

National Center on Educational Outcomes

Special Topic Area:

Participation of Students with Disabilities

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Should all students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments?

All students should be included in educational accountability systems. This includes students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities will participate in the same way as other students; they will take regular state or district tests with no accommodations. Other students with disabilities will participate in regular assessments using accommodations to enable them to demonstrate their skills without the interference of their disabilities. Most students with disabilities could participate in these ways. In the past we have not had a good estimate of how many students use accommodations. IDEA 2004 requires states to report on the number of students with disabilities using accommodations during the general assessment.

Some students with disabilities who are unable to participate in paper and pencil assessments may participate in [alternate assessments](#) based on grade-level achievement standards. A small percentage of students with significant cognitive disabilities may participate in a state or district alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards. This small percentage of students should still be part of the overall accountability system.

2. Legal requirements aside, why is it important to include students with disabilities in the general accountability system?

To get an accurate picture of where the educational system's strengths and weaknesses are, you need to determine how ALL students are doing. Students who are excluded from measurement are excluded from school improvement plans based on that measurement. Unintended effects such as not having access to limited resources to improve schools are important reasons to include ALL students in measurement for accountability. But it is important for the students themselves: by raising expectations that all students will learn at very high levels, and then testing their accomplishments, successful outcomes will be raised as well. If all students are to benefit from educational reforms, all students must be included.

3. Who should decide about the participation of a student with disabilities in an assessment?

For students with disabilities, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team makes decisions about participation. Because decisions should not be made on the basis of arbitrary criteria, it is essential that specific criteria exist and that decision makers know these and the student well. Knowing the student well includes knowing about the student's instructional program as well as the student's strengths, weaknesses, and other relevant characteristics. These student-focused characteristics are not necessarily evident from the student's IEP.

4. How should participation decisions be made?

Start with the premise that all students are going to participate in the accountability system. Starting with the assumption that all students are in the accountability system really helps to maximize the participation of students with disabilities. The category of a student's disability, the setting in which the student receives instruction, and the percentage of time in a particular classroom should not be the basis for decisions about participation in assessments.

Student characteristics and the nature of the student's instruction are the important variables to consider. Generally, the guiding principle is that the student should be in the general assessment if the goals of the student's instruction are consistent with the instructional goals measured through the general assessment. Expectations that the student will not perform well on an assessment should not be a consideration in the decision.

Students whose instructional support needs are significant and whose disabilities are significant should participate in the [alternate assessment](#) based on alternate achievement standards. Students who are unable to participate in the general assessment but who can meet grade-level proficiency with good instruction, should participate in the alternate assessment based on grade-level achievement standards. Regardless of how students participate in the assessment system, it is important that they are all part of the accountability system—that their scores count.

5. Why should students who won't do well be put through the emotional stress of taking a state or district assessment?

Assessments in standards-based systems serve a number of purposes: instructional planning; measuring school and district performance; and for accountability on the part of the state, district, and school as well as the student. The purpose of an assessment will affect how best to include all students:

- If the purpose is to measure the effectiveness of the school in helping all students reach high standards, then having students participate in the assessment is important WHETHER OR NOT they have had the opportunity to learn those skills. Only by measuring "how well the system

is doing" will we clearly identify and then fill the gaps in instructional opportunity that leave some students out.

- If the purpose is to measure the progress of individual students, or to use the results for decisions about graduation status or promotion, then full participation in the assessment is important, along with ensuring that the system has made opportunities to learn to high standards accessible to ALL students. If current instructional practices or assessment technical limitations prevent the student from demonstrating skills in current formats, other measures can be used to validate learning on an individual basis, in addition to the assessment scores. An appeals process may be part of this validation of student learning. Eventually technical limitations should be corrected, and assessments built in line with the elements of [universally designed assessments](#), so that all students can participate and receive meaningful scores. Working directly with the student and his or her family or guardian is important so that all involved understand the purpose, and any concerns can be minimized. Training and support for IEP teams on this topic is very important.

6. How can students with disabilities participate in assessments if the state or district does not know all of the accommodations needed by the students who take the test?

The NCEO Web pages on accommodations provide some strategies to address the problem of state or district accommodation guidelines not allowing certain accommodations. See the special topic area on [accommodations](#). All states are working to resolve these issues, as are researchers, test publishers, advocacy groups, and practitioners. Contacting the state or district for advice on individual situations is usually a good first step. Also, volunteering to be part of stakeholder groups working on revising current policies is helpful for pushing policies forward.

7. Isn't it better to exempt from testing students with mild to moderate disabilities who are in vocational settings where they are not working toward the same academic standards as other students?

It is important to address the problem of students not working toward academic content and achievement standards. The solution is not to exempt them from testing. Instead the quality of the vocational program should be improved to ensure that all students are working toward the same standards. Where and how students work toward standards can be flexible as long as the standards remain the same; many students with and without disabilities can learn standards-based knowledge and skills more successfully in an applied setting like those in many vocational programs. By aligning the instructional opportunities in the applied setting to state or district standards, students are able to learn in a way that fits them well, but with clear expectations that they will master the same standards expected of students in more traditional academic settings. Increasing the rigor and expectations aligned to standards in the vocational curriculum will benefit all students.

For the small number of special education students who are in a curriculum geared toward measurement by an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, the same solution applies. Identifying the core context of state standards that is appropriate for these students, and aligning the instructional opportunities to those standards, is the key to resolving the "misalignment" between instruction and assessments. Exempting students from assessment requirements is not the answer. See the special topic area on **alternate assessment** for more information on alternate assessment requirements.

Related NCEO Publications:

- **[2005 State Special Education Outcomes: Steps Forward in a Decade of Change](#)** / [PDF Version \(3MB\)](#)
- **[2003 State Policies on Assessment Participation and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities \(Synthesis Report 56\)](#)** / [PDF format](#)
- **[Alternative Routes to the Standard Diploma \(Synthesis Report 54\)](#)** / [PDF format](#)
- **[Steady Progress: State Public Reporting Practices for Students with Disabilities after the First Year of NCLB \(2002-2003\) \(Technical Report 40\)](#)** / [PDF format](#)
- **[2003 State Special Education Outcomes: Marching On](#)** / [PDF format](#)
- **[Putting it All Together: Including Students with Disabilities in Assessment and Accountability Systems \(Policy Directions 16\)](#)** / [PDF Version](#)
- **[Principles and Characteristics of Inclusive Assessment and Accountability Systems \(Synthesis Report 40\)](#)**

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