

Alternate Assessments for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Introduction

Accountability systems are based on measuring the progress of all students. The reform movements and current laws are designed to ensure that all students have opportunities to learn to high standards. Alternate assessments allow students with significant cognitive disabilities to be assessed on extended or alternate standards that are aligned with the overall state standards. Alternate assessments are designed for testing students who are unable to take the regular assessment, even when testing accommodations are provided. These assessments are given to a very small number of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Alternate assessments are typically administered individually by a special education teacher.

Practices for administering alternate assessments vary from state to state and may include observations, checklists, individually administered tasks, or collections of classroom work. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and may overlap (Quenemoen, Thompson, and Thurlow, 2003). They may be used in combination.

This paper explores the federal requirements shaping educational accountability, the evolution of alternate assessments in accountability systems, formats in use, and the multiple uses of alternate assessments. It also presents an overview of technical requirements for scoring and reporting.

Federal Requirements and Educational Accountability

Two pieces of federal legislation require states to offer alternate assessments to students with severe cognitive disabilities who are unable to take the regular assessment. The requirement was initially stipulated in the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as reauthorized by the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (*NCLB*) gave emphasis to the requirement that states offer alternate assessments aligned to content and performance standards. The legislation also requires that alternate assessments be built with the same high standards and technical adequacy as the regular assessments and adhere to the principle of public reporting.

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Federal legislation requires states and school districts to make alternate assessments available and use the results in educational accountability systems. *NCLB* regulations published in the *Federal Register* on December 9, 2003, indicate that only 1% of students in the general school population and approximately 9% of students receiving special education should be considered candidates for alternate assessment. These are the students with significant cognitive disabilities whose assessments are based on alternate achievement standards rather than against grade-level standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

On December 9, 2003, the U.S. Department of Education provided final regulations on Title I under *NCLB*. The regulations allow states to establish alternate achievement (performance) standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities and to use the alternate standards in determining proficiency for up to 1% of the total population of students tested when calculating Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

In accordance with *NCLB* requirements, the results of alternate assessments must be reported in state accountability systems and used in the calculation of AYP. According to the final Title I regulations published in the *Federal Register* on December 9, 2003, up to 1% of students determined to be “proficient” for the purposes of AYP can be held to alternate standards. The regulations are designed to ensure that schools are held accountable for the educational progress of all students with disabilities, just as they are accountable for the progress of all students.

The Evolution of Alternate Assessments

In a recent publication (Quenemoen, Thompson, and Thurlow, 2003), the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) described the evolution of alternate assessments over the past six years. Initially, alternate assessments that evaluated functional skills in real-life or natural environments were viewed as best practice for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Following the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, Ysseldyke and Olsen (1997) recommended that alternate assessments:

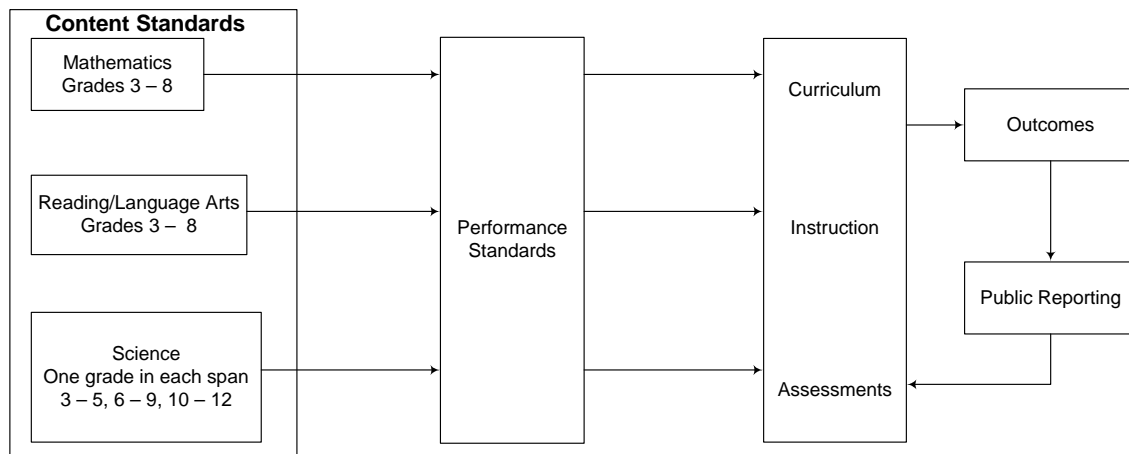
- (1) focus on authentic skills and on assessing experiences in community/real life environments;
- (2) measure integrated skills across domains;
- (3) use continuous documentation methods if at all possible; and
- (4) include, as critical criteria, the extent to which the system provides the needed supports and adaptations and trains the student to use them. (pg. 1)

Two years later, Kleinert and Kearns (1999) noted that success for students with significant disabilities was strongly associated with an authentic and integrated approach. By 2001, Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, and Ysseldyke noted an emphasis on alternate assessments that measure content standards and performance levels reflective of those expected by the general curriculum.

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Figure 1 illustrates the alignment of content standards with performance standards and their relationship to curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Figure 1. Alignment of Components with Standards



Alternate Assessment Formats

Quenemoen, et al. (2003) provides a clear description of the various alternate assessment formats used throughout the United States. These definitions are quoted below:

Portfolio

A collection of student work gathered to demonstrate student performance on specific skills and knowledge, generally linked to state content standards. Portfolio contents are individualized, and may include wide ranging samples of student learning, including but not limited to actual student work, observations recorded by multiple persons on multiple occasions, test results, record reviews, or even video or audio records of student performance. The portfolio contents are scored according to predefined scoring criteria, usually through application of a scoring rubric to the varying samples of student work.

