.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who decides that a student should participate in an alternate assessment?

The IEP team makes the determination of how a student will participate in statewide assessments. No one member of the IEP team makes this decision. Parents, teachers, and administrators make the decision based on evidence and adherence to the *Participation Guidelines* and *Guidance for IEP Teams*.

2. How do we know that a student has a “significant cognitive disability”?

Maine does not define a “significant cognitive disability” in terms of a “cut off” IQ score. Most students with significant cognitive disabilities have intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism, but not all do. And not all students with these disabilities are considered to have a “significant cognitive disability.” Students demonstrating academic deficits or difficulties due to learning disabilities, speech- language impairments, and emotional-behavioral disabilities do not qualify

for participation in an alternate assessment. Performing 3 - 4 grade levels below peers without disabilities is not, by itself, evidence of a significant cognitive disability. Academic deficits or difficulties alone do not indicate that a student has a significant cognitive disability. Further, a significant cognitive disability will be pervasive, affecting student learning across content areas and in social and community settings.

Students with autism or intellectual disabilities should be carefully considered for participation in an alternate assessment, but they should not automatically be assigned to the alternate assessment based on their identified disability category. Not all students with autism or intellectual disabilities have a significant cognitive disability. Many students eligible to receive special education and related services under these categorical labels are able to participate in general assessments, with accommodations.

Students receiving special education services who are identified as having orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, or traumatic brain injuries, do not necessarily have a significant cognitive disability.

Determinations for student participation in statewide assessments must be evidence centered and made individually for each student by the IEP team.

Students demonstrating mild to moderate cognitive disabilities may be more appropriately placed in the general assessment system with accommodations. Anticipated or past low achievement on the general assessment does not mean the student should be participating in an alternate assessment. An annual review of students who are in assessments based on modified achievement standards must be conducted.

3. How do I know if an alternate assessment is appropriate for a multilingual learner with an IEP whose language proficiency makes it difficult to assess content knowledge and skills?

An ML should be considered for the alternate assessment if (a) his/her intellectual functioning indicates a significant cognitive disability using assessments in his/her home language as appropriate, and (b) he/she meets the alternate participation guidelines. Assessments of adaptive behavior and communication should take into account linguistic and sociocultural factors for valid interpretation of these assessments. Information regarding goals and instruction in the student's IEP may be used to determine what may or may not be a significant cognitive disability. If an ELL with an IEP does not meet the criteria for the alternate assessment, he/she should take the general assessment with accommodations as appropriate.

4. *Why is it important to indicate that a student, participating in an alternate assessment is receiving instruction on content linked to state standards and his/her performance is measured against alternate academic achievement standards?*

The decision to align a student's academic programming to Core Content Connectors and Extended Performance Expectations that are linked to the state standards and participation in alternate assessments limits a student's direct contact with the breadth of the state standards for the grade level in which he/she is enrolled. This limited or modified exposure to the grade level standards may have significant impact on academic outcomes and post-secondary opportunities.

5. *What if it is impossible to assess a student because the student does not appear to communicate?*

All attempts should be made to find a route of communication with the student as soon as he or she is enrolled. If various approaches and technologies do not appear to demonstrate a route of communication, then consider that all behavior that the student exhibits is a form of communication, and use this as the starting point. A critical element in assessing all students is a focus on communicative competency as the base for student access to state standards. Best practice would indicate that students should enter Kindergarten with a communication system that allows them to demonstrate an understanding of academic concepts prior to entering the third grade. However, with or without a communication system, students must still participate in an alternate assessment.

6. *If a student has been tested in the past on an alternate assessment, but the current IEP team determines that the student does not meet the Participation Guidelines, can the student be assigned to the general assessment?*

Yes. The IEP team must ensure that the student receives appropriate instruction on the state standards and participates in the required general assessments for their current grade level with or without accommodations.

