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assessment report

# Administering Alternate Assessments...

## What Special Education Teachers Need to Know

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## Introduction

In the United States, a series of federal laws have been enacted that require all students with disabilities to be included in state accountability assessments. The most recent reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA 2004) requires that “children with disabilities [be] included in general state and district-wide assessment programs with accommodations, where necessary” (§ 612 [a] [16] [A]). The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) mandates that *all* students be tested, including the six million students with disabilities. Because of the high stakes tied to each state’s criteria for student achievement, teachers must be well prepared to administer state accountability assessments, including alternate assessments.

According to NCLB and IDEA 2004, states are required to develop and administer alternate assessments for those students with significant cognitive disabilities (US DOE, 2003). The decision of whether a student should take the alternate assessment is not based on his or her expected result on the general education assessment but on whether the student is being taught using a modified curriculum that follows the same content standards measured by the general education assessment (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000). A student who has severe significant cognitive disabilities, who is two standard deviations below average on an individually administered intelligence test, qualifies to take the alternate assessment (US DOE, 2003).

Like their general education counterparts, special education teachers have to teach to high standards which will be measured by accountability assessments. For alternate assessments to produce results which are reliable, the teachers who are responsible for administering the assessment must be sure to create an optimal testing environment and follow the standardized directions. This report will examine what knowledge, skills, and tools a special education teacher needs to successfully administer an alternate assessment.

## What Teachers Need to Know and Do

There are several things teachers need to know and do to prepare for administering high-stakes alternate assessments. Every teacher wants his or her students to have the best opportunity to demonstrate what they know and are able to do on test day. The following topics are what the special education teacher needs to know and do in order to successfully administer an alternate assessment.

### Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

The teacher must be familiar with each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP team meeting should have taken place within the year, determining whether the student will take an alternate assessment. The IEP team documents a statement explaining why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment and why the alternate assessment or general assessment is appropriate. If needed for assessment; accommodations, assistive technology, and other adaptations which are used by the student in daily classes must be documented in the student's IEP as mandated in the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA 2004 requires that the student's IEP document the justifications for any accommodations that a student will be allowed to use during the administration of the alternate assessment (Washborn-Moses, 2003). Rather than introducing new accommodations specifically for use on the state test, the IEP committee must only allow accommodations that the student uses during classroom instruction and testing (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000). Introducing new accommodations will only confuse the student, possibly causing distraction and poor performance on the assessment.

### Building Rapport

The teacher should establish a good rapport with the students being tested. Rapport is defined by the Random House Dictionary (1987) as being "a harmonious or sympathetic connection," (p.1601). This positive rapport or connection between teacher and student on testing day has been shown to reduce student anxiety and encourage students to show what they know and can do. Buskist and Saville (2001) also suggest that to establish this connection with their students, teachers should strive to make their classroom environment a warm, supportive community for learning.

### Preparation for Testing

To administer an alternate assessment successfully, one of the most important things a teacher needs is preparation. For testing to produce valid results, the teacher should spend time studying the process for administering the assessment

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and ensuring that all questions have been answered, all materials have been obtained, all accommodations are in place for the student, and every required detail is ready for testing day. By prior planning and being prepared a teacher can prevent many irregularities on test day, including emotional, social, academic, and environmental situations. Possible preventive measures for these anomalies should be thought out. This small measure of time spent in prior planning might just prevent a problem during testing which could invalidate a test.

**Testing Location**

The special education teacher responsible for the administration of the alternate assessment should know the location for testing ahead of time in order to prepare the students in advance of test day. It is very important to determine whether the alternate assessment will be administered in the student's regular classroom; or in another room or building or individually. Some students with significant cognitive disabilities do not respond well to alterations in their daily schedules, and the implications of this situation must be addressed to avoid problems on test day. Scheduling the assessment can be very challenging if there is a large population at the school, but every effort should be made to keep the students in their normal environment when taking the alternate assessment. If a different setting is necessary, then it is imperative that the teacher plan some transition activities to help acclimate the student to the new location. Students who are fearful of change in their environment will "benefit from the gradual introduction of new information and novel situations, until they are comfortable with them" (Rothbart & Jones, 1998). Therefore, taking the time to plan ahead will help to reduce anxiety associated with a change in environment as well as mitigate the disruption of the normal daily routine caused by testing.

**Directions for Administration (DFA)**

The Directions for Administration (DFA) provides a great deal of information. Pearson Inc. (Pearson) organizes its DFA's into three categories: 1) What to do prior to testing, 2) What to do during test administration, and 3) What to do after testing.

**What to do Prior to Testing.** The DFA specifies security steps required (eg., Keep the test in a locked room or filing cabinet, sign the non-disclosure agreement and study the DFA on how to administer the test. In order to obtain valid results, it is imperative that the directions to students be read exactly as they are given, how to explain directions if needed—all this should be studied prior to test day.

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Some states specify what content area is to be tested on a particular day. States also specify whether or not there are time limits for the subtests, whether or not materials must be removed from the bulletin boards or classroom displays, and the like.

Pearson provides a Frequently Asked Questions section in its DFA's for teachers. If the answers to your questions are not found in the DFA, call your district test coordinator. If the district test coordinator cannot answer your question, Pearson has a customer service number (1-800-211-8378) with a trained staff who can answer your question or obtain the answer to your inquiry. If you need additional copies of test materials, call the Pearson Customer Service Hotline as soon as possible.

**What to During Testing.** This section of the DFA must be followed closely. It specifies how to fill out the student demographic page and provides definitions for terms in case you need them (e.g., minority groups, migrant education, etc.). All of the information is required to meet district and state reporting requirements specified by the U.S. Department of Education.

Follow the test administration directions exactly. It is extremely important that you read the directions to the students exactly as written. By doing so, you will have confidence in the reports you receive and your school benefits by having valid score reports.

**What to do After Testing.** This section of the DFA instructs you on how to check the student materials, how to package it, and when and where to send the materials for scoring. It is important to follow these directions as well.

## Training for Administration

Training for teachers who will administer the assessment is an integral part of the assessment process and should occur well in advance of the test administration (Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, and Kearns, 2001). Teachers must acquire the skills they need to administer the test appropriately and help their students succeed.

A recent empirical study demonstrated the importance and benefits of teacher training on state alternate assessment scores (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, and Karvonen, 2005). This study provided evidence that alternate assessment scores can be improved by training teachers. The students in the experimental group received proficient or distinguished scores, making significant gains from prior years. A correlation between the alternate

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achievement scores and IEP growth objectives was also observed. According to this study, sufficient time for training of teachers definitely benefits students who take alternate assessments.

## Conclusion

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (2001) and the requirement of high-stakes assessments for students with severe cognitive disabilities, it has become increasingly important for teachers to know how to appropriately assess their students. Successfully administering an alternate assessment to achieve valid results is a challenging task. However, given the high-stakes of these accountability assessments, it is essential that teachers involved in this process be well prepared.

Pearson is committed to developing and providing alternate assessment systems that meet state and federal requirements and measure student achievement against state content standards. This includes providing a tested usable DFA and the training needed to give the assessments. However, the development of these alternate assessments does not mark the limits of Pearson's commitment to the needs of students with severe cognitive disabilities. By providing teachers with high-quality, standards-based assessment materials, informative ancillary documents, and empowering professional development and training, Pearson stands ready to serve classroom teachers as a capable partner in the education of all students—including those students in our education system who require the most help, those who take the alternate assessments.

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