



Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System

Regulations for Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states to make available to eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities an alternate assessment designed to measure their knowledge and skills (34 CFR §§ 200.1(d) and 300.160 (c)). Connecticut's alternate assessment system for students with significant cognitive disabilities is composed of the following:

- Connecticut Alternate Assessment (CTAA) for English language arts and mathematics, developed with the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) for eligible students in Grades 3-8 and 11; and
- Connecticut Alternate Science Assessment (CTAS) for eligible students in Grades 5, 8, and 11.

This document serves as a Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) resource for frequently asked questions (FAQ) related to the Alternate Assessment System and implications of state and federal legislation including the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This FAQ document will be updated to add new questions and answers as important issues arise, or amended as new information is clarified.

This FAQ document is intended to provide local education agencies (LEAs), parents, advocacy organizations and other interested parties with information regarding the requirements for serving Connecticut's children with significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate assessments. This document represents the current understanding of the CSDE on this topic. This guidance does not impose any additional requirements beyond those required under applicable law and regulations.

1. What does “significant cognitive disabilities” mean?

Answer: Students with significant cognitive disabilities are a relatively small population who: (1) are identified with one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (for example: intellectually disabled, autism, multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury, which are the most common); and (2) have cognitive impairments that may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with systematic instruction and accommodations.

Additionally, student records indicate a pervasive disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior defined as *essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life*.

2. Why is it necessary to confirm that the student requires extensive, direct, individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curricula?

Answer: Unlike the standard assessments that provide for greater access in a subject area, the CTAA and the Connecticut Alternate Science Assessment (CTAS) are designed for the student who: (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. Access to content across subject areas is provided in a systematic manner allowing these students greater opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. Students who do not require extensive, direct, individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curricula are expected to be able to access the standard assessment with requisite accommodations.

3. Why does Connecticut need alternate assessments?

Answer: Alternate assessments are designed to measure the knowledge and skills of students with significant cognitive disabilities as required by the IDEA and ESSA. Alternate assessments are designed to support student independence to the greatest extent possible by making academic content accessible and the expected achievement levels appropriate. The CTAA is aligned to the same Connecticut Core Standards (CCS) used to instruct and assess all of Connecticut's public school students in English language arts and mathematics. The CTAS is aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and is administered in Grades 5, 8, and 11.

4. What is the Connecticut Alternate Assessment?

Answer: The CTAA is an assessment of English language arts and mathematics aligned to the CCS for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 3-8 and 11. It is a secure test accessed via an online platform during the CSDE's testing window. Teachers administering any alternate assessment must be trained by the CSDE **each** year to administer the assessment to each student individually. Accessibility features and accommodations are available based on the needs of each student.

5. What is the Connecticut Alternate Science Assessment (CTAS)?

Answer: The CTAS is an assessment of the Next Generation Science Standards for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 5, 8, and 11. This alternate assessment is non-secure and is administered to students by a CSDE trained teacher. The teacher supports students throughout the school year in the completion of specific Performance Tasks aligned to the NGSS Science content.

6. Why is it necessary to confirm that the student is learning content linked to and derived from the CCS and NGSS?

Answer: Connecticut public school students are expected to be provided instruction aligned to the CCS and the NGSS. The CTAA assesses grade-level content linked to and derived from the CCS, which are the academic standards for English language arts and mathematics expected for all Connecticut students. Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives should be based on the general education curriculum defined in the CCS for all Connecticut students. The CTAA has been developed to ensure that all eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to the grade-level CCS.

Similarly, eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 5, 8, and 11 are assessed in science using the CTAS, which is aligned to the grade-level NGSS allowing students to access the content, and demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level science standards.

7. How is eligibility for Connecticut's Alternate Assessment System determined?

Answer: The Learner Characteristic Inventory (LCI) is a document that defines eligibility criteria and student needs for instruction and assessment. It is completed by trained teachers and is discussed by the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) to determine if the student qualifies for the alternate assessments. Using the LCI, the PPT determines eligibility for the alternate assessment verifying sufficient student evidence supporting the following criteria:

- The student has a significant cognitive disability. (The student's disabilities, or multiple disabilities, significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.)
- The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the CCS and NGSS.
- The student requires extensive, direct, individualized instruction, and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curricula.