7. *Is it possible that a decision to participate in alternate assessments could change as a student gets older?*

Participating in alternate assessments requires that the student has a significant cognitive impairment and interacts with content that has been significantly modified from that which is provided to the student's typically developing peers. Even though students with significant cognitive disabilities often are identified early, prior to starting school, they may be able to participate in the general assessment during their elementary grades. IEP teams should be especially cautious about assigning students with significant cognitive disabilities to an alternate assessment in their early school years.

When the level of support needed for the student to participate in the breadth of the state standards and the general assessment increases, the team may determine that participation in alternate assessments are appropriate.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to continue to need supports to live as independently as possible throughout their adult lives after high school. Students who did not need early intervention services, or who are unlikely to need substantial daily supports in their adult lives, probably do not have a significant cognitive disability and would not be appropriately assessed through an alternate assessment.

Glossary

AA-AAAS: Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards: AAAS Standards, are aligned to grade level content standards and reduced in breadth, complexity, and depth for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

AAC: Augmentative and Alternative Communication (e.g., speech generating devices such as text-to-speech communication aids, pictures or symbol boards, etc.)

Accommodation: A change in materials or procedures that facilitates access during instruction and assessment. Accommodations do not change the construct or intent of what is being taught or measured. Assessment accommodations are intended to allow the student to participate in the assessment and to produce valid results that indicate what a student knows and can do.

Adaptive behavior: Behaviors defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

State Standards: The state's content standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics that define what students are expected to learn at each grade in order to leave school ready for college or careers.

Communicative competence: The use of a communication system that allows students to gain and demonstrate knowledge.

Constructed response items: Student forms an answer to a question rather than choosing from answer options.

Content target: Content targets identify those state's content standards that are the focus of MSAA. The content targets are defined by the Core Content Connectors in English language arts and mathematics.

Core Content Connector (CCC): The CCC are Maine's alternate academic achievement standards. Each CCC is a representation of the essential "core" content of state standards. Each CCC was identified by examining hypothesized learning progressions aligned with the state standards to determine the critical content for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Participation criteria descriptor: These descriptors provide further information about the characteristics students would have in order to meet the participation criteria for alternate assessment.

Multilingual Learner (ML): Multilingual learners are students with a primary or home language other than English who are in the process of acquiring English. They bring valuable assets with them to school and high-quality programs for MLs leverage those assets through individualized supports and equitable academic opportunities. Students who are multilingual learners receive English language development services from teachers who specialist in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) as well as supports throughout their instructional day provided by all teachers.

Evidence: This refers to the specific sources of information being used to identify student characteristics that either meet or do not meet the participation criteria.

Extensive direct individualized instruction: Concentrated instruction designed for and directed toward an individual student. This type of instruction is needed by students with the most significant cognitive disabilities acquire knowledge and skills in content. Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to need this extensively to apply knowledge and skills in multiple contexts.

Learning progression: A learning progression is a description of the way in which typically developing students may develop and build academic competencies over time. Learning progressions can be useful tools for teachers to use to determine where a student is in the process of learning a specific skill or understanding a concept.

Modification: A change in materials or procedures during instruction and assessment that changes the learning expectations of the grade level content. Modifications during instruction may be appropriate on a temporary basis for scaffolding the student's understanding and skills. Assessment modifications result in invalid measures of a student's knowledge and skills and thus should be avoided.

Pervasive: Present across academic content areas and across multiple settings (including school, home, and community).

Selected response items: Assessment items that are structured for students to respond by choosing an answer (e.g., multiple choice, true or false, etc.)

Substantial supports: Substantial supports include support from the teachers and others (e.g., resource teacher, co-teacher, educational technician) and various material supports within the student's environment. Examples include adapting text for assessments and learning, and extensive scaffolding of content to support learning.

Substantially adapted materials: Substantially adapted materials include various classroom and other materials that have been altered in appearance and content from the materials that peers without disabilities use for instruction or assessment. Examples include significantly shortening the length of passages, or using raised dots and hand-over-hand counting when identifying a matching number in math.