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Alternate Assessment

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# Introduction

Our world is full of different types of accommodations that allow people to perform tasks they may not otherwise be capable of doing. People have the ability to select and wear eyeglasses or contacts, people with visual impairments often times have access to buttons in Braille, and even voters with disabilities are able to receive assistance with the voting process.

It is equally important, then, to recognize how accommodations play an important role in educational settings. There are children in today’s schools who exhibit disabilities that interfere with basic learning tasks, tasks you and I may take for granted. Some of these could include, but are not limited to; reading a book, taking notes in a class, writing an essay, or what one may think of as simply taking a test and filling in some blanks or circles. All of these “basic” educational tasks can be critical for both educator and student. It is important that each party understand each other in the assessment process. As educators, it is our job to know our students and how we can do our very best job in fulfilling their needs, and similarly important, is that our students are aware of why we are assessing those needs.

# What is an Alternate Assessment

An important part of teaching and assessing students with disabilities, is providing them with accommodations that support learning and that support their ability to show what they know and can do (Luke & Schwartz, 2020). An alternate assessment, then, can be one answer to fulfilling the educational obligations set forth by society as well as humanity. What is an alternate assessment? An alternate assessment is a way of measuring the performance of students with disabilities. It is an assessment that must be aligned with the State’s content and student achievement standards. It must report student achievement in the same way as the State’s regular assessment. Lastly, it must serve the same purpose as the assessment for which it is an alternate (ODE).

# No Child Left Behind

Amendments to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have allowed for a certain portion of students with disabilities within each state[[1]](#footnote-1) to be tested via an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (Elliot, Kettler, & Roach, 2017). Historically, in many states, struggling students who were taking general education grade level tests were given out-of-level tests (Elliot, Kettler, & Roach, 2017). After NCLB, this practice was deemed unacceptable. The testing practices did not produce meaningful results with regards to what the tests were measuring, nor were they an accurate look at student achievement. The general assessments were too difficult for many of the students with disabilities and the alternate assessments were too easy. In summary, neither of these options resulted in accurate assessment of what the students were being taught, or what they can be known to do (Elliot, Kettler, & Roach, 2017).

# Modified Achievement Standards

An assessment based on modified achievement standards would appear to be the solution for the times. Fast forward to today’s alternate assessments. Eligible students who are unable to perform proficiently on regular state assessments because of their disability may be eligible to receive an alternate assessment. [(See the Student Eligibility section)](#_Student_Eligibility) These alternate assessments have similar materials to the general assessment, only the language is presented in a simpler way, and there is less content to be memorized for successful performance. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2007 stated that students with disabilities must have access to tests that would allow them to demonstrate adequate proficiency. In the past, students with disabilities did not have to be held accountable for their test performance, whereas today, they must be included in the school’s accountability system.

There are many ways for students with disabilities to access these tests and be given an equal chance to demonstrate their knowledge while still providing teachers with the necessary data that will reveal the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Some of them are, by changing the setting, scheduling, presentation format, or response format (Johnson, 2016). With the use of some of these simple modifications, teachers may gain a clearer understanding of their students in order to more effectively drive instruction.

# Who Will Benefit

It is important to consider which students would benefit from alternate assessments. First the regular assessment must be deemed too difficult. This decision would be made by the team who writes the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a particular student. How a student with disabilities will participate in statewide assessment will be determined by the IEP team at least annually (Ohio Department of Education, 2017-2020). These would be students who are unlikely to reach proficiency within the same time frame as students who take the regular assessment (Kettler & Elliot, 2018). Alternate assessment for students with disabilities is going to be appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2017-2020). One would look at students who learn at a slower rate than their peers and who are considered as having persistent academic difficulties (Kettler & Elliot, 2018).

In determining eligibility, it is equally important that the IEP team make an informed decision regarding individuals who will participate in alternate assessment. If states and individuals do not follow guidelines and criteria, the data for those who should and should not take the alternate assessment could likely threaten the validity of the alternate assessment (Johnson, 2016).

One accurate way of screening students who may need a modified assessment in a Computer Based Alternate Assessment Screening Test (C-BAAS). Comparable to problems found on state assessments, the test includes multiple choice items. This computer assessment was developed to measure the academic achievement of students that would not otherwise meet proficiency within one year in the classroom. It is one example of how the results of the study can indicate how the C-BAAS or other computer tests can predict the outcome of general assessments in a valid way (Kettler in Johnson (2019), pg. 2).

# Student Eligibility

In further discussing the topic of eligibility, the Ohio Department of Education has a model decision making framework in place to assist those making decisions regarding alternate assessments. First and foremost is the big question to consider. Can the student show what he/she knows on a general assessment using allowable accommodations? If the answer is yes, the student should undoubtedly participate in the general assessment with or without allowable accommodations. If the answer is no, two critical questions can arise. Does the student have a disability that presents “unique and significant” challenges to participation in district and state assessments regardless of allowable accommodations available? Is the student completing a curriculum that is modified substantially (in form and/or substance) by the IEP from the general education curriculum? If the answer to those questions is yes, then the student with disabilities must also meet all four of the following criteria to participate in alternate assessment. The criteria are: Does the student have a cognitive disability? Does the student require substantial modifications to general education curriculum? Does the student require instruction focused on application of state standards through essential life skills? Does the student require instruction multiple levels below age/grade level? If the answer is yes to the four criteria, then the student will participate in alternate assessment (Ohio Department of Education, 2017-1020).

Of all special education students, only 14% qualify to take alternate assessments. These students are under the disability categories of mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities. Typically, these students may have difficulty in expressive and receptive communication. They may often use communication devices. They may use pictures, signs, gestures or objects to aid in communication. They could need assistance with motor tasks, and additionally, may need extra time to acquire skills and to maintain those skills.

# Conclusion

It appears evident that students with disabilities are not likely to be able to perform in a proficient manner on general state assessments. With the advancements of the Individual’s with Disabilities Act (IDEA) 2004, as well as the No Child Left Behind Act, school districts must be held accountable for all student achievement regardless of whether a student has a disability or not. Today, educators have the option of the alternate assessment, where their students can have the opportunity to show what they know using a test that is technically easier, but has the same content as the regular statewide assessment. As a result, test scores are becoming more valid. With alternate assessment, teachers can continue to adjust styles to meet the needs of all students, while fine tuning accommodations and instruction for students with disabilities.

Alternate assessment is just another step forward for assisting those students who have special needs and circumstances. Adding this piece of equipment to the tool belt and allowing students with disabilities the means of showing their knowledge and skills in a regular assessment format is just another step toward including them in the general world of education.

# Bibliography

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1. The Ohio state standards have been used in this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)