

# **Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions for the Multi-State Alternate Assessment**

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## **Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions on the Multi-State Alternate Assessment (MSAA) for English Language Arts and Mathematics**

### **Introduction**

This document is intended to help guide Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to determine whether the Multi-State Alternate Assessment (MSAA) is the most appropriate assessment for an individual student. This assessment was developed to ensure that all students are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to grade level state standards. MSAA was developed, so that students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in content instruction and assessments that are aligned to state standards.

IEP teams must consider a student's individual characteristics when determining whether a student with a disability should participate in the general assessment with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment. This document outlines steps that an IEP team should take in determining whether MSAA is appropriate for a student. These 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 MSAA, as outlined in this document.

### **Description of MSAA**

The Multi-State Alternate Assessment consists of 11 state or territories Partners. All MSAA Partners are actively involved in continuing the development and enhancements of the MSAA Comprehensive System including evidence-based instructional practices, professional development modules to support educators and a summative alternate assessment with built in supports for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

### ***Assessment Design***

MSAA is an assessment of English language arts (reading and writing) and mathematics in grades 3-8 and 11. It is an on demand assessment of approximately 30 test items that assess approximately 10 prioritized content targets per grade level. These content targets were identified for each grade based on learning progressions and alignment to the grade level state standards. The assessment includes multiple choice items and constructed response items. Each content target is assessed by items that have been carefully and intentionally designed to assess a range of ability and performance.

### ***Assessment Administration***

The assessment is delivered via computer, with allowances for flexibility in administration (for example, a student may respond to administrator-presented item stimuli rather than to the item stimuli on the computer). A trained testing administrator familiar to the student (e.g., the student's teacher) facilitates the administration, presenting items via paper or manipulatives as appropriate for the student. Items are administered to the student over the course of one or more testing sessions as needed for a student to complete a content area assessment. Testing sessions are scheduled within a testing window of approximately six weeks.

The assessment uses an adaptive approach, meaning that each student receives items that have been determined to be an appropriate level of challenge. Embedded locator tests and classroom data help determine the items a student encounters. The administration script provides flexibility in the ways in which a student may interact with items, so that what is being measured is not changed.

## Participation Decisions

MSAA *Participation Guidelines* are provided in Appendix A. IEP teams will want to use the guidelines to determine whether a student participates in the alternate assessment. MSAA is administered each year to students in grades 3-8 and 11 who meet the required criteria. As reflected in the *MSAA 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 records 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 instruction called Core Content Connectors (CCC). A CCC is a representation of the essential "core" content of a standard in the 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.
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 for MSAA. 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 MSAA 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 MSAA.

[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 MSAA.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. *Who decides that a student should participate in MSAA?*

The IEP team makes the determination of how a student will participate in statewide assessments. The IEP team must follow the MSAA 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 *MSAA Participation Guidelines and Guidance for IEP Teams*.

### 2. *How do we know that a student has a “significant cognitive disability”?*

MSAA 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 MSAA. 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 MSAA, 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 MSAA. An annual review of students who are in assessments based on modified achievement standards should be conducted.

*3. How do I know if MSAA is appropriate for an ELL with an IEP whose language proficiency makes it difficult to assess content knowledge and skills?*

An ELL 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 MSAA participation guidelines. Assessments of adaptive behavior and communication should take into account linguistic and sociocultural factors for valid interpretation of these assessments, alongside the information on goals and instruction in the student's IEP 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 MSAA 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 the Core Content Connectors that are linked to the state standards and participation in MSAA 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 MSAA.

*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 MSAA 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 an AA-AAS could change as a student gets older?*

Participating in MSAA 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 MSAA is 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 with MSAA.

*8. Who can we ask if we have questions about this important decision?*

Contact your state department of education if you have any questions about participation decision making for MSAA.

*For information about MSAA contact:*

Audra Ahumada  
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[Audra.Ahumada@azed.gov](mailto:Audra.Ahumada@azed.gov)

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## 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 three participation criteria for MSAA

**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, aide) 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 MSAA***

## MSAA Participation Guidelines

**The criteria for participation in MSAA reflect the pervasive nature of a significant cognitive disability. All content areas should be considered when determining who should participate in this assessment. Thus, a student who participates in MSAA participates for all content areas.**

In addition, evidence for the decision for participating in MSAA 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 services
8. English Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated 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

Participation Criteria	Participation 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 linked to (derived from) state content standards	Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level state standards and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.	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 (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.	Yes / No

**The student may participate in MSAA if all responses above are marked Yes.**

# Appendix B

## *Participation Checklist*

## MSAA Participation Decision Documentation

To meet the criteria for MSAA, the student must meet all participation criteria descriptors.

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Sources of Evidence [check if used]
<b>1. The student has a significant cognitive disability</b>  YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/>	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>	<input type="checkbox"/> Results of Individual Cognitive Ability Test <input type="checkbox"/> Results of Adaptive Behavior Skills Assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual and group administered achievement tests <input type="checkbox"/> Results of informal assessments <input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual reading assessments <input type="checkbox"/> Results of district-wide alternate assessments <input type="checkbox"/> Results of language assessments including English language learner (ELL) language assessments if applicable
<b>2. The student is learning content linked to (derived from) state content standards</b>  YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/>	Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level state standards and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.	<input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives and materials including work samples <input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals and objectives from the IEP <input type="checkbox"/> Data from scientific research-based interventions <input type="checkbox"/> Progress monitoring data
<b>3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curriculum.</b>  YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/>	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.	<input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives, and materials including work samples from both school and community based instruction <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher collected data and checklists <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

**The student may participate in MSAA  
if all responses above are marked YES.**

<b><i>Additional Considerations Not to Use in Reviewing Evidence</i></b>	
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>
10.	<i>Anticipated disruptive behavior</i>
11.	<i>Impact of test scores on accountability system</i>
12.	<i>Administrator decision</i>
13.	<i>Anticipated emotional duress</i>
14.	<i>Need for accommodations, e.g., assistive technology/AAC to participate in assessment process</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Evidence shows that the decision for participating in MSAA <b>was not</b> 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 with the participation decision in MSAA:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent(s)/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix C

**MSAA**

***Participation Decision Flowchart***

## MSAA 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 research-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 is 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 MSAA.

No

No

No

No

Student must participate in the general assessment. Student may be eligible to use accommodations. If there are questions, please contact your state's Alternate Assessment Department.