

Assessment & Accountability for Students with Disabilities

A Look Back at the Alternate Assessment on Modified Academic Achievement Standards



The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that all students, including students with disabilities, participate in state assessments. Most students with disabilities participate in the general assessment, with or without accommodations. A small number of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). The IDEA requires all states to have an alternate assessment and all states provide such as assessment.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced an additional *optional* assessment for states to use to include students with disabilities in state assessment and accountability systems under NCLB—an alternate assessment on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) (see box on reverse). ED also provided \$21 million in grants to assist states in developing an AA-MAS.

The *optional* AA-MAS policy did not limit the number of IDEA students that could take the assessment, however, it capped the *number of proficient and advanced scores* from such assessments at 2 percent of the total tested population that could be counted for purposes of showing adequate yearly progress determinations at the district and state level. According to ED, 2 percent of the tested population translates to roughly 18 percent of IDEA students nationally, although there is great variability among the states.

MOST states decided not to develop and implement an AA-MAS, choosing instead to focus their resources on improving instruction for students with disabilities. Several states undertook a serious analysis of low performing students with disabilities and concluded that these students would be better served through targeted intervention, specialized instruction, and instructional and assessment accommodations based on their individual educational needs rather than create a separate assessment system.

SOME states developed and implemented an AA-MAS, totaling sixteen states* between 2007 and 2013. Most of these states monitored use of the AA-MAS as required by Federal regulations.

A HANDFUL of these states allowed extensive overuse and abuse of the AA-MAS, resulting in large numbers of students being taken out of the general assessment. Four states, California, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas, account for two-thirds of all students assigned to an AA-MAS nationwide in the 2011-2012 school year (389,962 in Math, 435,638 in Reading).

The percentage of students assigned to the AA-MAS in these states in the 2011-2012 school year appears in the table below. These states do not show a significantly smaller proficiency gap between student with disabilities and non-disabled students than states not using an AA-MAS.

STATE	Percent of Students with Disabilities in Math AA-MAS (2011-2012)	Percent of Students with Disabilities in Reading AA-MAS (2011-2012)
California	34%	43%
Oklahoma	49%	52%
Tennessee	43%	43%
Texas	36%	36%

Implications for overuse of the AA-MAS were expressed in the findings of a 2011 study of Special Education in the Houston Independent School District—the nation’s seventh largest school district:

“The fact that the majority of students with disabilities are not included within the standard accountability system is not only at variance with federal law but it may well be diverting the attention of school leaders from engaging in instructional improvement that could benefit these students. Further, this extensive use of modified assessments may also reflect a broader problem of lowered expectations for students with disabilities.”

The Houston study also found that Hispanic and African American students were systematically more likely to be assessed on substantially less rigorous and modified assessments than White students.

Source: Hehir, Thomas (2011). Review of Special Education in the Houston Independent School District. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/pc72agu>.

*States administering an AA-MAS in 2011-2012: CA, CT, GA, IN, KS, LA, MD, MI, MN, NC, ND, OK, PA, TN, TX, VA.

KS and PA discontinued use of the AA-MAS in 2012-2013.

All states with ESEA Flexibility are required to end use of the AA-MAS in 2014-2015.

A draft federal regulation eliminating use of AA-MAS for ESEA accountability was published in 2013 and awaits finalization.

Development of tests based on modified achievement standards are not part of the Smarter Balanced or PARCC test development programs.

Modified Academic Achievement Standards

A modified academic achievement standard was defined as “an expectation of performance that is challenging for eligible students, but may be less difficult than a grade-level academic achievement standard. Modified academic achievement standards must be aligned with a State’s academic content standards for the grade in which a student is enrolled.”