

Understanding Alternative Assessments and Access Points

Determining Appropriate Participation and Supporting Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Purpose & Overview

Alternative assessments and access points are designed for a small population of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who require instruction aligned to alternate academic achievement standards. These students often need extensive supports, individualized instruction, and modified learning expectations to access educational content and demonstrate what they know.

Because decisions regarding alternative assessments can significantly impact a student's educational program, educators must understand who qualifies, how access points are used, and how instruction should be planned to support student success.

The purpose of this guide is to help educators understand alternative assessments, access points, eligibility considerations, and instructional practices that promote meaningful participation and progress.

Instructional Outcomes

Teachers will be able to:

- Understand the purpose of alternative assessments
 - Identify characteristics of students who may participate in alternative assessments
 - Understand the role of access points in instruction
 - Connect access point instruction to IEP goals and daily teaching
 - Support student growth through meaningful assessment and progress monitoring
-

What Are Alternative Assessments?

Alternative assessments are statewide assessments designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are instructed using alternate academic achievement standards.

These assessments allow students to demonstrate learning in ways that are appropriate for their instructional level and individual needs.

Alternative assessments are:

- Aligned to alternate academic standards
 - Designed for a small percentage of students
 - Based on individual student needs
 - Supported through specialized instruction and accommodations
-

What Are Access Points?

Access points are alternate academic expectations that provide students with significant cognitive disabilities access to grade-level standards at varying levels of complexity.

Access points help teachers:

- maintain connections to grade-level content
- provide meaningful instruction
- support individualized learning goals
- monitor progress toward academic outcomes

The goal is not to lower expectations but to provide an appropriate pathway for learning.

Understanding Access Point Levels

While terminology may vary by state, access points generally represent reduced complexity while maintaining alignment to grade-level standards.

Grade-Level Expectation	Access Point Example	Student Learning Focus
Analyze details within a text	Identify key details in a text	Comprehension of important information
Solve multi-step math problems	Solve single-step problems with support	Basic problem-solving skills

Compare informational texts	Identify similarities between texts	Foundational comparison skills
Explain scientific processes	Identify parts of a process	Understanding essential concepts

Who May Participate in Alternative Assessments?

Alternative assessments are typically considered for students who:

- have significant cognitive disabilities
- require extensive supports across settings
- receive instruction aligned to alternate standards
- demonstrate substantial learning needs that cannot be addressed through accommodations alone

Participation decisions should always be made by the IEP team using student-specific data.

Important Considerations

Alternative assessment participation should NOT be based solely on:

- Low academic performance
- Poor attendance
- Disability category alone
- Limited English proficiency
- Behavior concerns
- Placement setting

Instead, decisions should be based on comprehensive data regarding the student's cognitive, academic, adaptive, and functional needs.

Real Classroom Scenarios

Scenario 1: Student Struggles Academically

A student performs several grade levels below peers in reading and math.

Question

Should the student automatically participate in an alternative assessment?

Answer

No.

Low academic performance alone does not indicate eligibility for alternate assessment participation.

The team must review the student's overall cognitive, adaptive, and educational needs.

Scenario 2: Student Requires Significant Supports

A student:

- uses a communication device
- requires extensive support throughout the school day
- receives instruction aligned to access points

Team Consideration

The IEP team reviews evaluation data and instructional needs to determine whether alternate assessment participation is appropriate.

Scenario 3: Parent Questions Alternative Assessment Participation

A parent asks how alternative assessments differ from general state assessments.

Appropriate Explanation

Alternative assessments are designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities and are aligned to alternate academic standards while still addressing meaningful academic learning.

Planning Instruction Using Access Points

Students participating in alternative assessments still require:

- rigorous instruction
- meaningful learning opportunities
- standards-based teaching
- progress monitoring

Instruction should focus on:

Academic Skills

- reading
- writing
- mathematics
- science

Functional Skills

- communication
- problem-solving
- independence
- self-advocacy

Application of Learning

Students should have opportunities to apply skills in authentic situations whenever possible.

Example: Access Point Instruction

Grade-Level Standard

Determine the central idea of an informational text.

Access Point Instruction

Student identifies one important fact from an informational passage using visual supports.

Teaching Strategies

- picture supports
- guided reading
- repeated practice

- modeling
 - verbal prompting
-

Progress Monitoring for Students on Access Points

Progress monitoring should focus on:

- skill acquisition
- independence
- accuracy
- consistency
- generalization of skills

Examples include:

- teacher observations
 - task completion data
 - work samples
 - skill checklists
 - performance assessments
-

Myths vs. Facts

<i>Myth</i>	<i>Fact</i>
<i>Students taking alternative assessments do not learn academic skills.</i>	Students continue learning academic content aligned to alternate standards.
<i>Alternative assessments are easier versions of state assessments.</i>	They measure learning through alternate achievement standards and expectations.

*All students with disabilities qualify for
alternative assessments.
Access points replace academic
instruction.*

Only a small percentage of students with
significant cognitive disabilities participate.
Access points provide pathways to academic
learning.

Teacher Reflection

Consider the following:

- ☐ Do I understand the purpose of alternative assessments?
 - ☐ Can I explain access points to families and colleagues?
 - ☐ Is instruction aligned to the student's educational needs?
 - ☐ Are academic and functional skills being addressed?
 - ☐ Am I collecting meaningful progress monitoring data?
 - ☐ Are instructional supports promoting student growth and independence?
-

Connecting Access Points to IEP Development

For students participating in alternative assessments:

Present Levels Should

- describe current performance
- identify strengths and needs
- include functional and academic data

Goals Should

- be measurable
- reflect access point instruction
- support meaningful progress

Services Should

- address individualized needs

- support academic and functional development
-

Closing Reflection

Alternative assessments and access points provide students with significant cognitive disabilities meaningful opportunities to demonstrate learning and make academic progress. When educators understand how access points connect to instruction, assessment, and IEP development, they can create educational experiences that are both challenging and accessible.

The focus should always remain on helping students build skills, increase independence, and achieve their highest potential.
