



Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions for the Maine's Alternate Assessments

Maine Department of Education

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Introduction

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

1. Participation in the statewide assessment without accommodations;
2. Participation in the statewide assessment with approved state accommodations;
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 of the 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 current Alternate Assessments include:

MEA Alternate Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy (MSAA)

MEA Alternate Science (PAAP)

MEA (Alternate) English Language Proficiency (WIDA ACCESS for ELLs® alternate)

Participation in Alternate Assessment

As reflected in the *Alternate Assessment Guidelines*, a student must meet all three of the following criteria to participate:

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.** Goals and instruction listed 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.
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. MSAA has derived these smaller steps from the standards to guide mathematics and English language arts instruction called Core Content Connectors (CCC). PAAP has derived these smaller steps from the science standards to guide instruction called the Alternate Grade Level Expectations (AGLEs).
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.

The IEP 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.

Do Not Use the Following 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

Participation Tools

There are several tools that may be helpful to IEP teams as they collect and organize evidence before making a decision about whether a student meets all of the criteria listed above. Participation forms and other tools designed to assist teams in collecting and reviewing evidence to determine whether it is appropriate for an individual student to participate in alternate assessments are provided in the appendices.

[Appendix A. Participation Guidelines.](#) This is a short form that IEP teams can use to make decisions when determining whether a student should participate in the alternate assessments.

[Appendix B. Participation Checklist.](#) This is a form that includes a way to indicate the evidence that was used in making decisions and the considerations that should not be the basis of making decisions.

[Appendix C. Decision Flowchart for Participation.](#) This shows the sequence of decisions made by IEP teams when determining whether a student should 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. The IEP team must follow the Participation Guidelines if they are to assign a student to participate in the alternate assessment. 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 an English Learner with an IEP whose language proficiency makes it difficult to assess content knowledge and skills?

An English Learner 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 achievement standards?

The decision to align a student's academic program to Core Content Connectors and Alternate Grade Level 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

AAC: Augmentative and Alternative Communication (e.g., speech generating devices such as text-to-speech communication aids, picture 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): A 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 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.

English Language Learner (ELL): An ELL is a student whose native language is a language other than English or a student who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency. An ELL's difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be a barrier to learning in classrooms instructed in English and to performance on assessments presented in English.

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 significant cognitive

disabilities to 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.

Appendix A

Determination of Participation in Alternate Assessments



MAINE'S ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES

All students in grades 3- 8 and 3rd year high school must participate in either a general or alternate mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy assessment. Students in grades 5, 8, and 3rd year high school must also be assessed in a general or alternate science assessment.

These criteria indicate that a student's significant cognitive disability is pervasive across all content areas and may participate in the alternate assessments.

Eligibility Criteria	Eligibility Criteria Descriptors	Agree (Yes) or Disagree (No)? Provide documentation for each
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. <i>*Adaptive behavior is defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.</i>	Yes / No
2. The student is learning content standards linked to (derived from) the Updated Maine Learning Results	The student is learning content based on grade level alternate achievement standards that are linked to Maine's Learning Results.	Yes / No
3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade-and age-appropriate curriculum.	The student: * requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature. * uses substantially adapted and modified materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings.	Yes / No

The student is eligible to participate in Maine's Alternate Assessment if all responses above are marked Yes.

In addition, evidence for the decision for participating in Maine's Alternate Assessment is **Not Based** on:

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
8. English Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated student's disruptive behavior
11. Impact of student scores on accountability system
12. Administrator decision
13. Anticipated emotional duress
14. Need for accommodations (e.g., assistive technology/AAC) to participate in assessment process

Appendix B


Participation Checklist

**Maine Alternate Assessment
Participation Decision
Documentation**

To meet the criteria for the Maine’s Alternate Assessment, the student must meet all participation criteria descriptors.

