

DISTRICT ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS

What is required by law in terms of implementing a district alternate assessment?

With the passage of IDEA in 1997 and its reauthorization in 2004, it has been required that both state and districts provide an alternate assessment for students who cannot participate in general state and district assessments. Federal statute 20USC1411 provides the regulations on including children with disabilities in both state and district level assessments (including alternate assessments) with appropriate accommodations as indicated on their IEPs.

In relation to district assessments, IDEA states that districts must:

- Establish accommodation guidelines for their regular district assessments.
- Establish participation guidelines for the district alternate assessment for those students who cannot participate in the regular district assessment even with accommodations.
- Report results for students with disabilities (on both the district assessment and district alternate) with the same frequency and detail as students who do not have disabilities.
- Universal design principles must be observed in the development and administration of the alternate assessment.

What is a district assessment?

A district assessment is a large-scale test given to students to measure student performance on district curriculum content. Districts use the results to determine school improvement priority areas, to gain formative information on student progress, and to report student progress to the community.

Some district-wide assessments are embedded into the curriculum by grade levels, content areas, or courses. In some cases, teachers weave the assessment into everyday classroom instruction. These assessments are then graded using a district developed rubric, or submitted it to a group of trained scorers. These embedded assessments can be district developed or purchased commercially from a test publisher.

Another assessment design used at the district level is a large scale test. These are typically paper and pencil assessments which are timed (60 minute sessions for example) and administered across grades to several students at once. Typically these consist of multiple choice and/or constructed responses to academic questions. Accommodations on these tests are typically very codified and structured. Examples include the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Terra Nova, the California Achievement Test, and also some district designed tests.

What is a district alternate assessment?

If a school district has a district-wide assessment, then that district must also have a district alternate assessment for those students who cannot participate in the regular assessment even with accommodations. The CDE *recommends* that districts use either a **Body of Evidence** or a **Performance Based Test** to measure the progress of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the district-wide assessment. These assessments should be used to measure student progress in the district's academic curriculum. If the district assessment covers several different content areas (Reading, Writing, Math, Science, etc.) then the district alternate must also measure progress in those content areas and should be linked to grade level expectations. While the district is responsible for creating guidelines as to which assessment the student should take, it is still the responsibility of the IEP team to make the final determination as to which test (the general district assessment or an alternate assessment) the student should take.

Body of Evidence:

In terms of a district alternate assessment, a Body of Evidence is a collection of information about a student's progress in the general academic curriculum. A Body of Evidence incorporates data from multiple sources and assessment methods. Many sources of information for a Body of Evidence assessment are already administered, developed, or gathered on an ongoing basis.

In general, the strength of the Body of Evidence assessment is that it allows a great deal of flexibility for teachers and students in finding evidence of academic skills, and thus may allow for a more valid assessment of what a student knows and can do. However, the Body of Evidence approach may have more threats to reliability, as it is difficult for the test to be administered and scored in the same way across several students.

Both the information collected and the scoring rubric for the Body of Evidence assessment should be closely aligned with the district's academic content or standards. The Body of Evidence assessment should use a variety of clearly defined acceptable materials to document student knowledge and should be scored using a carefully designed rubric accompanied by extensive scoring training.

Performance Based Test:

A Performance Based Test (like the CSAPA) is a point-in-time, direct measure of a student's knowledge and skills. This assessment typically measures how independently the student can perform an activity linked to an academic standard or to general education curriculum content.

A strength of the Performance Based Test is that it, in many ways, mirrors components of a general assessment. For example, it uses a set and ordered questions for each student and yields quantitative data that can be analyzed in much the same way as the general assessment. In addition, since this is the form of test used for the state alternate assessment in Colorado (the CSAPA) teachers should be more familiar with giving and scoring this type of assessment and resource materials are more readily available from the CDE.

Making Performance Based Tests valid for this population of students can be a challenge. Threats to validity result in part from the specific content of the test being more prescribed. That is, the test defines how a student can demonstrate Reading or Math, etc. in a more standardized way. Typically this would be an advantage in a testing system but for this population of students it may limit how they can demonstrate what they know. In addition, the demonstration of the academic knowledge/skill is at one point in time, instead of across a longer period.

To address threats to validity, the content of the test must be closely aligned with academic standards. Also, because of the variety of challenges this population of students presents in accessing and responding to assessments, significant accommodations and modifications should be allowed. For example the test should allow for the extensive use of assistive technology devices, flexibility in testing session length and scheduling, and changes to the materials presented to the student so that they may better understand, manipulate, and respond to questions and activities. Reliability on the Performance Based Test is typically strong if those administering the test are trained to give the same questions to all students and there is clear guidance provided on scoring the levels of independence in performing each task.

What questions should districts ask in developing a district alternate?

1. What is the purpose of your district's large-scale assessment?
2. To what extent has your district aligned assessment with standards and district curriculum?
3. To what extent does your district have a system to collect and analyze district-wide assessment data?
4. How will the results of the alternate be reported?
5. Will your alternate process measure what is intended to measure? (Validity)
6. To what extent does the assessment provide the same results over repeated administrations? (Reliability)
7. Will your system be able to demonstrate growth?
8. Will your system provide meaningful information to parents and teachers?

2008 IDEA Amendments to regulations mandate districts to provide IEP Teams with a clear explanation of the differences between assessments based on grade-level academic achievement standards and those based on modified or alternate academic achievement standards, including any effects of State or local policies on the student's education resulting from taking an alternate assessment based on alternate or modified academic achievement standards (such as whether only satisfactory performance on a regular assessment would qualify a student for a regular high school diploma).

The amendments also mandate districts to ensure that parents of students selected to be assessed based on alternate or modified academic achievement standards are informed that their child's achievement will be measured based on alternate or modified academic achievement standards.