Eligible students participating in the alternate assessments represent a relatively small group of students who, due to their disability cannot meaningfully participate in standard assessments (Smarter Balanced, Connecticut SAT School Day, NGSS Standard Assessment), even when provided accommodations. The CSDE continues to monitor the characteristics of students participating in the alternate assessments in accordance with federal guidance. Only these students, meeting all three criteria, should be participating in the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System. Students who do not meet all three criteria for eligibility would be expected to participate in the standard assessment, typically with designated supports and/or accommodations.

8. Why is it important to identify the most appropriate primary disability category?

Answer: The CSDE continues to monitor assessment participation as required by federal regulations. Although there is no federal restriction on the primary disability for participation in an alternate assessment, certain disabilities, by their nature, would encourage greater justification for participation. For example, the selection of alternate assessments for students with the primary disability of a specific learning disability (SLD) may be inappropriate because these students may not have evidence supporting a significant cognitive disability that is pervasive in nature. A student with an SLD may be most appropriate for the standard assessment, with accommodations, to support their needs in the more challenging subject areas.

9. How is the most appropriate assessment selected?

Answer: Best practice is for the assessment decision to be made by a comprehensive team, such as the PPT, comprised of those directly involved with the student, who are also knowledgeable of the age-appropriate grade-level curriculum, and with specific expertise regarding the student's strengths and areas of concern. High expectations should guide the process. Teams should initiate discussions as if the student would participate in the standard assessment, defining how the student will access the content of the assessment using designated supports and accommodations as needed.

If, after the standard assessment has been explored, evidence is shared defining the needs and characteristics of the student and their access to grade-level curriculum that meets all three components of the eligibility criteria as described in the LCI, for the alternate assessments, the PPT may develop the student's IEP and select the appropriate alternate assessment indicated on Page 9 of the IEP document.

10. Why is communication competency so important for students, especially those with significant cognitive disabilities?

Answer: In order to determine if a student understands the content presented, the student needs to be able to communicate in a manner that may be understood by another individual. The alternate assessment system is designed to provide access to the assessment using a student's preferred mode of communication, allowing them to demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level standards. The alternate assessments provide opportunities for the use of assistive technology, expressive and receptive communication supports, and accommodations included in the student's IEP that are consistent with Connecticut assessment policies.

The CSDE recognizes the importance of communication in instruction and assessment, and supports the NCSC definition of communication competency as the ability to use a communication system that enables students to gain and demonstrate knowledge. Communication competency prior to the third grade is the foundation the CSDE strives toward. It is a priority for students to establish communicative competency to reliably access curriculum, receive content related information from others, and to consistently demonstrate their skills ultimately improving post-school outcomes.

11. Why are there questions on the Learner Characteristics Inventory (LCI) about expressive communication/Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC)?

Answer: Communication pervades all aspects of education (*Calculator, 2009). Many children with disabilities may not be able to communicate using the traditional spoken and written modalities. Evidence suggests that up to 40 percent of students who take an alternate assessment may require AAC support (**NCSC, 2013). The AAC support or devices may include, but are not limited to sign language, communication boards, vocal output communication systems, and assistive listening devices, including FM systems. The CSDE continues to support greater understanding of assistive technology and AAC particularly for students with significant cognitive disabilities to improve access to the general education curriculum and assessments. For more information, see [Connecticut's Assistive Technology Guidelines](#).

*Calculator, S. (2009). Augmentative and alternative communication and inclusive education for students with the most significant disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13, 93-113.

**[NCSC's Commitment to Communicative Competence \(2014\)](#), Retrieved August 8, 2018.

12. How is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) included in the alternate assessments?

Answer: Alternate assessments are designed with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The entire CTAA test, including passages, items, and response options, are read to the student by the trained test administrator or the embedded text-to-speech accessibility feature. Additional built-in supports include reduced passage length in reading, pictures and graphics included to help students understand test content, along with models in reading, writing, and mathematics, and common geometric shapes and smaller numbers on the mathematics test. The CTAS provides guidance for trained teachers to use meaningful content-aligned Performance Tasks using the preferred communication methods of the student, to rate how the student demonstrates what they know and can do related to science.

13. Where can I find more information about Connecticut's Alternate Assessment System?

Answer: The following links provide more specific information related to the CTAA System:

[CSDE Student Assessment webpage](#);

[CSDE Special Populations webpage](#);

[CSDE Alternate Assessment System webpage](#); and

[CSDE Comprehensive Assessment Program Portal Alternate Assessments](#).