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Sources of Evidence [check if used]
<p>1. The student has a significant cognitive disability</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></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 cognitive ability test</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of adaptive behavior skills assessment</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual and group administered achievement tests</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 learner (ELL) language assessments if applicable</p>
<p>2. The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></p>	<p>Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level CCSS 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 and functional performance, goals and objectives from the IEP</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Data from scientific evidence-based interventions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Progress monitoring data</p>
<p>3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade-and age-appropriate curriculum.</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></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 community based instruction</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher collected data and checklists</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals, and objectives, and post school outcomes from the IEP and the Transition Plan for students age 16 and older unless State policy or the IEP team determines a younger age is appropriate</p>

The student may participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] if all responses above are marked Yes.

Additional Considerations Not to Use in Reviewing Evidence	
1.	<i>A disability category or label</i>
2.	<i>Poor attendance or extended absences</i>
3.	<i>Native language/social/cultural or economic difference</i>
4.	<i>Expected poor performance on the general education assessment</i>
5.	<i>Academic and other services received</i>
6.	<i>Educational environment or instructional setting</i>
7.	<i>Percent of time receiving special education services</i>
8.	<i>English Language Learner (ELL) status</i>
9.	<i>Low reading level/achievement level</i>
.	<i>Anticipated disruptive behavior</i>
.	<i>Impact of test scores on accountability system</i>
.	<i>Administrator decision</i>
.	<i>Anticipated emotional duress</i>
.	<i>Need for accommodations, e.g., assistive technology/AAC to participate in assessment process</i>
	<i>Evidence shows that the decision for participating in MSAA was not based on the above list.</i>

IEP Team Statement of Assurance: *Our decision was based on multiple pieces of evidence that, when taken together, demonstrated that the Alternate Assessment is the most appropriate assessment for this student; that his/her academic instruction will be based on the CCCs linked to state content standards; that the Additional Considerations listed above were not used to make this decision; and that any additional implications of this decision were discussed thoroughly.*

Each of us agrees that the student will participate in an alternate assessment appropriate to MEA assessments.

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

Parent(s)/Guardian: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Participation Decision Flowchart

Participation Decision Flowchart

Consider These:

Results of Individual cognitive ability test, adaptive behavior skills assessment, individual administered achievement tests, and district-wide alternate assessments, and English language learner (ELL) language assessments, if applicable

Data from scientific evidenced-based interventions, progress monitoring data, results of informal assessments, teacher collected data and checklists

Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives, and materials, work samples from school- or community-based instruction

Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals, and objectives, and post school outcomes from the IEP and the Transition Plan if applicable

1. Do the student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that most significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior? *

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

Yes ↓

2. Would the student be appropriately challenged by goals and instruction linked to the enrolled grade-level state standards knowledge and skills?

Yes ↓

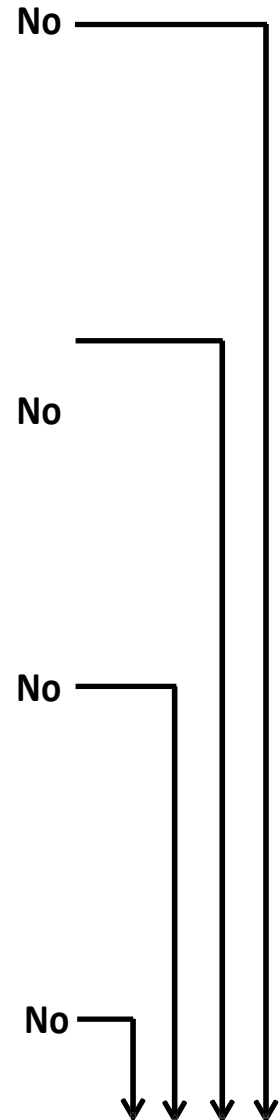
3a. Does the student require extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that are not of a temporary or transient nature?

Yes ↓

3b. Does the student use substantially adapted materials with individualized methods of accessing information in alternate ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across academic content?

Yes ↓

Student may participate in alternate assessments.



Student must participate in the general assessment. Student may be eligible to use accommodations.