



# LEARNING POINT

## How do students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments?

Since 1997, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has required that all students with disabilities, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, must participate in statewide and district-wide student assessment programs. However, assessing students with disabilities can be challenging for both the students and their teachers. Although there are good reasons why these students should participate in assessment, there are some significant challenges in including these students in classroom, school, district, and state assessments.

The major reason IDEA was adopted was to assure that students with disabilities participated in classroom instruction to the fullest extent possible. It has been known for some time that how—or even if—students are assessed affects how they are taught. The goal is to obtain accurate and useful information on the achievement of students and then to use the results of the assessments to plan subsequent instruction. The hope is to provide a more inclusive instructional program for every student with a disability.

### How students with disabilities can participate in assessments

Students with disabilities participate in state and local assessments in several ways. The student's local Individualized Education Program (IEP) team makes this decision, based on the level and nature of the student's disabilities. Students with disabilities can participate in state and local assessment using any of the following (according to their IEP):

- **No accommodation:** Some students with disabilities might participate in state or local assessments using no accommodations, taking the assessments just as general education students do.

- **Accessibility features:** Some students with disabilities might choose to use one or more of the accessibility features or universal tools available to any student during the assessment. Features available during online assessment might include individual or small group test administration, use of colored overlays and color settings, blank place markers, and magnifying devices and a zoom feature for online tests. In general, these are features and tools available to any student who regularly benefits from the use of them during instruction.
- **Designated supports:** Some students with disabilities require designated supports that are available for students who meet certain criteria. Some examples of designated supports include braille and large-print tests, basic student response transcribing, extra time, and mathematics manipulatives. Designated supports may require district or state approval.
- **Accommodations:** Some students with disabilities participate using accommodation types that the state or district make available to them. Ideally, these should be ones used daily in instruction. Accommodation types include presentation (e.g., oral presentation of a mathematics test), equipment (e.g., amplification equipment; calculators), response (e.g., scribed responses to open-response questions), and timing (e.g., extended time or frequent breaks on timed tests).

### Alternate assessment

Teachers should help students access the academic content standards expected of all students, since federal law requires all students be taught the same academic standards. Yet, we know that there are students with disabilities for whom the general education standards as written may not be realistic. For these

students, states have developed alternate achievement standards (AAS), which are similar to general education content standards, but set at one or more levels lower (see sidebar).

If participation in state and district general assessments, even with accommodations, is viewed by the IEP team to be not appropriate for a student with a significant cognitive impairment, the student must participate in an alternate assessment based on the alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). It is anticipated that 1% or fewer of all students—those with the most significant cognitive impairment—will take part in the AA-AAS, due to ESSA restrictions on alternate assessment participation.

### How should teachers help students with disabilities access general education content in their classrooms?

The first step for teachers is to determine the level at which students with disabilities can access the content standards and classroom instruction provided. For some students, the teacher will need to extend the instruction to level(s) at which the students can work and experience success. The goal is to help these students to achieve as much of the academic standards as written as possible over time. Some examples of this include the following:

- In an English class discussion on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* presented in the original old English version, the student with significant cognitive disability might be expected to understand the general content of the story either through a current-English or abbreviated version, or through the presentation of the basic themes using simplified texts or illustrations. Thus, the student could comprehend the basic story of love

even as other students are delving into the themes of the story in greater depth and breadth.

- In a mathematics class, the student may be able to use manipulatives to understand adding fractions even as other students are writing numerals to show the same thing.
- In a science class discussion about the characteristics of different types of leaves from various trees, the student with significant disabilities might be able to distinguish between leaves that are small and large, green and another color, or rough and smooth. The general education students might have created several classification categories that could be used to classify the characteristics of a large number of leaves.

The next step is to determine how to assess student learning. Since students with disabilities often display difficulties with language-based tasks, assessments that don't rely on written language are preferred. The following are some examples:

- **Demonstration:** Rather than describe what they have learned (which requires written or oral facility), students with significant cognitive disabilities might be able to show the teacher their learning through a demonstration using objects or manipulatives.
- **Presentation:** Students with severe disabilities may be able to demonstrate their learning by using a simple PowerPoint presentation from parts already created for them to show what they have learned.
- **Observation:** For some skills, the teacher may be able to observe the

student with a significant disability performing the activity, and then use a standard observation protocol to reliably and validly assess the student.

- **Interviews:** One-on-one assessments conducted by the teacher will permit students with severe disabilities to use whatever mode of communication that best suits them to respond to the assessment task.
- **Individual or small-group performance assessment:** If the teacher assesses the students individually, students with significant disabilities can demonstrate their achievement in a variety of ways instead of writing their answers.

Each of these assessment techniques should permit classroom teachers to better assess the achievement of students with disabilities. Better assessment strategies enable teachers to improve how and how deeply they teach these students. And improved teaching should, in turn, improve students' achievement.

### Conclusion

The purpose of including all students with disabilities, including those with the most severe cognitive disabilities, in district-wide and statewide assessments is to afford each student the greatest opportunity possible to learn and then to demonstrate their learning to move them closer and closer to being college- and career-ready. We do not know, in advance, what any student is capable of learning; but if we maintain the positive presupposition that all students are quite capable of learning, we won't fail in our responsibilities to move student learning forward. This is the challenge of IDEA-97 when adopted over 20 years ago, and this remains the challenge today.

One way that states indicate to teachers how to help students with disabilities access the general education standards is by extending the content standards to one or more lower access levels. Some examples of this in different content domains include the following:

### Reading:

Point to a character in a story read to them; indicate the basic theme of a story by picking from among two pictures; sequence three pictures to indicate the sequence of events in a story; predict what will happen next in a story using pictures.

### Writing:

Correctly hold a pencil; trace letters on a piece of paper; free-hand write letters; write several short words; write simple sentences.

### Mathematics:

Recognize different coins; understand which coins are more valuable; correctly purchase an item in a classroom store; correctly purchase something at a fast-food restaurant.

### Science:

Distinguish between hot and cold temperatures; understand that the sun provides warmth; keep track of whether it is sunny, cloudy or rainy each day using a data chart and stickies with the sun, clouds, or rain; use a simple thermometer (in 10 degree increments) and stacked sticky notes to record the daily temperatures over time.

*Note: The manner in which the state's academic content standards have been extended for students with significant cognitive disabilities and the assessments designed by the state for these students are excellent resources for all classroom teachers, since these can suggest instructional sequences that other students may benefit from in learning the skills. The alternate assessment procedures can also be useful for assessing general education students with low verbal skills (especially reading and writing) in the classroom. General education teachers should check with their special education colleagues to determine if the state has created extended standards and alternate assessment resources for use by local educators.*

## TO LEARN MORE

Learning Point: **Performance assessment: What is it and why is it useful?**  
Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017.  
[bit.ly/Perf-Assessment](http://bit.ly/Perf-Assessment)

**IDEA Topics Areas – State and District-Wide Assessment.**  
U.S. Department of Education  
[sites.ed.gov/idea/topic-areas/#Assessment-State-District-wide](http://sites.ed.gov/idea/topic-areas/#Assessment-State-District-wide)

**Supports and Accommodations Guidance Document**  
Supports and Accommodations Guidance Document (for Michigan statewide assessments). Michigan Department of Education.  
[bit.ly/MI-AccommodationsManual](http://bit.ly/MI-AccommodationsManual)

**Michigan's Alternate Assessment: What it Is, What It Means, and What it Offers.** Michigan Department of Education.  
[bit.ly/MI-Access-info](http://bit.ly/MI-Access-info)

*The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.*