

Session 2B: Eligibility for Participation in the AA-AAAS

Panelists: *Andrew Hinkle, Sheryl Lazarus, Cary Rogers, Wendy Stoica, Robin Stripling, Kathy Strunk*

This session began with a discussion on eligibility for participation in alternate assessments. Presenters shared results of NCEO research on states' participation guidelines and explored state participation guideline examples. Dr. Lazarus also noted an update to *2021-22 Participation Guidelines and Definitions for Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards* (Slide 6).

To conduct research on states' participation guidelines, NCEO reviewed what is available publicly on state websites. Most states have a description and text, as well as a checklist (Slide 7). Some states use flowcharts, and others use rubrics, worksheets, and case studies.

All state participation criteria indicate that students must be receiving extensive individual instruction; needs to have a significant cognitive disability; and the student has a disability or an IEP (Slide 8). Most states' criteria also indicate that these students must be learning to meet alternative or modified curriculum standards. All students are learning grade-level content; however, those who take the alternate assessment are learning at less breadth, depth, or complexity, said Dr. Lazarus. Some states have alternate achievement standards. Only 17 states indicated in the participation criteria that parents must know the implications of the participation decision.

Dr. Lazarus also highlighted factors not to be considered (Slide 9). Most states' participation criteria indicate things an LEA cannot consider, such as poor performance or chronic absences. In the time shortly after the 2015 passage of ESSA, chronically absent students were often included in the alternate assessment. Even students in a separate school do not automatically take the alternate assessment, said Dr. Lazarus. The district or independent school must make an individual decision for each student. English learner status or foreseen disruptive behaviors also are not considerations for most states.

Federal law requires that parents be told the implications of these participation decisions (Slide 10). Dr. Lazarus said 37 states have general information for parents about the alternate assessment. In 31 states, parents receive notice that their child will take the alternate assessment. Nineteen states require parent signatures.

Dr. Lazarus closed the opening presentation with a look at how states define "significant cognitive disability" (Slide 11). Most states, 41, indicate that it means a significant cognitive or intellectual deficit. Other states mention poor adaptive skill levels. Fifteen reference IQ scores. Dr. Lazarus provided case studies for further review of state definitions (slides 12–13).

State Examples

Providing a state example of determining initial eligibility, Ms. Stoica said Ohio shifted in 2020 from a broad resource to an alternate assessment participation decision-making tool (Slide 15).

The tool asks whether the student has a current IEP. The LEA also can review the student's IDEA category. Part B of the tool determines most significant cognitive disability (Slide 16). The state focuses on significant deficits in three adaptive behavior domains: conceptual, social, and practical. For Part B, a student must be in Column 4 of the entire tool (Slide 17). This tool attempts to guide teachers and administrators in what to look for in the instruction of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Noting the questions for the social domain, Ms. Stoica recalled receiving many phone calls about toileting. These questions revealed areas of breakdown and misunderstanding about which students really need the alternate assessment. The social domain tool includes links for more assistance.

Part C of the Ohio tool focuses on determining how to provide extensive, direct, individual instruction and substantial supports (Slide 20). The tool includes rubrics for curriculum instruction and assessment, accommodations/modification, and assistive technology. Part D of the tool requires signatures from the IEP team, as well as the parents.

Ms. Rogers highlighted two companion documents from Kansas (Slide 21). With the Alternate Assessment Flowchart, every answer must be a "yes" before one can consider a student's participation in the alternate assessment. The next document, a rubric, supports the state's participation guidelines. The document highlights what IEP teams can use and the data to review to make alternate assessment participation decisions. The rubric begins with the question, Does the student have a current IEP? The rubric also addresses most significant cognitive limitations and adaptive behaviors (conceptual, social, and practical). The document also asks for signatures from parents and the IEP team.

Arkansas offers similar criteria to those in Kansas (Slide 34). The state also provided short training videos via Zoom. The videos and trainings helped teachers and IEP teams understand that the alternate assessment is for a small, specific group of students.

Questions and Comments

After the presentation, participants discussed statewide IEP systems, participation guideline updates, and the number of English language learners in the 1.0 percent population. Ohio has developed an alternate ELP assessment. Ms. Stoica noted the difficulties of communicating with families of English learners with most significant cognitive disabilities. These families may be disenfranchised already from the educational experience, said Ms. Stoica.

Regarding barriers to updating participation guidelines, some participants noted that small staffs and position turnovers create assessment challenges. Other barriers include lack of communication or connection with administrators or other critical staff members. Panelists encouraged participants to build strategic relationships. The hard work of building these connections will help students and create better communities.