IEP-linked Body of Evidence

Similar to a portfolio approach, this is a collection of student work demonstrating student achievement on standards-based IEP goals and objectives measured against predetermined scoring criteria. This approach is similar to portfolio assessment, but may contain more focused or fewer pieces of evidence given there is generally additional IEP documentation to support scoring processes. This evidence may meet dual purposes of documentation of IEP progress and the purpose of assessment.

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Performance Assessment

Direct measures of student skills or knowledge, usually in a one-on-one assessment. These can be highly structured, requiring a teacher or test administrator to give students specific items or tasks similar to pencil/paper traditional tests, or it can be a more flexible item or task that can be adjusted based on student needs. For example, the teacher and the student may work through an assessment that uses manipulatives, and the teacher observes whether the student is able to perform the assigned tasks. Generally the performance assessments used with students with significant cognitive disabilities are scored on the level of independence the student requires to respond and on the student's ability to generalize the skills, and not simply on accuracy of response. Thus, a scoring rubric is generally used to score responses similar to portfolio or body of evidence scoring.

Checklist

Lists of skills, reviewed by persons familiar with a student who observe or recall whether students are able to perform the skills and to what level. Scores reported are usually the number of skills that the student is able to successfully perform, and settings and purposes where the skill was observed.

Traditional Test (Paper- or Computer-based)

Traditionally constructed items requiring student responses, typically with a correct and incorrect forced-choice answer format. These can be completed independently by groups of students with teacher supervision, or they can be administered in one-on-one assessments with teacher recording of answers.

Multiple Uses of Alternate Assessments

Accountability

The uses of alternate assessments parallel the purposes of general education large-scale assessments. In the current educational environment, accountability is the primary reason states set content standards, evaluate achievement, and report on AYP as required by *NCLB*. Large-scale assessment systems address instructional improvement, placement and graduation. Other uses of large-scale assessment systems include aiding in instructional decisions about individual students, motivating change and evaluating programs certifying a student's achievement or mastery. Each state has its own combination of purposes and its own collection of assessments to meet those purposes (Almond, et al., 2002). Alternate assessments are designed to be an integral part of the larger system and are used for the same purposes. School accountability or AYP has been the most frequently cited purpose for large-scale assessment since *NCLB* was enacted. Another commonly cited purpose is graduation. An increasing number of states require students to achieve a passing score on a state exit exam to earn a high school

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diploma. In addition, an implied if not overtly stated purpose of the assessment system is instructional improvement.

Informing Instruction

The focus of special education has always been on the individual student and his or her instructional needs. For this reason, special education assessments have typically been individually administered. Traditionally, the results have been used to identify areas of strength and weakness for program planning.

Three recent approaches to alternate assessment purposefully craft a direct relationship between alternate assessments and instruction. Using the *portfolio* approach described above, the alternate assessment administration is being embedded within the ongoing instructional process (Kearns, Burdge, and Kleinert, 2004). With this approach, the acts of instruction and assessment are indistinguishable. In a *curriculum-based measurement* (CBM) approach, the alternate assessment is designed to produce clear, meaningful data that can be used prescriptively with this approach. Performance on the alternate assessment is directly related to performance on the general education assessment system (Tindal, McDonald, Tedesco, Glasgow, Almond, Crawford, and Hollenbeck, 2003). The CBM approach seeks measures that are sensitive to the effects of instruction and provide feedback to guide teaching and learning.

Scoring and Reporting

Timeliness

If scores are to be included in reporting adequate yearly progress (AYP) within states as required by *NCLB*, results need to be available within the same time frame as other assessment results. If scores will be provided to teachers, students and families for instructional planning, the individual student results need to be available when the IEP team meets.

Usefulness

When results are to be part of accountability and achievement reports used to make decisions about school, district and state achievement, they need to be interpretable in relation to established definitions of proficiency. When results are to be used to measure the effects of instruction, they must be sensitive to change. When used to guide instruction, results must be aligned to the curriculum and achievement standards.

Fairness

When results reflect the student's performance level, the scores must reflect the student's actual level of competence and not the effect of the student's disability. For example, when students with vision problems are assessed on their ability to decipher a visual stimulus, it needs to be provided in an alternative form such as a tactile or auditory representation of the stimulus.

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Validity

When results are meant to reflect student achievement in particular subject areas, there needs to be documentation that competence on the alternate assessment actually reflects capabilities and accomplishments in the subject area being assessed. Items, tasks, or indicators designated must represent the domain being tested.

Reliability

When results are to be used to make meaningful judgments about a student's achievement and understanding, the results must be dependable. Scores or results need to engender confidence that scoring will be consistent across raters and occurrences. Furthermore, scoring criteria used in judging proficiency need to be easily understood, consistent in interpretation and unambiguous to educators, students and families.

Conclusion

Alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities have evolved from tests of functional skills to alternate measures of the state's content standards. Schools are responsible for ensuring that students of all ability levels are engaged in a challenging curriculum and receive the instruction and support they need to succeed. Alternate assessments based on the same content and alternate achievement standards are increasingly used to improve instruction and include all students in the general learning environment. In addition to helping states meet state and federal accountability requirements, results from alternate assessments will be expected to inform instructional improvement, measure the effects of instruction and provide feedback to teachers, students and families about student learning.

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